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**Stiegler, Foucault, and Epictetus:
The Therapeutics of Reading and Writing**

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Abstract

Why does Bernard Stiegler speak of “this culture, which I have named, after Epictetus, my *melete*?” In the first part of this article, I elucidate Stiegler’s claims about both Stoic exercises of reading and writing and their significance for the interpretive questions he has adapted from Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. In particular, I address the relations among care for oneself and others, the use of material technologies, and resistance to subjection or “freedom.” In the second part, I consider the merits and limitations of Stiegler’s comments about reading and writing in Stoicism, with particular attention to Epictetus. We will see that Stiegler’s interpretive framework casts considerable light on ancient texts and contexts, on the condition that it be combined with close reading of ancient texts and engagement with specialist scholarship. Finally, in the conclusion, I will suggest that the history of technology in Epictetus’ time contributes to a debate about Stiegler’s theories.

Introduction. Epictetus and Stiegler’s *Meletē*

In “How I Became a Philosopher,”¹ Bernard Stiegler describes his “passage to the act” of philosophizing. This “becoming-a-philosopher” took place during his five-year incarceration for armed robbery, which imposed a “suspension” of unreflective routine activity (AO, 11–24). In this state of suspension, Stiegler created a system of exercises of reading, writing, and reflecting on his material, technological, and social contexts (AO, 28). He connects this self-cultivation with the Stoic Epictetus:

¹ Bernard Stiegler, “How I Became a Philosopher,” in *Acting Out*, (tr.) D. Barison, D. Ross, and P. Crogan (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 1–35. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as AO.

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One perceives with astonishment that, in that cell, one is much more free, or at least that liberty is more *accessible* there, much purer, appearing then essentially as *fragility*, as what is *intrinsically* fragile, that which must be made the object of the whole of one's care, of a veritable cult, of culture. This culture which I have named, after Epictetus, my *melete*.² (AO, 28)

This quotation raises several questions. The most basic of these is why Stiegler mentions the Stoic philosopher Epictetus here. Compared to Plato and Aristotle, the Stoics receive little attention in Stiegler's numerous publications. So why does he give them pride of place when describing what he calls his philosophical "vocation" (AO, 1–2)? Next, what is the connection between what Stiegler calls his "culture" and *meletē* in the works of Epictetus? Third and last, what does this have to do with the "fragility" of "liberty" for either Stiegler or Stoicism?

These questions exemplify the difficulty of understanding Stiegler's claims about Stoic thinkers or ideas. In this article I will let the answers emerge from an exploration of his reception of Stoic exercises of reading and writing. Although Stiegler alludes to these exercises many times in his oeuvre,³ his comments are compressed, elliptical, and hard to evaluate.⁴ Moreover, they presume understanding not only of his larger philosophical project, but also of Jacques Derrida's

² I will leave Greek words in quotations exactly as they are printed, but correct and standardize the use of macrons when I use the words myself.

³ The following list does not pretend to be exhaustive: Bernard Stiegler, *Taking Care of Youth and the Generations*, (tr.) S. Barker (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 112–18, 135–38, 154–59; hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as TC; Stiegler, *The Decadence of Industrial Democracies*, (tr.) D. Ross and S. Arnold (Cambridge: Polity, 2011), 74–85, hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as DID; Stiegler, "Biopower, Psychopower, and the Logic of the Scapegoat," [<http://arsindustrialis.org/node/2924>], accessed Dec. 30, 2014, hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as "Biopower"; *What Makes Life Worth Living: On Pharmacology*, (tr.) D. Ross (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), 84, hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as WML; Stiegler, "Chute et élévation: L'Apologie de Simondon," *Revue philosophique de la France et de l'étranger* 131 (2006) 325–341, here 329, henceforth referred to parenthetically as CE.

⁴ Compare Christina Howells and Gerald Moore: "The montage style of his tortuously long sentences, which frequently 'cut' from one part of the history of philosophy to another, and between contemporary politics, science, and technology, doubtless adds to the sense of reading as if clicking through hyperlinks, laid out by an eclectic, impatient writer" ("Introduction," in *Stiegler and Technics*, (ed.) C. Howells and G. Moore [Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013], 9).

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Forthcoming in *Symposium: The Canadian Journal of Continental Philosophy*, issue 24.2 analysis of Plato's *Phaedrus* and two key articles by Michel Foucault. In Part One I will therefore elucidate Stiegler's claims about both Stoic textual exercises and their significance for the interpretive questions he has adapted from Foucault and Derrida. In particular, I will address the relations among care for oneself and others, the use of material technologies, and resistance to subjection or "freedom." In Part Two I will consider the merits and limitations of Stiegler's comments about reading and writing in Stoicism, with particular attention to Epictetus. We will see that Stiegler's interpretive framework casts considerable light on ancient texts and contexts, on the condition that it be combined with close reading of ancient texts and engagement with specialist scholarship. Finally, in the conclusion, I will suggest that this ancient material contributes to a debate about Stiegler's theories.

1. Stiegler, Foucault, and Stoic "Self Writing"

Stiegler's most detailed engagement with Stoic practices of reading and writing appear in *The Decadence of Industrial Democracies* and *Taking Care of Youth and the Generations* (TC, 112–18, 135–8, 154–9; DID, 74–85). These remarks are mediated by Jacques Derrida's reading of Plato's *Phaedrus* in "Plato's Pharmacy."⁵ More importantly, they are also mediated by Michel Foucault's articles "Self Writing" and the summary of his lectures on "Technologies of the Self" at the University of Vermont in 1982.⁶ I shall also refer to parallel passages in Foucault's *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, though Stiegler himself does not cite them.⁷ We will see that Stoic discussions of

⁵ In Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, (tr.) B. Johnson (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2004), 69–186, hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as PPh.

⁶ Both are in Michel Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, (ed.) P. Rabinow, (tr.) R. Hurley and others (London: Penguin, 2000), 207–22 and 223–51, hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as "SW" and "TS." Stiegler consults both in *Dits et écrits 1954–1988: IV, 1980–1988*, (ed.) D. Defert and F. Ewald (Paris: Gallimard, 1994).

⁷ Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France 1981–1982*, (ed.) F. Gros, (tr.) G. Burchell (New York: Picador, 2005), 356–67. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as HSu. See also Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité, Vol. 4: Les aveux de la chair*, (ed.) F. Gros (Paris: Gallimard, 2018), 108–113.

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reading and writing are a platform for Stiegler's critique of Foucault.⁸ Like Foucault, Stiegler sees

in Stoic techniques of self-cultivation a resource for critiquing the processes of "subjectivation" and

"governmentality" in his own time. Stiegler's combination of Derrida-reading-Plato with Foucault-

reading-Stoicism thus amounts to a new move in the familiar game of opposing "Platonism" to its

others, especially "sophistics" or Stoicism, in order to elaborate philosophical positions with

contemporary relevance.⁹ But Stiegler argues that both Derrida's and Foucault's interpretive

frameworks fall short of what is necessary today for critiquing the relations among material

technologies, care of the self and others, and resistance to power. In this regard, Foucault in

particular has failed to learn what his own analysis of Stoicism shows.

In order to elucidate Stiegler's response to Foucault, first we must remind ourselves of the key features of Foucault's reception of Stoicism. These have been explained by other

commentators,¹⁰ so I will be very concise. In the final years of his life, Foucault reconceived his

ongoing philosophical project as a genealogy of the interlocking processes of self-formation or

"subjectivation," truth-telling or "veridiction," and power over oneself and others or

"governmentality."¹¹ He argued that in "Hellenistic and Roman texts," most prominently including

those of the Roman Stoics Seneca, Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius, and Musonius Rufus, "the care of

the self becomes an autonomous, self-finalized art imparting value to the whole of life" (HSu, 254).

