Foucauldian approaches to the self

Gavin Kendall

Introduction

Michel Foucault, when he is read in the company of the many other significant thinkers on the self and on identity gathered in this collection, may well — and, indeed, should — be perceived as an ‘outsider’. The reason for this is that Foucault is not, in any meaningful sense, a theorist of self or identity. Rather, his major contribution to this field is the contrary of a theoretical one: he gives us a series of empirical studies, using the standard historical approach of documentary analysis, of how the self has, at various important junctures, been problematised in terms of the relation it has to itself. Yet Foucault’s interest was not so much in a kind of relativised, historically changing self, but in the differing types of relations the self has established with itself; and, moreover, in the differing types of relations the self has established with others, especially to the extent that these self–other relationships are typically relations of power or government. Additionally, we can say that, for Foucault, the self is simply one of any number of ways in which human beings have given meaning to their experiences of themselves. It just so happens to be our current mode of experience, and for that reason alone, is of special interest to us. Still further, we can state that the focus of Foucault’s enquiries was more upon the systems which have been invented to problematise the self, rather than upon the self which is the result of those very systems.

It is vital to grasp this distinction between what Foucault tried to do and what most thinkers on the self and on identity have tried to do, or else we are doomed to misunderstand and misappropriate Foucault. So we need to emphasise the difference. For most who theorise the self, the exercise is about the generation of a (more or less) universally applicable account of the self. There are two ways of being this type of ‘grand theorist of the self’: one can either assume a certain universality in the self, a certain historical continuity, and aim to isolate and describe these transcendent characteristics, taking it for granted that the social contexts within which the self finds itself are of little relevance; or, one can assume a series of historical shifts which cause the emergence of new types of self (a third possibility is an offshoot of the second: the assumption of a series of historical shifts in the form of the self which cause the emergence of new types of society). In the first camp, one can place thinkers such as Kant or Freud, for whom the self has a transhistorical durability, and is characterised by reason, the ego, the unconscious, the
personality, or whatever; in the second camp, one can place most sociologists, who tend to theorise the self as causally emergent from, or, in rare cases (in the ‘offshoot’ manifestation), causative of, great social and cultural shifts, and for whom, then, changed forms of self map neatly (and causally) onto changing forms of social organisation. This second group end up with both a relativistic and a deterministic notion of self, as transformations from, for example, the premodern to the modern world, or from Gemeinschaft to Gesellschaft, force the self to transform; perhaps to become the blasé self, for example, to use a characterisation from Georg Simmel, or to become the alienated self, to take Marx’s hypothesis. Interestingly enough, both these approaches – the self-as-universal and the self-as-constructed – tend to give the self a certain historical consistency: in the first case, of course, the self is unchanging, and has a universal, timeless essence; in the second case, it must have enough of a universal essence to respond with a certain regularity and consistency to social change. Further, to examine those ‘offshoot’ thinkers in the second camp who posit a changing form of self which leads to a series of new social arrangements – and here we might think of Max Weber’s work on the role of the puritan personality in the emergence of capitalism, or Norbert Elias’s work on the causative role a new ‘courteous’ self played in the emergence of the European state – again, the self needs to be understood as having a certain consistency which enables it to react to and connect with changing social conditions; historical differences in forms of self, then, are superficial, because we can see that the self always reacts predictably to external stimuli. Elias, to follow our last example, uses psychoanalytical concepts to theorise the ‘inner core’ of the historically variable self.

Foucault is sometimes thought to belong to the second camp, to be some sort of constructivist. In his earliest writings, as he sought to derive a form of analysis that avoided what he saw as the weaknesses of existentialism and phenomenology, there are hints that such a characterisation might have been accurate. However, by the time of his last writings, on governmentality and on the care and technologies of the self, it is clear that Foucault was in neither camp. We must start with these earlier writings, and analyse Foucault’s conceptual work on self and identity.

Historical and intellectual development

Experience books, 1954–69: leaving the past behind

The context in which Foucault began his career – the context against which he felt he must write – were the linked traditions of existentialism and phenomenology. For Foucault, both these approaches erred in their emphasis on personal experience, whether the stress was on a deformed type of self denied its authentic destiny, or on the examination of natural forms of experience. Sartre was the person who dominated French intellectual life when Foucault emerged as a key thinker, and in response to Sartre, Foucault produced a form of historical work which, while still analysing types of experience, nonetheless assumed the self to be a historical rather than a natural kind, and which aimed to avoid any sort of psychological essentialism. So, for example, in Madness and Civilization, Foucault refused the concept of madness as a universal experience. He historicaised madness, focusing not so much on the experience of being mad itself, but on the ways in which the experience of madness has been given meaning. These latter ways of ‘being given meaning’ were understood as historically located. Here, we can see Foucault using historical techniques to generate not so much a general theory of the experience of madness but an empirical study of how the experience of madness was thinkable at certain key moments. His anti-humanistic antipathy to a general theory of the self was clear at this time, and he was so far from considering the self as a valid object of a theory that, understandably, he became linked in popular consciousness with the structuralist thinkers of the time,
many of whom eschewed the self other than as a kind of terminal point of deep structural rules. So, famously, in the structural linguistics of Saussure or the structural Freudianism of Jacques Lacan, the self is a constructed mechanism, ultimately dependent on social structures, such as language or the ‘unconscious structured as a language’; and in Louis Althusser’s work, the self is, in the last instance, a weak entity, emerging deterministically (‘interpellated’, as Althusser puts it) from the great social forces that surround it. While Foucault’s work in the first phase of his career has some resonance with this deterministic, structuralist way of thinking about the self, once again Foucault is somewhat of an outsider, since he was never especially interested in the self as a theoretical problem; for him, the point of analysis was to generate empirical, historical accounts of the conditions within which forms of experience have meaning, and ‘the self’ is just one of those ways in which we can experience ourselves. The difference in approach is subtle, and led to a number of charged debates, especially a tetchy and drawn out argument between Foucault and Jacques Derrida about what exactly the object of Foucault’s analysis might be (madness itself? the experience of madness? the historical conditions which allowed madness to be silenced?). During this period in his work (roughly from 1954 to the late 1960s), and continuing on through the second phase of his work (roughly through the 1970s), Foucault demonstrated his aversion towards the active, authentic and authorial self, sometimes aligning himself with a Barthesian view which seeks to decentre authorial power, and expressed his boredom and unease with the simple correspondence lazily made between the author’s history and the meaning of a new work. On the other hand, this anti-biographical stance was somewhat softened from time to time, as for example when he suggested (1991a: 25ff.) that his books be understood as ‘experience books’: that the idea of them is to change the self and to allow it to think in a different way, to escape what is known and comfortable, rather than be ‘books of truth’. Foucault was also fascinated by the power of the thought from outside, the irruption of the thought of the outcast (the madman, the artist) as a way of derailing the truisms of our times: here, he envisaged a Nietzsche, an Artaud, a Van Gogh shaking up the settled truths of a culture, and in this way Foucault seemed to allow the existence of a particularly powerful form of subjectivity that comes from nowhere (Foucault and Blanchot 1989).

