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Foucault, Stoicism and Self-Mastery

Introduction

In Michel Foucault's late work he explores how Ancient practices of the self, including those advocated by later Stoics such as Epictetus, Seneca, and Marcus Aurelius,[i] were used to cultivate a form of subjectivity that contrasted to what Foucault saw as the subjugation of the modern subject. Foucault claimed that a unifying theme in his work was an historical exploration of the "different modes by which, in our culture human beings are made subjects." (Foucault 1982: 208) In *Discipline and Punish*, the first volume of *The History of Sexuality,* 'About the Beginnings of a Hermeneutics of the Self', and already to some extent in *Madness and Civilisation* (Foucault 1979, 1978, 1993, 2001), we can see he is tracing a "genealogy of the modern subject" (Foucault 1993:201) in the context of power strategies, while continually developing and revising his understanding of that context. For Foucault, the Stoics, and other schools that emerged out of Hellenism, offered an example of the cultivation of a relationship of the self to the self in terms of self-mastery. Stoic practices involved getting control of oneself, rather than fitting into the strategies of control imposed on one by society. Their method of self-cultivation, while not reducible to the aim of non-subjugation, therefore therefore, offers a potential resource for understanding how we can reconstruct a subjugated self in a non-subjugated form.

In order to show both the potential and the limits of turning to Hellenistic practices to inspire a contemporary ethics of self-cultivation, I am limiting my discussion to a comparison of Foucault and examples of Stoicism, in particular Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius. I will briefly explore the framework of the Stoic

practices of self-cultivation in terms of their understanding of what we are, what we should aim to be and how we can arrive at this destination, to set up a contrast with Foucault's understanding of the self as constructed and the goal of self-cultivation as a means of creative resistance. I will then examine what, given the fundamental differences in their understandings of the self, attracted Foucault to the Stoic practices. I will argue that the aim of non-subjugation is not a sufficient telos for a practice of self-cultivation. Further concrete goals are needed to give content to such a practice, though these further goals need not be universal but can differ between individuals. I will go on to set out how a Foucauldian practice of the self aimed at non-subjugation could be developed, the particular challenges it faces in selecting concrete goals that are compatible with this broad aim, and finally how Stoic techniques can contribute to this practice even if detached from the broader framework of Stoic philosophy and their view of the self. What will emerge is the importance of critical self-awareness in a process of loosening the ties we have to ourselves, which can find inspiration in Stoic self-examination, but also the need for this be accompanied, or followed, by trying out new forms of subjectivity in a Nietzschean spirit of experiment.

Stoic Self-Cultivation

A practice of self-cultivation proposes various means of working on the self, which implies an understanding of what is being worked on and a conception of the destination that is being worked towards, i.e. a telos. In order to know what sort of practices we should take up, we need to have an understanding of the self and the material that practices of self-cultivation will

work on, and a vision of what kind of self we want to become. In relation to this we can then elaborate a set of practices that are designed to move us from what we are now to what we want to be.

So to understand the Stoic practice of self-cultivation we first need to recognise that the Stoics saw the material of this cultivation as the soul, which they understood in materialist terms (Sellars 2009: 114, 2006: 106). The soul for the Stoics is the seat of human action, and its character thus shapes our behaviour. A key feature of the soul as it relates to an ethics of self-cultivation is its rationality. Man is "the rational animal" (Epictetus 2008: 8), and what distinguishes the human soul from that of animals is reason (Sellars 2009: 124). Also crucial is the soul's relation to the cosmos as a whole. Marcus Aurelius writes in book two of his *Meditations*:

> Always keep the following points in mind: what the nature of the whole is, and what my own nature is; and how my nature is related to that of the whole, and what kind of a part it is of what kind of a whole, and that no one can prevent you, in all that you do and say, from always being in accord with that nature of which you are a part. (Marcus Aurelius 2011: 12)

For the Stoics this wider context includes the claim that we share with animals a drive for self-preservation (Sellars 2006: 108). Given that unlike animals we have a rational soul, however, it is this, and not our body, that we are concerned to preserve. As John Sellars puts it: "when a rational being seeks to persevere its own constitution *qua* rational being, it will seek to preserve its rationality, that is, to take care of its soul" (Sellars 2009: 58,). So the starting point for a Stoic

practice of the self is that our distinguishing characteristic as human beings is our rational soul, but also that we are part of a coherent whole.

