6

Formation and Care of Self: A Foucauldian Analysis

Gargi Goswami

Abstract: *Foucault's major work revolves around formation of self with regard to the relationship between three major forces: power, truth and subjectivity. Each of this has a unique relationship with the other, and the three forces in tandem have a major impact in the formation of the individual being. For Foucault, one must be aware of oneself and one's surroundings, and also must have the freedom to question it. This freedom manifests and perpetuates itself through the ancient practice called care of the self. Foucault often turns to the ancient Greeks in his work and analyses the individual in relation to this power dynamics. Care of the self-constitutes a lifelong work on one's body, mind and soul in order to better relate to people. This paper explores the aspect of care of self along with the constituents.*

Keywords: Self, care, ethos, askesis, *hupomnemata*, subjectivity, discourse, truth, power.

Introduction

Formation of Self encompasses our individual and social behaviour, which is determined not merely by our biological construction but by an interplay of society, politics, economics, religion etc. in framing up the so-called 'self'. Michel Foucault as a historian and philosopher, being associated with the structuralist and post-structuralist movements, brings out a critical engagement (in an historical manner) with the thoughts of traditional philosophers. Foucault through this historical analysis brings out a critical self- knowledge, a knowledge which can show the different ways our self may be constituted and constructed. Most of his ideas about this self-knowledge revolve around the concept of care of self and cultivation of self.

The last two volumes of *History of Sexuality* give us a thorough examination about how the ultimate function of Foucault's historical analysis

provides us with a critical self-knowledge. Rather than a substantive self-knowledge, his type of historical analysis can be seen as providing a critical self -knowledge, a knowledge that can show the different ways our ''selves'' may be constituted and constructed. As Foucault has said: ''Among the cultural inventions of mankind there is a treasury of devices, techniques, ideas, procedures, and so on, that cannot exactly be reactivated, but at least constituted ,or help to constitute,a certain point of view which can be very useful as a tool for analyzing what's going on now-and to change it.'' (Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics, p.236)

Thus, this idea of self-wariness leads not only to a critical self -knowledge but also to action, not by prescribing any particular course, but by pointing out possibilities. Here, too, Foucault's understanding of history challenges the more traditions of that conception that sees its task as that of discerning the necessary condition of that which it investigated must already be defined and in some sense complete .However ,as Foucault as well as the new historians have shown ,there is nothing in history that can serve as such a non -contingent object of investigation (everything is open to re-interpretation and therefore is not complete); therefore, rather than seek necessary conditions, Foucault's histories spell out conditions of possibility.

Foucault identified practices of self-information as what he called, 'the ethical subject'. Foucault used the notion of the ethical subject to describe our continual processes for emerging in ethical action. According to Foucault, the ethical subject a process in which the individual delimits that part of himself that will form the object his moral practice, defines his position relative to the precept he will follow, and decides on a certain mode of being that will serve as his moral worth. Foucault points out that the technologies of the self are operations available for self-formation which help in cultivation of the self and taking care of it too. Foucault's major work revolves around formation of self with regard to the relationship between three major and inherently connected forces: power, truth and subjectivity. Each of these has a unique relationship with the other, and the three forces in tandem have immense impact on the formation of the individual being.

For Foucault, this freedom manifested and perpetuates itself through the ancient practice called *Care of the Self*. Foucault often turns to the ancient Greeks in his work, and this concept remains a central theme in his analysis of the individual as subject to various power dynamics. Care of the self, constitutes lifelong work on one's body, mind, and soul, in order to be

related to other people and live an ethically – driven life. For him formation of self, talks about becoming a self, other than recovering a lost self. Contrary to Freud who assumed a hidden truth for all human behaviour, where we reveal our true self through introspection, Foucault believed that we continually reshape our past creations to conform to our present needs and our formulations of new meanings for present experiences.

