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Research Article:

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Jiayao Wang

In this paper, I will focus on the difference of the conceptions of technologies of self by Freud and Foucault. My central argument is that whereas Freud sought to explain how self-knowledge gives us power over the self, Foucault seeks to demonstrate how theories of the self changed over time and it is power over the self shapes how we know ourselves.

One starting point to examine how they understand the self is through their investigation on sexuality. For Freud, the discussion of sexuality is an important avenue to intellectual enlightenment. Freud preeminently concerns about self-knowledge and believes that from dragging the past experiences in the unconscious mind and bringing them to surface of consciousness, one can understand oneself and gain self-knowledge. Thus, to know oneself means an act of retrospection. The memories, emotions, and experiences of the past influences one's present behavior and thought. One's sense of continuity with the past is crucial for the establishment of one's identity.

In writing on "technologies of the self", Foucault's methods are heavily influenced by Freud's unstated presence. However, his methods of approaching the human mind are diametrically opposed to Freud. Whereas Freud provides a method for investigating the internal workings of the psyche, Foucault seeks to show how the method itself is an ancient technique of self—a fashion that has over the centuries shaped the mind.

Our conception of the self, for Foucault, has been shaped by the techniques that we have devised to probe its inner workings, to oblige it to submit hidden

thoughts that will reveal to us the truth about who we are. Psychoanalysis is just a later addition to the tradition. By a genealogical research on this technique of the self, Foucault shows us that techniques for the care of the self are erratic and discontinuous and sometimes repeated.

Freud's project tries to demystify the human psyche and bring it into the realm of scientific understanding. The psyche is tripartite in which the self (ego) wrestles with the conflicts between the primitive drives of unconscious (id) of free expression and the control of conscience (superego) for renunciation, the ego maintains its identity by figuring out these conflicting claims and making decisions about which to heed and which to deny. The instinctual impulses pressed upon the ego by the id would usually go through a process of sublimation in which the energy is converted into creative and socially useful endeavor.

However, the conflict between the demands of the *id* for instinctual gratification and the voice of the superego for their denial can never be perfectly resolved, the unresolved conflicts with which all of us are confronted, are often repressed in the unconscious mind. Underneath the consciousness, they remain hidden yet actively affect and trouble the unconscious mind. The psyche is always to some degree impaired, for it is bound to unresolved issues of its past and get obstructed by those problems. Only by dealing with these conflicts out of the past can the ego deal more effectively with the problems of the present.

Psychoanalysis is the method that Freud invented to oblige the ego to open its secret history, to recall the past experiences of the psyche's life history and to reveal to the conscious mind those unsatisfied desires or unresolved conflicts. Such knowledge, once restored to memory, would restore and reaffirm the ego by enabling it to become aware of the continuity between past experiences and present perceptions. Such a search involves a search for lost or hidden self, memories of one's experiences. For Freud, one's sense of identity is established through the psyche's recognition with particular experiences, especially those during childhood

and infancy. Moreover, one's formation of identity enhances one's power to deal more realistically with present circumstances. In a way, psychoanalysis is what Freud believes the technique through which one gains self-knowledge and thus the power over the psyche.

For Foucault, the psyche is not an archive but only a mirror, to search the psyche for the truth about ourselves is a futile task because the psyche can only reflect the images we have conjured up to describe ourselves, looking into the psyche, therefore is like looking into the mirror image of a mirror.

For Freud, the truth about ourselves is grounded in our sexuality, for sexual energy is the matrix of human creativity. By discovering the power of sexual impulses to motivate all manner of human endeavor not ostensibly perceived to be sexual, we learn a previously hidden truth about ourselves that is liberating. In other words, discourse about sexuality is a source of self-knowledge; whereas for Foucault, it is an arena for the practice of power over the subject. This is manifested when confessional practice works as a power mechanism over individual's sexual behaviors and thoughts. If for Freud one's self is shaped by the memories of past experiences, for Foucault, it is constructed through humankind's development of techniques of the self, especially the various forms these techniques have adopted. For Foucault, past experiences are fixed and lost in the various formulas humans have created to construct them.

