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Self and Others: The Work of 'Care' in Foucault's Care of the Self

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Recent discussions of Foucault's work on the care of the self have centered on its apparent excessive individualist focus. In "Resisting Foucauldian Ethics: Associative Politics and the Limits of the Care of the Self," Ella Myers challenges recent attempts to enlist Foucault's late work on the care of the self, in particular the emphasis on self-cultivation, as a resource for both developing ethical practices suited for democratic culture as well as an element for resistance.¹ She argues that practices of the care of the self are limited instruments for challenging "the depoliticizing effects of disciplinary power and biopower both of which cut off the potential of establishing counter-powers generated by associations with others."² Instead, the care of the self has the opposite effect: it serves to further isolate individuals. She underscores the limitations of the care of the self by highlighting Foucault's claim that the "care for others should not be put before care of oneself. The care of the self is ethically prior in that the relationship with oneself is ontologically prior."³ Amy Allen also cites Foucault's remark in her discussion.⁴ She takes Foucault to task for his account of the self in his elaborations of the care of the self in ancient Greece and Rome. For her, although Foucault's account of the self does have a social dimension, his conception of the self is problematic, because the relations with others in Foucault's account of the care of the self are inadequate for the formation of an ethical subject insofar as they are not based on mutuality and reciprocity.⁵ In this essay, I offer an interpretation of Foucault's claim about ontological priority that deflects charges of objectionable—i.e., excessive—individualism. Further, I show that reciprocal relations with others are not only possible in caring for oneself but are also needed in the continual maintenance of one's self. I conclude by demonstrating how such practices of the care of the self allow for engagement in collaborative political projects with others through an examination of the term "care" for those engaged in the care of the self.

I

In this section, I examine the critiques of Foucault's work on the care of the self by Myers and Allen. Their arguments echo criticisms raised in other feminist critiques. For instance, Lois McNay contends that Foucault's account of the practice of the self faces two sets of difficulties owing to its excessive focus on the individual: first, it lacks the resources to better understand the intersubjective dimensions of social relations; and second, it cannot provide strategies to counter the disciplinary effects of contemporary relations of power.⁶ Allen's critique focuses on the first set of difficulties outlined by McNay; Myers' discussion is centered on the second set. Both single out Foucault's remark that "the relationship with oneself is ontologically prior" to highlight the shortcomings in his account.⁷

Myers begins her critique of Foucault's account of the care of the self with an examination of his discussion of disciplinary power and biopower. The contrast between Foucault's work on power and his later work on the care of the self is meant to highlight the depoliticizing effect of those relations of power. She is right to point out that both disciplinary power and biopower work against the emergence of a "multiplicity" with others. With disciplinary power, Foucault tells us that "the crowd, a compact mass, a locus of multiple exchanges, individualities merging together, a collective effect, is abolished and replaced by a collection of separated individuals."⁸ Further, it seeks to "neutralize the effects of counter-power that springs from [an organized multiplicity] and which form a resistance to the power that wishes to dominate it: agitations, revolts, spontaneous organizations, coalitions—anything that may establish horizontal conjunctions."⁹ In short, disciplinary power cuts off the possibility of solidarity in organized

multiplicities. While disciplinary power is aimed at individuals, biopower is directed against groups of individuals. It subjects populations to regulation by controlling various processes such as death, illness, productivity and so on.¹⁰ Under biopower, human beings are treated as if they were an undifferentiated, statistical mass to be subjected to various regimes of regulation and administration. For Myers, both disciplinary power and biopower work against the possibility of individuals connecting with and acting together as “co-creators of ‘counterpower.’”¹¹

Although Foucault couches the care of the self in terms of practices of freedom, Myers contends that it is too closely tied to an individual’s project of self-creation, since the aim of the care of the self is to “bring into existence a distinctive entity.”¹² This intense focus on oneself is reflected in Foucault’s remark that the cultivation of the self is “evident in [one’s] clothing, appearance, gait, the calm with which he responded to everything and so on.”¹³ With such emphasis on the individual’s self-formation, Myers claims that practices of the care of the self are inadequate resources for countering the effects of disciplinary power and biopower against the formation of multiplicities; indeed they further the segmentation of individuals. Following Richard Flatham, she contends that Foucault favors the Hellenistic appropriation of the care of the self in which individuals pursue caring for the self for its own sake.¹⁴ As opposed to the Greek model of the care of the self in which self-rule is linked to governing others, undertaking such practices now detaches a person from her relations with others. Citing Foucault’s claim that “the care of the self is ethically prior in that the relationship with oneself is ontologically prior” as evidence, she claims that “the shadow of solipsism” is never far from Foucault’s account of the care of the self.¹⁵

While Myers recognizes that for Foucault the individual is always socially situated, she nonetheless insists that since the relation of the self (however situated) is directed to itself, the care of the self is not a collaborative project in which others appear as “fellow actors or partners.”¹⁶ She finds the individualist character in Foucault’s account of the care of the self to be in stark contrast with his discussion of collective practices elsewhere, such as in his comments on gay politics. For example, he tells us that “a way of life can yield a culture and an ethics. To be ‘gay’ is . . . to try to define and develop a way of life.”¹⁷ While Myers does not claim that there is a clear boundary between these two strands in Foucault’s work, “such that they are wholly distinct undertakings,” nonetheless she insists that there is “a significant difference between [practices] that take the self’s reflexive relation as its starting point and one which begins from relations of association between individuals.”¹⁸ The former does not provide an account of how reflexive relations with oneself can “guide, transform or otherwise impact one’s relationships with others.”¹⁹