Rather than searching for a lost ,foundation self, Foucault directed his energies towards retracing the historical development of present practices for continual self-formation .He identified two historical periods as dominated by the precept, 'to know one self is to care for oneself': the Greco-Roman culture of the first and second centuries AD and the ascent of Christian Asceticism of the fourth and fifth centuries AD. Foucault held fourth that through the inversion of this moral precept, the modern conception of the self ,and our interpretation of self -knowledge as moral action ,have resulted.

Both the philosophy of Greek antiquity and the doctrine of Christian Asceticism emphasized self-knowledge as a moral principal, although for the Greeks, the care of the self, preceded self-knowledge, while for the Christian, self –knowledge was of the foremost important. Foucault identified an inversion in the role of self- knowledge between these periods from the Greek concern for the self and living the good life –for which self- knowledge was necessary for their occurrence and reproduction - to the Christian commitment to know oneself for the purpose of renouncing oneself in the care of the soul, and equally importantly, in the reproduction of Christian dogma.

What is 'care of the self'?

'Those of antiquity who wished that all people throughout the empire would let their inborn luminous virtue shine forth governing their states well first;wishing to govern their states well, they first established harmony in their households; wishing to established harmony in their households, their first cultivated themselves...'('Confucius,The Great Learning', p. 11)

According to Michel Foucault, care of the self, first and foremost,constitutes creation and ornamentation of self.It requires a continuous practice of introspection that simultaneously allow for a realistic sense of one's own surroundings.One could argue that this is the only constant element of the practice known as care of the self;while it is vital

to introduce oneself to new activities,ideas and challenges throughout life ,that sense of both internal and external awareness must always remain intact. According to Foucault: 'In the Platonic current of the thought ...the problem for the subject or the individual soul is to turn its gaze upon itself, to recognize itself in what it is and, recognizing itself in what it is,to recall the truths that issue it and that it has been able to contemplate' ('The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom', p. 29).

For many, looking on the inside may be time-consuming, difficult or even painful. When there is so much to take in from the outside, it almost seems counterintuitive to keep us from the inside out. In our technology –based world, there are more than enough distractions to keep us from thinking about ourselves. A quiet moment of reflection fades fast when the phone begins to ring, or perhaps causes us to feel guilty that we aren't focused on something 'more productive'. For Foucault and the ancient Greeks, it was counterproductive not to on the self, and a keen self –awareness was vital for participation in social and political life. Care of the self, then, became a focal point for individual freedom, positive relationship with others, and, potentially ethical participation in politics.

Ethos: The path to freedom

In order to know ourselves, we must first understand what constitutes caring for ourselves. It is both a mind-set and a practice, constant throughout one's life, in which the individual takes charge of his own identity and sense of self. This self-care occurs at the bodily, mental and spiritual level. When Foucault spoke of spirituality, he in on way referred deities or religions. Instead, one's 'spirit' or 'soul' refers to an ethical, cosmic sense of self. Care of self, for soul, mind and body, is much more complex than eating healthy and avoiding stress, as Foucault explains: 'It is a matter of acts and pleasures, not of desire. It is a matter of the self through techniques of living, not of repression through prohibition and law' ('Subjectivity and Truth', p. 89).

Rather than identify oneself according to manmade limitations, Foucault suggests that we instead form our own unique individuality by way of our own experience and ethical code. If we look beyond social and judicial constraints and see ourselves in relation to the cosmos, the perspective tends to change. In terms of smallness in the universe and the limits of mortality, the often-obscured reality remains that every human on this Earth is equal. We will all die eventually, as will our Earth, and no individual

is exempt from it. Recognizing this limitation and questioning one's socially –formed limitations are the first steps toward building what the Greeks called an ethos. One's ethos, and its continuous improvement, has essential permanence in one's practice of care for the self. Foucault elaborates on the importance of this mind-set:

> For the Greeks, [*ethos*] was the concrete form of freedom; this was the way they problematized their freedom. A man possessed of a splendid ethos, who could be admired and put forth as an example, was someone who practiced in a certain way... Extensive work by the self on the self is required for this practice of freedom to take shape in an ethos that is good, beautiful, honorable, estimable, memorable and exemplary. ('The Ethics of the concern of the self as a practice of Freedom', p. 29)