Power of Policing vs. Power of Repression

Freud leaves us with the impression that our destinies are shaped by the inner conflicts and drama of the psyche. However, Foucault seeks to demonstrate how theories of the self changed over time and it is power over the self shapes how we know ourselves. He first approaches the workings of the psyche, the very being of the self from the public arena. His early work concerned the ways in which external

authority shapes the structure of the mind. Both *Birth of the Clinic* and *Discipline and Punish* explored the way in which management of behavior that deviated public expectations was differentiated into a spectrum of types and parceled out among a variety of institutions— asylums, hospitals, prisons, and other places of segregation. The disciplining of human behavior becomes more and more integrated into the field of knowledge and the asylum was part of a larger institutional apparatus through which censorship and domination were imposed. Within the asylums, both the body and the mind were controlled by a mechanism of censoring power.

Although each generation utilized linguistic and institutional structures to carry the policing process forward, the justification offered for the process shift abruptly over the course of time. From late Middle Ages to the present, the justification for segregation of socially unacceptable behavior changes from religious vocabularies to legal ones and then to medical and psychological terminologies¹. Eventually, discourse about segregation reaches beyond the asylums' walls, as public authorities seek to define norms for the society at large in terms of social discipline.

Foucault' thesis about the imperative of the policing process to intrude into unregulated domains of human experience contributes to the shift from his early work on asylums and his later work on sexuality. *History of Sexuality* (Volume I) is the transitional work where he changes his focus from the technique by which external authority manages the mind to the techniques of self-management. Foucault observes that the policing of sexuality depends far more on techniques of self-control than did the policing of madness and criminality. Foucault especially is interested in how the discipline of self-control in sexual matters has generated an imperative to seek knowledge of the self.

Talking about sex as a means of understanding our human nature has made discourse about sexuality a part of the policing process. It works to constrain the self

¹Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*, pp. 35, 63-64.

as a subject by various techniques of self monitor and confessional practice. The sexual revolution of the twentieth century opens a wider discussion of sexuality. In the name of demystifying sex, it actually becomes a subjected topic to public scrutiny. This kind of discussion seeks to police sexuality by classifying it into legitimate behavior and illegitimate ones. Foucault shows how a discourse initially focused on heterosexuality expanded in the course of the nineteenth century to encompass a wide range of peripheral sexual issues, such as autoeroticism, homosexuality, birth control, and eugenics.² Making sense of our sexuality is perceived in the modern age to be a method for discovering the truth about who we are.

Foucault's thesis about the policing power is different from Freud's theory of repression. For Foucault, the policing process is what public authority invents and uses to satisfy the need for a disciplined conception of the self. Through the policing process, the modern frame of mind has been formed. For Freud, repression proceeds from the ego, or the self-respect of the ego. He also locates the conditioning factor of repression in the formation of an ideal ego. Whereas repression works as a constraint on psyche in Freudian understanding, policing works as productivity for Foucault. In his work on insane asylums and that on prisons in the nineteenth century, Foucault shows that the inmates being policed and watched are enticed into participating in, and hence confirming the validity of the policing process. The madman is encouraged to rid himself of his infirmity by actively seeking a cure³. The prisoner is admonished to undertake his own rehabilitation⁴. Both become members in a process to confirm the behavioral norms of the society at large. Through this process, a positive economy of human behavior is delineated and linguistic and institutional forms through which human beings define their relationships are

²History of Sexuality, I: 69-70, 77-80

³ Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*, p. 246-55.

⁴ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 231-48

constituted. This policing process is the public expression of our essential activity as human beings.

Techniques of the Self— Deconstruct the Formulas

Foucault's genealogy of the technique of the self from ancient Greek to Christian practices reveals that Freud's psychoanalytic technique was not new at all. It has its ancestry. Foucault tries to show that the different techniques of the care of the self in history share similarities and discontinuities. For example, in the Christian experiences, the revelation of the truth about oneself cannot be separate from the obligation to renounce oneself. One has to sacrifice the self in order to discover the truth about oneself, and the discovery of the truth about oneself has its aim in sacrificing oneself. The formula is like this: one becomes the subject of the manifestation of truth when and only when one destroys oneself as a real body or as a real existence. Thus, self knowledge and self sacrifice in the Christian way of life is interconnected and interdependent. Whereas in the Cassian way of life, the verbal act of confession is the proof, the manifestation of truth. Verbalization constitutes a way of sorting out thoughts which present themselves⁵. In the Californian cult of the self, one is supposed to discover one's true self, to separate it from that which might obscure or alienate it, to decipher its truth thanks to psychological or psychoanalytic science, which is supposed to be able to tell you what your true self is.