⁸ On Stiegler, Foucault, and writing (but without reference to Stoicism), cf. Sophie Fuggle, "Stiegler and Foucault: The Politics of Care and Self-Writing," in *Stiegler and Technics*, (ed.) C. Howells and G. Moore (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 192–207.

⁹ To give just two prominent examples, compare the Eighteenth Series of Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, (tr.) M. Lester with C. Stivale (London: Bloomsbury, 2004), 145–51; Barbara Cassin, *L'Effet sophistique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), speaks constantly of sophistics as the other of "platonico-aristotélicienne" philosophy.

¹⁰ See Edward McGushin, *Foucault's Askesis: An Introduction to the Philosophical Life* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press), 97–147; Katrina Mitcheson, "Foucault, Stoicism, and Self-Mastery," in *Ethics and Self-Cultivation: Contemporary and Historical Perspectives*, (ed.) M. Dennis and S. Werkhoven (London: Routledge: 2018), 124–40; and the items in n.7.

¹¹ Michel Foucault, HSu, 252–55; Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 3: The Care of the Self*, (tr.) R. Hurley (London: Penguin, 1990), 3–7; Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others: Lectures at the Collège de France 1982–1983*, (ed.) F. Gros, (tr.) G. Burchell (New York: Picador, 2010), 2–6; Foucault, *The Courage of Truth (The Government of Self and Others II): Lectures at the Collège de France 1983–1984*, (ed.) F. Gros, (tr.) G. Burchell (New York: Picador, 2011), 8–9, 65–68.

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In other words, unlike what Foucault calls “the Platonic model,” Stoicism does not *identify* caring

for yourself with coming to know yourself (*i.e.*, recognizing your ignorance, then recovering

yourself “in the mirror of the intelligible”); and unlike what he calls “the Christian model,” the

Stoics do not *subordinate* caring for yourself to deciphering and renouncing your desires (*i.e.*,

uncovering and “purifying” your hidden temptations in order to make yourself able to receive

scriptural Truth). Rather, the “Hellenistic model” “tends to accentuate and privilege care of the self,

to maintain its autonomy at least with regard to knowledge of the self” (HSu, 254–8; cf. TS, 235–

45).

Foucault sees in this Hellenistic model, of whom he makes the Stoics the primary exponents,¹² a relationship between subjectivation and veridiction that can facilitate criticism of the operations of power in his own time. In a frequently quoted passage, he puts this rather dramatically:

I think we may have to suspect that we find it impossible today to constitute an ethic of the self, even though it may be an urgent, fundamental, and politically indispensable task, if it is true that there is no first or final point of resistance to political power other than the relationship one has to oneself. (HSu, 252)

In a later interview he softens the claim that “there is no first or final point of resistance to political power other than the relationship one has to oneself”;¹³ his considered opinion is that power, as a “mobile field of force relations,” is always also a mobile field of “points, knots, or focuses of resistance.”¹⁴ Yet he clearly believes that subjection to institutions of knowledge and practices of

¹² Stoic authors dominate parts 2–5 of *Care of the Self* and lectures 13–24 of HSu, though in both cases many non-Stoic texts appear as well.

¹³ Michel Foucault, *Foucault Live: Collected Interviews, 1961–1984*, (ed.) S. Lotringer, (tr.) L. Hochroth and J. Johnston (New York: Semiotext(e), 1996), 448: “I do not believe that the only possible point of resistance to political power...lies in the relationship of the self to the self.”

¹⁴ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: The Will to Knowledge*, (tr.) R. Hurley (London: Penguin, 1998), 95–96, hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as WK.

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scrutiny and diagnosis is an important threat to freedom in the twentieth-century, as he exemplifies most famously in *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: The Will to Knowledge*. There he speaks of “bio-power,” whose object is “bodies and their materiality, their forces, energies, sensations, and pleasures” (WK, 155), and whose modality is “to qualify, measure, appraise, and hierarchize” (WK, 144). If Foucault takes inspiration from Stoicism, it is not only because—like all of Greek and Roman antiquity—it pre-dates “the deployment of sexuality” as bio-power, but more particularly because it does not subordinate caring for oneself to knowing oneself (*e.g.*, by qualifying, measuring, appraising, hierarchizing, deciphering, diagnosing, and so on). For this reason, it is an important resource for “resistance to political power” today.

This is the context for Foucault’s article “Self Writing.” Although the article begins with Athanasius’ *Life of Antony* and touches briefly on Plutarch and Epicurus, it is predominantly concerned with Stoic authors: Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius, and especially Seneca. Foucault uses Stoic texts to illustrate his core argument, that “writing—the act of writing for oneself and for others—came...to play a considerable role” in Hellenistic and Roman practices of self-care (SW, 208).

Three points in “Self Writing” are particularly important for understanding Stiegler’s claims about Stoicism. First, Foucault begins with a short discussion of literary *meletē* in Epictetus: “Epictetus...emphasizes several times the role of writing as a personal exercise: one should ‘meditate’ (*meletan*), write (*graphein*), train oneself (*gumnazein*)” (SW, 208–209, referring to Epict. *Disc.* 1.1.25). This “meditation” often involves reading and re-reading (*ibid.*). In “Technologies of the Self,” Foucault explains his understanding of “meditation” and “training”:

“*Meletē* means ‘meditation,’ according to the Latin translation, *meditatio*....The philosophical meditation...is composed of memorizing responses and reactivating those memories by placing oneself in a situation where one can imagine how one would

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react....While *meditatio* is an imaginary experience that trains thought, *gymnasia* is training in a real situation....” (TS 239–40; cf. HSu 356–59)

Since Stiegler always discusses Stoic writing in connection with these Foucauldian articles, this already puts us in a position to explain, at least in a superficial way, why Stiegler speaks about “This culture which I have named, after Epictetus, my *melete*.” I am suggesting that Stiegler has adopted from Foucault the connections among three elements: exercises of reading and writing, the terms *meletē* and *meletan*, and the texts of Epictetus. From this I shall also propose that Stiegler’s literary “culture,” like the Stoic exercises Foucault admires, involves privileging self-care in order to reduce forms of subjection and increase freedom. But as we will see, Stiegler believes Foucault has not fully grasped either what is involved in self-care or in what respect the Stoic model is preferable to the Platonic one.