Nonetheless, in this phase of his career, the self was not an especially important problem, and he tended to assign it a rather low level of attention. The key problem Foucault sought to address is the problem of knowledge, and later, from the early 1970s, the problem of the relation between knowledge and power. Crudely, we can say that Madness and Civilization is a book about the knowledge systems which target madness; The Birth of the Clinic is a book about the systems of control that connected up to anxiety about sexuality. When we consider this oeuvre, we see that Foucault develops a complex understanding of knowledge, discourse and power,

Major claims and developments

Games of power, 1970–76: the subject as a doubling upon itself

By the time he came to write Discipline and Punish and The History of Sexuality Vol. I, Foucault had added the analysis of power to his famed ‘archaeological’ method, which he renamed ‘genealogy’. Thus, Discipline and Punish focused on the power–knowledge arrangements found in forms of punishment and incarceration, while The History of Sexuality Vol. I analysed the systems of control that connected up to anxiety about sexuality. When we consider this oeuvre, we see that Foucault develops a complex understanding of knowledge, discourse and power,
and, consequently, the role of the subject in this system. For Foucault, knowledge has two poles or forms: the discursive and the non-discursive. Roughly, this is a division between the ways of speaking, thinking and talking about objects (‘the sayable’), and the objects themselves (‘the visible’). Foucault grants the discursive pole of knowledge primacy; in his analyses of madness, clinical medicine, life, labour and language, the emphasis was squarely on the discursive – the ways of understanding, of speaking, of practising – that came to form the objects, the bodies and the practical systems that were implanted in our societies.

It is especially in the books on the prison and on sexuality that Foucault addresses the problem of power, and to an extent this is done to remedy a problem of determinism in the relationship between the discursive and the non-discursive poles of knowledge. For Foucault, power is the vector that helps maintain an agonism between the discursive and the non-discursive, and ensures that the latter is not consumed by the former. Power is a strategy which maintains a relation between the sayable (the discursive) and the visible (the non-discursive). The visible is in danger of exhaustion because it is potentially completely determined by the sayable: the problem for Foucault is one of how the visible, being completely receptive, is inexhaustible. The solution begins in regarding the two poles of knowledge as always in conflict, and he often describes their interrelation by martial metaphors. The sayable and the visible are divided from each other, yet insinuate themselves inside the relation between the other and its conditions. The sayable offers the visible in a ‘space of dissemination’, while offering itself up as a ‘form of exteriority’ (Deleuze 1986: 66, 73).

Foucault liked to say that he was interested in games of truth, games of power, and games around the self. We can understand the earliest phase of his work (1954–69) as being especially about games of truth: the point of his analysis of knowledge is to understand what counts as true at a given time, and what are the conditions that allow the formation of a ‘regime of truth’. The next phase of his work (1970–76) is especially about the games of power: in Discipline and Punish and The History of Sexuality Vol. I, he sought to understand the power relations that infested societies such as ours. Although power is now placed in the foreground, it is clear in these two books that the effects of power are co-dependent with the games of truth around punishment and sexuality. The self, or the subject, makes a restricted, if clearly more central, appearance in this phase of Foucault’s work, but not enough to satisfy his critics. Duccio Trombadori, for example, is worried about the disappearance of ‘real’ subjects in Foucault, and the lack of any account of who struggles against whom: ‘One profound criticism [of Foucault] remains that of the lack of individuating real subjects who are capable of determining a relation of power . . . who struggles against whom?’ (Foucault 1991a: 112–13, emphasis in original). The games of self are not yet central to Foucault’s thought, but it is in his analysis of the relationship between knowledge and power that a key role emerges for the subject. We can begin to notice the shift in Foucault’s writing: as power becomes more central, the self or the subject begins to feature more heavily. For example, he writes: ‘My objective . . . has been to create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects’ (1982: 208), and: ‘One has to dispense with the constituent subject, to get rid of the subject itself, that’s to say, to arrive at an analysis which can account for the constitution of the subject within a historical framework’ (1980: 117).