In modern terms of, ethos translates quite obviously to ethics one's personal philosophy of morals and values. For the Greeks, one's ethos was the means by which individuals relate to themselves and others. Similarly, it was a means of opposing and preventing absolute and oppressive power, a major concern for many ancient Greek thinkers. According to Foucault, power exists everywhere, in every human relationship. Foucault's more pessimistic critics fear that power's ubiquity makes it inescapable, and that we are perpetually at odds with oppression physically, mentally and spiritually. In some ways, Foucault would argue that this is absolutely true. The individual, oppressed or not and, and conscious of it or not, always participates in what Foucault calls ''power relations''. For Foucault, power relations exist when all practicing care of the self allows one to adjust and control power over both oneself and others.

Askesis:The path to ethos

Askesis may be thought of in the manner of the physical manifestation or practice of one's ethos. In the ancient school of thought, *askesis* consisted of training for mind, body and soul. Many of their texts, according to Foucault's analysis, suggested a strong general awareness of the power relations that underlie each relationship, as well as fear of enslaving oneself to the unjust desires of oneself or others. In 'Technologies of Self', Foucault speculates: What are the principal features of *askesis*? They include exercises in the subject puts himself in a situation in which he is armed. It is a question of testing the preparation. Is this truth assimilated enough to become ethics so what we can behave as we must when an event present

itself? Truth can be a rather elusive problem. While forever bombarded with individuals and groups professing various discourses as truth, the responsibility remains within individuals to determine their own relationship with these truths. The 'preparation' Foucault mentions has to do with positioning oneself toward analyses of these truth in terms of one's relationship to oneself.

A lifelong cultivation of self, consisted of ethical practices allows one to alter one's relationship with these truths. Foucault proposes activities such as meditation and one self-writing, practices that bring oneself inside oneself, and momentarily outside of one's relationship with the world. He also mentions about practices of self-deprivation, such as fasting, that help individuals teach themselves about their own needs, and discipline themselves from that which is unnecessary or perhaps unjust. Most importantly, however, all of these practices help one to explore one's sense freedom by maintaining the ability to choose where to fit oneself within society.

A noted practice of *askesis* was in the form of the *hupomnemata*, a book commonly used by the Greek for self –writing and as memory aids in which remembering was a tool for examining daily practices, measuring them against expectations, and using one's observations for the betterment of one's actions in the future. The *hupomnemata* was neither a book for memorization nor 'substitution when recollection might fail'('Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth', p.11) Instead, it was a tool for reading rereading in order to know oneself in the service of caring for oneself and developing proper relations with oneself and others. Quoting Foucault:

> It is a matter of constituting ... an equipment of helpful discourses, capable ...of elevating the voice and silencing the passions like a master who with one word hushes the growling of dogs. And for that they must not simply be placed in a sort of memory cabinet but deeply lodged in the soul must make them not merely its own but itself ('Technologies of the Self', p.28).

Similarly, to the Greco-Roman practices for the Care of the Self, Christian Asceticism enforced the moral percept to know oneself through the repetition of accepted discourses and conceptions of truth. The significant difference was Christianity's use of 'true and rational' discourses for practices of self-renunciation and maintaining the authority of the church. Foucault recorded that 'the duty to accept a set of obligations, to hold certain books as permanent truth, to accept authoritarian decision in matters

of truth, not only to believe certain thing but to show that one believes, and to accept institutional authority are all characteristics of Christianity' ('Technologies of the Self', p.29) Uploading this duty required, first and foremost, an individual to know himself. Thus, according to Christian Asceticism, self-knowledge was an opportunity to rid oneself of the part of oneself that was sinful for the purpose of reaching a higher reality, while for the Greeks, self-knowledge was a tool for accessing the present reality.