The second point worth noting in “Self Writing” is Foucault’s insistence that material technology is an indispensable component in the practice of self-care through reading and writing. He discusses two types of texts, namely correspondence and *hupomnēmata* (“notebooks” or “memory aids,” from *hupomimnēskō*, “remind”). Stiegler focuses on the latter, about which Foucault writes,

These *hupomnēmata* should not be thought of simply as a memory support ...; they are not meant to be substituted for a recollection that may fail. They constitute, rather, a material and a framework for exercises to be carried out frequently: reading, rereading, meditating, conversing with oneself and with others. (SW, 210)

Although this is a passing remark for Foucault, for Stiegler it is crucial. Stiegler believes that technical artefacts like notebooks, in which memory and know-how are exteriorized, are fundamental components in the extended systems out of which human anticipations for the future

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arise: compulsions, hopes, fears, desires, plans, and so on. In his first book, *The Fault of*

Epimetheus, he articulates this by saying that there are dynamic interactions between the “organized inorganic matter of the *organon*” and purposeful human organisms and communities.¹⁵ Already in this work he connects this with the problem of written texts in Plato’s *Phaedrus*, the terminology of which resonates with Foucault’s emphasis on Stoic *hypomnēmata*: “In this dialogue’s staging of the conflict between the Sophist and philosopher,” Stiegler writes, “hypomnesic logography menaces the anamnestic memory of knowledge” (FE, 3). This distinction between *hypomnēsis*, meaning “reminding” by knowledge exteriorized in material technologies, and *anamnēsis*, meaning “recollection” in the Platonic sense (*i.e.*, learning truths through critical reasoning), becomes a regular feature in Stiegler’s works. His focus on these particular elements in Plato’s *Phaedrus* betrays the influence of his teacher Derrida (PPh, esp. 104–114).¹⁶ From Derrida Stiegler also adopts the term “*pharmakon*” to designate the “organized inorganic matter” of technical artefacts. As Derrida writes,

Socrates compares the written texts *Phaedrus* has brought along to a drug (*pharmakon*). This *pharmakon*, this “medicine,” this philter, which acts as both remedy and poison...This charm, this spellbinding virtue, this power of fascination, can be...beneficent or maleficent. (PPh, 75).

The term *pharmakon* thus highlights the ambivalent power of written texts in both the formation and the destruction of attentive, caring, critical reasoning. That is why Stiegler says that Derrida “opened up the question of pharmacology—within which the hypomnesic appears as that which constitutes the *condition* of the anamnestic” (WML, 19). However, Stiegler does not believe that Derrida actually undertook such a “pharmacology”—*i.e.*, such a critique of the roles *pharmaka* play

¹⁵ Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 1: The Fault of Epimetheus*, (tr.) R. Beardsworth and G. Collins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 177, hereafter referred to parenthetically as FE.

¹⁶ The preeminent study of this complex and puzzling dialogue remains G. R. F. Ferrari, *Listening to the Cicadas: A Study of Plato’s Phaedrus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

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in the formation and destruction of attention, desire, and reasoning, both individual and collective
(WML, 4, 22–23, 42–54).

Stiegler’s appropriation of “Plato’s Pharmacy” substantially influences his approach to Foucault and Stoic writing exercises. He praises Foucault not only for his incisive critique of bio-power (TC, 12), but also for revealing the importance of *pharmaka* through his study of Stoicism:

Thus, after Plato, *epimēleia* [sic] becomes synonymous with *gnōsis*.... Here [in the first *Alcibiades*] what Plato specifically denies is the need to pass through writing—through the *pharmakon*—as the Sophists did, and as the Epicureans and Stoics will. Foucault shows all of this clearly in “The Writing of the Self.” (TC, 137)

Several elements in this passage require clarification. Stiegler has been discussing the first *Alcibiades* because that is the text whose analysis leads Foucault to argue that “the Platonic model” subordinates self-care (*epimeleia*) to knowledge (*gnōsis*): “To take care of oneself consists of knowing oneself” (Foucault TS, 231, quoted by Stiegler in TC, 137; cf. Foucault HSu, esp. 25–83). What is less transparent is why Stiegler connects this with writing, which is not discussed in the *Alcibiades*, or with the sophists, whom Foucault mentions in neither “Self Writing” nor “Technologies of the Self.” The explanation for both is to be found in Derrida’s reading of Plato. Derrida writes that “it is above all against sophistic that this diatribe against writing [in Plato’s *Phaedrus*] is directed.... The sophist sells the signs and insignia of science: not memory itself (*mnēmē*), only monuments (*hupomnēmata*)...” (PPh, 108–109). Thus Plato’s “diatribe against writing” really amounts to “a preference for one sort of writing over another” (PPh, 149): that is, for writing that contributes to genuine learning (*anamnēsis*) over writing that, by merely supplying words (*hupomnēsis*), impedes that learning. Notwithstanding Stiegler’s statement that “what Plato specifically denies is the need to pass through writing,” elsewhere it is clear that he, too, recognizes in the *Phaedrus* a hierarchy of ways of using written texts: “Plato opposed the Sophists who he

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accused of misusing writing: in their hands it became extremely poisonous” (RE, 7; cf. TC, 21,

110–111). Yet on the whole, both Derrida and Stiegler believe that Plato’s *Phaedrus* remains deeply suspicious of *hupomnēmata*. “*Phaedrus*,” Stiegler writes, “... *opposes* anamnesis to *hypomnesis*: the latter, as a *technics of memory* (and he is concerned here essentially with the writing of books)...is for Plato what renders the soul *forgetful*, replacing *true* memory with *artificial* memory” (AO, 15–16; cf. WML, 19–20, DID, 74–75). That is why, when it comes to the value of writing for self-care, Stiegler contrasts Plato not only with the Stoics and Epicureans, but also with the sophists. He has sutured a Derridean critique of Plato’s attitude toward written texts to Foucault’s critique of “the Platonic model” of self-care as self-knowing, to which Foucault prefers the “Hellenistic model” exemplified by Stoic (and, to a lesser extent, Epicurean) exercises of reading and writing.

That brings us to the third and most complex theme worth highlighting in Foucault’s “Self-Writing,” which is the connections it establishes among self-care and care for others, both as traditional authorities and in personal relationships. Let us begin with the authority of tradition. Foucault writes,

Inside a culture strongly stamped by traditionality, by the recognized value of the already-said, by the recurrence of discourse, by “citational” practice under the seal of antiquity and authority, there developed an ethic quite explicitly oriented by concern for the self toward objectives defined as: withdrawing into oneself, getting in touch with oneself, living with oneself, relying on oneself, benefiting from and enjoying oneself. Such is the aim of the *hupomnēmata*: to make one’s recollection of the fragmentary *logos*, transmitted through teaching, listening, or reading, a means of establishing a relationship of oneself with oneself.... (SW, 211)

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He goes on to explain, via a synthesis of passages from Epictetus' *Discourses* and Seneca's *Moral*

Epistles (esp. *Ep. Mor.* 2, 84; *Disc.* 1.17.11–14), how Stoic exercises reconcile this tension:

deliberate reading must alternate with writing, so that composition can organize in *hupomnēmata*

the otherwise scattered and distracting resources of the past. The aim is a form of subjectivation

troped as bodily transformation:

The role of writing is to constitute, along with all that reading has constituted, a 'body'

(*quicquid lectione collectum est, stilus redigat in corpus* [The pen should make whatever

has been gathered through reading into a body,¹⁷ *Sen. Ep. Mor.* 84.3]). And this body should

be understood not as a body of doctrine but...as the very body of the one who, by

transcribing his readings, has appropriated them and made their truth his own.... (SW, 213)

In other words, the "body" thus generated is neither a system of doctrines nor a person subjected to such a system. Rather, it is a subject whose truth-telling consists in selecting elements from texts inspired by various doctrinal systems—primarily, but not solely, by the Stoic system—in order both to constitute "a share of the past, as it were, toward which it is always possible to turn back, to withdraw" and to address particular circumstances (SW, 212). Thus the turn to oneself passes through study of the past. At the same time, it also passes through personal relationships of epistolary "soul service" (SW, 215). As Foucault argues on the basis of Seneca's and Marcus Aurelius' letters, correspondence not only replicates the subjectivating and truth-telling processes involved in *hupomnēmata*, it also integrates these processes into "the reciprocity of the gaze and the examination" as well as reciprocity of "counsel and aid" (SW, 216).

