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PHILOSOPHY AS TRANSFORMATION OF THE SELF
IN FOUCAULT AND MURDOCH

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Abbreviations

Abbreviations for Foucault's and Murdoch's own works, and a few others, are given below. Any other abbreviations are normally explained on their first occurrence.

Foucault:

The History of Sexuality:

- WK Vol.I *The Will to Knowledge*, London: Penguin, 1998
UP Vol.II *The Uses of Pleasure*, London: Penguin, 1992
CS Vol.III *The Care of the Self*, London: Penguin, 1990

Courses at the Collège de France:

- A *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1974-75*, London: Verso, 2003
BB *The Birth of Biopolitics, Lectures at the Collège de France 1978-79*, London: Palgrave Macmillan 2008
CT *The Courage of Truth (The Government of Self and Others II): Lectures at the Collège de France, 1983-84*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. Translation of :
CV *Le courage de la vérité, Cours au Collège de France, 1984 : Le Gouvernement de soi et des autres II*, Paris: Gallimard Seuil, 2009.
GSA *Le Gouvernement de soi et des autres, Cours au Collège de France, 1982-83*, Paris : Gallimard Seuil, 2008.
HS *The Hermeneutics of the Subject, Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981-82*, New York: Picador, 2005
STP *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-78*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007

Other Books and essays by Foucault:

- DE *Dits et écrits*, 4 vols. Ed. Daniel Defert et al, Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1994.
DP *Discipline and Punish*, New York: Pantheon, 1977
M&C *Les mots et les choses*, Paris : Gallimard, 1966
NGH "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History", in Bouchard, D.F., ed., *Language, Countermemory, Practice*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977.
NSR "Non au sexe-roi", in DE, pp.256-79
OT *The Order of Things*, London: Routledge Classics, 2002

The Cambridge Companion to Foucault, (CCF), New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003

- AI Whitebook, J, "Against Interiority: Foucault's Struggle with Psychoanalysis", pp. 312-48
AF Han, Beatrice, "The Analytic of Finitude", pp. 176-209
EAF Davidson, A. "Ethics as Aesthetics: Foucault, the History of Ethics, and Ancient Thought", pp. 123-48
FEHN Sluga, Hans, "Foucault's Encounter with Heidegger and Nietzsche", pp.210-40
FMH Flynn, T., "Foucault's Mapping of History", pp.29-49
ICCF Gutting, G., "Introduction: Michel Foucault: A User's Manual", pp. 1-28
MFEI Bernauer, J. & Mahon, M., "Michel Foucault's Ethical Imagination", pp. 149-175
PM Rouse, J., "Power/Knowledge", pp. 95-122

Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, (EWF1), ed. Rabinow, P., London: Penguin, 2000

- ECS “The Ethics of the Concern for the Self as a Practice of Freedom”, pp.281-302
FWL “Friendship as a Way of Life.” pp. 135-40
ISR “Interview by Stephen Riggins”, pp. 121-34
OGE “On the Genealogy of Ethics”, pp. 253-80
PHS “Preface to The History of Sexuality, Volume 2”, pp. 199-206
SCSA “Sexual Choice, Sexual Act”, pp. 141-56
S&S “Sexuality and Solitude”, pp. 175-84
STSW “The Social Triumph of the Sexual Will”, pp. 157-162
TS “Technologies of the Self”, pp. 223-52
WE “What is Enlightenment?”, pp. 303-20
WKI “The Will to Knowledge: Introduction to the 1970-1971 Course at the Collège de France, pp. 11-16

Other books and articles on Foucault

- BSH Dreyfus, H., and Rabinow, P., *Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, Brighton, UK: Harvester Press, 1982.
FFE Veyne, P., “The Final Foucault and his Ethics”, in: *Foucault and his Interlocutors*, ed. A. Davidson, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997, pp. 225-33

Works by Iris Murdoch:

For essays published in *Existentialists and Mystics* (E&M) and elsewhere, page references are given only for this publication. For *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher*, ed. J. Broackes, Oxford University Press, 2011, references are given to this as (IMP). For essays published in *Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness*, ed. Antonaccio, M., & Schweiker, W., 1996, University of Chicago Press, references are given as in (IMSHG).