Christianity is both a salvation religion and a confessional religion. The individual must know what part of himself interferes with access to the next level of reality. He must have the capacity to renounce that part of himself which interferes with his transgressions. In this way, self-knowledge became inseparable from the possibility of salvation. As Foucault observed, 'the acts by which he punishes himself are indistinguishable from the acts by which he reveals himself' ('Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth', p.17)

'Self-renunciation required establishing specific attitudes towards the self as the object of others' awareness. It involved practices produced through relations with others in which the individual was obligated to put others before himself, bear public or privet witness against himself, and reject himself for the purpose of 'replacing himself with a self, closer to the ideal worthy of salvation. By putting others before himself, the emphasis was placed on seeking appropriate relations with others rather than with himself; by bearing public or private witness against himself, he placed himself in the position of being judge; and, by having the capacity to reject himself, he always had the capacity to begin anew. To continually maintain these self-relations required becoming self-aware as if one was the object of others judgement, thereby maintaining a constant vigilance over oneself, protecting oneself from sinful thoughts and behaviour while simultaneously oneself as the object to renounce.

The practice of formulating through the attitudes attributed to others is evidenced in the Christian practice of self-writing used as a 'safeguard against sinning', in which recording one's thoughts and actions was done for an imagined audience whose suggested presence could induce shame for any impure thoughts, thereby controlling any sinful impulses that might arise from them.

Foucault claimed the Christian moral precept to know thyself dominates our moral actions today, observing '...our morality, of asceticism, insists

that the self that the is that which one can reject.' ('The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of   Freedom', p. 19) He believed we inherited Christian moral principles along with a social morality that seeks the rules for acceptable behaviour with others.

We also see similarities with the Greek emphasis on the care of the self, especially since the eighteenth century and the human sciences, the social principles they inspire, and the pedagogical institutions that ensure the repetition of their knowledge in daily practices. The human sciences have also altered the legacy of Christian Asceticism such that we no longer commit ourselves to the practice of knowing ourselves for the purpose of self-renunciation; rather, as Foucault observed, the purpose today is 'to use [scientific discursive practices] without renunciation of the self but no constitute positively, a new self'. ('The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of   Freedom', p. 20) This takes the form of repetition of acts associated with the ethical subject while avoiding that parts of self which interfere with moral action.

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a 'state of domination'. In this light, practicing care of the self allows one to adjust and control power over both oneself and others.

What is subjectivity?

Where, then, may freedom play into this constant flux of power relations? Foucault sees care of the self as being an essential component of individual freedom. Once again, self-awareness and consciousness of one's surroundings plays a key role. In order to maintain freedom from states of domination, whether internal or external, an individual must first explore how he fits into these power relations and how he may change that relationship. Foucault clarifies this concept in his essay 'The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom':

> ...The risk of dominating others and exercising a tyrannical power over them arises precisely only when one has not taken care of the self and has become the slave of one's desires. But if you take proper care of yourself, that is, if you know ontologically what you are, if you know what you are capable of, if you know what it means for you to be a citizen of a city ... if you know what things you should and should not fear, if you know what you can reasonable hope for and, on the other hand, what things should not matter to you , if you know, finally, that you should not be afraid of death –that you know all this, you cannot abuse your power over other (p. 31)

When one gains enough power over another so as to invade his sense of self and identity, Foucault calls this condition of subjectivity. In this study of subjectivity, Foucault is not interested in how one individual exerts power over another, but how societal institutions when the power over individuals. An individual becomes subject to these institutions when the institution dominates some aspect of the individual's identity.

Discourses of truth

Throughout history, humanity has developed many schools of thought in an attempt to understand individuals and how they function within their societies. Each of the sciences as we know them today has bred its own languages (or discourses of truth that explore the problems of our discovering truth. We engage in discourses of truth that explore the problems of our relationships to the earth, other people, and ourselves. The study of