Foucault's analysis of how Stoicism reconciles retiring into oneself with personal relationships and the authority of tradition foreshadows Stiegler's analysis of the relationships in literary education among "the preindividual," the "I," and the "we." However, Stiegler's

¹⁷ All translations from Greek and Latin are my own.

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interpretive framework for addressing these issues differs substantially from Foucault's. This is where his critique of Foucault becomes trenchant, including what Foucault should have learned about technology, power, and freedom from Stoic arts of self-cultivation.

Let us begin with the preindividual and the I. After quoting Foucault's claim that the composition of *hypomnēmata* aims to make "an equipment of helpful discourses...not only one's own, but oneself" (SW, 210, quoted in part at TC, 155), Stiegler comments, "The passage from 'one's own' to 'oneself' means that what was *mine* becomes *me*, what Foucault calls subjectivation, which is to become subject to the object, its interiorization" (*ibid.*). Here Stiegler represents Foucauldian subjectivation as the genesis of the ego (I/me, French *moi*). In other words, if I engage in Stoic exercises of reading and writing, I become myself by "incorporating" the resources of the past. When Stiegler re-describes this as "to become subject to the object, its interiorization," he is once again reading Foucault's Stoics alongside Derrida's Plato: with Derrida, he means that the "inside" in which I recollect Platonic Ideas anamnesically is always being co-constituted with the "outside" of hypomnesic *pharmaka* (TC, 156; AO, 29–30; WML, 20); with Foucault, he means that Stoic processes of subjectivation always involve selectively appropriating knowledge that has been exteriorized in objects such as books. Stiegler prefers to call this process "individuation," a concept he borrows from Gilbert Simondon ("subjectivation...is a Foucauldian name for individuation," DID, 76).¹⁸ Individuation is the ongoing process whereby I project myself toward completion and unity; although I will never complete myself, the activity of projection sustains my relative somatic and psychical stability (or "metastability") (AO, 3–5; RE, 1–13; WML, 1–4, 65–72). This individuating self-projection requires the preindividual, as Stiegler explains by reference to Seneca's remarks about reading and writing:

Individuation presupposes the preindividual.... The individuation of the preindividual is a function of the 'disparate' [SW, 212] that must be unified, which Seneca compares to the

¹⁸ Simondon presents this theory concisely in "The Genesis of the Individual," in *Incorporations*, (ed.) J. Crary and S. Kwantler (New York: Zone Books, 1992), 297–319.

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gathering of nectar by bees, to digestion, and to the arithmetic operation of addition. (TC,
155, referring to Foucault, SW, 213, and Sen. *Ep. Mor.* 84)

While the preindividual includes the pre-symbolic traces of personal memory (as in the psychoanalytic unconscious: CE, 330–31), Stiegler focuses on knowledge exteriorized in technical objects, from hunting tools to books. Above all, the preindividual is the written *logos* through which thought is “grammatized”—in other words, through which the flux of linguistic sounds is “discretized” alphabetically so that it can be recorded and retrieved “without loss of content” (DID, 75).¹⁹ Thus Stiegler reads Senecan exercises of reading and writing as a process of individuation, *i.e.*, of “metastabilizing” self-projection toward wholeness, by selective appropriation of preindividual knowledge exteriorized in books and *hupomnēmata*.

Now let us turn to education and the we. Speaking still of Seneca’s attitude toward reading and writing, Stiegler writes, “what is most important is that this subjectivation, here strictly psychic, also presents itself as the individuation of a *we*.... In this process, the *ego* [*moi*] becomes itself a *self* that is always already supraegoic, ‘spiritual’” (TC, 155). In Stiegler’s own terms, education involves the “transindividuation” of a system with three types of “organs”: bodily and psychical (the I), social and institutional (the we), and material and technological (*pharmaka*). This is made possible through learners’ and teachers’ shared orientation, as they use these *pharmaka*, toward the idealities that govern their activity. Stiegler’s examples include “art,” “God,” “the beautiful” “justice,” “the French language,” “the triangle,” and “the bee” (AO, 32; DID, 89–92; RE, 10; WML, 32–34, 43–48). These are the objects of “deep” or “concentrated” attention, which Stiegler represents as “desire” and “care” (TC, 72–83, 100–10; RE, *passim*; “Biopower”). That is why he speaks of education in terms of both psychoanalytic “sublimation” or “superegoization” and “spirituality.” Education sublimates and superegoizes insofar as it “defers” or “diverts” psychosomatic, social, and artefactual “drives” by converting them into the “desire” to behave in

¹⁹ Cf. Bernard Stiegler, “Relational Ecology and the Digital Pharmakon,” *Culture Machine* 13 (2012): 1–19, here 5–6, hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as RE.

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accordance with shared principles such as justice and beauty (FE, 185–203; LSC, 58–63; CE, 135–37).²⁰ These principles are “spiritual” for a variety of reasons: they do not “exist,” although their “consistence” makes sense of things that exist;²¹ they are “infinite,” overflowing any concrete articulation of their content; and they “inspire” and “haunt” those who believe in them (AO, 32; WML, 59–76; TC, 34–35, 43; LSC, 58–63, 84–92; “Biopower”). Since their application requires interpretation and reasoning, desire for them is “hermeneutic” and “noetic”: it is a desire to interpret, a will to know (FE, 201; LSC, 58–59; CE, 136–37; TC, 109, 130). Both these principles and the techniques of their interpretation and application are transmitted and acquired through educational relationships. All of this explains why, where Foucault speaks of Stoics reconciling inward focus, the authority of tradition, and personal relationships, Stiegler describes “an intergenerational, spiritual genealogy of *hypomnēmata* forming circuits of epistolary transindividuation” (TC, 156). In other words, he implies that Stoic “culture” involves the ongoing interaction of practitioners caring for themselves, training and habituation in educational relationships, and the exteriorization and re-interiorization of knowledge in *hypomnēmata* and epistles, all of which are coordinated by care for “spiritual” idealities like virtues and the gods.

Although Stiegler repeatedly praises “Self Writing,” he argues that Foucault himself does not fully grasp the implications of this article for his conception of the care of oneself and others (TC, 115–31; DID, 76–85; “Biopower”). First and most generally, Foucault fails to develop an “ecology” and “economy” of what Stiegler variously denotes as libido or desire, mind or *nous*, and spirit (TC, 86, 93, 159, 163; DID, 46, 51–52, 61–72, 101–103; LSC, 57, 65, 81). In other words, Foucault neither theorizes how the capacity to pay attention and care about ideals is generated and destroyed (an “eco-logy”) nor addresses its political management (an “eco-nomy”). Second, he

²⁰ On Stiegler and desire, see the excellent article by Robert Hughes, “Bernard Stiegler, Philosophical Amateur, or, Individuation from Eros to Philia,” *Diacritics*, vol. 42, no.1 (2014): 46–67; on Stiegler and psychoanalysis, with particular attention to Winnicott and Lacan, see Tania Espinoza, “The Technical Object of Psychoanalysis,” in *Stiegler and Technics*, (ed.) C. Howells and G. Moore (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 151–64.

²¹ This of course is influenced by Deleuze’s *Logic of Sense*. Stiegler’s appropriation of Deleuze’s reading of Stoicism is far more elliptical than that of Foucault, and would take us outside the scope of this article (see DID, 126, 156–61).