- AD “Against Dryness” (1961), E&M 287-95
BP, *The Black Prince*, London: Vintage Books, 2006
DPR “The Darkness of Practical Reason” (1966), E&M 193-202
EM “Existentialists and Mystics” (1970), E&M 221-235
E&M *Existentialists and Mystics* (1977), ed. P. Conradi
F&S “The Fire and the Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists” E&M 386-463
HMD “Hegel in Modern Dress” (1957), E&M 146-50
IP “The Idea of Perfection” (1964), E&M 299-366
KV “Knowing the Void” (1956), E&M 157-60
LP “Literature and Philosophy: A conversation with Bryan Magee” (1978) E&M 3-30
ME “Metaphysics and Ethics” (1975), E&M 59-76
MGM *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (1992)
NM “The novelist as a Metaphysician” (1950), E&M 101-7
NP “Nostalgia for the Particular” E&M 43-58
N&S *Nuns and Soldiers*, London: Vintage Books, 2001.
OGG “On God and Good” E&M 337 362
S&G “The Sublime and the Good” (1959), E&M 205-21
S&BR “The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited” (1959), E&M 261-86

- SGOC “The Sovereignty of Good over other Concepts” (1967), E&M 363-85
- SRR *Sartre: Romantic Rationalist* (1953; 1999), Vintage, London
- SW “Salvation by Words” (1972), E&M 235-242
- SZ “*Sein und Zeit: Pursuit of Being*”, (2011), IMP 93-111
- TL “Thinking and Language” (1951), E&M 33-42
- UTN *Under the Net*,
- VC “Vision and Choice in Morality” (1956), (with omissions) in E&M 76-98

Other works:

Iris Murdoch Philosopher, (IMP), ed. Broackes, J., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012 (IMP):

- EML Bagnoli, C. “The Exploration of Moral Life”, pp. 197-226
- FSK Nussbaum, M., ‘ “Faint with Secret Knowledge”: Love and Vision in Murdoch’s *The Black Prince*,’ pp. 135-54
- IM&E Moran, R. ‘Iris Murdoch and Existentialism’, pp. 181-96
- INV Crisp, Roger, ‘Iris Murdoch on Nobility and Moral Value’ (2011) in IMP 275-293
- PEMM Denham, A.E., “Psychopathy, Empathy and Moral Motivation”, pp. 325-352

Iris Murdoch and the Search for Human Goodness, eds. Antonaccio, M., Schweiker, W., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996

- L&V Nussbaum, M., ‘Love and Vision: Iris Murdoch on Eros and the Individual’ pp.29-53
- IMPP Taylor, C. ‘Iris Murdoch and Moral Philosophy’ pp. 3-28
- WPM Diamond, C. “ ‘We are Perpetually Moralists’: Iris Murdoch, Fact and Value, pp. 79-119

V&R McDowell, J., “Virtue and Reason”, in *Virtue Ethics*, ed. Darwall, S., Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003

Works by Stanley Cavell:

- CW *Cities of Words*, Cambridge Massachusetts: Belknap, Harvard University Press, 2005
- MMWS *Must We Mean What We Say*, Cambridge University Press, 1969
- QO *In Quest of the Ordinary*, University of Chicago Press, 1988

Works by Wittgenstein:

- C&V *Culture and Value*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980
- PI *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford: Blackwell Paperbacks, 1974
- TLP *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*, Oxford: Routledge Classics, 2001

Hadot, Pierre:

- IC *The Inner Citadel*, Cambridge Mass-Lon: Harvard University Press, 2001, (1992)
- PWL *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, Ed. Davidson, A., Oxford: Blackwell, 1995
- WAP *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap, Harvard, 2002 (1995)

Other works:

- HO Hacking, I *Historical Ontology*, Harvard University Press, 2002
IML Conradi, Peter J., *Iris Murdoch: A Life*, London: Harper Collins, 2001.
TD Nussbaum, M., *The Therapy of Desire*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1994
V&R McDowell, J., "Virtue and Reason", in *Virtue Ethics*, ed. Darwall, S., 2003, Oxford: Blackwell, Oxford, pp.121-44

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Philosophy as Transformation of the Self

Introduction: Foucault, Murdoch and Philosophy.