Allen also recognizes that for Foucault individuals are always socially situated. In her view, however, Foucault’s remark that individuals do not invent practices amounts to no more than “the minimal claim that no one invents their practices out of thin air.”²⁰ She acknowledges that there are passages in which Foucault suggests that others figure more prominently in the care of the self.²¹ Nonetheless she contends that the relationship with others that Foucault had in mind in his discussion is much more limited than on first blush. She cites for instance Foucault’s discussion of the importance of hypomnemata and letter writing in practices of the care of the self.²² Yet, hypomnemata are notebooks in which individuals jot down reflections on conversations with others, passages they have read and so on. In letter writing, Foucault tells us that it is “a certain way of relating to oneself and to others. . . . To write is thus to ‘show oneself.’”²³ Allen infers from these passages that Foucault’s position in such practices

appears to be one in which an already formed self makes use of the words of others as guides or projects himself to others in correspondence. On her view, neither form of writing “evinces a recognition that one needs particular relationships with concrete others in order to attain one’s sense of self in the first place or to maintain it once it has been achieved.”²⁴ In addition, Allen notes that there are other passages in which Foucault does not even mention others at all in the care of the self. For example, Foucault once described technologies of the self as

techniques that permit individuals to effect, by their own means, a certain number of operations on their own bodies, their own souls, their own thoughts, their own conduct, and this in a manner so as to transform themselves, modify themselves, and to attain a certain state of perfection, happiness, purity, and supernatural power, and so on.²⁵

Allen cites this passage to highlight her criticism of Foucault for not providing a relational account with others to attain a sense of the “self” in practices of the care of the self.²⁶

Like Myers, she cites Foucault’s remark that “the care of the self is ethically prior [to care for others] in that relationship with oneself is ontologically prior” to contrast his account of the self with the central insight of feminist work on the self that “the self is both created and maintained by social interactions structured by mutuality and reciprocity.”²⁷ In her view, feminists would hold that “relationships with others are ontologically prior to the relationship with oneself in as much as acquiring and maintaining a sense of self is possible only when the right sorts of relations with others are in place.”²⁸

In summary, Myers criticizes Foucault’s account of the care of the self for not having the resources to develop strategies to counter the effects of disciplinary power and biopower, while Allen criticizes Foucault’s account of the care of the self for not paying sufficient attention to the role that “relations of mutuality, reciprocity and recognition play in the creation and sustaining of the self.”²⁹ Both critiques however suffer from overlooking textual evidence that would suggest that their interpretations of Foucault’s account of the care of the self are reductive. More significantly, both Myers and Allen do not pay enough attention to the role played by the central idea of “care” in such practices of self-transformation. While acknowledging that Foucault’s analysis of “care” is underdeveloped, nonetheless an argument based on the analysis of “care” can be constructed to meet Myers’s and Allen’s critiques.

In what follows, I argue that Foucault’s late work on ethics is committed to a focus on the individual because it is focused on promoting new forms of subjectivity for individuals and the ability of individuals to practice their autonomy.³⁰ Yet, I argue that such attention paid to the individual is not excessive by showing how reflexive practices of the care of the self can develop reciprocal relations and allow for engagement in collaborative political projects with others. I begin by addressing Foucault’s puzzling remark about the ontological priority of the care of the self. I offer an interpretation of the remark which does not run afoul of excessive focus; I further show there is strong textual evidence that dispels charges by Allen and Myers of excessive focus on the individual.

II

Foucault's remark that the relation with oneself is ontologically prior in the care of the self is puzzling because it is not at all clear what work is being done by the adjective "ontological." Unfortunately, Foucault himself did not explain what the phrase "ontological priority" means. While the phrase "ontological priority" has purchase in other philosophical inquiries—such as Aristotle's examination of the ontological priority of actuality over potentiality in the *Metaphysics* or perhaps in Sartre's slogan "existence before essence"—the phrase is misleading and ill-suited for discussions about relations with others. However, we get a sense of Allen's objection to Foucault's remark with her contention that for feminists "relations with others are ontologically prior to the relationship with oneself, inasmuch as acquiring and maintaining a sense of self is only possible when the right sorts of relations with others are in place."³¹ This is the philosophic insight, starting perhaps with Hegel, that mutual recognition by others is central to self-formation and maintenance. Foucault's remark then is interpreted as claiming that the self is ontologically prior to relations with others; this interpretation is echoed in Allen's discussion of the importance of writing in hypomnemata and letters in the care of the self noted earlier. On Allen's interpretation, Foucault's remark would fly in the face of human development: that the formation of the self is dependent on our relations with others.

Note however that Foucault does not claim that the self is ontologically prior but that the relation to oneself is ontologically prior to relations with others. What can that mean? Foucault is, perhaps, making two points here: first, y subjectivity depends on my ongoing relation with myself; and second, the relation of the self to others is a relation of one subjectivity (mine) to other subjectivities. If this is so, then from a structural point of view there can be no relation to others without my subjectivity which logically depends on my relation to myself. Yet this interpretation is compatible with Allen's contention that our relations with others are not only temporally prior but necessary to having a self. Here think about the person who wants to transform herself; she must already have a sense that she is a self, and that her self is damaged or defective.

Perhaps that is what the phrase "ontological priority of relation to oneself" is pointing to.

On this view the phrase, however, does not carry the connotation of excessive focus on oneself but rather that there must be some awareness of one's subjectivity, however defective, before one can engage in practices with others that foster its development and maintenance.³²

There is also textual support for why the charge of excessive individualistic focus is wide of the mark. Allen, for example, in her discussion emphasizes the importance of writing in hypomnemata and letters in the care of the self. But the use of hypomnemata is but one technique that Foucault describes. However, Foucault insists that the care of the self involves complex relations with others. He tells us in *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* that the other is always present in the care of the self. Under the Platonic model, the student requires a teacher to demonstrate his ignorance.³³ Under the Hellenistic model, another person is required to help the individual escape from "the grips of bad habits" in order to constitute the self as one "capable of orienting the will."³⁴ Such spiritual direction takes place in a variety of social relations, from obligatory relations to mutual and reciprocal bonds of friendship. It would appear that the care of the self does not necessarily exclude reciprocal relations with others. The question is: why do practices of spiritual direction generate reciprocal bonds between individuals?