The telos of Stoic practices is determined by this conception of human nature as a rational and connected to "a perfect whole into which all parts fit" (White 1985: 63). Thus, it involves firstly an emphasis on being rational: "what is in accord with a rational being, then, is rational behaviour" (Sellars 2009: 58). This requires learning to avoid the emotional reactions and value judgements that disturb the soul (Sellars 2009: 66). We have to cease to lament the misfortunes that come upon us and are out of control. For example in Epictetus we find: "Whenever I see a person suffering from nervousness, I think, well, what can he expect? If he had not set his sights on things outside man's control, his nervousness would end at once." (Epictetus 2008: 103) And in Marcus Aurelius "What is bad for yourself lies neither in the ruling centre of another, nor yet in any change and alteration in the things that surround you. Where, then? In that part of you which judges that certain things are evils." (Marcus Aurelius 2011: 31)

Being rational thus also involves recognising the second key element of our nature, our connection to the coherent and perfect whole. The Stoics aim is to live in accordance with nature. The state the Stoic aims at is not simply fitting into the whole, as everything inherently does. Nicolas White argues that for the Stoic's one's logos must agree with nature, the aim is that "one's soul actually reflects the pattern of nature, in the sense of comprehending it and one's activities are ordered *by that condition of the soul*" (White 1985: 67). The aim is to achieve a rational understanding of the whole that at the same time exemplifies the whole (White 1985: 68). Thus, the goal of expressing our

rationality and of being in accordance with nature come together. This implies having the appropriate, rational attitude of recognising the coherence and perfection of nature, and behaving and reacting accordingly. A transformation in understanding implies a transformation in behaviour. As Sellars puts it: the aim of self-cultivation is "an internal disposition of one's soul that determines the *way* in which one responds to external events" (Sellars 2009: 83). Having recognised that there is no good or evil in any parts, we are then able to respond rationally to events that befall us. But this disposition is one that involves a proper understanding of the context of these events. Foucault recognises the mutual interdependence of understanding and achieving the desired state of rationality in which we are able to react appropriately to the world:

> You also have the theme of the Stoic exercise by which a subject first ensures his autonomy and independence—and ensures it in a rather complex relationship to the knowledge of the world, since it is this knowledge that allows him to ensure his independence, and it is only once he has ensured it that he is able to recognize the order of the world as it stands. (Foucault 1997: 279)

What kind of practices then can get us from a being with a rational soul, that despite this rationality is disturbed by emotions and allows themselves to be (in the Stoics' view) inappropriately distressed by events beyond their control, to the state of the accepting rational sage that is the Stoic telos? As Foucault puts it, in this state: "you have become the *logos*, or the *logos* has become you". How would the Stoics have us incorporate the logos, the truth that no parts, no events that happen to us, are good or bad, into who we are? Sellars suggests that the spiritual exercises developed by the Stoics are "a form of practical training

directed towards the incorporation of philosophical doctrines into one's everyday habits. This habituation involves a transformation of one's character which in turn transforms one's behaviour." (Sellars 2009, 121) So the followers of the Stoics have to make the Stoics' rational understanding of the cosmos as a coherent and perfect whole part of them, such that they rationally and appropriately react to the universe. They have to internalise the doctrines and this requires more than the theoretical study of ideas or coming to know or believe something. It requires continually calling these doctrines to mind, remembering them, applying them, and coming back to them when they stray from this way of viewing the world.

We can see this in Book III of Epictetus' *Discourses* in a section titled 'Why training for impressions is necessary':

> [1] Just as we practice answering the sophistic questions, so should we train for impressions every day, [2] as they implicitly pose their own questions.
>
> 'So-and so's son died.' ('The question').
>
> Answer: 'Since it's nothing he can control, it isn't bad.'
>
> 'So and so's father left his son nothing when he died.'
>
> 'Not something the son can control, so not bad.'
>
> [3] 'He lamented those events.'
>
> 'That *is* in his control- and bad.'
>
> 'He withstood it like a man.'
>
> 'That is in his control – and good.'
>
> [4] If we make a habit of such analysis, we will make progress, because we will never assent to anything unless it involves a cognitive impression.

[5] 'His son died.'

What happened. His son died.

'Nothing else?'

Nothing.

'The ship was lost.'

What happened. The ship was lost. (Epictetus 2008: 152)

We can see here there is an acknowledgment that this attitude is one that has to be actively cultivated, on a daily basis, and with repetition. The reader should make the way of looking at the world, in which what is not in his control cannot be considered bad and should not be described emotively, part of him. This is required if he is going to be able to break habits of lamenting external events, and instead react to such events with the desired rational acceptance that accepts and exemplifies his place within the whole as a rational soul.

