

# Therapies of Desire and Aesthetics of Existence: On Foucault's Relevance for Philosophical Counselling

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The care of the self ... implies a relationship with the other ... One needs a guide, a counsellor, a friend, someone who will be truthful with you .

(Foucault, *The Ethics of the Concern for the Self as a Practice of Freedom*)

My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad. If everything is dangerous then we always have something to do.

(Foucault, *On the Genealogy of Ethics*)

In Greek ethics people were concerned with their moral conduct, their ethics, their relations to themselves and to others much more than with religious problems ... [T]heir theme was to constitute a kind of ethics which was an aesthetics of existence.'

(Ibid.)

## 1. A note of self-explanation, in lieu of an abstract

This paper offers a discussion of how one might understand the role of philosophy in the practice of 'counselling' another person, which necessarily involves some aspiration to their transformation. It attempts to articulate a difficulty that I experience in what seem to have become dominant images of the process, aims and legitimacy of philosophical counselling as portrayed in the literature on the subject. I write from the perspective of one who has taken a practical course in philosophical counselling but who has yet to begin practising, and who can barely, therefore, claim to speak from a wide experience of 'cases'. What I have to say grew out of a certain hesitancy rather than experience, a hesitation before the question of what it is that one would be engaged in by claiming to 'use' philosophy in a counselling process, or

what it would mean to seek to engage another in 'doing' philosophy for herself.

Many issues arise for me here, amongst which are questions about the results we would be seeking in committing ourselves and another to an ongoing philosophical investigation, what ideals would govern implicitly or explicitly our evaluation of the outcome and orientation of such an investigation, and how we might imagine the process of articulating our beliefs, desires, fears and longings in philosophical form to 'work' towards some sought-after end. In raising these questions for myself, moreover, I was concerned to reconcile the philosophical interests I have pursued theoretically with my own image of what philosophical counselling might aspire to be. Of particular importance for me here is a somewhat sceptical interrogation of the complex role and form of practices of truth-seeking in ethical life and of the ethical ideals of autonomy and authenticity. These are questions I have pursued first through the work of Nietzsche and Nietzscheans like Foucault, and then, in a rather different vein, in the work of Levinas and Derrida. Within the frame of philosophical thought provided for me by my study of these thinkers there was much in the self-presentation and self-legitimation of philosophy as a means of 'counselling' that struck me as questionable. One concern in the following paper is to pursue, experimentally, a set of challenges derived from Foucault, which might be directed at philosophical counselling conceived in terms of the client's pursuit of clarification in her beliefs and values, so as to discover what she 'truly' believes or 'truly' values, and thus to increase her autonomy and authenticity.

My unease here concerns what appears to be the dominant image of what takes place in philosophical counselling - of how it 'works' (clarification, articulation, discovery) and of what it aims at (increased autonomy and authenticity). The suspicion I shall direct at this self-image is that it is bound up with a primary interest in

establishing the *legitimacy* of philosophical counselling, and is offered as a self-description of that process at the cost of neglecting many significant aspects of the complex ethical relation established between a 'counsellor' and 'client'. It also neglects to consider the potential variety of interests and of powers at work in engaging in ethical reflection. Foucault, as I present him, engages in a polemic with philosophy understood in the above terms, refusing its comfortably self-legitimizing account of itself and thus, in my view, opening out the demand for a more rigorous consideration of what the ethical relationship between client and counsellor involves, and of what it is we seek to achieve through ethical reflection. My point will be that to specify the relationship to the client and the purpose of philosophising in terms of respecting and enhancing autonomy, tends to foreclose the question of whether this way of imagining what would make philosophy 'legitimate' corresponds to what makes it practical, interesting or important.

This interrogation of the dominant image of philosophical counselling is initially motivated by the sense that we need to *open up* questions about images of the self, of the power of speech and thought exercised in philosophical exchange, and of the transformative ends of ethical reflection. But it is also motivated by a direct worry that may perhaps appear more immediate and tangible to those already practising philosophical counselling. This concerns the difficulties inherent in that ideal of autonomy (the capacity to be one's own source of authority, profoundly linked in modern times with the ideal of authenticity, of being true to oneself, the author of oneself) which not only philosophy but modern moral, legal and political thinking makes so central a feature of our lives. My question is: how far is a philosophy that is conceived of in practical terms as enhancing autonomy able to engage with the many aspects of human life that appear to defy this ideal image, to wreck the self-determining subject on the reefs of its own hubris? Here it is enough, perhaps, to merely mention the facts of desire, death, and constitutive dependency with which classical philosophy has always struggled, often arguing for the mastery or repression of desire, the promise of immortality, or the self-sufficiency of the ego in ways that seem simply to seek to deny an 'otherness' that reason cannot embrace. This difficulty raises questions about philosophy which all the figures I have mentioned above engage in profoundly interesting ways. But if, as following them I would argue, the primary ethical demand a philosophy must respond to is that it not foreclose the human relationship to 'otherness', we must ask how the self-conception of

philosophy in terms of the enhancement of autonomy can be situated, and whether there are not some irreducible aspects of heteronomy that rightfully enter into the ethical practice of philosophy.