Foucault notes that the care of the self “implies a relation with others insofar as proper care of the self requires listening to the lessons of a master. One needs a guide, a counselor, a friend, someone who will be truthful with you.”³⁵ Although the mention of friendship in this passage is suggestive, the kind of relation with others remains vague. However, the suggestive remark about relations with others can be elaborated further in Foucault’s writings. He writes, for instance, that the teacher-student relation in ancient philosophy is not one of obedience, since the goal of such spiritual guidance is to allow the student to achieve autonomy.³⁶ For example, in the Platonic model,

the master’s position is defined by that which he cares about, which is the care the person he guides may have for himself. . . . The master is the person who cares about the subject’s care of himself, and who finds in his love for his disciple the possibility of caring for the disciple’s care for himself. By loving [his student] disinterestedly, he is then the source and model for the care the boy has for himself as subject.³⁷

It would seem that the teacher-student relation, under the Platonic model, is also an affectionate one. Furthermore, in the Imperial period, spiritual direction in the care of the self can take place in different settings, including “the whole bundle of customary relations of kinship, friendship, and obligation.”³⁸ Foucault adds even in cases of obligation, such as the relation between teacher and student, that

It is sometimes the case that the interplay of the care of the self and the help of the other blends into preexisting relations, giving them a new coloration and a greater warmth. The care of the self—or the attention one devotes to the care that others should take of themselves—appears then as an intensification of social relations.³⁹

If Myers and Allen were right that the care of the self does not require particular relations with concrete others, how can there be an intensification of social relations in the care of the self?

To explain the intensification of social relations as well as to better understand Foucault’s idea of the care of the self, I would like to situate Foucault’s interests in these ancient practices of the self in the context of the corpus of his work. Foucault’s late work marks a shift in emphasis from his earlier studies of disciplinary power. He tells us: Perhaps I’ve insisted too much on the technology of domination and power. I am more and more interested in the interaction between oneself and others and in the technologies of individual domination, the history of how an individual acts upon himself, in the technology of self.⁴⁰ Foucault is well aware that the process of socialization is complex. He tells us,

Governing people is not a way to force people to do what the governor wants; it is always a versatile equilibrium, with complementarity and conflicts between techniques which assure coercion and processes through which the self is constructed or modified by himself.⁴¹

For Foucault, individuals are at liberty to mold themselves through various technologies of the self. As was described in an earlier quotation, these are techniques which allow individuals to work on themselves to become different kinds of subjects. Such technologies, however, could also bind us to categories in which individuals are subjected to social control. As such, we have to

take into account the points where the technologies of domination of individuals over one another have recourse to processes by which the individual acts upon himself. And

conversely, [we have] to take into account the points where the techniques of the self are integrated into structures of coercion or domination. The contact point is . . . what we can call, I think, government.⁴²

Foucault's analyses of government then involve two complementary parts: how individuals direct their own actions as well as those of others, and how institutions and states direct the actions of groups of individuals. The latter connects up with his examination of relations of power and disciplinary techniques, with *Discipline and Punish* and *History of Sexuality, Volume 1* as exemplars of that work. The former is central to the critical project in Foucault's late work, which considers not merely how government imposes laws on individuals but also how individuals mold themselves into subjects.

In his 1980 Dartmouth lectures, Foucault remarks that the problem of the self for the past two centuries has been to find "positive foundations for technologies of the self," foundations in scientific knowledge grounding practices which allow individuals to become subjects.⁴³ However, in so doing, such practices are linked to disciplinary power which "categorizes the individual . . . imposes a truth on him that he must recognize and others have to recognize in him."⁴⁴ For Foucault, the problem of self today is not to seek "either a positive self or the positive foundation of the self"; rather, the problem we face today is "a politics of ourselves"⁴⁵ in which new forms of subjectivity are to be promoted.⁴⁶ The task is to develop those relations to ourselves whereby the subject actively constitutes herself as an ethical agent.⁴⁷

Foucault is aware that the structural features of a subject—i.e., having beliefs and desires, having the capacity to choose and so on⁴⁸—can result in the duplication of social relations whereby the individual is just an effect of power.⁴⁹ What is required to offset such disciplinary effects is for individuals to develop the competencies necessary to practice their freedom. He tells us that what is of interest in ancient ethics is that a strong structure to one's life is provided by developing a relation with oneself, without submitting to normalizing and disciplinary structures telling us how to act.⁵⁰ The structure to their lives thus reflects a link between the person's volition and action, enabling the person to govern herself.⁵¹ Such a relation to oneself—what Foucault calls "ethics"⁵²—is not prescribed by a moral code but rather is a matter of individual choice to pursue,⁵³ by undertaking "self-forming activities."⁵⁴

Establishing a relation to the self is central to Foucault's project of developing new subjectivities. In contemporary society, individuals are made "subjects," categorized and attached to an identity.⁵⁵ In contrast, a "self" is a set of core beliefs and principles that constitute the person's understanding of who she is. The "self" is neither a sovereign universal subject nor some sort of pre-social human nature which individuals strive to realize or to return to. Foucault rejects both notions because there is no such power-free realm. He tells us that "power relations are rooted deep in the social nexus, not a 'supplementary' structure over and above 'society' whose radical effacement one could perhaps dream of ...a society without power relations can only be an abstraction."⁵⁶ Furthermore both notions direct individuals towards conceptions of the "self" that are not their own and away from establishing a relation with their "selves" so that they can understand their own lives. By inserting such a "self" into the process of subject formation— what Foucault calls subjectivation—new forms of subjectivities may emerge, since there is a critical engagement between the way the person understands herself and the forces that affect her.⁵⁷ He remarks:

[Critique] consists in seeing on what type of assumptions, of familiar notions, of established, unexamined ways of thinking that accepted practices are based. Criticism

consists in . . . showing that things are not as obvious as people believe, making it so that what is taken for granted is no longer taken for granted.⁵⁸

Foucault's work on ethics is thus inherently political because it is about forming new subjectivities and resisting the imposition of identities that discipline individuals. If so, this would suggest that the charge that Foucault's work on ethics, the care of the self in particular, does not provide adequate resources for countering the effects of disciplinary power and biopower because such practices further the segmentation of individuals is too hasty.