One sees oneself reflected in an image of infinite recess. In the end, the meaning of the self is less important than the methods we employ to understand it, it is in the technologies of the self that humans have employed across the centuries that we find continuities.

He specifically retraces how individuals establish particular relationships to themselves from ancient Greek to Christianity. Psychoanalysis, with its precedent

⁵About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the self, Foucault p. 211

Christian confession and the practices of Stoics can be analyzed more of a form of self-care and a technology of the self than self-knowledge. By elaborating on Plato's *Alcibiades I*, the Stoics, Seneca, etc., Foucault tries to demonstrate that it is through these theories of the self that power works over mind. What psychoanalysis reveals to us is what the Christian confessors and the stoics have done long ago-not self-knowledge but a method of self-care.

Different from Freudian conception, the self is not something to be discovered or deciphered as a very obscure text, but it is to be constituted through the force of truth. In other words, we know our self not by measuring the original meaning of behavior precedents, but rather by deconstructing the formulas through which we endlessly examine, evaluate, and classify our experiences. Human nature is a human construction for Foucault. They are the linguistic and institutional artifacts left behind by successive generations as each makes up the categories, methods, and forms to explain their perception of the human nature. Foucault's interest lies not in the values that successive generations favored but rather in the formalities through which such values were presented.

Furthermore, he argues "it is not knowledge of our sexuality that gives us power over ourselves but our will to establish power over our sexuality that incites our search for self-knowledge."(Foucault, *History of Sexuality* 77) because everyone is called upon to monitor his sexual behavior in these modern techniques of self-analysis, knowledge of sexuality and knowledge of ourselves become ever more closely linked. The truth that we seek about ourselves is a truth we associate with the power of self-control.

Foucault opposes the idea that there is an authenticity within oneself that one should return to or refer the creative activity of someone to the relation he/she has to himself/herself. He upholds the idea that one's existence is itself a creative activity, a kind of aesthetics. This new relation of one with oneself is what Foucault believes to be ethics:

The kind of relationship you ought to have with yourself, *rappor a soi*, which I call ethics, and which determined how the individual is supposed to constitute himself as a moral subject of his own actions. We have to create ourselves as work of art.

(Foucault, *Genealogy of Ethics* 262)

The responsibility to treat oneself as a work of art and create meaning about one's own life opens up new possibilities of self-understanding, new modes of experience, new forms of subjectivity, authority, and political identity. It is also a politics of the self:

I think that one of the great problems of western culture has been to find the possibility of founding the hermeneutics of the self not, as it was the case in early Christianity, on the sacrifice of the self but, on the contrary, on a positive, on the theoretical and practical, emergence of the self.

(Foucault, *Political Theory* 222)

Since the self is nothing else than the historical correlation of the technology built in our history, the problem or the proposal for Foucault is to change those technologies. And in this case, one of the main political problems would be the politics of ourselves. In *Hermeneutics of the self*, Foucault argues:

A politics of ourselves would entail a recognition that if the self is nothing else than the historical correlation of the technology that has come to create it, then the aim would be to get rid of the sacrifice which is linked to those technologies. This sacrifice is twofold: it is the creation of a positive foundation for the self by means of procedures that at once makes us amenable to social control and dependent upon it, as well as who do not fit what the foundation posits as "normal."

(Foucault, *Political Theory* 200)

We can rid ourselves of the imposed sacrifice through what Foucault called a “critical ontology of ourselves.” This is, he wrote, “at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them [...] in the care brought to the process of putting historico-critical reflection to the test of concrete practices” (*Foucault Reader* 50).

The concrete practice Foucault offers to us is to treat one’s life as an aesthetic experience, a work of art in process. To live one’s life with a style is the kind of relationship one ought to have with oneself. Since our human nature is being reconstituted by the forms that we create along the way. It is through such self-forming creativity that our power is revealed, and it is in our capacity to use it well that our destiny lies.

Therefore, the meaning of the nature of the self is always reconstituted along the quest. It is our perpetual task to create meanings and values anew. Therefore, we should not treat ourselves as an onion to be peeled and revealed, but as a piece of mud to be molded so as to create an art work out of a self. “From the idea that the self is not given to us, I think that there is only one practical consequence; we have to create ourselves as a work of art” (Foucault, *Genealogy* 262).

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