I see Foucault's polemical reversals of some of the traditional forms of self-understanding offered by philosophy as pertinent, in affirming the *heteronomy* of a subject 'produced' by a discourse such as philosophy, an idea I explore below. But I shall frame my discussion of Foucault with the account of philosophy as a practical therapy offered by a philosopher who is also immensely sensitive to this tendency of philosophy to turn its back upon the exigencies of human life. In Martha Nussbaum's work, there is a powerful torsion between what I have described here as the classically self-legitimizing image of philosophy (aimed at enhancing autonomy through reason) and the insistence that we must learn to *value* the limits to our powers of self-determination in which our particular humanity consists. With this broadly Aristotelian conception of rationality, Nussbaum aims to redress the tendency that seems so characteristic of philosophy to turn its back upon the human condition of exposure to all that threatens autonomy. But I remain unconvinced as to the success of her attempt to integrate an image of philosophy's methods and aims that remains centred upon the value of autonomy, with a responsiveness to and affirmation of the vulnerability of human life.

In what follows, I begin by expounding Nussbaum's critique of Foucault's understanding of ancient forms of 'philosophy as therapy' and her own image of what such therapy would need to be. I question the terms of this critique, however, and thus the positive image that corresponds to it. I then lead certain of Nussbaum's reflections in a direction suggested by Foucault's deconstruction of the clear distinction and antithesis of knowledge and power, in order to explore the reverberations of this 'undoing' both for philosophy's sense of its own legitimacy and for the clarity of the structuring opposition between heteronomy and autonomy.

What follows is my attempt to throw a somewhat different light on certain aspects of the way in which we - or I - might think of philosophical counselling. And perhaps I can stake what interests me here on the Nietzschean thought that philosophy is - and ought to be - something 'dangerous', thus affirming a transgressive potential that is inherent to its power of transformation. With this no doubt overly-dramatic gesture I seek to *open out and not, as it might seem, to*

foreclose certain ethical questions that to me, as I hesitate before the practice of philosophy, appear absolutely real.

## 2: The Image of Philosophy as Therapy

In the opening pages of *The Therapy of Desire*, Martha Nussbaum passes swift judgement upon Michel Foucault's inquiries into Hellenistic ethical practices. It is important but insufficient, she suggests, to point out as he does that the ancient philosophers were not just teaching lessons but engaging in complex practices of self-shaping. For,

this the philosophers have in common with religious and magical/superstitious movements of various sorts in their culture... What is distinctive about the contribution of philosophers is that they assert that philosophy, and not anything else, is the art we require, an art that deals in valid and sound arguments, an art that is committed to the truth (TD: 5).

At the forefront of this critique is a concern with the legitimacy of philosophy. Philosophy properly conceived is not one more form of power, but a counter to power. It delivers freedom from the tyranny of custom and convention. What it promises, in Nussbaum's view, is to 'create a community of beings who can take charge of their own life story and their own thought' - a community, in other words, of autonomous individuals. Foucault, she concludes, fails to confront the fundamental commitment to reason that distinguishes philosophical *techniques du soi* from other such techniques, and this is linked to his failure to acknowledge the ideal possibility of a community of autonomous beings, a vision closed to him because of 'his view that knowledge and argument are themselves tools of power' (TD: 5).