[F]or what is ethics, if not the practice of freedom, the conscious [*réfléchie*] practice of freedom?" (Foucault, ECS, 284).

Morality is after all the great central arena of human life and the abode of freedom. (Murdoch, SRR, 31-32)

Not much of the philosophy of the twentieth century could be said to be concerned with the transformation of the self. The work of Michel Foucault and Iris Murdoch, in very different ways, was, or came to be. Both had begun their work however, in a twentieth century dominated by what was known as "the linguistic turn" in both continental and Anglo-Saxon philosophy, by exploring the relation of language and experience; though from the beginning, each of them took a critical stance to their respective traditions. Foucault, in a much quoted passage from *The Uses of Pleasure*, puts together two questions *as if* the one followed smoothly from the other; but in effect, the conceptual space between these two questions marks both the turn about to take place in his own philosophical practice, and the gulf between his changing conception of philosophy and the more mainstream conceptions he was implicitly challenging. He writes:

what therefore is philosophy today – I mean philosophical activity – if it is not the critical work of thought on itself? And if it does not consist in undertaking to know how and to what extent it would be possible to think differently, instead of legitimating what one already knows? (UP, 16)

The first of these two questions would make no waves among the communities of academic philosophers today who see philosophy as a profession, not necessarily as an activity permeating their way of life; while the second, which *prima facie* seems to merely clarify the first, in fact suggests that philosophical practice might radically transform one's life, might serve precisely that purpose, if, that is, as he goes on to say, "the living body of philosophy [...] is still now what it was in the past, that is to say an 'ascesis', an *akèsis*, an exercise of oneself in the activity of thought." (Ibid.) "Ascesis", even when defined as an exercise of oneself in thought, does not succeed in shaking off all sorts of connotations in which thought is situated in practices that the professional philosopher of today would find completely alien, and of which Foucault, never one to use a term lightly, is more than aware; his own studies had always involved meticulous ("archeological") attention to concepts, and to the historical correlates of their various connotations. His work had led to considerable insight into the way in which the thought of the

individual is shaped by the practices that determine what counts as “knowledge” in any given field, at any given time, and had instigated upheavals in the academic disciplines the work touched on; but it had not led to an investigation of subjectivity, let alone to an “asceticism”.

As he turned his attention away from the ways in which our thought and lives are “objectified” by discursive practices, to use his own terms, to what he calls “subjectivation”; the “subject”, having a degree of freedom that will be circumscribed in a number of ways, moves to a more central place in Foucault’s thinking, in the first instance through an analysis of power and its counterpart – resistance. For a period of time – the middle, “genealogical” period in Foucault’s work – he dedicated his time to how this story, essentially that of the *possibility* of thinking differently, played out in various “games of truth” and practices of modernity. But freedom as *resistance* is just one form of freedom, and one that is reactive, tied as it is to the discourses and practices of one’s time and place; and as his interest in freedom deepened, his need to study other notions of freedom, and other *practices* of philosophical freedom, led him to the only secular place where a wealth of such practices are to be found, to the philosophy of Antiquity, where none of the practices of one’s life could be excluded from philosophy, and where all the practices of one’s life were philosophical practices.