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never recognizes that education is not only a system of subjection and discipline, but also one of intergenerational sharing of sublimation and superegoization, producing the conditions of the possibility of *philia* or political “friendship.”²² Third, like Derrida, Foucault “does not ask the question of pharmacology—a question that is nevertheless essential to all therapeutics, all medicalization, and all questions of care and *epimeleia*” (TC, 125). In other words, he neglects the ways in which the peculiarities of each new material technology both nourish and damage the transindividuating system. Fourth, Foucault’s interpretive tools are therefore inadequate to explain what has become increasingly clear since his death, namely that “biopower” as control of bodily forces has been overtaken by “psychopower” as control of drives and desires. Stiegler believes that the key political challenge today is the combination of hyperconnectivity, social media, big data harvesting and analysis, and targeted marketing, which collectively tend to solicit an economy of drives (for consumption and reputation) while destroying the kinds of care and desire that make life meaningful. Stiegler describes the result as “*generalized* proletarianization...as a bypassing and short-circuiting not only of producers and consumers deprived of their *savoir-faire* and *savoir-vivre*, but also of theorists and scholars deprived of their theoretical knowledge, thereby becoming proletarians of the spirit” (WML, 131; cf. RE, 2). Without effective care of the spiritual-libidinal-noetic economy, we cannot elevate ourselves above the “inhumanity” and “stupidity” into which it is our human destiny always to be falling (WML, 132).

While ancient Stoic theory will not provide us with a “digital relational ecology” in order to overcome psychopower, Stoic exercises of literary self-care might still inspire our pursuit of freedom in this situation. But this cannot simply be a matter of recuperating an “ethic of the self,” because what is needed is “metacare” of the “spirit” of the entire system: not only psychosomatic selves, but also social collectives and technologies and artefacts (TC, 177–80). Perhaps the clearest example of such metacare and the freedom it supports is precisely what Stiegler describes as his Epictetan *meletē* in “How I Became a Philosopher” (AO, 20). The biographical narrative he

²² On Stiegler and *philia*, see Hughes, “Amateur,” 55–60.

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interweaves throughout this essay begins with subtle allusions to his criminal “passage to the act”

(AO, 11–12). He does not detail the technology involved in this armed robbery, but we know that he believes “taking action” paradigmatically involves pharmaceutical destabilization of the transindividual. (A mythical analogy would be the primal parricide in Freud’s *Totem and Taboo*, in which the sons are emboldened by “some new weapon” [LSC, 61].) But for this “passage to the act” to be “philosophical” and “political,” it must also, in an *après-coup* redoubling of attention, be elevated toward transindividuation (AO, 9). Stiegler achieves this through his “ensemble of disciplines” of reading and writing (AO, 20). This *meletē* is transindividual because it encompasses both the materials and technologies of his penitentiary milieu and the desire to share its products with people animated by the same spirit. This desire has of course been realized in Stiegler’s subsequent teaching, publications, and organizational leadership. Thus he speaks of transforming the “accident” of his crime into the “necessity” of his personal and political narrative (AO, 12, 17, 24), and of turning his subjection to the (finite) penal code into care for the (infinite) spirit of the Law (AO, 8–9, 12, 22–24, 35). Precisely this “adoption” of the ideals available in his milieu constitutes the “fragile liberty” he links with his Epictetan *meletē* (AO, 20, 35), for “spirit...is always, and in all forms, the *freedom* of spirit” (LS, 91).

2. The Libidinal Economy of Stoic Writing

I have now explained what Stiegler says about ancient Stoic exercises of reading and writing and what modern concerns he thereby addresses. In this section, I want to discuss to what extent Stiegler’s interpretation enriches our understanding of ancient philosophizing. For this purpose I will return to close readings of ancient texts and engagement with specialist scholarship. My analysis will suggest that, although Stiegler’s own claims about ancient philosophy need to be challenged and refined, we can use Stieglerian tools to discover deeper philosophical significance in certain passages. At the same time, this detailed engagement with texts and scholarship will provide the basis for raising a question about Stiegler in the conclusion.

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Since Stiegler's reading of Stoicism sets it against Platonism, it is worth beginning with some brief remarks about the latter. As we have seen, Stiegler believes that Plato is suspicious of written texts, because he embraces a "phantasm of pure liberty" (AO, 24)—in other words, of an intelligence whose sovereignty lies in communion with Ideas, without the involvement of bodily, social, or artefactual organs. This might be correct, but given the perennial debates about the interpretation of Platonic dialogues, it should not be accepted without question. Stiegler's only explicit engagement with the interpretive tradition is with Derrida and the dated scholarship of Léon Robin, to whom Derrida is indebted as well.²³ Robin's readings are based on deep understanding of classical literature and years of scrupulous reflection about the Platonic corpus. But any assertions about Plato's attitude toward writing should also take account of more recent landmarks in the field. For example, even if we set aside Eric Havelock's dubious claims in *Preface to Plato*,²⁴ we should acknowledge Danielle Allen's arguments in *Why Plato Wrote* that Plato both affirms in theory and embraces in practice the politics of writing.²⁵

More importantly, we should also question Stiegler's contention that "Plato struggles against that sophistic that had caused the spirit of the Greek *polis* to enter into crisis through its misuse of the *pharmakon*" (WML, 19; cf. RE, 6–7). In other words, Stiegler claims that sophists substituted for dialectical education an art of persuasion facilitated by written manuals, and that this harmed Athenian politics (TC, 21–22, 136). This is significant, because it implies that Plato's *Phaedrus* attempts a critique of a real problem in the Athenian libidinal economy, thus anticipating

²³ Stiegler cites Robin's *Platon* (Paris: PUF, 1968 [orig. F. Alcan, 1935]) at TC, 157, 211. Derrida acknowledges instead Robin's translation of Plato's *Phaedrus*, prefaced by a 185-page "Notice," in *Platon: Oeuvres complètes, Tome 4, 3e partie, Phèdre*, (tr.) L. Robin (Paris: Les belles lettres, 1933), i–clxxxv; and Léon Robin, *La théorie platonicienne de l'amour*, 2nd ed. (Paris: PUF, 1964) (cited at PPh 75, 77, 171n.5, 185n.78). It should be added that Derrida engages with an impressive array of scholarship, especially in French and German.

²⁴ Eric Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1963). For a critique, see John Halverson, "Havelock on Greek Orality and Literacy," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 53, no.1 (1992): 148–63.

²⁵ Danielle Allen, *Why Plato Wrote* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010). See also Ferrari, *Cicadas*, 204–32.

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Stiegler's own critique of digital relational technology and consumerist capitalism.²⁶ However,

there are many problems with this assertion. First, rather than accept a simple opposition between Plato and some homogenous group called “the sophists,” we should recognize that diverse foreign and Athenian intellectuals competed in this period to conceptualize and legitimate models of education involving written texts.²⁷ Second, we cannot describe how any of these educators (mis)used *pharmaka* without investigating their techniques, forms of relationships, and institutional contexts—in Plato's case, the Academy.²⁸ Third, Plato may well have *invented* the misleading definition of sophistry as “the art of persuasion” in order to denigrate some of those very competitors.²⁹ Fourth, it is far from clear what role any of these educators played in the politico-military crises of Athens in the late fifth century BCE, if any.³⁰ For all these reasons, it is better to set aside Stiegler's comparison between Plato and the Stoics with regard to pharmacology. To put it more constructively, while it would be thought-provoking to approach Plato's attitude to writing as a critique of genuine problems in Athenian transindividuation, only extensive engagement with interdisciplinary scholarship would permit us to draw sound connections between his dialogues and the libidinal economy to which they refer.