Again, we must remind ourselves that Foucault does not think of the self, or the subject, as anything more than a historically specific mode within which human beings can experience themselves; the subject, though real enough (a ‘truth effect’), is not necessary. That being said, Foucault insists upon an active role for subjects in societies such as ours; subjects are active in producing themselves in the sense of being subjected to power, so Foucault’s goal is to describe the ‘immense labor to which the West has submitted generations in order to produce . . . men’s subjection: their constitution as subjects in both senses of the word’ (1978: 60).
The notions of discourse, the non-discursive and power are all involved here. Subjects’ actions take place in discourse, and subjects themselves are produced through discourse. Subjects are the punctuation of discourse, and provide the bodies on and through which discourse may act. In line with this, we may say that subjects form some of the conditions for knowledge. Human action within discourse is positional: it occurs through a subject position inhabiting a space between the two poles of knowledge, the discursive and the non-discursive. But subjective action also takes place at the moment at which power doubles over upon itself. Just as knowledge is the agonism between the two forms – those of the discursive and the non-discursive – so power is the agonism between or action of a force upon another force.

For Foucault, then, power is a series of relations between forces, and knowledge is a series of relations between forms. But what are the relations between these relations, between power and knowledge? The two are completely heterogeneous, but engage in a process of contest. However, power passes through forces not forms; it is diagrammatic (Foucault discusses the Panopticon as diagram in *Discipline and Punish* (1977: 205) in the following terms: the presentation of the relations between forces unique to a particular formation; the distribution of the power to affect and be affected; the mixing of non-formalised pure functions and unformed pure matter; a transmission or distribution of particular features). In being diagrammatic in this way, power mobilises non-stratified matter and functions, it is local and unstable, and it is flexible. Knowledge is stratified, archivised, and rigidly segmented; power is strategic, but it is anonymous. The strategies of power are mute and blind, precisely because they avoid the forms of knowledge, the sayable and the visible. This production of subjectivity occurs within this system, as a doubling of self upon self in every realm, in the realm of the body, the realm of force (power), and the realm of forms (knowledge).

It might be thought that such an account of the subject raises the problems of discourse determinism and the essentialisation of power: the subject seems at times to be moved mechanically through discourse by the workings of power relations which themselves only seem to be exercised through what we might term a ‘will to power’. However, to the contrary, the complex intertwining of power, knowledge and the subject precludes the questions of origin and of determination. The triad power, knowledge and the subject is so systematic that it makes little sense to consider each component separately – they all condition, and form the conditions for, each other. The circularity of interdependence precludes questions of primacy, since none of the components of the triad would exist (except in a virtual form) without the others.

By the middle of the 1970s (certainly by the time of the publication of *The History of Sexuality Vol. I* in France in 1976), Foucault had developed his own unique approach to the empirical investigation of the working of knowledge, power and the subject – probably in that order – and was now paying increased attention to the subject in his writing. So, for example, in *Discipline and Punish*, the emphasis is simultaneously on forms of knowledge such as penology, the relations of power that connect to those knowledges, and the subject positions that are the third term in the equation: the disciplined individual as an exemplary form of modern subjectivity is very much a key aspect of the book. Similarly, in *The History of Sexuality Vol. I*, while much of the book is about power and knowledge, the types of self specific to these power-knowledge arrangements – such as the self who is enjoined to find freedom, forgiveness or truth through confessing – have been moved to centre stage.

Foucault was famous for his constant reinterpretation of what his books were about – sometimes he claims they are books about truth, sometimes books about experience, sometimes books about power, and sometimes books about the self. What makes this series of books so valuable is that they have a number of interlocking themes, and the reading of later volumes often draws one’s attention to previously unnoticed lines in the earlier books. For example,
once one has read *Discipline and Punish*, if one returns to *Madness and Civilization*, it becomes much clearer how the latter book was simultaneously a book about the forms of knowledge that gave meaning to a human experience, a book about the power relations that played between those knowledges, and a book about the forms of self-experience (madman, psychiatrist) that emerged from these systems. While power and the subject are not to the fore in *Madness and Civilization*, the careful reader can discern a consistency between the approach of the early work and the later.

**Techniques of the self, 1977–84: the relation of self to self, and self to other**

As we have already seen, the interest in power led Foucault to pay more sustained attention to the problem of the subject. The issue of the subject and the forms of power over it (anatomy – power over the body; and biopolitics – power over life itself) drew Foucault’s focus not just to the relationships between the self and the other who sought to govern it, but also to the relationship the self had to itself. Foucault had originally planned to extend the *History of Sexuality* series into six (and then later into four) volumes, but his developing interest in these two key types of relationships with the self caused him to reformulate this plan, and to delay for some time as he battled with a series of new literatures which were not just about sexuality, but also about the ethics of the self.