Marcus Aurelius also writes of the need for training regarding our thoughts (Marcus Aurelius 2011: 17). A related technique he suggests is retreating not from society but into oneself. If you have your "mind in good order" it will provide you with peace

 "So constantly grant yourself this retreat and so renew yourself; but keep within you concise and basic precepts that will be enough, at first encounter, to cleanse from you all distress and to send you back without discontent to the life to which you will return. [...] And among the precepts which you keep most closely at hand for frequent reference, let the following be included; firstly, that things of themselves have no hold on the mind, but stand motionless outside it, and all disturbances arise solely from the opinions within us; and secondly, that all that you

presently behold will change in no time whatever and cease to exist;"

(Marcus Aurelius 2011: 24-25).

We can also view his *Mediations*, the process of writing them and the material they provide to readers, as a mechanism of internalising these concise precepts. The *Mediations* consists in short and sometimes repetitive precepts and rhetorical questions, as opposed to a philosophical treatise. The *Meditations* thus serves as a tool of self-cultivation aimed at the Stoic telos.

Foucault and the Stoics

In his study of the Stoics Foucault is sensitive to this aspect of incorporating "fragmentary logos" through "teaching, listening, and reading" (Foucault 1997: 274). Given, however, the differences, which I will discuss further below, in his approach to what we are now and what the goal of self-cultivation is from that of the Stoics, what draws him to study and discuss them? And how accurately does his depiction of the Stoics reflect their approach to self-cultivation? At one point Foucault claims that his interest in Hellenistic ethics is an interest in tracing the problem of the ethical subject, not an attempt to find a solution to our modern problem of subjugation (Foucault 1997: 256). A genealogy of the subject, however, is motivated from our present standpoint and serves to disrupt the idea that the modern subject is simply given, rather than formed. So at its most minimal level Foucault's discussion of the ethics of self-cultivation can be read as a disruption of our existing understanding of what a subject, and morality, is and has to be. This then opens the space to challenge the kind of subject we are now, and thus opens the space to change it, without

Hellenistic practices necessarily providing an example of how to achieve this change.

What aspects of the contrast between a Stoic subject and the modern subject were particularly important for Foucault in terms of employing them to critically interrogate and disrupt the stability of the modern subject? Crucially for Foucault, he claimed that the Stoics were interested in self-mastery (Foucault 1997:270). Foucault contrasts the Christian and Stoic practices of self-examination suggesting that where the former is seeking to reveal the self, and renounce (sinful) aspects the self, the latter is seeking to establish self-sufficiency (Foucault 1997: 276-277, 2006: 327). Foucault maintains that this Christian model of confession, in which there is always another who we confess to, continues into medical and scientific relationships (Foucault 1978). So he is drawn to a model that cultivates self-mastery in contrast to dependency.

Thus far Foucault's analysis fits well with the available Stoic texts but Foucault goes as far as to suggest that the principle target of Hellenistic ethics was aesthetic (Foucault 1997: 254). Michael Ure suggests that Foucault tends to distort Stoicism with this emphasis on an aesthetic telos (Ure 2007: 22). In his excellent, detailed study of Foucault's ethics of self-cultivation, Timothy O'Leary acknowledges that Foucault chooses to privilege the aesthetic and that to do this overlooks how the Hellenistic conceptions of nature and reason determine their framework of evaluation and thus the telos of their practices of self-cultivation (O'Leary 2002: 76).[ii]

To what extent, in terms, of his own project is Foucault's misrepresentation of Stoicism a problem? He never suggests that we should simple emulate Stoic practices. Foucault is clear that the practices of self-

cultivation that an individual employs are something " that he finds in his culture and are proposed, suggested, imposed, upon him by his culture, his society, his social group". (Foucault 1997: 291) We do not share the cultural context of the Stoic practices and cannot simply pick up and apply their techniques. Foucault is also clear that there is no return to a past philosophy but only the possibility of using it to produce something new (Foucault 1997: 295). The Stoics offer an alternative model of the self to the modern subject, which supports Foucault in his claim that the self is constructed, rather than simply given, and that it could be constructed differently. He is concerned to show us the subjugation of the modern subject is not a necessary feature of selfhood. ~~If Foucault's use of the Stoics is primarily to disrupt the assumption that the self as we know it is given to us rather than constructed, and secondly hat it can only be constructed in one way, and to~~So Foucault is not suggesting we adopt ~~rather than be~~ inspired by the Stoic practices of self-cultivation in forming a new practice of self-cultivation. The~~, then the~~ key questions ~~are~~ then are really how does Foucault understand what we are and what we should aim towards, and is his framework adequate for, and compatible with, a practice of self-cultivation? Stoic examples may show us that the self can be different from the modern subject, but if they are tied to a strict understanding of human nature which informs the telos of self-cultivation, they do not show us that a practice of self-cultivation that is not tethered to a view of human nature as a normative reference point is possible. We have to assess the coherence of a Foucauldian practice of ~~Foucault's practice of~~ self-cultivation aimed at non-subjugation, and not tied to any essential view of human nature, on its own terms. If we can conceive of an ethics of self-cultivation without the kind of metaphysical grounding we find in the Stoic philosophers,

then we can then return to the Stoics and consider further if elements of their practice of self-cultivation can be used in a different framework, or offer particular lessons in developing our own new practice or practices of the self.