The promise of philosophy is splendidly rendered by Nussbaum as intrinsically ethical insofar as a profound concern with human flourishing, and thus an implicitly therapeutic element, is manifest in its pattern of rational inquiry. She provides a succinct model of the terms on which the therapeutic function of reason can be understood, whereby philosophy is imagined to diagnose 'diseases of belief and judgement' whose cure will consist in part in their adequate articulation. When errors can be seen for what they are, they are the more readily dislodged (34). The ethical reality in terms of which we can speak of truth and error is not 'altogether independent of human theories and conceptions' since ethical truth is 'not independent of what human beings deeply wish, need, and (at some

level) desire'; nonetheless, it is appropriate to speak of ethical truth since rational inquiry into human flourishing requires (i) 'the scrutiny and sorting of beliefs towards the end of consistency', (ii) the aim of corresponding to 'the deepest of human wishes and needs and desires', a project of discovery, and (iii) the requirement of coherence with other areas of rational inquiry (23-4). Thus philosophy becomes a means of criticising both the sources of heteronomy that lie in the 'diseased' patterns of belief in any given community of desiring subjects and those that lie in the inner confusions of an individual's emotional life, without, however, Platonistically detaching itself from the given community or renouncing altogether the sway of emotional life and attachment (32).

This last point is crucial for Nussbaum. In pursuit of the truth of the self, the philosophical subject uses reason, but reason is placed in close relation to the project of self-transformation, demanding that it discovers the deepest needs and desires. Philosophy itself is *expanded* by this commitment; it is asked 'not simply to deal with the patient's invalid inferences and false premises, but to grapple, as well, with her irrational fears and anxieties, her excessive loves and crippling angers' (37). And if it is able to do so, this is because the passions are themselves significantly orientated by belief and therefore modified by the interrogation of belief (38). Philosophy engages the entire person, not only her 'rational' faculty - as if this stood in opposition to a life of desire - because at all levels of human activity beliefs are at stake. Only if I judge something to be important, for example, will I fear its loss. To 'discover oneself' is to excavate a deeper reality than that which is constituted by the uncritical acceptance of social norms; one 'discovers oneself' only by going behind these surfaces, surfaces that 'polite dialectic' merely preserves as such (40). What I am led by philosophy to 'discover' deep in myself must guide my judgement upon the social world I inhabit. Or, in other words, a point of profound *internality* (the deep self) is used to figure the point of *externality* in terms of which I might judge my culturally and socially imposed beliefs.

This is one of the richest accounts available of what philosophical counselling might aspire to be - a force of social criticism as well as of individual development; respectful of the 'all-too-human' world of desires and vulnerabilities but regarding these as modifiable by means of critical reflection, since desires are bound up with beliefs; and informed by a complex psychology which also does justice to the subject's freedom. What can we find to criticise in it?

Here I shall pursue two thoughts. First, that there is something too neat about this description of what makes philosophical 'therapy' a *legitimate* process of transformation (one which in no way interferes with but only enhances the freedom of the individual because, through the use of reason, the truest parts of the self are 'discovered'). Second, that there is an unresolved tension in Nussbaum's work between the image of philosophy presented here as aiming to enhance autonomy through reasoning and the attempt to resist the tendency of philosophy conceived in these terms to detach the individual from community, to turn away from the risk and vulnerability of human life and desire.

The relevance of the first point to philosophical counselling is that it matters how we conceive of the kind of practice we are engaged in, and it also matters that we should understand the origins of various kinds of self-description we put forward in terms of the purpose they are designed to serve. For example, Nussbaum's account begins with the classical philosophical gesture of distinguishing philosophy as a science from the lesser 'arts' for which it might be mistaken - rhetoric, religion, superstition. It is clear that many of Socrates' dialogues which engage with 'sophists', aim to distinguish the art of philosophy from the art of rhetoric in terms of its legitimacy as a form of transformation. Philosophy is legitimate both because it aims at the Good and because it proceeds by dialectical argumentation; it does not tempt, seduce or otherwise irrationally persuade the other, as do interactions whose aim is power or pleasure. Philosophy as a practice is defined and defended in terms of these distinctive virtues. The Nietzschean riposte to this self-image of philosophy, however, argues that to define a practice in terms of its *ideal* elements is often to be blind to what takes place in the practice, that is, to simply ignore what we might call the 'performative' elements of the practice; in other words, one assumes that the process has been adequately *described* when we have said what it *ought* to be and do. If on the other hand, one asks how the process of transformation works and one is concerned with the relations of power and pleasure here, one's questions may lead to a different sense of what philosophy is and does. Does the transformation that takes place in a philosophical dialogue really proceed through the clarification of beliefs? Are these beliefs bound up with desires in such a way that the desire is modified by a change in the belief? Or are we caught in an *unstable* dialectic here which requires us to acknowledge also that the belief we *arrive* at and *accept*