In this section, I have provided an interpretation of Foucault's puzzling claim that the relation with oneself is ontologically prior in the care of the self which does not carry the connotation of excessive focus on oneself suggested by both Myers and Allen. I have also provided textual evidence that the charge of excessive individualistic focus is wide of the mark. I want now to briefly address a concern stemming from the above discussion before moving on to expand upon Foucault's idea of establishing relations to the self in order to show how collaborative political projects are possible. The worry is that since such critical engagement takes place in history, within power relations, there is no telling whether or not the person has got it 'right' without first establishing some transhistorical normative criteria that take into account all value commitments at once.⁵⁹ Foucault, however, explicitly rejects such an Archimedean approach. He tells us that his project abandons "hope of ever acceding to a point of view that could give us access to any complete and definitive knowledge of what may constitute our historical limits";⁶⁰ rather, the project is provisional and local. One must still provide reasons and evidence, though not cast as universal claims, for why certain practices have to be changed and how. Partial justification can be provided by using hitherto non-problematic practices or discourses. If in time, those practices were to prove problematic, then the critical project would begin again.⁶¹

III

Foucault's interest in the relations to ourselves led him to examine various modes of the care of the self in ancient Greece and Rome. He tells us that the goal of the care of the self in the Greek mode is for young aristocrats to know what they are in order to govern others. Care of the self involves a form of self-knowledge that is "an ontological and not a psychological form of contemplation. . . . [It is] independent of what one could call an exercise of the self upon the self."⁶² As opposed to the Greek mode, Foucault tells us that the goal of the care of the self in the Imperial period is to constitute oneself as a "morally valid" subject.⁶³ In order to accomplish that, one must strive to constitute "the self as the object capable of orientating the will" through various spiritual exercises.⁶⁴ He adds that the goal is to constitute "a self which could at the same time and without discontinuity be subject of knowledge and subject of will."⁶⁵ As an ethical agent, one must minimally have a coherent structure guiding one's life; one must have a will.

At the other pole, a state the Stoics call *stultitia*, the individual, the *stultus*, is not "settled on anything and not satisfied by anything."⁶⁶ The *stultus* does not reflect on his desires and does not "direct his attention and will to a precise and well-determined end"; his life lacks cohesion.⁶⁷ The *stultus* is an individual "who does not want the self."⁶⁸ By caring for the self, one avoids the bog of *stultitia* by inserting the self in the process of subjectivation, constituting oneself as a morally valid subject. The goal of self-

formation in the Stoic mode has one significant advantage over the other modes: it requires neither the ontological contemplation in the Platonic mode nor the sacrifice of the self as in the Christian mode. It is in this context that we should understand Myers's contention that Foucault favors the Stoic mode of the care of the self, where individuals practiced the care for the self its own sake. But note further that the assertion of the self in Foucault's account of ethics goes beyond the minimal requirement of having ethical agents deliberate and endorse their first-order volitions, which may only reproduce the disciplinary effects on the person. The insertion of the self in practices of the care of the self then is the care for the way these beliefs and volitions are developed and which will help steer a person into what she wants to become.

Foucault's discussion of the *stultus* parallels Harry Frankfurt's discussion of the wanton in his work on "personal autonomy."⁶⁹ Frankfurt joins Foucault in emphasizing the centrality of the will in considerations of autonomous agency. Frankfurt considers the capacity to deliberate on one's own desires, what he calls second-order volitions—"to want a certain desire to be [one's] will"⁷⁰—an essential feature of personhood. Persons lacking second-order volitions are wantons. A wanton, Frankfurt remarks,

does not care about his will. His desires move him to do certain things, without its being true of him either that he wants to be moved by those desires or that he prefers to be moved by other desires. . . . He is not concerned with the desirability of his desires themselves. He ignores the question of what his will is to be.⁷¹

As with the *stultus*, there is a non-connection between the will and the individual in the wanton.

I mention Frankfurt's discussion of the wanton in this context because I want to make use of his idea of "care" in explaining Foucault's insistence that the practices of the care of the self involve complex and sometimes reciprocal relations with others, in spite of the strong hint of excessive individualism. It is not my intention, however, in comparing Foucault to Frankfurt to suggest that Foucault is Frankfurtian on the concepts of the "will" and "care." Rather, I want to construct a line of argument by using Frankfurt's analysis of "care" which Foucault does not provide.⁷²

For Frankfurt the formation of a person's will is most centrally connected with coming to care about something, and it is coming to care about something that gives a cohesive structure to one's life.⁷³ As opposed to having no cohesion, as with the *stultus* or the wanton, he tells us that "the moments in the life of a person who cares about something [are not linked] by formal relations of sequentiality. The person necessarily binds them together, and . . . in richer ways. This both entails and is entailed by his continuing concern with what he does with himself and with what goes on in his life."⁷⁴ Given the central role that the concept of "care" plays in Frankfurt's discussion, his analysis of "care" may shed light on how practices of the care of the self can lead to an intensification of social relations.

Frankfurt points out that "caring" coincides with the idea of something guiding a person's life and conduct. Caring is "being active in a particular way, and the activity is essentially a reflexive one . . . [because] the agent purposefully does something with herself."⁷⁵ A person who cares about something identifies with that which she cares about. She is concerned with what concerns the object of her care. She makes herself vulnerable to losses if what she cares about is diminished, and is proud of the success if what she cares about succeeds. In short, she is invested in the object of care. Frankfurt goes so far as to

claim that the relation with the object of care “tends to selflessness. [Her] attention is not merely concentrated upon the object; it is somehow fixed or seized by the object. [She] is guided by its characteristics rather than primarily [her] own.”⁷⁶

On this view, if a person cared for something, she would constitute herself in such a way that there is a bond with that which she cared about. It is this bond, I suggest, which allows for the intensification of the relation between a person and what she cares about. Annette Baier has criticized Frankfurt’s account of caring for being vulnerable to fanaticism.⁷⁷ Such captivation of the person by the object of care as to be rendered selfless would seem to be a symptom of the fanatic. Nonetheless, even she remarks that “a reliable sign of real caring is the intolerance of ignorance about the current state of what we care about,” so much so that one needs “constant contact with and news about the welfare of what is cared about.”⁷⁸ Both Baier and Frankfurt appear to agree that there has to be a strong bond with the object of care if a person is to care about anything at all.