Foucault was about to join a group of thinkers who argue that the self is contingent, transitory, piecemeal, and, above all, technical: that the self is an agglomeration of ‘techniques’ for doing things. This perspective has perhaps been most famously suggested by Marcel Mauss (see, for example, 1973); Mauss described various ‘techniques of the body’ that are used in different societies at different historical conjunctures, stressing their contingent form. For Mauss, there is no truly or simply human way of walking, eating or swimming, for example. In similar vein, Norbert Elias dealt with the formation of the person of the Renaissance courtier: the courtier does not build up a coherent form of selfhood based on some telos, but merely takes elements from here and there, as they are pleasing and useful. The self is an aggregation of these ‘pleasing ways’, but not especially systematic or coherent: rather it is emergent and contingent. In the later Foucault (especially 1986), we see an analysis of the antique self as ‘technical’, and the emergence of a new vocabulary which stresses ‘techniques of the self’ and ‘technologies of the self’. Foucault (unlike most post-Foucauldians) does discriminate carefully between these two terms, using the French technique to refer to a practical instance, while the term technologie refers to a practical system. Techniques are singular and elemental, while technologies are accretions of techniques formed into a logical and systematic whole. When we think of this vocabulary as applied to the object ‘the self’, a technique of the self (or techne heautou) is not simply a reflective sense of self but a lived and practical experience. We must bear this in mind when we read Foucault: the antique sense of self he analyses is nothing like a contemporary Western idea of a reflective, intellectual self divorced from the realm of the body, but it is a self formed from the playing out of ways of comporting oneself in the bios politikos, public life.
In the later Foucault, we hear a lot about the self (soi), but Foucault also likes to make use of a variety of terms that are cognate with ‘subjectivity’, such as sujet, assujettir and assujettissement. For example, in The Use of Pleasure, Foucault speaks of a ‘mode of subjection’ or ‘mode of subjectification’ (mode d’assujettissement) (1984: 27). The self is understood as the subject in a linguistic sense – that is to say, as notionally (grammatically) the one who speaks, but at the same time a function of a social system (language). The subject can simultaneously be the source of action (or the agent), without necessarily being the conscious originator of that action. On the other hand, one can be a subject while simultaneously being ‘subjected’ – governed by a series of external rules and conventions. Here we also get a hint of the omnipresence of power, in that the subject is both governor and governed, subjecting others while simultaneously subject to others, and subject to the self.

Foucault does not favour what he regards as a prosaic and fixed term: identité. Rather, he prefers sujet to refer to the various manifestations of self, always-already located within discourses. Just as discourses are plural, so manifestations of subjectivity are plural. Subjectivity is nomadic, temporary, contradictory, and heterogeneous, while identity is stable, permanent, coherent and homogeneous. For Foucault, the character of discourse, which he regards as in flux and characterised by martial relationships, does not support something like ‘identity’. The subject, the fragile result of specific discursive combinations, is what interests Foucault, and moreover we can immediately see that this subject represents a kind of ‘disempowering’ of identity-politics: if identity is an illusion, a straitjacket description of something far more tenuous and subtle, if ‘the sides’ one takes are constantly reformulating and dissolving, then where is the authoritative place from which one can locate the self and be located in order to speak for or against a political position? It is for this reason that one sees in the later Foucault a description of forms of self that seem to be impossible to link to ‘politics’ in a straightforward sense. However, Foucault does allow the contradictory sujet to act consistently: he likes to use the term multiplicité as a way of conveying the idea that a subject, though multiple and fractured, can still act in ‘singular’ fashion.

At this point, we need to summarise Foucault’s last major research project, his work on the self. Again, it is important to remember that this is in no way a general theory of self, but is rather a series of empirical enquiries into the ways in which the possibility of experiencing the self were systematised – how those systems worked, what their logic was, and whence they arose. We must also remember that Foucault was writing about antique forms of self – those of Classical Greece and the Hellenistic Age, and those of the early Christian West – and offered no more than a few passing remarks on the character of more recent forms of self. With these caveats in place, we can begin. First of all, Foucault found the ancients interesting because they appeared, like us, to assign a major role to what Foucault called ‘ethics’. Foucault liked to make a distinction between morals and ethics, and suggested that in the ancient world it is possible to identify a shift from an emphasis on the former to an emphasis on the latter – from a simple, externally imposed system of rules for conduct, to an internal reflection on how to constitute oneself as a subject of one’s own actions. The ethical dimension is about the construction of a relationship with oneself (the rapport à soi); the moral dimension concerns how the human being simply obeys a code which is external to it and with which it does not engage in any dynamic and mutually transformatory relationship. Foucault thought he could discern some similarities between our own age and that of the Greeks; for us, as for them, the question of our relation to ourselves has slowly shifted from the moral to the ethical, especially as our society has become more secular:

I wonder if our problem nowadays is not, in a way, similar to this one [sc. the Greeks’ concern with the ethics of the self], since most of us no longer believe that ethics is founded in
religion, nor do we want a legal system to intervene in our moral, personal, private life . . .
I am struck by the similarity of problems.

(Foucault 1997: 255–6)

And so he announced his intention to write a ‘genealogy of ethics’ (Foucault 1997: 266). In this seminal paper, ‘On the genealogy of ethics’, Foucault gives an extremely clear summary of the approach given a longer treatment in The Use of Pleasure (1984) and The Care of the Self (1986). He argues that the Greeks had a ‘four-fold’ schema which allowed them to make sense of their ‘ethic of self’: the four elements are ontology, deontology, ascetics and teleology. Ontology, or what Foucault sometimes calls the ‘ethical substance’, concerns the material that needs to be worked over by ethics, the element that is of ethical concern and needs to be made part of a system that can manage it. For the Greeks of the Classical Age, the pleasures, or the aphrodisia, are the ethical substance. Pleasures themselves have no ethical charge – they are in themselves neither good nor bad – but as Foucault shows, they are problematic, and must be subjected to some regime of management, whether through acts of moderation or acts of renunciation. The second element – the deontological element – concerns how one is invited to recognise one’s ethical/moral obligation, and is also labelled by Foucault, as we discussed earlier, the ‘mode of subjectification’. Again, for the Classical Athenians, this element concerns attempts to fashion a particular type of beautiful or noble life, and so is an aesthetic choice. The third element, termed the ascetics, concerns the sorts of trainings and other activities that one must undergo in relation to these ethical problems. This element is the core of the ‘techniques of the self’, and can be seen in the variety of techniques the Greeks used to enable them to have an appropriate relationship to the pleasures, or the aphrodisia. The techniques of askesis are outlined in Foucault (1984, 1986), but there are important clarifications in three papers from the 1997 collection Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth (‘The ethics of the concern of the self as a practice of freedom’, ‘Self writing’ and ‘Technologies of the self’), and in the 1981–82 lecture series at the Collège de France (2005). In these six sources, we can see a range of trainings that were employed by the Classical Athenians, including the sorts of erotic techniques that could be used to manage the problematic relationship between men and boys, or between the husband and the wife. The final element, concerning the teleology, is the ultimate goal of all of this ethical work. For the Athenians, this goal was mastery of the self.