Foucault's Framework for Self-Cultivation

So first, how does Foucault understand human nature and the material that would be worked on in the context of a practice of self-cultivation? The key point to recognise is that for Foucault there is no fixed human nature that a practice of self-cultivation aims to realise or return to. While Foucault claims of Hellenistic ethics, perhaps somewhat disingenuously, "I do not think it is ever completely clear or resolved in Hellenistic and Roman thought whether the self is something to which you return because it is given in advance or an objective you must set for yourself" (Foucault 2006: 213), it is clear that for Foucault there is no self prior to a process of self-construction that we could return to. The subject is not a substance but a form (Foucault 1997: 290). He considers us to have moved beyond "the Cartesian question: Who am I? I, as a unique but universal and unhistorical subject?" (Foucault 1982: 785). The question of the form that the subject takes is, for Foucault, an historical one. Further, this is a question that must be answered in the context of an understanding of power relations. Foucault says regarding his own work:

> What I wanted to try to show was how the subject constituted itself, in one specific form of another, as a mad or a healthy subject, as a delinquent or nondelinquent subject, through certain practices that were also games of truth, practices of power and so on. (Foucault 1997: 290)

Power is not something that operates on subjects for Foucault but something creative that we actively engage, it is:

> a total structure of actions brought to bear upon possible actions; it incites, it induces, it seduces, it makes easier or more difficult; in the extreme it constrains or forbids absolutely; it is nevertheless always a way of acting upon an acting subject or acting subjects by virtue of their acting or being capable of action. A set of actions upon other actions. (Foucault, 2000, 291-292)

Thus, the subject actively forms themselves, but they do this in the context of power strategies and a particular structure of power relations.

If we turn now to the goal of self-cultivation it clearly cannot be *constituted* by Foucault's conception of what we are now, given that on his conception we have no essential nature to express or exemplify in this process that would parallel the Stoic appeal to our rational nature. However, that given this contingency we can be formed differently and that the modern subject has been formed in a particular power context are crucial to understanding the objective of a Foucauldian practice of the self and the nature of his interest in practices of self-cultivation. To understand why Foucault thinks we need an ethics of self-cultivation, and thus what it aims at, we need to turn to Foucault's understanding of practices of government.

For Foucault a crucial part of the various and complex ways in which power operates is in the production of certain kinds of subjects with certain patterns of behaviour. Power is not itself negative for Foucault, but structures of power can become constraining and involve the domination of some groups by others. We thus need to understand how power strategies are involved in

shaping who we are and how the kind of subject we are contributes to maintaining a particular power structure. Foucault thinks this is a distinctive aspect of modern power:

> This form of power applies itself to immediate everyday life which categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others have to recognize in him. It is a form of power which makes individuals subjects. There are two meanings of the word 'subject': subject to someone else by control and dependence; and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to.
>
> (Foucault 1982: 781)

Thus the modern form and structure of power relations produces a subject normalised within the context of the problem of modern government. Foucault is thus interested in understanding precisely "how relations of subjectification can manufacture subjects." (Foucault 1997: 59) This is not a passive process, we are always actively engaged in reacting to power strategies and constructing our own subjectivity. Foucault's concept of Governmentality introduces the notion that we act not just to influence the conduct of others but to control our own conduct, and to control how others will control their own conduct. Governmental power relations occur at the intersection between "the technologies of domination of others and those of the self." (Foucault 1988: 19) Influencing the kind of subjects we make ourselves into, and how we relate to and act upon ourselves, is a powerful technique for governing us through self-government.