So let us focus instead on Stoic reading and writing. Here, as we have seen, Stiegler has sketched the bodily and psychical, social, and artefactual dimensions of the transindividuation concerned. However, he has left it to others to specify the ambivalent potency of the *pharmaka*

²⁶ Cf. Daniel Ross, “From ‘Dare to Think!’ to ‘How Dare You!’ and Back Again,” *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, vol. 52, no. 4 (2020): 466–67.

²⁷ Yun Lee Too, *The Pedagogical Contract: The Economies of Teaching and Learning in the Ancient World* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2000), esp. 13–52; Andrea Nightingale, *Genres in Dialogue: Plato and the Construct of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), esp. 13–59.

²⁸ The basic facts are in John Dillon, *The Heirs of Plato: A Study of the Old Academy (347–274 BC)* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2003), esp. 1–26.

²⁹ Edward Schiappa, “Did Plato Coin *Rhētorikē*?” *The American Journal of Philology*, vol. 111, no. 4 (1990): 457–70; Michael Gagarin, “Did the Sophists Aim to Persuade?” *Rhetorica: A Journal of the History of Rhetoric*, vol. 19, no 3 (2001): 275–91.

³⁰ The closest approximation to a Stieglerian “ecology of spirit” in classical Athens may be Josiah Ober, *Democracy and Knowledge: Innovation and Learning in Classical Athens* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), which one might profitably read alongside Claire Taylor, *Poverty, Wealth, and Well-being: Experiencing Penia in Democratic Athens* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

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Forthcoming in *Symposium: The Canadian Journal of Continental Philosophy*, issue 24.2 involved. This is despite the fact that almost all the discussions of reading and writing in the *Moral Epistles* of Seneca and *Discourses* and *Enchiridion* of Epictetus focus on *problems and risks* associated with reading and writing.³¹ One of the merits of Foucault's "Self Writing" is actually the way it brings out the constructive and quotidian Stoic use of written texts. Building on this foundation, Stiegler's theories are well suited to elucidating the critical edge in Stoic discussions of written texts, as I will illustrate by focusing on a cluster of passages by Epictetus (*Disc.* 1.4, 1.10, 2.17, 2.19; *Ench.* 49). To the best of my knowledge, these passages have not yet received any detailed attention—an observation which in itself suggests how Stiegler's organological approach can enrich mainstream scholarship.³²

Let us begin with Epictetus' criticism of the wrong way to use written texts. The most extended critique occurs throughout *Discourse* 2.19, which is entitled "To Those Who Take up Philosophy Only as far as Logos." The phrase "only as far as logos" (*mekhri logou monon*) appears to designate students who learn concepts and arguments, but do not reflect critically on them, incorporate them in their characters, or enact them in their behavior and emotions. The chapter begins with a summary of the so-called "Master Argument,"³³ a summary of its possible solutions, and a list of the authorities who proposed them: not only the Stoics Chryippus, Cleanthes, Archedemus, and Antipater, but also the Dialecticians Diodorus Cronus and Panthoides (2.19.1–10). This is an impressive display of logical and bibliographical erudition, but it is intended as a cautionary example: when it comes to deciding among these solutions, Epictetus remarks, "I am no better than a grammarian" (2.19.17). In other words, he can enumerate and explicate, but he cannot judge. Compare *Enchiridion* 49, where Epictetus criticizes someone who "prides himself on being able to understand and explicate (*noein kai exēgeisthai*) the books of Chrysippus." Like the Master

³¹ E.g., Seneca *Ep. Mor.* 2, 33, 84, 108; Epictetus, *Disc.* 1.4.7–16, 1.10.7–9, 2.1.29–40, 2.17.34–36, 2.19, 4.4.4–18, 4.5.36, *Ench.* 49.

³² I have been unable to access Ivo Bruns, *De schola Epicteti* (Kiel, 1897).

³³ On which see Section 5 of Suzanne Bobzien, "Dialectical School," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2019 Edition), (ed.) E. N. Zalta, [<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2019/entries/dialectical-school/>], accessed January 3 2020.

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Argument, the works of Chrysippus are notoriously hard to understand,³⁴ so their explication is a performance of both erudition and perspicacity. “But if I admire this very act of explication,” Epictetus remarks, “what has happened, if not that I have become a grammarian rather than a philosopher?”

This wrong way of reading is connected to a wrong way of writing, which is addressed in *Discourse 2.17*. There we discover that these students not only want “to know what Chrysippus says in *On the Liar Paradox*” (2.17.34), but also to compose their own dialogues, imitating renowned philosophical writers: “‘Shall I read to you, brother, and you to me?’ ‘Man, you write amazingly.’ And ‘You very much in the style of Xenophon,’ ‘You in the style of Plato,’ ‘You in the style of Antisthenes’” (2.17.35–36; cf. 2.1.29–33). Epictetus brings this complex of aspirations together in *Discourses 1.4*: “Go ahead and not only explicate books, but write similar books yourself. What good will it do you? Don’t you know that the whole book only costs five *denarii*? Do you think the explicator is worth more than five *denarii*, then?” (1.4.15–17). I wish to extract two points here: first, books are affordable technology for Epictetus’ (relatively wealthy) students, although they are vastly more expensive than they would be today;³⁵ second, the *value* of books is not in their purchasing price, but in what you do with them. Recitation, explication, and imitation are not valuable ways of using books.

This is where Stiegler can help us to deepen our analysis. These passages’ implied distinction between superficial (“only as far as *logos*”) and deep learning is crude and misleading. What these passages illustrate is instead a contest between competing libidinal economies supported by the same *pharmaka*. Epictetus (ca. 50–125 CE) was teaching in a period intellectual historians call “the second sophistic” (ca. 50–250 CE). During this period, especially in the Greek-speaking parts of the Roman empire,

³⁴ “If Chrysippus hadn’t written unclearly, he [this student] would have no reason for pride!” (*Ench.* 49).

³⁵ To give some indication, this is nearly a week’s military wages at this time (the annual military pay after Domitian was 1200 HS = 400 *denarii*). See Hans Neumann, Jean Andraeu, and Ludolf Kuchenbuch, *Wages*, in *Brill’s New Pauly*, (ed.) H. Cancik, H. Schneider, and C. F. Salazar (2006), [http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1574-9347_bnp_e709090], accessed February 12, 2020.

Perhaps the most important of all the arenas for elite ambition was education. Like the English word, the Greek word *paideia* has a double meaning: not just the process of upbringing, but also the property possessed by a select coterie of cultured individuals, the “educated” (*pepaideumenoí*).³⁶

In Stieglerian terms, *paideia* was a key ideal within the spiritual economy. This spiritual economy had psychological, social, and technological organs, as I will concisely explain.

To start with pharmacology, we have just seen that “books” (actually papyrus rolls) were very expensive in modern terms, even if this expense was insignificant for Epictetus’ audience. They were also harder to read than modern books, because the codex, despite being both cheaper and easier to use than the roll, was surprisingly slow to catch on. Although “its advantages were obvious from the outset,” Lionel Casson remarks, “the heavy weight of habit” maintained the dominance of the roll for about three hundred years.³⁷ This explanation is manifestly insufficient: a meaningful answer would need to engage with the economy, ecology, and sociology of papyrus rolls. Among the possibilities worth investigating is that, precisely by being inaccessible, the roll both nourished and was nourished by the competitive elitism of the spiritual economy governed by *paideia*.