We can go through an example of how all this worked in practice so we can be absolutely clear about the four elements and their interconnection. The Athenians, as has already been mentioned, did not regard the aphrodisia or pleasures (the ontological element, or the ethical substance) as having any particular ethical or moral charge. Pleasures are dangerous, and need to be used and enjoyed appropriately, but the pleasures themselves are not regarded as dishonourable. The point is to ensure the correct use of these pleasures, and the Athenians developed a complex economy of pleasure which suggested the times when it might best be taken, the direction in which it should travel, its intensity, and so forth. To take an example of one pleasure – that of sex with boys – there is no law or custom which prohibits this, but it is important that it be done suitably. One engages in sexual acts in the approved manner and shows that one is living the noble and beautiful life: one behaves honourably, one acts according to one’s status as a citizen, and one plays an important part in the young boy’s life as his noble companion and guide. Here, then, we can see two elements – the access to pleasure (the ethical substance) and the living of the beautiful life (the mode of subjectification) – as interconnected. There are also a series of erotic techniques which are the ascetic element of this use of pleasures. In our example of sex with young boys, there are some difficulties to be managed. First, the older man must always be active, never passive. Yet he must respect the younger boy and act in his interests. As
for the boy, he must not be active in sex (this would be seen as abhorrent and contrary to nature); yet he cannot be passive either, since one day, in the near future, he will be a full citizen, and to be passive is unworthy of the citizen. The young boy must not give in to the demands of the older man for sex too easily, of course, because this would be shameful, but should only relent as a sign of the great friendship the two have. All of this is managed through the erotic technique of intercrural sex, where the man ejaculates between the legs of the boy, but without penetration. A number of other techniques, including ideas about when sex should take place (some seasons are better than others, for example) also feed into this complex economy of the use of pleasures (chresis aphrodision). Finally, for the Athenian, the point of all this – its telos – is self-mastery. The problem with the pleasures is that they can become the master rather than the slave, but the honourable citizen who lives the beautiful and noble life does not let this happen. In being the master of the pleasures – including the pleasure of sex with boys, but also including many other pleasures such as eating, drinking, sleeping, and so forth – and not their slave, the Athenian adult male citizen shows how the practical aim of self-mastery connects up to his social status. So we can see in this example how the four elements interlink in an everyday ethic of self – how an Athenian is enjoined to think about how he understands and experiences himself, and how he relates to himself and others.

Foucault suggests that these four elements shift somewhat over time. By the time of the Hellenistic Age, for example, Foucault suggests that not least because of social and political shifts (changes in the domestic sphere, particularly in relation to the wife, and the decline in the classical city state), the Hellenistic Stoics reconfigure the four-fold. The ontological element does not change, however, and the pleasures are still the ethical substance. The mode of subjectification does alter: the Stoics come to emphasise themselves as rational beings, and invoke a type of universalism which is different from the beautiful life of the Classical Age, as the human being is understood as subjected to universal laws. The Hellenistic ascetics are also somewhat refined and developed, and include a variety of newly invented techniques of self-examination, including the use of diaries, letter-writing and the hupomnemata, the note books which were used as guides for life conduct. We also see the implantation of a series of techniques of the self which emphasise austerity and self-renunciation; Epictetus and Seneca, for example, speak of exercises such as depriving oneself of food for a few days. The Hellenistic telos changes too: the Athenians had a strong sense of self-mastery which had little concern for the other, but was very much inwardly focused. The Stoics change that, introducing a greater degree of reciprocity between self and other. The goal is still self-mastery, but it is in a rational world in which a series of self-mastering selves interact with each other:

in the classical perspective, to be master of oneself meant, first, taking into account oneself and not the other, because to be master of oneself meant that you were able to rule others. So the mastery of oneself was directly related to a dissymmetrical relation to others. You should be master of yourself in a sense of activity, dissymmetry, and nonreciprocity. Later on . . . mastery of oneself is not something that is primarily related to power over others: you have to be master of yourself not only in order to rule others, as it was in the case of Alcibiades or Nicocles, but you have to be master of yourself because you are a rational being. And in this mastery of yourself, you are related to other people, who are also masters of themselves. And this new kind of relation to the other is much less nonreciprocal than before.