*as true* always contains an unanalysable sub-text of desire? In Nietzsche's witty engagements with the dramatic persona of Socrates he presents the philosopher as arch seducer, and the process of philosophical transformation as an erotic and dangerous game, thus insisting upon that dimension of dialectic which the self-image of philosophy *must deny* when it stakes its legitimacy upon ultimately *stabilising* the relationship between belief and desire.<sup>1</sup> I take it that Nussbaum's subtle treatment of the *interdependency* of belief and desire nonetheless seeks to stabilise the relationship between these elements, and needs to do so in order to affirm that the legitimacy of transformation of the person through philosophical reflection is established by the special interest philosophy has in truth itself. It is telling that she does not put her point about the interdependency of belief and desire in terms of the thought that there are *desires* at stake at every level of human activity. The question the Nietzschean must ask here is: which desires (and these may be various) are bound up with the pursuit of truth? Setting aside the self-legitimizing assurance conveyed by this value, Nietzsche asks: why do we want the truth, and what does it cost us to pursue it? These questions, which we should take as open-ended and genuinely reflective, but also as aimed at *destabilising* the primacy of the legitimating languages of knowledge, are carried forward in Foucault's work. They seem to me to be profoundly important questions to engage with in considering the methods, ethics and capacities of philosophical counselling.

Foucault's subversion of the standard self-image of philosophical probity relies upon stressing the dimensions of ethical reflection that are, one might speak of variously as, 'creative', 'performative' or 'constitutive'. Seeking truth, he suggests, is not some pure form of activity that would, without further effect, simply counter those erroneous beliefs and assumptions 'internalised' by the individual in some prior process of socialization. Rather, seeking truth is intrinsically self-shaping; it 'constitutes' the subject as an object of examination. For Foucault, then, the contrast Nussbaum proposes at the outset between self-shaping practices and the pursuit of truth is question begging. The pursuit of truth is neither a 'neutral' activity nor paradigmatic of the only legitimate form self-transformation might take. If Nussbaum assumes the proper antagonism of knowledge and power in accordance with her ideal of autonomy, Foucault assumes their irreducible

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<sup>1</sup> *Twilight of the Idols*.

complicity precisely because the pursuit of knowledge *is* transformative, a way of acting upon the self or another. If, for Nussbaum, the only virtuous form of transformation comes through discovery of errors in belief, for Foucault such discovery occurs within a discourse in which we must acknowledge the irreducibly internal relations between asceticism and truths, between moral injunctions and the desires constituted by those injunctions, in ways we can no longer separate by distinguishing the 'false' from the 'true'. There are not beliefs first and desires second, as Nussbaum herself agrees. Yet in rendering such relations more perspicuous so that we may become judges of both beliefs and desires, as Nussbaum suggests our philosophical 'therapy' should do, Foucault's model would ask that we also take account of how this gesture of self-judgement itself *constitutes* the self as an object to be judged, and to experiment with the implications of the thought that the subject who seeks to separate what is 'true' in himself from what is 'false' has already taken on a certain form. Thus he asks that we find ways of judging the philosophical gesture of *self-judgement*; its requirement that we constitute ourselves as coherent, responsible selves; its ethical ideal of autonomy. What may appear to be the vista of an infinite regress opened up by this demand has a deliberately destabilising effect on the deeply entrenched assumption that there is *no question at all* to be raised about the value of autonomy or the value of truth.

Yet the value of raising these questions for philosophical counselling concerns, in my view, the entire basis of the practice. Let me give just one example of this. Nussbaum's account of what it would mean to recover autonomy involves, as a first gesture, separating out beliefs that are 'externally imposed' by a culture from those that an individual could accept for herself on the basis of critical reflection. She also wishes to affirm, on the other hand, that individuals are irreducibly situated in cultures. She uses the second point to resist the radical rejection of concrete social beliefs and desires characteristic of Platonism and the first point to insist that, nonetheless, we need to take up a critical stance towards the cultures we inhabit. At first sight this appears to be a useful schema. But we should note how it is related to the earlier schema of active-critical philosophical reflection (the project of discovery of the 'true' self) versus passive-transformative 'illusory' effects of religion, superstition etc., a schema which established the legitimacy of philosophy. Foucault's picture of philosophical therapy as one amongst other 'techniques' of transformation aims to raise difficulties for the