One might object here that if Frankfurt’s discussion of care were to be applied to Foucault’s idea of care of the self, then wouldn’t this suggest that the person engaged in caring for her “self” that she does so selflessly, i.e., fanatically, as Baier notes, focused on herself? How can meaningful relations with concrete others develop? Wouldn’t this lead to excessive individualism? To answer this objection, it should be noted that Foucault’s idea of care of the self is individualistic in that it is the person who must develop the proper relation to the self by herself. She has to choose to do so; no one else can do it for her. But this commitment to individualism is tempered by the fact that, as Foucault notes, the practices of care always involve others, at least one other. The person cannot develop the proper relation to the self—develop and maintain her “self”—alone. These helpful others care about the person developing the right attitude towards the self for the person’s own sake.⁷⁹ Others are needed to help her develop and master the necessary techniques to develop the self and to maintain it. This requires establishing close relations with each other based on frankness (parrhesia), which allows for the emergence of affectionate reciprocal bonds.

Foucault notes that the care of the self “implies a relation with others insofar as proper care of the self requires listening to the lessons of a master. One needs a guide, a counselor, a friend, someone who will be truthful with you.”⁸⁰ In the Stoic mode, another person is required to help the individual to escape from “the grips of bad habits.”⁸¹ Such spiritual guidance, he tells us,

Could not take place without an intense affective relationship of friendship between . . . the guide and the person being guided. And this guidance requires a certain ethics of speech [Parrhesia]. . . . Parrhesia [or frank speech] is opening of the heart, the need for the two partners to conceal nothing from each other and to speak to each other frankly.⁸²

For instance, Foucault notes the affectionate tone in the frank exchanges between Seneca and Lucilius.⁸³ And in one letter Seneca tells Lucilius: “I am cheering on one who is in the race and so in turn cheers me on.”⁸⁴

The reason for the presence of a reciprocal bond is that the individuals involved in spiritual guidance are sharing details about their lives in an open and truthful way since there is a harmonization between speech and conduct of the individuals involved in such relationships.⁸⁵ This explains Foucault’s comment that practices of the care of the self can lead to an intensification of social relations. If this line

of argument is correct, then affectionate reciprocal bonds are not only possible in Foucault's account of the care of the self, they are also needed for the continual maintenance of one's sense of self. One would not expect an intense relation to develop from the onset in every instance, but in time an intense relation may well develop. While individuals must undergo the process of self-formation themselves, I have shown how relations with oneself and relations with others are linked in Foucault's account of the care of the self. Myers' contention that Foucault's account of the care of the self carries with it a whiff of solipsism would seem to be premature.

IV

Still, there are concerns that the aim of the care of the self does not mesh with those of political engagements with others. The worry is that although practices of the care of the self involve relations with concrete others, it may still not be enough to counter the depoliticizing effects of disciplinary power and biopower, because those very relations can turn in on themselves, isolating those individuals from the broader community. This is Myers' concern that solipsism is never far from Foucault's project of self-cultivation. She insists that it would be different if one started thinking about political possibilities with Foucault's project of reflexive relations with oneself rather than with the aim of building a common world. Although Foucault tips the balance in favor of projects of self-realization over mutual fulfillment with society serving as the locus of such political projects,⁸⁶ I contend that the emphasis on self-formation does not foreclose the possibility of political engagements with others in projects that overcome collectively experienced obstacles, as I shall argue below.

To begin to address this objection, it should be noted that practices of self-formation require that individuals be able to cultivate and exercise their autonomy.⁸⁷ The skills and competencies a person needs to exercise her autonomy are developed, fostered, and enhanced in relation with others.⁸⁸ She must also have the opportunity to explore other perspectives, be able to critically revise her own views, to experiment with different versions, and in certain circumstances to explain her choices to her peers. After all, a person's comportment, her ethos, is open to public scrutiny. These requirements put constraints on the kind of social environment in which individuals can practice their autonomy. Autonomy, too, is socially situated. A person's ability to pursue her projects and to find fulfillment through them would not be possible without reference to the various values, traditions, institutions and relations with others that make such pursuits possible—that is, in the context of civic engagement in a community.⁸⁹ If this line of reasoning is cogent, it points to a possible intersection between practices of self-formation and political practices. Political engagements with others will be required when there are obstacles in which individuals are not free to act on various possibilities, i.e., as agents or groups of agents—at which time, there will be need for collaboration with others to overcome these blockages.⁹⁰

But what will motivate individuals pursuing self-formation in the care of the self to engage politically with others? I suggest that an argument can be developed based on the concept of "care." As was noted earlier, "care" implies certain obligations on individuals in caring for something; these demands are in the very "logic" of caring.⁹¹ For instance, if I care about my son's health, then I must care about gathering truths about children's health in general. It is incumbent on me to find out, in a conscientious manner, reliable information about children's health. Such information will inform my

actions in dealing with issues concerning my son's health. Similarly, those individuals engaged in caring for the self would seek out what self-formation—the insertion of the self in the process of subjectivation—requires, such as the fostering and cultivation of the capacities to exercise one's autonomy, the exploration of other possibilities, etc., as well as the social conditions necessary for individuals to practice their autonomy. They can well imagine what it would be like if their ability to pursue their projects were frustrated and if the resources were available to them to overcome such obstacles. Since most individuals also care about what others care about, unless one is a misanthrope, then these individuals can also imagine what it would be like for others likewise facing such hurdles in attempting to practice their autonomy. They might then be motivated to join in their struggles. I say "might" because many other factors may intervene, as such demands clash with other things individuals may care about—e.g., one's family—or even sheer cowardice. Nonetheless, the possibility of engaging politically with others is a live one. And in certain cases counter-powers may emerge from these engagements with others. Even if counter-powers do emerge, much more need to be in place if blockages are to be overcome. Foucault remarks that "Liberation is sometimes the political or historical condition for a practice of freedom. . . . But this liberation [only] paves the way for new power relationships, which must be controlled by practices of freedom."⁹²

Foucault, however, cautions that in forging such counter-powers, "perhaps one must not be for consensuality, but one must be against nonconsensuality."⁹³ His point is that the aim of seeking consensus is itself played within a system of power relations, and is not without its own exclusionary effects. Rather, we should work against the exclusion of other perspectives. He adds that we need to "ask oneself what proportion of nonconsensuality is implied in such a power relationship, and whether the degree of nonconsensuality is necessary or not, and then one may question every power relation to that extent."⁹⁴ Working with different, perhaps even oppositional, points of view foregrounds the present constellation of values and traditions framing our relations to one another and to ourselves and allows us to challenge them by viewing the values and traditions differently. This is why Foucault does not privilege the idea of a community, a "we," in his discussions on politics. He tells us "the 'we' must not be previous to the question; it can only be the result—and the necessarily temporary result—of the question as it is posed in the new terms in which one formulates it."⁹⁵ In conjunction with the practice of parrhesia, the joint examination of values and norms in place at present may give rise to other voices, other possibilities.