(Foucault 1997: 267)

Foucault notices that in the movement from the Classical Athenians to the Hellenistic Stoics, we see a growing austerity, an austerity which would be intensified by the early Christians.
The four-fold now starts to look very different. First of all, the ethical substance is quite altered: rather than the pleasures, the Christians are concerned with desire and the flesh. The mode of subjectification is no longer a personal-aesthetic choice, but divine law as set out by God. The techniques of the self that are the types of *askesis* develop the Stoic austerity themes, and centre on a variety of techniques of self-examination and self-mortification. The Christian techniques of mortification – fasting, penance, and so forth – are well known, but Foucault has a special interest in confession as a technique for self-examination. The development of the confessional is seen by Foucault as a fundamental feature of Christian culture, and is one which is never erased, even as our society becomes more secular: the spirit of the confession lives on in psychoanalysis, but also in the general sense of achieving freedom through unburdening oneself of one’s inner thoughts, through such practices as counselling, psychotherapy, friendship, or even the problem pages of magazines and the lurid revelations of ‘trash TV’ talk shows. The history of the confession strengthening its grip on our society and our ways of experiencing our selves is a long one: Foucault stresses the importance of the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 and the Council of Trent (1545–63) both for making confession a much more regular event in the lives of the faithful and for shifting the confessional material from deeds alone to deeds and thoughts. Finally, for the early Christians, the *telos* no longer revolves around self-mastery, but has shifted to purity (in this life) and immortality (for the next).

**The modern four-fold?**

Foucault has little to say about how this four-fold is adapted by us moderns – and, indeed, we must be sceptical about whether it can be adapted, since Foucault has not given us a grid which can be laid across all times to interpret them; once again, his work is empirical rather than a work of general theory. Nonetheless, there is a sense that we have yet to fully escape our Christian (and thus Hellenistic Stoic, and thus Classical Greek) set of problematisations of the self. It is because of the *rarity* of historical innovation, because of the fact that we are dealing from a very limited set of cards, that the history of the four-fold seems in many ways rather un inventive (Foucault (1984: 250) refers to the ‘poverty and monotony of interdictions’ that successive societies work with). So, we can piece together a modern four-fold, especially by remembering some of the lessons from Foucault’s (1978) *History of Sexuality Vol. I*, that might look as follows: first, the modern form of ethical substance is sexuality; the mode of subjectification is through psychological understandings of self knowledge, especially to the extent that these are vectors for a Kantian sense of universal rationality; the techniques of self remain practices of self-examination and self-decipherment, especially as these emerge out of the ‘psy sciences’ (psychology, psychiatry, psychoanalysis, psychotherapy, and all the other modern scientific analyses of the self that begin with ‘psy’); finally, the modern *telos* is the desire for the emancipation of the self, especially through sexual and other forms of personal liberation. We can represent these various incarnations of the four-fold in Table 4.1.

**Main criticisms and developments of Foucault on the self**

We can quickly canvass, and summarily dismiss, most criticisms of Foucault’s work on the self. This is because virtually all these criticisms wrongly assume Foucault’s point was to develop a generalised theory of the self, rather than to provide empirical studies of various historically located systems which have as their goal the giving of meaning to the experience of being human. Consequently, when critics suggest Foucault has not given enough weight to gender, class, race or resistance, we can usually see behind that criticism an expectation that Foucault’s
work should have had a level of generality to encompass these concerns – to have been a ‘grand theory’ of the self. The only response to these criticisms is to assert firmly that anyone interested in extending Foucault’s thoughts on the self to the realm of those systems which allow the experience of the gendered subject, or any other type of subject, is welcome to do so; but Foucault should not be castigated for failing to do others’ work for them. A second type of critique suggests that Foucault’s work on the self is too deterministic – that the self is seen as a rather mechanical result of the power-knowledge system, or of the four-fold system, that produces it. By this account, the active nature of the self, and its capacity to resist and reinvent, is underestimated in Foucault. This second critique, however, is virtually identical to the first: such a critique can only be mounted from the assumption that the self has a series of pre-existing capacities that must be respected by a comprehensive social theory: that the self can somehow stand outside the systems and resist them. Foucault is not interested in this approach, other than in relation to the exceptional ‘thought from outside’: his point is rather to show the conditions which allow a certain restricted form of self to be one possible result. It is quite possible, although difficult, for human beings to refuse to see themselves in the ways given to them, but again this is rather tangential to the main thrust of Foucault’s analytical work. On the other hand, Foucault is very interested in the idea that one of the results of his analytical work might be that one is enabled to take a ‘transcendent’ view, and refuse to be who we currently are. We should, in passing, also make it clear that it may well be the case that a general theory of self is possible, and that there is evidence of so little variability in the way humans experience themselves that pronouncements on the character of a universal self are possible; however, we should leave this question to one side, because Foucault is not much help in this regard.

The critic of Foucault is on surer ground when arguing about the correctness of the empirical studies themselves. We need to ascertain whether Foucault’s accounts of the techniques of self are accurate. One criticism is that Foucault was over-reliant on Kenneth Dover’s groundbreaking work on Greek homosexuality, which allowed him to develop an account of the neutrality of the *aphrodisia* (contrary to the concern with the flesh and with sexuality that characterise later ages) and of the Classical emphasis on activity and mastery (as opposed to the more passive *telos* of purity and immortality that succeeded it). In this way, Foucault is able to argue for a line of development from moderation to austerity, and to suggest that the austerity themes which can be seen in Christian interdictions are still at work in our society. Recent scholarship is giving us a more nuanced picture of this moderation/austerity divide (for a useful review, although clearly pushing a strong agenda, see Davidson 2007). Nonetheless, other scholars of the ancient world,
such as Peter Brown, Geoffrey Lloyd and Pierre Hadot, tend to give (qualified, but strong) support to the analysis Foucault draws. While it is a useful and important continuing endeavour to finesse Foucault’s account, and to provide the occasional correctives, we can be confident in accepting its general thrust.