These technological factors dovetail with social and institutional processes. Education was almost entirely private, with no examinations or transparent measures of success. It was therefore assessed primarily by performance.³⁸ In fact, the word *meletē* was commonly used to refer to declamatory exercises, in which a speaker would exhibit their command of Attic grammar and style, knowledge of the literary, philosophical, historical, and mythical canons, and skills in

³⁶ Tim Whitmarsh, *The Second Sophistic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 13.

³⁷ Lionel Casson, *Libraries in the Ancient World* (New Haven: Yale, 2002), 129.

³⁸ Teresa Morgan, *Literate Education in the Greek and Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 74–89; Ruth Webb, “Schools and *Paideia*,” in *The Oxford Handbook to the Second Sophistic*, (ed.) D. S. Richter and W. A. Johnson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 139–54.

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extemporaneous wit and eloquence.³⁹ Even in Epictetus' school, it appears that "reading out"

(*anagignōskō*) and "commenting on" (*epanagignōskō*) passages from canonical Stoics were regular exercises (*Disc.* 1.4.13–16, 1.10.7–9, 1.26.1, *Ench.* 49).⁴⁰ This makes sense of students' eagerness to *display* their understanding of Chrysippus' difficult texts through oral explication (*exēgeomai*). It also explains why they want to read out loud to one another. Finally, this context illuminates why the students are imitating the Socratic authors Plato, Xenophon, and Antisthenes, because they were influential models of style and eloquence in this period—which Chrysippus certainly was not. To put this in Stiegler's terms, the social organs of this period, due to their orientation toward the infinite ideal of *paideia* (and associated values) encouraged the manner of using texts Epictetus imputes to his students.

The psychological dimension here is individual students' desire to achieve, embody, and display *paideia* and its associated values, and thus to attain the position and reputation dependent on them. If this is a functioning spiritual economy, then "ulterior" motives are inseparable from idealism. Consider the following question by Epictetus: "If someone reads these things [about Stoic logic] and frequents philosophers only out of the desire to show off in symposia, what is his goal other than for the senator beside him to be impressed?" (*Disc.* 1.26.9–10; cf. 2.19.8–9, 1.21). Clearly the implication is that such a student wants *nothing* other than to impress the senator, except of course to benefit socially or professionally from the senator's influence. But Stiegler helps us to see that this way of describing the situation misses most of what is going on. First, as the *Symposiums* authored by Plato and Xenophon famously exemplify, symposia were far more than drinking parties; they were, throughout Greek antiquity, recognized venues for enjoying and sharing *elevated* culture. Alcohol was in fact one of the conditions of this elevation, precisely because it could just as easily lead to "debasement": it required care. (In fact, as Thomas Bénatouïl has shown, "the use of

³⁹ Whitmarsh, *Second Sophistic*, 23–40.

⁴⁰ W. A. Oldfather refers this interpretation of *epanagignōskō* to I. Bruns, *De schola Epicteti*, 8f. See Epictetus, *Discourses, Books I–II*, (tr.) W. A. Oldfather (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1925), 75.

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alcohol” was a major topic of discussion in the Stoa, as it had been in Plato’s *Laws*.⁴¹) Next, we

should re-translate “wanting to show off” (*epideiknusthai thelōn*) as “wanting to display,” where the modalities of displaying (*e.g.*, with wit, erudition, taste, and eloquence) are—in Stiegler’s terms—“sublimations” of competitive drives, of *eris* as “strife” (FE, 191–2, DID, 50–61). Thus the desires to perform, impress the senator, and benefit from his influence should be viewed as manifestations of a spiritual economy: if he is impressed and becomes the student’s patron, it will be because the two of them desire and care about the same elevated, sublimated, spiritual consistences.

The problem is that Epictetus approves of neither these ideals nor the economy coordinated by them. Viewed from a pharmacological perspective, we could say that the techniques and material technologies of reading and writing are “poisoning” the very libidinal economy Chrysippus wrote these books in order to support. We can illuminate how that economy is supposed to work by considering *Discourses* 1.10, in which Epictetus compares his own manner of being “active” (*praktikos*) with those of people at Rome, who “keep accounts, enter into disputes, and take counsel” about grain or land (1.10.7–9). “When day breaks,” he explains, “I briefly remind myself whose work I must comment on. Then right away I say to myself, ‘But what do I care (*ti de moi kai melei*) how so-and-so reads out? The first thing is for me to sleep” (1.10.8). Epictetus is being ironic, of course: he does not go back to sleep, because he cares about both his student’s reading and his own commentary about that day’s text. Here already we begin to see how social desires intersect with desires concerning the use of books. The interweaving of personal and social desires is stressed throughout the passage. Epictetus begins in the first person plural, wishing that “we were as keenly intent upon our task (*houtōs sphodrōs suntetametha peri to ergon*)” as those in Rome “are zealous” for advancement and profit (*espoudakasin*, 1.10.1). “If I saw you wide awake and sharing your enthusiasm (*diegēgermenous kai sumprothoumenous*)” he later tells his students, “I too would be enthusiastic about sharing your zeal” (*proethoumōmēn an suspoudazein kai autos*, 1.10.13). The psychological processes of individuals intersect with the dynamics of relationships: the

⁴¹ Thomas Bénatouïl, *Faire usage: La pratique du stoïcisme* (Paris: Vrin, 2005), 279–320.

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students are summoned both to be intent, awake (*i.e.*, attentive), enthusiastic, and zealous, and to share these motivating sentiments.

The key question is which ideals should animate these personal and social desires. The answer is not far to seek. Epictetus imagines himself “petitioning” a student, like profit-seekers at Rome petition for a grain export license: “I beseech you to investigate, with Chrysippus’ help, what the administration of the cosmos is, and what place in it the rational animal holds. Investigate too who you are, and what kind of thing is good and bad for you” (1.10.10–1). The “spiritual” ideals here are properly theological: it is a matter of the divine administration of the cosmos, human beings’ position and function within that administration, and what therefore counts as good or bad for them. Epictetus, like many Stoics, expresses the desire simply to “behold” (as in *theōria*) and “interpret” this beautiful providential system.⁴² Moreover, these “theoretical” desires are interwoven with the aspirations that underpin Epictetus’ three pedagogical “fields of study,” namely freedom from passion and disappointment, good relationships with other people, the state, and the gods, and intellectual judiciousness and constancy.⁴³ He explicitly connects these aspirations with reading and writing in *Discourses* 2.19 (2.19.14–18, 29–33). It is this nexus of infinite ideals that is supposed to coordinate the libidinal economy—in other words, to organize how the drives and desires of individual psyches, the exchange of energies in relationships, and the skill and care devoted to understanding, reading out, explicating, and composing texts all contribute to the transindividuation of the system.

The foregoing illustrates how Stiegler’s “general organology” (of psychical and somatic, social and institutional, material and technological organs) can enhance our understanding of a topic in Stoicism that has received little attention, namely the use and abuse of written texts. In Epictetus’ own terminology, this is a problem of “education” (*paideia*) and “progress” (*prokopē*) toward

⁴² Epictetus, *Disc.* 1.6.19–20; Seneca, *On Leisure* 5.3–4, *To Helvia* 8.3–10; Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods* 2.37.

⁴³ A. A. Long, *Epictetus: A Stoic and Socratic Guide to Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 112–25, from whom I have taken the phrase “field of study”; Pierre Hadot, *The Inner Citadel: The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius*, (tr.) M. Chase (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard), 82–89.