The implication of this for Foucault is: "Maybe the target nowadays is not to discover who we are but to refuse what we are. We have to imagine and to build up what we could be to get rid of this kind of political 'double bind,' which is the simultaneous individualization and totalization of modern power structures." (1982, 785.) If the production of a certain kind of subject is central to modern power structures it is also the site of resistance to these power structures. Hence Foucault declares that an ethics of the self is "an urgent, fundamental, and politically indispensable task, if it is true after all that there is no first or final point of resistance to political power other than in the relationship one has to oneself." (Foucault 2006: 252) For Foucault, given that the kind of subject we are now is not fixed, and is produced in creative power relations, the aim of self-cultivation is to become a different kind of subject that can disrupt patterns of domination. The aim for Foucault is to become a non-subjugated subject, and instead produce a subject that recognises its own capacity for self-construction and self-mastery. This involves, firstly, the subject becoming detached from its ties to its current form, a de-subjectification or dissolution of the self. O'Leary cites an interview of Foucault's in which he explains his attraction to thinkers such as Nietzsche, Blanchot, Bataille, and Klossowski, precisely because they are engaged in this kind of dissolution of the subject (O'Leary 2002: 141). Further, it requires trying alternative ways of relating to the self. Both the deconstructive and constructive aspects of the project require recognition that the subject is constructed and an understanding of the context of creative power strategies in which this occurs. I want now to address the difficulties that such an ethics of self-cultivation as a practice of non-subjugation faces.

The Challenge of Cultivating a Non-Subjugated Self

Foucault does not think "that a society can exist without power relations, if by that one means the strategies by which individuals try to direct and control the conduct of others." (Foucault 1997: 298) Power relations are all pervasive and immanent to our relationships, institutions, actions and self-construction. Both power and the subject, as Colwell emphasises "arise within a field of relations", (Colwell 1994: 65). If then, we as subjects are produced by these power relations, how can we challenge them to produce a different kind of subject?

One concern has simply been that there is no room for free action on Foucault's understanding of power. But Foucault is very clear that his theory of power does not exclude freedom but in fact depends on it (Foucault 1997: 300). Power is creative; it involves us doing things not just having things done to us. As Alan Schrift emphasises, that one is unable to escape relations of power does not mean that one cannot challenge particular forms of these relations (Schrift 1995: 53). Foucault insists that "to say that there cannot be a society without power relations is not to say either that those which are established are necessary or, in any case, that power constitutes a fatality at the heart of societies, such that it cannot be undermined." (Foucault 1982: 791-2). Resistance is not only possible within Foucault's view of power but implied: "where there is power", Foucault writes, "there is resistance." (Foucault 1978: 95). Resistance is a response to power strategies and a power strategy itself. This is not to say that how a subject can escape the relations that tie them to a form of subjugation is not a genuine problem, but the possibility of creative resistance is not excluded

by Foucault's claim that power relations are everywhere. This resistance contains the possibility of disrupting a given structure of power relations, and creating different forms of power relations, including a different way of relating to ourselves and thus becoming a different kind of subject.

So if a subject can take up practices of self-cultivation in opposition to the very structures that created its current form, then is the aim of creating a subject that is not subjugated to others, but master of itself, sufficient to guide this practice? We can have practices of self-cultivation that specifically focused on the dissolution of the subject as it is now, on breaking down who we are and detaching ourselves from the relationships which define us. Indeed one such practice is coming to an understanding of the processes in which the self we are now was constructed and the relations of power involved in these practices. Power works to cover itself over, being "tolerable only on condition that it masks a substantial part of itself. Its success is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms." (Foucault 1978: 84) It is in becoming aware of the hidden mechanisms of power that a subject can challenge the conditions of its own existence.

To create alternative subjectivities, however, we need more than merely the demand that these be creative alternatives to our current form of the self, which Foucault identifies as a product of the modern form of power relations. Creativity as a value supports the process of creative re-construction but on its own does not sufficiently guide it. To have practices of self-cultivation that go beyond exploring what we are now, and in this process loosen our ties to what we are now, requires an idea of what it is we want to cultivate. It does not require, however, that we take our goal of self-cultivation to be one that others

should share or even the only one that we will aim at within our own life. It is possible for us to pick a variety of different goals to give content to a constructive practice of self-cultivation as long as they are compatible with the aim of non-subjugation.

This of course raises problems associated with ethical relativism. The concern is that if any aim that allows creative refashioning of the subject, such that it is no longer subjugated, can be selected, then this could allow the pursuit of goals and accompanying practices that would cause what we would generally consider to be unacceptable harm to others. As such the goal of creative resistance seems unsatisfactory as the basis for a complete ethics. The response that the goals would be drawn from, and compatible with, a shared culture or set of social norms only shifts concerns over relativism from an individual to a cultural level. We can still worry that atrocities would not be ruled out even if they were acceptable to a given culture. Further, given Foucault's interest in self-cultivation concerns the disruption of hegemonic power structures and challenging processes of normalisation, restricting the goals in terms of what is morally *acceptable* in our culture, rather than the inevitability of drawing on cultural resources in terms of what is meaningful and available to us, would be self-defeating.