Much of the value of Foucault’s work can be found in the developments in thinking about the self and subjectification to which it has directly led. It is in these fields that Foucault’s work is most alive, and it is here that we can see the enduring power and value of Foucault’s pioneering work. It is difficult to survey these fields briefly, because of the enormously wide impact his work has had across the humanities and social sciences. However, to return to the point made earlier in our discussion, much post-Foucault analysis makes the mistake of thinking of Foucault’s work on the self as grand-theoretical, at which point the task is seen as applying that grand-theoretical grid to a new series of problems. This approach is likely to find exactly what it is looking for: the self described by Foucault present in a range of other settings. But we might be justly worried here that the tail is wagging the dog, because the task is not a deductive one; the point is not to use a general grid to enable us to specify a growing range of examples, but to engage in fresh empirical work which enables us to chart the various ways in which human beings are able to experience themselves.

Perhaps the most interesting and fertile development of Foucault’s approach is that which has investigated those practices of government of self and others which can be discerned in liberalism and neo-liberalism. Foucault himself made relatively few remarks (brilliantly insightful though they were) about these modern forms of understanding the activity of government, but it is clear he regarded neo-liberalism as a fascinating and intellectually complex system of thought. His lectures feature a number of interesting treatments of the problem of liberalism and neo-liberalism, but no book-length treatment of these topics was ever produced. His sketchy but provocative essay on ‘Governmentality’ (1991b) was the impetus for much work on this intellectual problem after his death, but the best of that work makes the connection between the ‘history of political thought’ angle, which is represented in the ‘Governmentality’ essay, and the work on the self, which dominated the last phase of Foucault’s writing. Nikolas Rose’s work (see, for example, 1996) is an excellent illustration of this tradition. Rose understands well that Foucault’s work on the self is not an analysis in the sphere of culture (the typical concern of the grand theorist of self), but in the sphere of government. Consequently, he sets out to show the interconnection between modern forms of self–self/self–other relations and modern forms of government, all the time understanding the self as a kind of ‘irreal projection’ of systems of thought and systems of social regulation. What Rose does so well is take the spirit of Foucault’s line of enquiry, and use it to develop his own empirical analysis of the major role played by the psy sciences in our society. Rose argues that the type of self these psy sciences implant and then assume to be foundational is a recent phenomenon, a fresh example of a way in which human beings have been asked to establish a relationship with themselves and with other human beings. This understanding of the self has been translated from the psy sciences into many other realms of life (politics, business, economics, private life, and so forth), and this ‘generosity’, as Rose puts it, has allowed the power of, and range of application of, concepts such as self-fulfilment, freedom and autonomy to increase until they have become unquestioned cultural imperatives.

This research tradition has drawn our attention to the way that a mutuality between governing others and governing ourselves became intensified, especially with nineteenth-century liberalism, at a moment when the conduct of rule became a matter of passionate concern and reflection: this was not only a reflection on the techniques and forms of rule, it was also an inquisition into the ethical justification for rule. Foucault suggests that the West has a long tradition of assuming a set of connections between forms of government and mastery at a variety of
levels, usually the self, the family and others. It has been a repeated theme in Western culture, as Foucault shows, for an intimate relationship between self-mastery and the mastery of others to be assumed and insisted upon: if you want to govern other people you must first learn to govern yourself. This theme of the relationship between the government of self and of others is very noticeable in the nineteenth-century liberal tradition, and continues to this day. Liberalism (and neo-liberalism) is insistent upon the notion that government of others requires self-mastery. It is perhaps useful here to think of liberalism, not especially in terms of political philosophy or practice, but as the constant problematisation of government: liberalism contains within it the fear of over-governing and so is prone constantly to review and renew the activities of governing. The liberal rapport à soi, then, is a means of establishing something like an ethical authority to govern. The monotonous repetition of this historical imperative connecting the government of self and the government of others can be seen in empirical analyses of many periods of our culture; for example in Peter Brown’s work on the ancients, Gerhard Oestreich’s account of the development of the early modern state, or in Stefan Collini’s analysis of nineteenth-century political authority. The neoliberalism/governmentality research tradition shows us exactly how these recurrent themes have been adjusted, reconceptualised and intensified.