analytical schema Nussbaum uses. Starting from the view that we are radically constituted by cultures, Foucault takes this to mean that it will not make sense to separate out an aspect of the self available to undertake independent critique of the desires and beliefs that one has come, through acculturation, to embody. We must also reject, therefore, the usefulness of the schema proposed by the image of an 'internalization' of beliefs that could be reversed into critical 'externalisation', and thus question the role played by the ideal of self-knowledge in our images of ethical life. Whereas for Nussbaum the issue is that the unphilosophical subject operates under externally imposed rules (rules that individuals could not assume responsibility for or 'take charge of' (TD: 5)), Foucault's concern is to point out the ways in which precisely this way of *conceptualising* our cultural situation has ethical consequences. This reflects his view that we will inevitably and invariably 'decipher ourselves' in richly productive vocabularies, to which the subject can *never* bear an external relation. The process of 'subjectification' as Foucault calls it, is one that requires us to work *within* the terms of self-understanding that a culture offers, because the 'external' critical position (equivalent to the deep 'internality' of the self) that Nussbaum seeks to deploy is a dominant 'fiction' with ethical implications of its own. The alternative to imagining such an external position is to try to detect certain 'blind spots' in a culture's thinking, one of which, for Foucault, would be the very assumption that Nussbaum makes about the opposition between knowledge and power.

In the practical environment of philosophical counselling, this difference in approach has enormous consequences for the way in which the question of an individual's freedom is addressed. Inquiry into a person's relationship to the background they take to have 'constituted' them as the individuals they now are, and the manner in which a project of self-transformation might be pursued would have quite distinct resonances. It is not a matter of indifference whether we take a Foucauldian 'genealogical' approach to the narrative of a life history or, instead, model that narrative in terms of the pursuit of autonomy. For one thing, the Foucauldian will stress how self-knowledge is always situated, relational, and has a complex temporality which links to ever-changing and mutually interfering projects and desires. There is not even an *imaginary* 'external' point of view providing the locus of critique, and we must certainly be wary of uncritically linking that point of view to the deep 'interiority' of the self. The cultural horizon of values and meanings which, for Nussbaum, is at once necessary to the moral subject and yet must be

open to critically reflective examination, becomes, in Foucault's thought, that pattern of discourses which are not merely 'internalised' by the subject as a set of beliefs but are *embodied* as feelings, desires, and inclinations that can therefore never be fully 'externalised' as objects of reflection. For Foucault, then, practical philosophy is properly described as a '*technique* of self-shaping' and has an essentially aesthetic dimension because it must work within a field of 'productive discourses' and because it is itself a productive discourse.

What I now want to suggest is that conceiving of practical philosophy in these terms can help us in addressing some of the evaluative and conceptual tension which surrounds the ideal of autonomy in Nussbaum's thought.

### III: Philosophy as Aesthetics of Existence

Foucault's turn to Hellenistic ethics is organised around the claim that whereas moderns take self-knowledge to be primary in ethical reflection, in ancient times knowledge of oneself was thought to follow from 'care of oneself', that is, from one's ethical practices. Since self-knowledge does not exist in abstraction from ethical 'self-relation', it is, he writes,

a matter of placing the imperative 'know thyself' - which to us appears so characteristic of our civilization - back in the much broader interrogation that serves as its explicit or implicit context: What should one do with oneself? What work should be carried out on the self? How should one 'govern oneself' by performing actions in which one is oneself the objective of those actions, the domain in which they are brought to bear, the instrument they employ, and the subject that acts? (ST, EF1: 87)

Knowledge emerges out of the attempt to 'govern oneself'. But it is not the knowledge of an autonomous subject who has been able to free herself from error. It is, rather, the sort of knowledge we find in 'genealogies' of processes, knowledge of events as linked contingently, as finding and inventing their purposes and guiding aims not at the beginning but in the midst of life, not in some deep truth but in the activity of living, where our 'performance' in pursuit of truth can never be fully separated out from the truth we 'discover'.<sup>2</sup> This is the kind of knowledge embodied in what Foucault calls an

'aesthetics of existence' and which he takes to have been at the heart of Hellenistic ethics.