Notice that the line of argument above is not based on the recognition of common interests. This is the worry of some deliberative democratic theorists, what Rawls calls *modus vivendi* agreements, since such efforts are inescapably unstable.⁹⁶ But the line of argument used in imaginative linkages with others points in another direction than mere convenience in achieving a common goal. They afford individuals the opportunity to better understand the perspective of others. By caring about what others care about—such as what marginalized persons care about—individuals may come to a better insight into the other's point of view without colonizing it.⁹⁷ Through the development of a sympathetic understanding for others, the connection between individuals goes beyond mere utility. Furthermore, this line of reasoning also allows for a response to the objection that such imaginative linkages with others likewise frustrated in pursuing their projects runs afoul of the observation that not all marginalized groups are engaged in progressive politics, such as sexist and racist groups. In caring about what these individuals care about, it will become clear rather quickly that their stances are closely linked with discrimination against and domination of others. These are not individuals who support others exercising their autonomy.

The Rawlsian worry about the instability of *modus vivendi* agreements based on mutual advantage echoes an objection that Allen raises against Foucault's account of practices of the self: that the value of politics with others is purely strategic or instrumental. Ladelle McWhorter, for instance, draws such an inference from Foucault's account of practices of the self. McWhorter tells us that "even though my ethical work must be my own, I need the work of other people. So I'll be inclined to pay some attention to others and to care about and even foster at least some of their work."⁹⁸ One is inclined to care for others because it will promote one's own development. Allen notes that although Foucault himself does not explicitly draw an instrumental conclusion, insofar as he is committed to the view that "power is games of strategy"⁹⁹ and that all social relations—including those in care of the self—involve power, all social relations for Foucault would have a strategic component.¹⁰⁰ In Allen's view, instrumental actions for Foucault are identical with strategic actions which cannot be mutual or reciprocal. Or, to put the point differently, actions aiming at mutuality cannot contain instrumental or strategic elements.

However, for Foucault, relations with concrete others are integral for the formation and maintenance of the self in the care of the self. These relations with others are not mere instrumental actions—in McWhorter's sense of "I'll help you because that is the only way that you will help me"—at all. Rather, help from others is essential because no one can develop and maintain her "self" by herself. And these others are motivated to help for the person's own sake, so that she can direct herself. Further, there is strong textual evidence that Foucault's account of power is not aimed at controlling the other. He tells us in "Subject and Power" that relations of power involve "partners" and do not involve a "renunciation of freedom."¹⁰¹ Furthermore, the other in such relations is "recognized and maintained to the very end as a subject who acts."¹⁰² On Foucault's account, then, relations of power as opposed to relations of domination do not involve reducing the other to only one course of action, but rather a whole field of possibilities is opened up. Further, if we understand relations of power less as aiming at control of others and more broadly as influencing one another's behavior in coordinating actions, then we can see that Allen's conception of strategic and reciprocal relations as mutually exclusive is open to question.

Friendship, a paradigm of reciprocal relations, often has strategic aspects, if we understand the term "strategic" broadly, as Foucault does. Friends often try to influence each other's views and behavior by using various devices without seeking to control or deceive each other. On the other hand, a strategic interaction may yet lead to the development of a cooperative relation. Take for instance the interaction between an instructor and her student. The student may ask for advice about whether or not to take a particular course on-line. The instructor may list the disadvantages of on-line learning, such as the timesensitive constraints of those courses as well as list the advantages of taking the course in-class—class discussions for example may lead to better understanding of the concepts than mere rote learning. The instructor's role is to allow the student to examine her choices against a wider context. She is not there to tell the student what to do. If the exchange between instructor and student were a lively and honest one, then it may lead to a warmer and open connection between the two than the formal student-teacher relationship. Strategic relations that aim at influencing the behavior of others need not then be based on control and may yet go beyond coordinating of actions in so far as frank speaking (*parrhesia*) is involved, which is the crux of Foucault's claim that the care of the self can lead to an intensification of social relations with others.

V

By way of conclusion, I have argued in this essay that the goal of undergoing practices of the care of the self for Foucault is to develop a “self” and to insert it in the process of subjectivation. As such, Foucault’s idea of care of the self is committed to a form of individualism: the person must choose to develop an ongoing relation with herself by herself; no one else can do it for her. But this form of individualism is not the excessive kind charged by his critics like Myers and Allen. Pace these critics, this project is pursued with others who are fellow actors or partners. Further, political engagement with others will also have value for the sake of individuals developing and practicing their autonomy. While practices of the care of the self do not in themselves directly lead to political engagement with others, they do not foreclose those possibilities either. NOTES

1. Ella Myers, “Resisting Foucauldian Ethics: Associative Politics and the Limits of the Care of the Self,” *Contemporary Political Theory* 7 (2008): 127.
2. *Ibid.*, 125.
3. *Ibid.*, 138.
4. Amy Allen, “Foucault, Feminism and the Self,” in Diana Taylor and Karen Vintges, eds., *Feminism and the Final Foucault* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press: 2004), 246. Johanna Oksala cites Foucault’s remark about ontological priority as well. In her view, the claim of the ontological priority of the relation to oneself is problematic because relationships with others have no role to play in the ethical which originates from a certain kind of relationship to oneself. She contends that the basic ethical question concerns relationships with others, and not to oneself. Foucault on Freedom (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 194–95. Addressing this issue would be the subject of another paper. However, it should be noted that not all commentators—Cressida Heyes, “Foucault goes to Weight Watchers,” *Hypatia* ²¹ (2006): 126–49, for example—treat the claim of ontological priority as problematic.
5. Allen, “Foucault, Feminism and the Self,” 236–37.
6. Lois McNay, *Foucault and Feminism: Power, Gender, and the Self* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992), 152–65. See also Kate Soper, “Productive Contradiction,” in Caroline Ramazanoglu, ed., *Up Against Foucault* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 35–36.
7. “The Ethics of the Concern for the Self,” 287.
8. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 201, cited in Myers, “Resisting Foucauldian Ethics,” 129.
9. *Discipline and Punish*, 219, cited in Myers, “Resisting Foucauldian Ethics,” 130.
10. Myers, “Resisting Foucauldian Ethics,” 133.
11. *Ibid.*, 134.
12. *Ibid.*, 135.