Against this ancient conception, what Foucault calls “the modern age of the history of truth” begins, he says, when “what gives access to truth, the condition for the subject’s access to the truth, is knowledge (*connaissance*) and knowledge alone [...] That is to say, it is when the philosopher (or the scientist, or simply someone who seeks the truth) can recognize the truth and have access to it in himself and solely through his activity of knowing, without anything else being demanded of him and without him having to change or alter his being as a subject.” (HS, 17) What he is describing here “is a form of reflexivity that makes it possible to fix the certainty that will serve as a criterion for all possible truth and which, starting from this fixed point, will advance from truth to truth up to the organization and systematization of an objective knowledge.” (Ibid. 460) This form of reflexivity that Foucault calls “method” is grounded in the conviction that objective knowledge is possible, and that in self-knowledge, in a certain sense, objective and subjective knowledge must come together. Orthodox at least in this, Foucault says that the first clear formulation of “the certainty that will serve as a criterion for all possible truth” is Descartes’ *Cogito ergo sum*; one of the few philosophical statements, in Latin at that, that have attained iconic status in the modern era of “the history of truth”.

Foucault's own earlier studies in and on this era of "method", which in recognition of Nietzsche's influence, he calls genealogies, took the form of analyses of the way in which new concepts and entire disciplines arise in response to historically specific conditions; of how the separate disciplinary practices in which knowledge is elaborated are interlinked; and of how they in turn create new "objective" filters through which we read ourselves. Underlying this disciplinary diversity is revealed, as a kind of epistemological style of the modern era, the depth of this conviction that truth can indeed be accessed by intellectual effort, and appropriate "method" alone. It is Foucault's clear understanding (and substantial and explicit demonstration) of the illusion of an objectivity untainted by subjective, or intersubjective, notions or habits of thought, that first led him to his enquiry into subjectivation, that is, to those practices through which the self constitutes itself as moral subject. Foucault's term "subjectivation" connotes the active nature of the process by which the individual becomes a moral subject. In shaping the raw material of myself into a moral subject, some form of inner change is therefore implicit: "There is no single moral action without reference to the unity of moral conduct; no moral conduct that does not require the constitution of the self as moral subject; no constitution of a moral subject without modes of subjectivation and without an 'ascetics' or 'practices of the self' to sustain it." (UP, 15)

At a certain point, in need of exemplification of self-formative practices that had fallen into disuse in the modern era, Foucault turned to an examination of the reflexivity of a previous era, that of "meditation", as he describes it, in Antiquity. This, he says, is a form of reflexivity which "carries out the test of what one thinks, the test of oneself as the subject who actually thinks what he thinks and acts as he thinks, with the object of the subject's transformation and constitution as, let's say, the ethical subject of truth" (Ibid.) His long engagement with some of the major developments of this form of reflexivity in Antiquity, and its repercussions on his later reflections on the possibilities of a philosophy for modernity will be examined here.

Iris Murdoch meanwhile writes, in another philosophical language:

"I think philosophy is very counter-natural, it is a very odd unnatural activity.[...] Philosophy disturbs the mass of semi-aesthetic conceptual habits on which we normally rely. Hume said that even the philosopher, when he leaves his study, falls back upon these habitual assumptions.
[...] Philosophy involves seeing the absolute oddity of what is familiar and trying to formulate really probing questions about it." (Murdoch, LP, 8)

Hume's cheerful acceptance (after his moment of deep crisis) of the disparity between the philosopher's "truth" in his study and the semi-aesthetic conceptual habits on which we normally

rely, had, according to Murdoch, a profound influence on philosophy in the British (and later also American) tradition in which she was trained; an influence which tended to circumscribe certain areas of human life as those on which philosophy could legitimately operate, and others as beyond its scope or interest. When Murdoch arrived on the British philosophical scene in the 1940s “philosophy” was largely treated as coinciding with “logic”, and “ethics” tended to be seen as a kind of annexed area of application. There was a certain Enlightenment optimism in this, in the belief that extending the reign of logic was an ethical priority, that through the gradual extension of “certain knowledge” and rational thinking to ever greater numbers of persons and domains, the array of semi-aesthetic conceptual habits, susceptible as they are to mythological narrative and other “nonsense”, would slowly diminish, replaced by rationally governed notions and human relations. Such reliance on the gradual rationalisation of human interaction led to codified forms of morality, what McDowell has called an “outside-in”¹ view of morality, which Murdoch did not share; or rather she agreed that moral codes were necessary, but not that they in any way exhausted the requirements of ethics. She saw this faith in the power of rationality as one that completely leaves out of account the self-centred egoism of the human individual (hard to deny empirically, whatever the “causes”), and its capacity to twist any narrative in its own favour, often quite unconsciously; a reason for which she, and McDowell in a different way, see the need for what he calls an inside-out moral perspective, and therefore forms of self-related moral practice. The forms of such practice Murdoch puts forward may, and in some respects do, correspond to what Foucault calls ascesis, and defines as an exercise of oneself in thought; though for Murdoch the elaboration of such practices requires some form of moral psychology, whereas Foucault went to considerable pains to refute this idea, as we will see.