The problem of ~~Concerns over~~ relativism ~~are~~ is not the focus of this discussion, however. ~~R~~rather ~~than the~~I am addressing the ~~coherence of a practice of self-cultivation aimed at the minimal goal of producing a non-subjug~~whether the goal of non-subjugation is too thin a telos to provide a substantive practice of self-cultivation~~ated self~~, and the potential of Stoic practices to contribute to ~~this~~ a practice that is fundamentally concerned with non-subjugation~~goal~~ despite ~~their~~

being conceived in relation to a different telos. I will only, therefore, suggest a path of exploration as to whether non-subjugation offers any restrictions on the concrete goals pursued that might inform a broader ethics. Focusing our ethics on self-mastery does not necessarily preclude domination over others, as the slave ownership and status of women in the context of Hellenistic ethics suggests. If a Foucauldian ethics of self-cultivation is open to every potential subject, however, it does at least support individuals developing their own resources to resist exploitation and abuse. It also encourages the questioning and dismantling of institutions that support relations of dominance. If Foucault is concerned with how behaviours and forms of relationships become institutionalised, then the focus of ethical concern is moved from our particular actions to how we, as a particular form of self, have particular forms of relationships and a place within these institutions. Disrupting the established order by changing our form of subjectivity is thus also a disruption of institutionalised abuse and exploitation. I do not pretend that this answers all the concerns raised by relativism that an ethics of self-cultivation that is not tethered to substantive universal goal raises, but these problems are shared with any ethical outlook that does not posit a universal grounding for values. I want for the reminder of the chapter to focus on problems specific to developing a practice aimed at a non-subjugated self.

I have already outlined how Foucault's view of power implies that we have a choice in how we react to power strategies. A problem remains however regarding the scope of this choice. If the overarching aim, under which more concrete aims will be selected and invented, is to escape the ties to a form of subjectivity that we produced within a nexus of power relations, then where do

we find the resources to challenge this same nexus of power relations? Foucault is clear that we do not select the concrete goals of self-fashioning or the methods of self-cultivation we employ in a vacuum or create them from nothing. Any goal and practice has to make sense in our social context, and thus the context of power relations in which we exist and were formed. Practices of self-cultivation and self-constitution "are not something invented by the individual himself. They are models that he finds in his culture and are proposed, suggested, imposed, upon him by his culture, his society, his social group". (Foucault 1997: 291) If we are immersed in a society of subjugated selves where to do we find the material to construct non-subjugated selves?

This is of course one reason to turn to the resource of history, even though it will always be a history motivated by the present and anything we take up will be given a new meaning by our modern day context. Thus, while it is clear that we cannot adopt Hellenistic ethics and any adaptation of a Hellenistic approach will take on a distinctive contemporary meaning, we can still make use of them from the perspective of the present. I will return to how Foucault uses the Stoics below.

Art also offers us an example of how we can create something new out of the materials available to us within our cultural and historical context. Picasso made sculptures from found objects. Cindy Sherman appropriates and gives new meaning to cultural imagery and gender roles in her untitled film stills. Duchamp places a urinal in a gallery, simultaneously making a work of art and questioning what the work of art is. These are instances in which something new, and potentially disruptive, is created out of our cultural resources and field of signification. For *Fountain* (1917), Duchamp used the physical material of a

ready-made object. Further, and in, addition both the cultural significance of *Fountain* (1917), and the act of placing it in a gallery, depended on the context of the art-world. *Fountain* also, however, disrupted and challenged that context from within that context. Similarly novel identities that can challenge the framework that previously excluded them can be constructed out of the cultural materials available within that framework. Kevin Jon Heller emphasises that the resources produced by dominant power strategies can be used in counter-hegemonic ways (Heller 1996:93). It is thus possible both to create something new and to do so in ways that resist the structures of dominance in which we are constrained to operate.

The creativity of power, however, cuts both ways. On the one hand because power does not simply suppress but harnesses our creativity there is the space for creative resistance and a shift in power structures. On the other hand this allows for the cooption of forms of resistance. We can clearly see this when we consider how the idea of working on our selves and being an individual are employed by capitalism as a trope in advertising and fuel the creation of an industry of self help, purification, retreat etc.