physics, for example, grounds us in acceptance of natural physical laws that dictate how objects relate to the space around them. Biology helps us to understand our own bodies, as well as the bodies of the other living beings with whom we share this earth, And so on. Each of these disciplines has its own method and terminology for discovering truth about the laws of the physical world. These 'hard sciences', however, leave many questions unanswered, and often trigger other, more problematic questions about our own existence. The discourses and empirical methods used by these scientists have not developed means for finding concrete laws of human nature or individuality. While the mysteries of the material world have well-defined methods for being solved, many of them 'hows' and 'whys' of human life remain rather obscure. There exists no science discerning the laws of power, freedom, or differences in individuality – only theories. Philosophy and religion attempt to tackle those questions for differences in individuality –only theories. Philosophy and religion attempt to tackle those questions for which we have no means answer empirically. Yet, after thousands upon thousands of years of philosophical and religious research, thousands of books pamphlets, letters, and lectures, thousands of lives lost, we are no closer to definitive answers than we were thousands of years ago. In many ways, these theologians and theorists, in expressing their doctrines as truths, may have problematized these issues even more.

More recently, social sciences have taken the place of philosophy and religion in attempting to explore truths about human societies. Psychologists look to bridge the complicated gap between biology and behaviour, economists study fluctuations in an ever-globalizing market, and political scientist examine dynamics of government. all with the hopes of improving upon our knowledge of this complex, multifarious phenomenon known as humanity. In a postmodernist perspective on how we gain and use knowledge. While Foucault rejects 'postmodernist' and other labels, I find that there is a harmony of postmodernism with our present discourse: Postmodernism as epistemology argues that social science cannot serve as a 'mirror of society'. Knowledge arises out of embodiment in society; it always has and always will. Social science and society bear a co-dependent and necessary symbiotic relationship to each other. This is not to say that the social sciences are entirely wrong about us, or that psychologists and economists should begin filling out unemployment forms. Rather, it is to say that social and self-understanding should always be fluid, evolving, and subject to change at any given moment. Consider again Foucault's earlier discussion of critique and its necessity for discerning truth. As different elements of the world change, both in nature and society,

so do the questions and answers that social scientist study. Where one school of thought claims to have the universal answer to any given problem, it would make sense for another question the limits that solution and explore its possible alternatives.

This epistemological problem was of major interest to Foucault interest to Foucault. He used various discourses to analyze and critique the ontological problem of the present. For him, the answers do not lie within knowing the singularities of these disciplines, but rather to understand how these disciplines function in bridging the gap between the individual and the world. He opposed applying the discourse of social sciences to social. Political and economic issues, and instead initiated his own discourse on power, truth and individual in conversation with these issues. In doing so, he practiced critique as a means of maintaining freedom from domination by those institutions that claim to know the truth about individuals.

When certain concepts or rules take effect on the general population, it is often the institution using its own discourse of truth to set standards and boundaries for individuals. By doing so, these institutions tend to exclude those that do not fit into their sense of what is 'normal' or expected, a group of people Foucault would call 'the other'. The judicial system, for example, enacts laws that distinguish law-abiding citizens from criminals. Psychologists diagnose clients with various mental disorders, thereby distinguishing the sane from the insane. Each of these labels, while useful to institutions, have powerful and sometimes tragic effects on individual identity.

I believe his theories provide a timeless critical framework with which to analyze and critique how individuals relate to themselves and the society in which they live, specifically in the less frequently discussed contexts of power and truth. While I realize that these concepts may not fit consistently with all individuals and all societies**.** If we are to sum up our discussion, then, what Foucault provides in the last two volume of his *History of Sexuality* is response to the present and our self- understanding by offering a perspective from which to view them, thereby suggesting the possibility of moving beyond them.

The use of pleasure described a possibility of one's relation to oneself characterized by triad of freedom –self-mastery-truth that contracts with the present triad freedom-autonomy-truth; Thus while the present is familiar with the idea of the self freely related to its own truth, it is not through the mode of self-mastery but through the mode of an autonomous relation

to the universal. The point of contrasting the two is to reveal the possibility of creativity implicit in the mode of self-mastery; creativity, that is, vis-a vis the code and rules regulating conduct, and thus of introducing this possibility of creativity in to the open. If one is to practice a freely creative relation to one's self as truth, then one should also take care to account for the fragility of that self and its truth.

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