What, then, might philosophical counselling today draw from such an image of 'ethics' as 'aesthetics of existence'? Negatively put, this idea helps us to contest the assumption that the ethical ideal appropriate to philosophical reflection is that of autonomy. An aesthetics of existence is not governed by the ideal of autonomy. Rather, it raises the *question* of 'how one should govern oneself'. To pursue an aesthetics of existence will to this extent differ from the kind of reflective exercise Nussbaum associates with the name of philosophy, having the end of discovering the values and beliefs that might render my life worthy of the human capacity for autonomy; a life one might 'take charge of' (TD: 5). Nonetheless, in pursuing this point, we should also take account of how *problematic* an ideal autonomy actually is for Nussbaum, and apply this sense of difficulty to the question of what it is a philosophical counsellor seeks to do. For the most part Nussbaum assumes that more autonomy could only be a good thing. And yet the honesty of her work does, nonetheless, in a curious way, lie in its constant unease about whether the ideal of autonomy, embodied in a practice of philosophy, tends to lead; that is, towards the negation of desire and emotion, the constitutive vulnerabilities of human life. If autonomy stands, in Nussbaum's work, for certain claims to which she is deeply committed - the individual's power of resistance to uncritically internalised norms, the site of the proper self, liberated from false belief, 'discovering' the truth of its desires - it also tends, in all the ancient philosophers she reads in these terms, to be bound up with the ascetic renunciation of worldly attachments, with the attempt to constitute an existence invulnerable to the forms of power from which philosophy so *radically* distinguishes itself (TD: 41). Nussbaum seeks to strike a balance between the profoundly critical stance the ideal of autonomy affords and a more Aristotelian emphasis on the ordinary beliefs and desires of ordinary citizens. Thus faced with the problem of how to specify philosophy as *practical*, she too presents its reason as arising in the 'midst of life', not Platonistically from sources outside culturally embedded practices. Faced with the question of how philosophy can work on desires rather than simply negating them, she argues for the interwinement of belief and desire. In both these respects, there is a sense in which her 'expanded' image of transformative philosophy comes close to Foucault's. Nonetheless she works within a moral and political framework for understanding the purposes of 'doing philosophy' to which the *fiction* of adopting an 'external'

<sup>2</sup> The best description of this mode of interpretation is to be found in Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals*, Essay 2 #12.

point of view on one's inherited beliefs is absolutely essential (for it is this that stabilises beliefs as objects of analysis). Thus any image of the counselling process drawn from a theoretical perspective like Nussbaum's will tend to stress the importance of that 'external' moment and will link the legitimacy of its practice to the non-interventionist neutrality of the quest for truth. The question I want to raise is whether there is something about that image of philosophy that leads us in the direction of an incapacity for engaging with our vulnerability in the midst of life, and thus also forecloses images of philosophy - perhaps of philosophy as 'aesthetics' - better able to address this need.

On Foucault's account, the question of self-governance typically arose for Hellenistic 'counsellors' in contexts where it is *impossible* for a person simply to 'take charge', where one must rather find ways of behaving virtuously in the face of that which challenges the self to nuance its power of agency in relation to 'otherness'. Self-governance is required in the face of various forms of 'otherness' - death, *eros*, irredeemable loss, the vulnerability presented or the threat posed by our attachments to worldly things and especially our attachments to other people. It is facilitated by philosophical 'discourses' through which we constitute ourselves as reflective subjects of desire (EF1: HS: 99 - 105, ECSPF: 288-9). Many of these discourses can be read as advocating an 'external' detachment from all that might affect one in ways that would undermine self-governance. But Foucault's presentation of them as 'aesthetic devices' and techniques of self suggest that we might also regard them along lines closer to those 'clients' who originally sought this wisdom as means of strengthening oneself, of reminding oneself of one's duties and one's courage. Such discourses formed an aesthetics of existence insofar as they enabled the self to both maintain itself and to *relate* to all that threatened it.

Here the parallels are striking between certain aspects of what Nussbaum tries to do justice to in her account of Hellenistic ethical thought, especially using images of human life drawn from ancient tragedy, and what Foucault finds integral to ancient conceptions of the demand of self-governance. Nussbaum presents such aspects of life as typically in tension with what philosophers have associated with reason, and worries repeatedly over this in her study. Foucault, on the other hand, finds in his reading of ancient ethical teachings that the way in which self-governance appears as a problem in relation to *otherness*, argues for the appropriateness of philosophy's 'aesthetic' response. Philosophy is a '*technique du soi*' because it seeks to

constitute a self who will be equal to the problems life poses. The response of 'wise discourse' to the exigencies of life is *not* to be thought about in terms derived from the ideal of autonomy - the effort to 'take charge of life' by establishing true beliefs - but corresponds to 'care for oneself', that is, care for oneself in one's relations with others or otherness as such. The role of philosophy is to aim at the embodiment of certain desires, beliefs, emotions and so forth; self-mastery is *generated* by a 'wise discourse', one that is concerned with the care of that 'self' which a wise discourse might *form*. Thus to seek self-mastery on the terms Foucault suggests belonged to the ancient Greeks, is to aim neither at full responsibility for oneself, one's actions and decisions, nor at the purification of one's choices until these are based on strictly internal motivations, free from external influence. It is not, in other words, to seek autonomy. For the problem of self-mastery appears as inextricable from the complex relations of in which the self is embedded, and to which the question of whether an influence comes from 'within' or 'without' is rarely fundamental. If the subject desires another, for instance, the problem is not to discern the '*truth*' of that desire - to establish its origin either within the self proper or in influences upon the self, nor to discern whether it disguises or is disguised by another order of interests etc. - but rather to discover a technique through which one will be able to take up an appropriate attitude to that desire in its relation to acts and pleasures (EF1: GE: 264). To take up an appropriate attitude is to weave an experience of life into an aesthetics of existence; we enact self-transformation and seek to master ourselves, but may never fully rise *above* our world.