The conflict between Murdoch’s induction into *modern* philosophy and (as a student of Classical studies at Oxford) her first encounter with *ancient* philosophy, could not have been greater; but whereas many of her contemporaries resolved the problem by reading the ancient philosophers through the spectacles of contemporary epistemological criteria, thereby consigning them to current historical irrelevance, for Murdoch the problems went much deeper. Entering into the way of thinking of ancient philosophy, essentially of Plato, enabled her to view analytic philosophy from the outside, as it were; to see it, that is, as what Wittgenstein called a “limited whole”, or a particular unified vision; and to see it as one among others, perhaps with profound insights, but

¹ See McDowell, J., “Virtue and Reason” (V&R), in *Virtue Ethics*, ed. Darwall, S., 2003, Blackwell, Oxford, pp.121-44,

with no infallible claim to truth. It was Wittgenstein's elucidation of the ultimate impossibility of grounding any kind of metaphysical foundation in philosophy, including the one he had himself elaborated in the *Tractatus*, that provided her with the theoretical instruments necessary to elaborate the position she was herself seeking to articulate; and gave her also its central metaphor for philosophical systems in general, that of "pictures", of ways of "picturing" the world. But whereas Wittgenstein, in the *Tractatus*, focused on logic, and on the *logical* "pictures" we create to render orderly our experience of the world, Murdoch believed that our aesthetic sense of our world was equally fundamental. And yet the study of aesthetics, as with ethics, had been largely sidelined in mainstream philosophy. For Murdoch, to see is to evaluate, to be in the world is to evaluate – the descriptions we give ourselves of our world are constantly evaluative, that is to say that "good" and "bad", as both aesthetic and moral judgement, are integral to our thinking, to the point that, she writes, "language itself is a moral medium, almost all uses of language convey value. This is one reason why we are almost always morally active. Life is soaked in the moral, literature is soaked in the moral." (LP, 27) The problem, of course, is that so often we are, quite casually, *immorally* active, in myriad ways, big and small (a generous action does not come from an irritated mind, for example). Murdoch saw self-centredness, absorption in our own fantasies, as the crucial moral problem. Therefore, she writes:

The problem is to accommodate inside moral philosophy, and suggest methods of dealing with the fact that so much of human conduct is moved by mechanical energy of an egocentric kind. In the moral life the enemy is the fat relentless ego. Moral philosophy is properly, and in the past has sometimes been, the discussion of this ego and of the techniques (if any) for its defeat." (OGG, 342)

The exploration of this problem will be the deconstructive work, so to speak, of self-transformation for Murdoch. The reconstructive work will involve changing the energy, re-orienting Eros to the Good. And as for Plato, her inspiration in this, beauty will have its part to play, but above all, she writes:

We need a moral philosophy in which the concept of love, so rarely mentioned now by philosophers, can once again be made central." (OGG, 337)

Ch. 1. Knowledge, power and, finally, the subject

1. From objectification to subjectivation

Foucault frequently remarks that “knowledge, power and the subject” form the “three axes” of his work, though it is well known that in the first phase his focus was mostly on knowledge, in the middle phase on the interaction of knowledge and power (construed very broadly, to include all gross and subtle games of power in human interaction), and that in both these phases “the subject” appeared mostly in the guise of individual elaborator of the particular package of knowledge/power that history had cast her way. It was only in the last phase that the subject, in its more usual guise as agent in its own history, became the important focus of his work. Spanning all three phases, however, the two concepts (neologisms he introduced) which form the cornerstones of Foucault’s work on the possibilities of self-knowledge, formation and transformation – of the self as object or subject – are those of *objectification* and of *subjectivation*.