How can this kind of cooption of practices of resistance be avoided? It is here that self-awareness and awareness of how power operates in general, and in relation to the formation of our subjectivity in particular, are essential. Indeed I think that ultimately for Foucault this is what non-subjugation means. We are always going to be formed in a way that is influenced by the power strategies of others. Understanding that we are formed at all, rather than given, and that our current subjectivity is not fixed, opens the possibility of changing who we. This in turn opens up the possibility of disrupting the existing form and structure of

power relations. Being aware of how any new identities or types of subject will always be shaped in the context of power strategies is what prevents this from taking another form that simply supports this broader structure. It is our awareness of our implication in power strategies that allows us to be masters of ourselves, and become able to reshape ourselves according to different goals.

Can Stoic Practices help?

Stoic exercises are framed by a view of what human nature at core is and a particular model of the self we should aim at, while Foucault rejects the idea of any nature we can uncover or exemplify rather than construct and, beyond the concern that we take control over the process of construction and remain free to continue to reconstruct ourselves, he wants the goal of practices of self-cultivation to remain open. The notion of self-mastery present in Stoics involves mastering our desires and our tendency to make value judgments, and privileging our rationality. Self-mastery for Foucault is in freeing oneself from being tied to a particular form of the self that was constructed in the individualising and totalising processes of Governmental power. Can Stoic exercises then be of any use to a Foucauldian ethics of self-cultivation, beyond simply disrupting the assumption that only one form of subjectivity is possible by presenting an alternative model?

O'Leary suggests it is the tradition of philosophy as a "critical, reflective practice" that we see in Hellenism that can be employed towards Foucault's own aims precisely by "calling into question our present modes of subjectivity" (O'Leary 2002: 152). Thus, it is not just idea of a subject that is master of themselves, but the critical and reflective practices that are meant to lead us

there that we might find useful in Stoicism, despite the different conception of what mastering oneself consists in.

Hellenistic techniques of self-examination and self-reflection, in which there is a form of giving an account of oneself, one's progress towards the aim of self-cultivation, and the distance yet to travel, can be seen to contrast to Christian and post-Christian practices of confession and self-revelation. An example discussed by Foucault is Marcus Aurelius' letters to his tutor rhetoric Fronto. Examining one letter in particular Foucault suggests that "it is an account of the self through an account of the day" (Foucault 2006: 159). Just as Seneca says he takes stock of his day Marcus Aurelius is reviewing his day (Foucault 2006: 162-163). What is important to Foucault in processes of telling oneself, writing down, or telling another about the minutia of ones life is that "the Hellenistic model, unlike the Christian model, far from moving in the direction of self-exegesis or self-renunciation, tends, rather, to make the self the objective to be obtained." (Foucault 2006: 257) The Christian model of the confessional offers our innermost thoughts to be interpreted by another, ceding the definition of the self to the other. Stoic practices shows how self-examination could be part self-construction when we no longer assume a hidden, pre-given self to be revealed, even whether we tell this self to another. This requires that we avoid "the risk of falling back on the idea that there exists a human nature or base that, as a consequence of certain historical, economic, and social processes, has been concealed, alienated, or imprisoned in and by mechanisms of representations." (Foucault 1997: 282)

It is not just the examination of the self and the recounting of the day that we can learn from in Stoic practices but also examining the context in which we

exist as subjects. Again Foucault is concerned to stress the difference between the Stoic examination of objects and events and Christian exercises of examination. The Christian concern, argues Foucault, is for the representation of events and things in terms of the "psychical reality" only, the concern in Christian practices is with the purity of the idea (Foucault 2006: 300). The Stoic concern with representations is with the external world (Foucault 2006: 301). Foucault recounts examples from Epictetus of taking a walk and looking at what is around us, and of recalling and re-examining events (Foucault 2006:298). One of the exercises from Marcus Aurelius which Foucault describes in his lectures *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* (2006) involves first considering an object in its reality as it is given and then considering its value in the context of the whole. The ultimate aim of this exercise is to reach "the condition in which the subject sees himself independent of the bonds and constraints to which he has had to submit his opinions and, following his opinions, his passions. To make the soul great means to free it from this framework, from all the tissue that surrounds, fixes and delimits it." (Foucault 2006: 296) Another example is in Marcus Aurelius' focus on the "decomposition of things into their material elements". Foucault asks:

> What is it we do by applying this method, by recalling that copulation is a friction of nerves with spasms and excretions, and that the robe is sheep's wool tinted with the bloody purple of a shellfish? We get to grips with the things themselves, we get to the heart of them and completely penetrate them so that they can be seen as they are. Thanks to which, he says, we will be able to lay them bare (*apogumnoun*: strip things bare) and get to the bottom of them (*kathoran*), see their *euteleian* (that is to say their

scarce value, their cheapness). In this way we will be able to free ourselves from the bombast (*tuphos*), from the bewitchment with which they are in danger of capturing and captivating us. (Foucault 2006: 305)

This "disqualifying, reductive, and ironic view of each thing in its specificity" (Foucault 2006: 306), whichthat Foucault identifies in Marcus Aurelius, is able to free us from things in the context of Stoic concerns to free us from attachments to worldly goods, and ultimately to our own bodies and particular lives, thus freeing us from concern over death.