13. Michel Foucault, "The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom," in *Essential Works of Foucault, vol. I: Ethics*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: The New Press 1997), 286.

14. Myers, "Resisting Foucauldian Ethics," 137–38.

15. *Ibid.*, 138.

16. *Ibid.*, 134.

17. 1997b, ¹³

18. Meyers, "Resisting Foucauldian Ethics," 142.

19. *Ibid.*, 138.

20. Allen, "Foucault, Feminism and the Self," 239. Foucault reminds us that practices of the self are "not something the individual invents." ("The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom," 291).

21. Foucault, for example, remarks that "around the care of the self, there developed an entire activity of speaking and writing in which the work of oneself on oneself and communication with others were linked together. Here we touch on one of the most important aspects of this activity devoted to oneself: it constituted, not an exercise in solitude, but a true social practice." *The History of Sexuality, Vol. III: The Care of the Self*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1986), 51. Margaret McLaren cites this passage to support the contention that relations with others play a more prominent role in practices of care of the self. However, she does not elaborate on why it is that care of the self is a "true" social practice. "Foucault and the Subject of Feminism," *Social Theory and Practice* ²³ (1997): 119.

22. Allen, "Foucault, Feminism and the Self," 245.

23. Michel Foucault, "Self Writing" in *Essential Works of Foucault, vol. I*, 216, cited in Allen, "Foucault, Feminism and the Self," 246.

24. *Ibid.*

25. Michel Foucault, "About the Beginning of The Hermeneutics of the Self: Two Lectures at Dartmouth," *Political Theory* ²¹ (1993): 203; italics added.

26. Allen, "Foucault, Feminism and the Self," 246.

27. *Ibid.*, 238. Allen also cites Jean Grimshaw's criticism that Foucault "does not do more than 'pay lip service' to the idea of the social in his analysis of technologies of the self," for his account focuses on "the relation to self of a few elite males; and it is noteworthy that those with whom they have relationships seem to be thought of as instruments through which they fashion their own freedom" (cited in "Foucault, Feminism and the Self," 238). However, the idea of relations being instrumental, or strategic, is problematic if it is taken to be a "pure" type. For even relations that are evidently mutual—say the relation between parent and child, which may arguably be the paradigmatic case of mutuality—are not themselves devoid of strategic elements.

28. Ibid., 246.

29. Ibid., 248.

30. Foucault emphasizes the importance of autonomy in his late work, especially in the context of self-formation. He tells us in “What is Enlightenment?” that the project of a critical ontology of ourselves, a central theme in his late work, is oriented towards an examination of “what is not or is no longer indispensable © DePaul University 20¹³ SELF AND OTHERS 1¹¹ for the constitution of ourselves as autonomous subjects.” “What is Enlightenment?” in *Essential Works of Foucault*, vol. I, 313.

31. Allen, “Foucault, Feminism and the Self,” 246.

32. I would like to thank my colleague Rebekah Johnston for helping me make this point clearer.

33. Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, trans. Graeme Burchell (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 57–58.

34. Ibid., 129, 133.

35. Foucault, “The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom,” 287.

36. Foucault, “About the Beginning of The Hermeneutics of the Self,” 205.

37. Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 58–59.

38. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. III, 52–53.

39. Ibid., 53; italics added.

40. Michel Foucault, “Technologies of the Self,” in *Essential Works of Foucault*, vol. I, 225.

41. Foucault, “About the beginning of The Hermeneutics of the Self,” 203–04. Foucault attributes such exercising of power over oneself and others to an earlier notion of government. Rather than the contemporary understanding of government as political institutions and the legitimation of those institutions, the earlier notion of government includes “how to govern oneself, how to be governed, how to govern others, by whom the people will accept being governed, how to become the best possible governor” and so on. “Governmentality,” in *Essential Works of Foucault*, vol. I, 229. He adds that to govern, in this sense, “is to structure the possible field of action of others.” “The Subject and Power,” in *Essential Works of Foucault*, Vol. III, 341. Foucault’s work on the totality of governmental practices, which he calls governmentality, remains incomplete. Nonetheless, given the broad sense of government, he warns against interpreting the idea of government as replacing that of discipline, for disciplinary techniques are still implicated in governmental technologies (“Governmentality,” 243).

42. Foucault, “About the beginning of The Hermeneutics of the Self,” 203. Elsewhere, Foucault tells us that “what makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn’t only weigh on us as a force that says no; it also traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network that runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repressive.” “Truth and Power,” in *Essential Works of Foucault*, Vol. III, 119.