The process by which the “object” of a particular discourse, or corpus of knowledge, is created from the procedures of selection, exclusion and elaboration of elements considered relevant to the discourse itself is called “objectification” by Foucault. Thus, for example, “possession”, “madness” and “mental illness” are the objects of three differently constituted discourses, three historically singular objectifications, regarding what may in some cases appear to be the same assemblage of phenomena of human experience. Power relations at institutional and interpersonal levels function in relation to the formulation of objects, and the elaboration of the discourses in which they are situated, and also to the constraints which oblige the individual to internalise these objects. In applying the different configurations of knowledge that have been acquired to the self – and it is not possible *not* to acquire the “knowledge” of one’s society and time – one effectively objectifies oneself, reading oneself as evidence of acquired views of what one is, or perhaps dissenting from them, but still taking them as the reference point; and thus seeing oneself as caught in a network of (differently theorised) determinations.

But there is another way of attempting to know the self, in the first instance through one’s experience as a knowing and active subject, focusing on what freedom one has to direct one’s own life, and this is what Foucault would come to refer to as “subjectivation”; though technically the term would also include, as its weak form, less conscious forms of personal adjustment to prevailing notions. This chapter will attempt to elucidate Foucault’s thematization of the subject,

and the conceptual shifts that mark his passage from a prevailing interest in objectification to a prevailing interest in subjectivation.

In the three examples of objectification given above, of possession, madness and mental illness, those to whom these definitions have been applied may have accepted them or not, but they will probably have accepted the criteria: “I am/am not possessed/mad/sick, because I manifest/do not manifest these behaviours; I correspond, or do not correspond to the criteria used to define me.” One can reject the classification imposed on one, but one cannot so easily reject the historically specific criteria on which it is based. In the classifications of mental states mentioned here there is a historical development, which Foucault had traced in its non-linear passage through different historical epochs, from a knowledge system governed largely by religion to one governed by science. But as he demonstrates, while this signifies a greater attempt at objectivity, it is not necessarily any guarantee of an equivalent achievement. To give an example from a domain Foucault does not analyse, if we apply his methods to, let us say, the situation of a worker in industrial society, on the basis of a particular configuration of acquired knowledge and morality, this worker may see herself as earning a reasonable wage, and having a duty to work well. Alternatively (or successively) she may acquire a different view from among those historically available, based on different knowledge and a different moral vision, and then see herself as trapped in a carefully constructed illusion to deny the basic truth of her exploitation. For this individual subject, this might then translate into the notion of a moral duty to attempt to break down the profit-making process from within; using her energies for *this* purpose, now conceived as morally more significant than scrupulously carrying out the tasks she is paid to perform. These two conflicting moral positions represent subjective choices, but they are based on, and correspond to, two of the available objectifications of “labour relations”, or of “the mode of production”, in twentieth century Western society. Whilst each of the discourses in which these particular objectifications are elaborated is logically coherent in itself, and the two discourses are concerned with the same reality, communication between them may be impossible, precisely because their *objectifications*, that is, their attribution of significance to a particular reading of that reality, are structured in such a way that each excludes the basic presuppositions of the other. They are, nonetheless, at the same time forms of *subjectivation*, in that the moral decision of each individual represents her own subjective choices, but choices that are necessarily made in relation to historically specific objectifications of knowledge, and to effective social constraints, the forms of power. It is this interlinking of knowledge, power and the subject in particular historical

singularities that forms a kind of framework for all of Foucault's work, with different focuses at different stages.