A second interesting development of Foucault’s work on the self pushes the notion of the technical nature of subjectification still further. There are two limits to Foucault’s analysis that we may try to move beyond. The first is the point that Foucault’s analysis is limited to the realm of the self, in particular the realm of the conduct of the self. However, as Osborne (1994) points out, there are a range of other concerns that scholars have busied themselves with: we might think of the history of systems for experiencing consciousness sketched out by Paul Hirst, or Peter Brown’s work on the history of systems for experiencing conscience. This emphasises once again the point that the self, and the problematisation of its conduct, is not the only way in which humans have experiences of themselves. Further, we could add new possibilities for ‘techniques of the mind’ – including analyses of the roles of numeracy and literacy (using the work of Patricia Cline-Cohen and Elizabeth Eisenstein respectively) in reshaping human beings (Rose 1996: 31) – and techniques of the body (in addition to the work of Elias and Mauss already mentioned, we can mention here the work of Judith Butler). The second limit we may move beyond is that while Foucault’s account is concerned with techniques of a restricted sort, in our society we have seen a sudden growth in the sorts of technical means by which human beings come to experience themselves. Again, Nikolas Rose is at the forefront of this development, with his more recent work on the targeting of the human being by the biosciences. It is also worth briefly mentioning the influence of Bruno Latour and actor-network theory. Latour has developed a series of analyses of socio-technical systems which, while not being especially concerned with the problem of subject-formation, nonetheless show us the power of an analysis of the socio-technical shaping of conduct (see, for example, Latour 1992); so, for example, automatic door-closers and seat belts play a role in the formation of human subjectivity and come to shape human action, even though they are nonhuman ‘actants’. The most mature uses of this thoroughly technological way of thinking about self and identity can be found in Donna Haraway (e.g. 1991) and Mike Michael (e.g. 2006). This work on the routinised generation of forms of subjectivity in networks dovetails nicely with the Foucauldian approach, and represents an interesting future trajectory; many scholars, including Andrew Barry, John Law and John Urry, have pursued this ‘technologised’ theme, in which the process of subjectification is understood as much more contingent, partial, contradictory, and above all technological, than has been common in the social sciences. In some of these scholars, the connection to Foucault is to the fore, in others he is more to the background, but his work still sets much of the agenda.
Another new direction or development of Foucault’s work that we should consider is the gradually increasingly recourse to Gilles Deleuze’s (1986, 1992) work on ‘the fold’ as a useful addendum to and clarification of Foucault’s approach. Deleuze introduces the concept of the fold as a way of expressing Foucault’s anti-phenomenology, and especially to show how Foucault can be distinguished from Heidegger; the details of this do not concern us here, but Deleuze’s goal is to show the possibility of avoiding psychologism (the assumption of the existence of a separate sphere of the psychological). As we have already hinted at in our earlier discussion, for Foucault, the concept of the fold – the doubling over of knowledge upon itself, or power upon itself – allows the formation of a pocket within the smooth line of the exterior; this pocket of ‘interiority’ is the zone of the self, simultaneously ‘inside’ and ‘outside’. A technical term in embryology which captures this movement is ‘invagination’, the process whereby in the developing cell, the cell wall folds back on itself to form an ‘interior’ pocket; this is the process by which internal organs are formed in developing organisms. We are used to this idea in fully developed biological entities, where we are aware, for example, of the lungs, throat, rectum or vagina as being internal organs or parts that are ‘folds’ in the line of the exterior: always simultaneously inside and outside. A metaphor that may help here is to think of a sheet of material which is occasionally pleated; the pleats are the zone of subjectification – both inside and outside, and rather temporary and reformable (as the sheet is stretched out and then folded upon itself again).

The reason this metaphor may be useful is that it enables us to investigate the history of subjectification without having to start from the perspective of an essentialised psychological subject, which our empirical enquiries suggest to be a fairly recent historical arrival; it gives us ‘a way we might think of an internality being brought into existence without postulating any prior interiority, and thus without binding ourselves to . . . the law of this interiority whose history we are seeking to diagnose and disturb’ (Rose 1996: 37). The fold is an encapsulation of all sorts of techniques, habits, moments of authority, which may, occasionally, become stabilised through routine and through human memory. Crucially, however, it is not simply the human body that is the site of this folding:

the lines of these folds do not run through a domain coterminous with the [flesh] . . . Human being is emplaced, enacted through a regime of devices, gazes, techniques that extend beyond the limits of the flesh. Memory . . . is not a simple psychological capacity, but is organised through rituals of storytelling, supported through artifacts such as photograph albums . . . The regimes of bureaucracy are not merely ethical procedures infolded into the soul, but occupy a matrix of offices, files . . . Folding being is not a matter of bodies, but of assembled locales.

(Rose 1996: 38)

Here we can see the connection to the Latourian injunction to consider non-human actors as crucial ‘actants’; we can begin to unpack the array of techniques that localise a form of experience of self across a network which is hybrid. As we give proper weight to the hybrid nature of these processes, we see that they are not simply ‘human’ or ‘psychological’, but extend out into what we once could only see as inhuman wastelands.

Without wishing to labour the point: while to some eyes this Deleuzian move may seem like a shift to a theory of self, the point of it is quite the reverse. If we wish to follow Foucault, to continue to write genealogies of the self, and genealogies of other ways in which human beings relate to themselves and to others, we cannot start from the ground of a psychology of the self. The aim here is to start with scepticism about the self, and allow the genealogy of the various guises of subjectification to break out of the psychologism of our culture.
Conclusion

In ‘The subject and power’, Foucault (1982: 208) usefully summarises ‘three modes of objectification which transform human beings into subjects’. The first mode concerns those sciences which objectivise, for example, the speaking subject (linguistics) or the labouring subject (economics); the second mode concerns the ‘dividing practices’ which either split a subject internally, or split certain subjects from others (for example, the mad from the sane, the criminal from the good, or the sick from the healthy); and the third mode refers to ‘the way a human being turns him- or herself into a subject’. In all three of these types of analysis, one can sense the pessimism of Foucault; he shows us the genealogy of these various modes of subjectification, and as we better understand the long history they have, how thoroughly burnt into our souls are the rituals of mortification, for example, or the malign problem of pleasure, we might wonder whether there is any escape, whether any other forms of experience of ourselves are possible. On the other hand, we can also see the recent lineage of certain shifts, such as the liberal moment, which, while clearly an intensification of earlier themes to which it bears a family resemblance, nonetheless always has a fragile hold on the reality it seeks to programme. Foucault’s final works on the self demonstrate to us the role particular forms of self are asked to play in the maintenance of the social; and his work has inspired vigorous new traditions which analyse the interconnection between the subject and government. Yet there is no theory here to be applied; no simple correspondence between the problems of one age, and the problems of our own, which would enable us to read off similarities and diagnose our contemporary problems. Just as for the Greeks, for whom the flexibility of their ethical code meant that the construction of a beautiful life has its elective moments; just as for the liberals, for whom the problematisation of government meant there were no simple answers to questions of ethical rule; so for us, the question of self is perhaps more about diagnosis and the raising of new questions than it is about giving the self a cosy pigeonhole to occupy.

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References