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wisdom and virtue.⁴⁴ Foucault has taught us to see this as a process of “subjectivation” in which self-care encompasses but is not subordinated to the process of learning about god, the cosmos, human beings, and oneself. Stiegler’s insight is that “care” is a form of desire, which depends upon a libidinal economy extending far beyond the individual. Therefore it cannot be an entirely “autonomous, self-finalized art”; in order to resist biopower and psychopower, we need to take care of the capacity to take care—in other words, to critique and attempt to change the interconnected system. Certainly Stoic theory does not articulate any such comprehensive organology of spirit. But perhaps it is not too much to suggest that Epictetus takes a few steps in this direction when he repeatedly discusses how to share intention, attention, and enthusiasm when pursuing education and progress with written texts, always bearing in mind the divine administration of the cosmos.

3. Conclusion

In the course of this article I have concentrated on two tasks. First, I have elucidated Stiegler’s comments about ancient Stoicism and explained how they bear upon modern debates about care of oneself and others, material technologies, and power and freedom. Second, I have argued that his treatment of the Stoics can help us to articulate the philosophical significance of a network of Epictetan passages discussing how to use written texts.

By way of conclusion, I want to use this ancient material to contribute to a debate about Stiegler’s own critical project. This question concerns the centrality of *pharmaka* to his critique. At times he implies that “general organology” can equally be represented as a “general pharmacology” (e.g., TC, 159; WML, 13). This is because he emphasizes the role of *pharmaka* in instigating those “falls” from metastability to which every transindividuating system is heir, and which both require and make space for critical suspension and reparative or “elevating” action. For example, in *The Neganthropocene*, he discusses the epochal impact of the steam engine: “the thermodynamic machine...as essentially *combustive*, introduces, on both the astrophysical plane (which replaces

⁴⁴ Both words are used in these discussions of reading and writing: for *prokopē* and *prokoptō*, see *Disc.* 1.4 (passim), 1.10.10, 2.17.5, 2.17.40; for *paideia* and *paideuomai*, see 2.17.27, 2.19.29.

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Forthcoming in *Symposium: The Canadian Journal of Continental Philosophy*, issue 24.2 (mythological cosmology), and on the plane of human ecology, *the question of fire and of its*

pharmacology.”⁴⁵ One must read the endnotes in order to discover an important proviso, namely that “the latter gains its meaning only if it is accompanied by the grammatization of *savoir-faire*.”⁴⁶

In other words, the new artefact only destabilizes the libidinal economy insofar as it destroys the possibility of skilled labour, in which producers and consumers both value skill and know-how.

This only occurs if the *pharmakon*'s introduction initiates a series of changes elsewhere in the libidinal economy. When that happens, it damages workers' feeling of autonomy and sense that life is worth living. Political action is then required in order for the new technology to be “adopted” in a manner that integrates it into a revised spiritual economy.

Our focus on Roman Stoicism gives us reason to query this priority of the *pharmakon*.

Critics of Stiegler's project have objected that he exaggerates some factors in contemporary problems and downplay others, partly because he neglects in-depth and up-to-date research.⁴⁷ I have made a similar suggestion with regard to his claims about Plato, sophistic, and the use of written texts. Richard Beardsworth worries in particular that Stiegler's analysis of contemporary capitalism is “technologically determinist.”⁴⁸ The Roman context offers us a different perspective on this theoretical debate.

Consider, for example, Stiegler's remarks about the steam engine. Steam-powered thermodynamic machines were not in fact invented at the beginning of the industrial revolution in the eighteenth century, as Stiegler implies.⁴⁹ The large-scale use of steam technology in Rome began with Nerva's effort to streamline the transportation of grain from Ostia to the capital (ca. 96–

⁴⁵ Bernard Stiegler, *The Neganthropocene*, (ed., tr.) D. Ross (London: Humanities Open Press, 2018), 39–40.

⁴⁶ Stiegler, *Neganthropocene*, 273.

⁴⁷ See Peter Gratton's review of Christina Howells and Gerald Moore, *Stiegler and Technics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2013), in *Notre Dame Philosophical Review* (2014), [<https://ndpr.nd.edu/news/stiegler-and-technics/>], accessed January 3, 2020.

⁴⁸ Richard Beardsworth, “Technology and Politics: A Response to Bernard Stiegler,” in Howells and Moore, *Stiegler and Technics*, 208.

⁴⁹ Stiegler, *Neganthropocene*, 39–42, 110, 146.

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98 CE).⁵⁰ By the second century, steam-powered locomotives were in regular use both between

Rome and Ostia and in the provinces, particularly on the northern and eastern frontiers, where they were used to supply and transport troops. But steam power was never adopted to any significant degree by industry, and subsequently disappeared.⁵¹ If historians of technology have found this enigmatic, Neville Morley argues, this is because they are guilty of a kind of “technological determinism” governed by “anachronistic, Eurocentric assumptions” about labour, value, and progress. What the case of Roman steam power teaches us, Morley claims, is that the impact of technological innovation “is subordinate to other social and economic structures, which determine how it will be used.”⁵²

Brent Shaw comes to slightly more nuanced conclusions in his study of Roman reaping-machines, which came into use no later than the first-century CE in a specific region in Gaul. These machines were substantially more efficient than reaping by sickles, which nevertheless remained the norm throughout the rest of the empire. As with steam locomotives, historians of technology have therefore wondered why, despite centuries of well-documented use, this technology did not spread. Shaw demonstrates that any worthwhile answer must incorporate an entire “ecology” of factors, most of which have not featured in prevailing explanations (which wrongly focus on the prevalence of slave labour). Among these factors are knowledge networks; crop varieties and climates; local division, calendrical organization, and gendering of free and slave labour; relationships between local laborers and itinerant free workers; and conceptions of gain and loss.⁵³ The upshot is not that use of technology is “*subordinate* to other economic and social structures” (my emphasis), but that “The interdependence of human communities, environmental forces, and exploitative technologies produced *continuous recursive chains of effects*” (my emphasis), including changes in “the way humans think, not only about the labour process itself, but also about

⁵⁰ Neville Morley, “Trajan’s Engines,” *Greece & Rome* 47.2 (2000): 197–210, here 199–200.

⁵¹ *ibid.*, 200–202.

⁵² Both quotations *ibid.*, 205.

⁵³ Brent Shaw, *Bringing in the Sheaves: Economy and Metaphor in the Roman World* (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2013), 93–149.

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other unrelated matters.”⁵⁴ In other words, Shaw avoids prioritizing any of the forces at play as the dominant causal factor. This begins to resemble what Stiegler calls a general organology of a libidinal economy.

These well-researched and theorized historical analyses remind us of something we also saw with the roll and the codex, namely that technological change in ancient Greece and Rome was very slow. This is not because inventions were lacking, but rather because they were not embraced. Written texts were far from a new technology in Plato’s Athens, and were positively ancient in Epictetus’ Nicopolis. This is not to deny that some technologies, such as writing and monetization, had profound and far-reaching impacts on early Greek thought.⁵⁵ But when we view classical and post-classical Greek and Roman philosophies as systems of care for oneself and others, we will rarely (if ever) find that what requires care is *new* artefactual organs. Rather, as the case of literary technology in Epictetus exemplifies, the problems arise from the way individual, collective, and technological forces interact and are coordinated by ideals. The merit of Stiegler’s interpretive system is that it allows us to recognize this interplay, allowing one or another factor to solicit our interpretation and care as the evidence demands on each occasion.

⁵⁴ *ibid.*, 148.

⁵⁵ See Rosalind Thomas, *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Richard Seaford, *Money and the Early Greek Mind: Homer, Philosophy, Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 175–291.

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