Similarly Foucault's analysis of power relations can facilitate freeing us from the particular forms of power relations that we are currently enmeshed in. Foucault's analysis of what it is that fixes and delimits us, and his concern with freeing us from this framework is different from Marcus Aurelius', but the idea of taking a new perspective on things, by drawing closer as well as standing back, in order to gain a new understanding of them, can be applied to the examination of power relations.

Further Foucault claims to see a double element in Marcus Aurelius' examination of things:

On the one hand, in penetrating to the heart of things and grasping all their most singular elements we demonstrate our freedom with regard to them. However, at the same time, it also involves showing the extent to which our own identity—that little totality we constitute in our own eyes: continuity in time and space—is in reality only made up singular, distinct elements, which are separate from each other, and that basically we are dealing with a false unity. (Foucault 2006: 306-307)

Foucault believes he sees in Marcus Aurelius an exercise that "tends towards a sort of dissolution of individuality" (Foucault 2006: 307). Of course in the case of Marcus Aurelius the unity that is asserted instead is unity "insofar as we are rational subjects" partaking in the rationality of the world (Foucault 2006: 307). While the nature of the dissolution of the self and the form of the self that is asserted in place of this dissolution is different in Marcus Aurelius, the way Foucault presents his exercises mirrors the double element of Foucault's own analysis. The dissolution occurs as part of an analysis of the self's wider context in both cases; for Foucault it is the context of power relations. We can take from Marcus Aurelius the lesson of looking at things in order to demystify them and apply it to an analysis of the power relations that surround us. Demystifying the tools of power and realising that our subjectivity is shaped by these tools operates to free us from what "fixes and delimits" who we are (Foucault 2006: 296).

The Need for Experiment

For an ethics of self-cultivation it is not enough to demystify our current form of subjectivity and show it to be open to change, though this is a prerequisite to the formation of a non-subjugated self. We also need to experiment with new forms of selfhood, to cultivate new selves. This is where we see in Foucault a celebration of creativity and, as O'Leary notes, a connection with Nietzsche who advocates the need for experiment (O'Leary 2002: 173). Nietzsche celebrates "*great* health, that superfluity which grants the free spirit the dangerous privilege of living *experimentally* and of being allowed to offer itself to adventure: the master's privilege of the free spirit!" (Nietzsche 1996: 8)

Creating ourselves according to goals that are our own rather than in line with the idea of the subject imposed on us, requires self-mastery but also the willingness to experiment with new types of selfhood.

O'leary suggests that this process of creation is ongoing. Given Foucault's concern for freedom, the formation of alternative subjectivities is a task that is never done (O'Leary 2002: 127, 133, 170). This is echoed in Nietzsche's claim that while we cannot do without horizons, and "A living thing can be healthy, strong and fruitful only within a horizon." (Nietzsche 1997: 63).[iii] These boundaries must be mutable, "for humans alone among the animals there are no eternal horizons and perspectives." (Nietzsche 2001: 128) An aim of non-subjugation or novelty is not sufficient to provide us with the horizons of value and meaning that we need to situate ourselves as subjects. We must provide our own individual experiments of self-cultivation with more concrete aims. But the awareness that these horizons can be redrawn, and an understanding of how to redraw them, is what, for Foucault, allows us to become masters of ourselves and be freed from the relations of subjugation that permeated our very subjectivity. There cannot be a single Foucauldian practice of self-cultivation. Different practices will need to be developed in line with the many different concrete aims that can be explored. But self-awareness, including an awareness of how the self has developed and is situated within power relations, must always be part of these practices to support Foucault's goal of non-subjugation.

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[i] Christopher Gill suggests that while Stoicism is not the only influence on Marcus Aurelius it is accepted to be the dominant one, and his ethical outlook in

particular clearly follows the earlier Stoics in character. (Marcus Aurelius 2011: xiii-xxiii)

[ii] It should be noted that even if he exaggerates or privileges the aesthetic moment, Foucault is not unaware of the role of reason in Stoic thought. He states for instance that for Marcus Aurelius the ultimate goal is to enable the soul "to find its true nature and, at the same time, its true destination, that is to say its perfect equivalence to the general reason of the world." (Foucault 2006: 296).

[iii] Translation modified.