When, following Nietzsche, Foucault writes of the aesthetics of existence as requiring us to 'create ourselves as a work of art', he gives the self-knowledge we gain through our self-forming practices a role in the transfigurative task which parallels the three aspects of ethical reflection Nussbaum took as evidence for its interest in truth. A work of art will demand (i) a high degree of coherence amongst its parts (ii) expressive power and (iii) persuasiveness. But although self-knowledge will play a significant role here we do not imagine that reason will *legitimate* the process by which we create something new. I have argued that there are revealing parallels between Nussbaum's and Foucault's turn to Hellenistic ethics in the attempt to give an account of a therapeutic philosophy. What most decisively turns Nussbaum *away* from the path Foucault follows, however, is her demand for a *deep* legitimation of the process of self-transformation. It is this, I have suggested, that is at stake in her concern to radically

separate knowledge from relations of power, to model the 'discovery' of self as the revelation of truth, and to establish the absolute difference between philosophy and other arts of transformation. What Foucault's perspective allows us to see is that this conception of philosophy as 'autonomous thought' is neither necessary nor, perhaps, most apt for describing the therapeutic value of a philosophy which aims at self-mastery.

If philosophy in its guise as a therapeutic discipline can be linked to an 'aesthetics of existence' - that is, to the attempt to bear ourselves well in the face of life's challenges, to reflect upon who we are and what our relations to others and to the world might become, thereby changing the character of our relationships - then perhaps we can somewhat distance its import from the primacy Nussbaum gives to the question of the legitimacy of its practices. If the distinctiveness of philosophy as an art of transformation is not the first thing that matters to us; if we do not quite believe in the clear alternatives of rational reflection versus 'brain-washing', 'religion' or 'magic', but seek rather to reflect critically on a *variety* of ideals of life at which different practices may aim, without assuming that some standard is established self-evidently by the autonomy of thought; then perhaps we will arrive at a richer rather than a merely looser conception of what philosophy as a practice of self-transformation may be about.

In its broad historical scope, Foucault's approach indicates the possibility and interest of interrogating the relationship between *different* images of the self and the kind of ethical questions they permit us to ask. His work suggests how ethical reflection is possible at the level of a genealogical exploration of the terms on which imperatives of life are understood: Which ideal image inspires a life? What experience of embodiment accompanies it? Which aspect of the experience of authority renders it forceful? How does the subject experience her own power to transform herself and her relations with others? These terms of analysis<sup>3</sup> introduce greater depth and complexity into

<sup>3</sup> These terms are drawn from Foucault's analysis in GE of four major aspects of the relation to self. Ethics, in Foucault's understanding, 'determines how the individual is supposed to constitute himself as a moral subject of his own actions' (GE: EF1: 263). The relationship to oneself has four major aspects, the first of which Foucault refers to as the 'ethical substance'. In answer to the question of which aspect or part of oneself is concerned with moral conduct, Foucault suggests that different eras and different schools of ethical thought have highlighted the importance of one's feelings on a question (our

contemporary era), one's intentions (Kantians), one's desires (Christianity, with historical variations), or one's 'acts linked with pleasures and desires' (the Greek's notion of *aphrodisia*) (GE: EF1: 263-4). The schema articulated here is a relatively familiar one, except for the attention Foucault pays to distinguishing the Christian understanding of the 'flesh' as ethical substance from the Greek understanding of 'sexuality' as ethical substance. Foucault is concerned to make an historical point about the change that occurs between the interest of Greek ethics in the acts that are performed by one who 'loves' another and the Christian interest in the nature of the desire for another in itself, regardless of acts. But his brief remarks suggest the broader interest of the topic of variations in the precise expression a person might give to their experience of embodiment, and to the aspects of their pleasures, desires, behaviour and so forth that are particularly tied to moral anxiety, a sense that here is the nodal point of a moral interdiction.