43. Foucault, "About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self," 222.
44. Foucault, "The Subject and Power," 331.
45. Foucault, "About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self," 222.
46. Foucault, "The Subject and Power," 336.
47. Foucault, "The Ethics of the Concern of the Self," 291; "On the Genealogy of Ethics," 263.
48. David Weberman, "Are Freedom and Anti-humanism Compatible? The Case of Foucault and Butler," *Constellations* 7 (2000): 258.
49. Mark Bevir interprets Foucault as making such a claim in his argument that Foucault is committed to the rejection of autonomy. "Foucault and Critique: Deploying Agency against Autonomy," *Political Theory* 27 (1999): 65.
50. Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics," 260, 263.
51. Elsewhere, Foucault describes the kind of self in which there is unity of knowledge and will as the "gnomic self" ("About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self," 209–10).
52. In an interview, Foucault tells us that ethics is "the relation with yourself when you act" and distinguishes his view of ethics from that of "a code that would tell us how to act." "Friendship as a Way of Life," in *Essential Works of Foucault*, vol. I, 131).
53. Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics," 270–71.
54. *Ibid.*, 265.
55. Foucault, "The Subject and Power," 331.
56. *Ibid.*, 343.
57. I thank Russell Anderson for this point.
58. Michel Foucault, "So Is It Important to Think?" in *Essential Works of Foucault*, Vol. III, 456. Elsewhere Foucault describes the work of critique as follows: "[Critique] is the movement by which the subject gives himself the right to question truth on its effects of power and questions power on its discourses of truth. . . . [Critique] will be the act of voluntary insubordination, that of reflected intractability. Critique would essentially ensure the desubjugation of the subject in what we would call . . . the politics of truth." "What is Critique," in *The Essential Foucault*, ed. Paul Rabinow and Nicholas Rose (New York: The New Press, 2003), 267.
59. Robert Noggle, "The Public Conception of Autonomy and Critical Self-Reflection," *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 35 (1997): 510. The topic of normative criteria is huge. Although the issue is beyond the © DePaul University 2013 PHILOSOPHY TODAY 1¹² scope of this essay, here I would like to suggest a line of argument that Foucault can deploy to meet the criticism.

60. Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" 316.

61. James Tully tells us that "the modification in practice provides in turn a test against which the original conceptual tools are assessed and reformulated and put into practice again, thereby forming a 'permanent critique.'" "To Think and Act Differently: Foucault's Four Reciprocal Objections to Habermas' Theory," in Samantha Ashenden and David Owen, eds., *Foucault Contra Habermas* (London: Sage 1999), 99.

62. Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics," 275–76.

63. Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 129.

64. *Ibid.*, 133.

65. Foucault, "About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self," 209.

66. Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 130.

67. *Ibid.*, 131–32.

68. *Ibid.*, 133.

69. Amy Allen similarly makes use of contemporary debates in personal autonomy in her interpretation of Foucault's critique of the liberal conception of "autonomy." She notes the intersection between Foucault's account of autonomous agency and contemporary conceptions of autonomy in Anglo-American philosophy in that they both focus on critical reflection on one's desires, values, normative commitments, and so on. She cites Frankfurt as an exemplar of what she describes as the structural account of autonomy. Such an account focuses on the proper relationship between current higher and lower-order desires. She further argues that "Foucault endorses a kind of structural account of autonomy and connects it with up with the historical constraint that emerges from his genealogical critique." "Foucault, Autonomy and the Genetic Fallacy," unpublished manuscript, 9.

70. Harry Frankfurt, "Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person," in *The Importance of What We Care About* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 16.

71. *Ibid.*, 17.

72. The comparison with Frankfurt, in particular the emphasis on the identification with one's desires, values, and normative commitments through self-examination, underscores the importance of selfreflection in Foucault's late work in general, and his discussion of autonomy in particular.

73. Harry Frankfurt, "The Importance of What We Care About," in *The Importance of What We Care About*, 91.

74. *Ibid.*, 83–84.

75. *Ibid.*, 89.

76. *Ibid.* In his recent work, Frankfurt favors the use of "disintereste" over that of "selflessness." He writes, "To say that a lover is disinterested means merely that he desires the good of his beloved for its

own sake rather than for the sake of anything else.” “Autonomy, Necessity, and Love,” in *Necessity, Volition and Love* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 168.

77. Annette Baier, “Caring about Caring: A Reply to Frankfurt,” in *Postures of the Mind* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1985), 93.

78. *Ibid.*, 84.

79. Foucault, “About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self,” 205; *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 58–59

80. Foucault, “The Ethics of the Concern of the Self,” 287.

81. Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 129.

82. *Ibid.*, 137.

83. Seneca does not hesitate to write Lucilius about his weaknesses and battles, and to seek his advice (Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. III, 49).

84. *Ibid.*, 53.

85. Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 402. Given the intensity of such concern, it is perhaps natural to compare it with love. Foucault notes the strong affectionate bond between Marcus Aurelius, and his teacher Fronto, whom he addresses as “my love, my delight” (*ibid.*, 158–59). One can also point to Foucault’s remark about the master’s disinterested love of his student under the Platonic model. The master “finds in his love of his disciple the possibility of caring for the disciple’s care for himself” (*ibid.*, 59). Foucault also tells us that parrhesia encourages good will (*eunoia*) not only between the teacher and students, but between the students themselves in the Hellenistic period (*ibid.*, 389, 407).

86. David Ingram, “Foucault and Habermas,” in Gary Gutting, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*, 2nd. ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 270.

87. Note though that not all activities in self-cultivation need be political—the pursuit of philatelists for example.

88. John Santiago, “Personal Autonomy: What’s Content Got to Do with It,” *Social Theory and Practice*, ³¹(2005):

88. See also Diana Meyers’s account of the skills and competencies that a person must develop in order to effectively exercise her autonomy: “Intersectional Identity and the Authentic Self,” in Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar, eds., *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency and the Social Self* (New York: Oxford University Press 2000), 151–80.

89. Ingram, “Foucault and Habermas,” 266–70.

90. Foucault, “The Ethics of the Concern of the Self,” 2⁸³

91. Linda Zagzebski, "Epistemic Value and the Primacy of What We Care About," *Philosophical Papers* ³³(2004): 353.
92. Foucault, "The Ethics of the Concern of the Self," 283; italics added.
93. "Politics and Ethics," in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Vintage Books, 1984), 379.
94. *Ibid.*
95. Foucault, "Polemics, Politics and Problematizations," in *The Foucault Reader*, 385.
96. John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 145.
97. Catrina Mackenzie, "Imagining Other Lives," *Philosophical Papers* ³⁵(2006): 321.
98. Cited in Allen, "Foucault, Feminism, and the Self," 238.
99. Foucault, "The Ethics of the Concern for the Self," 298.
100. Allen, "Foucault, Feminism, and the Self," 249.
101. Foucault, "The Subject and Power," 340.
102. *Ibid.*