Foucault's second aspect of self-relation further opens up these questions by pointing to variability in what he calls the 'mode of subjectification [*mode d'assujettissement*]', that is, the way in which people are invited or incited to recognise their moral obligations' (GE: EF1: 264). This category refers to the broad structure of moral knowledges which relate the practices of 'decipherment' of oneself to moral interdictions, so that one's subjectivity is composed in relation to an acknowledgement of a certain type of authority. Such authority may take the form of natural law, divine law, a rational or an aesthetic principle; it translates into a compelling order of reasons and of self-understanding for the subject, whose very being is articulated in relation to its imperatives. This category is interesting for the way in which it breaks down the assumption that a subject's reasons for action must be either externally imposed (for example through the fear of punishment) or internally accepted (out of a sense that they are right for me personally). The 'mode of subjectification' is responsible for my being the kind of person for whom certain orders of reason are authoritative; thus it pre-exists my acceptance of reasons without, for all that, implying that I am forced into acceptance. My subjectivity only exists in relation to authoritative practices; so even though I may take up a critical relation to these I cannot dispense with them altogether. This principle offers an important counterweight to strong (existentialist) images of the subject's freedom to choose her terms of ethical reasoning and thus to accept responsibility for them without reference to external authority. The analysis of the 'mode d'assujettissement' seeks to grasp what is most profoundly authoritative for a subject and, at this level, to show how he or she is 'constituted' as a subject of ethical reflection and only hence as a subject of choice or of necessity.

The third aspect of self-relation, however, emphasises the capacity for self-transformation, offering an interpretation of this as an historical and cultural variable, again linked to ethical practice and moral knowledges. It thus corresponds in detail to the first aspect of self-relation; I may believe in the importance and possibility of eliminating certain desires altogether, or simply of moderating my acts; I may seek to purify the goodness of my intentions or simply to respect the truth of my



questions such as 'what do you truly value?', questions that the philosophical counsellor uses to elicit a client's ethical orientation. In particular they help, I would suggest, in moving away from language that suggests these are either matters of mere subjective 'preference' or reflect the truth of one's 'inner nature'. In revealing a rich history of differences in the terms on which such questions have been understood, Foucault's work, I want to claim, offers a valuable resource for philosophical counselling in reminding us how self-understanding emerges in complex social contexts of authority, through various techniques of 'knowing', and within differing experiences of embodiment and power. He reminds us, too, of how strongly the ethical 'relation to self' is culturally inflected, and yet remains open to reflective engagement; and of how the relationship with an other - 'a guide, a counsellor, a friend' - constitutes an open space of practical transformation which can never be fully legitimated by reason.

This lack of deep legitimisation is one that *should* concern us; by drawing attention to the 'heteronomy' implied by the action of a discourse, Foucault raises questions we do not yet know how to answer about our 'responsibilities' in practice. This analysis is far from suggesting that what one might do in philosophical counselling is 'bad' but it does suggest that what one does is always, and in an interesting way, 'dangerous'. Critical reason cannot protect us from that conclusion; we must look again and again at what image of life we are creating, and attempt to weigh its value for such beings as ourselves. Such acknowledgement of *creative* responsibility in philosophy rather than responsibility to truth might, indeed, be truer to Nussbaum's own profound sense of the constitutive vulnerability of human life than the image of autonomy that animates her portrayal of what is distinctive to philosophy as a practice of giving reasons.

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spontaneous feelings. I may believe that the demand of some such transformation is imperative upon me without, however, believing that I am able to bring it about on my own account (I need an act of grace). But on the whole one's understanding of what the ethical substance is will dictate a mode of 'asceticism' in the broadest sense (GE: EF1: 265). It will lend one an understanding of one's powers.

The last aspect of self-relation Foucault identifies relates to the imaginary formation of an ideal. The 'telos' of ethical self-relation can be thought in different ways: 'For instance, shall we become pure, or immortal, or free, or masters of ourselves, and so on?' (GE: EF1: 265). One can see that the answer to this type of question might arise out of the other aspects of ethical self-relation or inform them.

### Abbreviations

Works by Foucault:

EF1 = Michel Foucault, *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth: Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984, Volume One* Ed. P. Rabinow (2000) Penguin Books, London

All in the above volume:

GE = '*On the Genealogy of Ethics*'

ST = '*Subjectivity and Truth*'

ECSPF = '*Ethics of the Concern for the Self as a Practice of Freedom*'

HS = '*The Hermeneutic of the Subject*'

Work by Nussbaum

TD = *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (1994) Princeton

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