There have been few moments in history, however, or societies, in which the practice of moral choice as a self-determining form of subjectivation has been actively cultivated, as opposed to submission to moral constraint; which is perhaps one of the reasons why Foucault came late to the study of the more self-directed forms of subjectivation. But the main reason he gives for his early reluctance to explore this field of subjectivity was his opposition to what he saw, in the mid-twentieth century, as the fact that philosophy was still dominated by a preoccupation with the subject construed as a centre of consciousness and the source of all knowledge and signification. He attributed this to the influence of Husserl, to the institutional context of the French university and its subject-centred "Cartesianism", and to "the political conjunct [in the 1950s and 60s]. Given the absurdity of wars, slaughters, and despotism, it seemed to be up to the individual subject to give meaning to his existential choices. [... However, this] philosophy of *consciousness* had paradoxically failed to found a philosophy of *knowledge*, and especially of scientific knowledge. Also, this philosophy of meaning had failed to take into account the formative mechanisms of signification and the structure of systems of meaning." (S&S, 176) This latter is a reference to structural studies in linguistics, anthropology, and psychology, and to the failure of academic philosophy to come to terms, literally and figuratively, with important developments in these adjacent fields of knowledge. It was to this perceived necessity that Foucault first turned his attention. Much later, through his studies of how knowledge is constructed in constant interaction with social practices and with individual subjects, and through a growing sense of the possibility of repositioning oneself, as individual subject, in relation to received views, he developed his own theory of subjectivity; or rather, of subjectivation, as arising from the inner relation of the self to itself, as the possibility of the self-formation of the subject.

Neither in the case of objectification nor in that of subjectivation however, can the individual truth-seeker establish private criteria. There are ways of doing these things, and the ways of exploring the self that pertain to processes of subjectivation are grouped by Foucault under the term: "techniques of the self" : "techniques that permit individuals to effect, by their own means, a certain number of operations on their own bodies, their own souls, their own thoughts, their own conduct, and this in a manner so as to transform themselves, modify themselves, and to attain a certain state of perfection, happiness, purity, supernatural power. Let us call these techniques

‘technologies of the self’ ” (Ibid., 177). Historically these techniques are variable and there have been many of them; interestingly some have maintained a presence, or been reworked, in periods where “objective” knowledge has undergone significant epistemic change. This relative elasticity of techniques of the self in relation to the historical periods in which they were first formulated, is indicative of a space of subjectivity that was of great interest to Foucault; becoming, in the final phase of his work, a major focus.

Knowledge of the self is governed by the same truth-criteria as any other object of knowledge in its own time and place, even where, as in contemporary Western society, two (at least) notions of truth coexist: the predominant, collective notion of “objective” truth, with its historically standardised criteria and its links to scientific method; and a notion of a private, “truth to oneself”, that, in a culturally mixed society, is more heterogeneous, and may delineate moral truths that are different from those linked to “objective truth”. (Murdoch makes the same point, noting also that the persons involved may believe that their truth is a superior description of reality to that of science, that it is indeed “objective”). Where any one such “private” conception of truth is mixed with power relations, however, as in the institutionalised religions, it may compete in the public sphere with “objective knowledge”, entrenching itself in primarily secular institutions such as the family, the school, the hospital, the State – institutions in which one’s knowledge of self is formed. Therefore one may experience oneself as “objectified” not only by “objective” knowledge, but also, and intensively, by “non-objective” systems of knowledge. The case of “original sin”, for example, an objectification which leads to presuming that one is constantly guilty of something (requiring investigation), whatever the circumstances, has had a long and variegated history in Western society.

In the case of both kinds of knowledge, “objective” or otherwise, the process of objectification of the subject is the same. A corpus of knowledge that has among its objects some aspect of “what human beings are” (or what the normal and the mad are, the good and the bad, the hero and the coward, etc.) is acquired by the individual, through various “discursive practices”, as the standard against which the self is to be evaluated and defined. The self-knowledge so acquired cannot then fail to play its part in the subjective life of the individual.

2. Discursive practices and the formless subject.

The discursive practices which engage the individual are described by Foucault as: “characterized by the demarcation of a field of objects, by the definition of a legitimate perspective for a subject of knowledge, [and] by the setting of norms for elaborating concepts and theories.” (WKI, 11) These are clearly epistemological criteria. The first and third refer to the internal organization of specific discourses or bodies of knowledge, and the second refers to the legitimacy that any such discourse may claim in the light of accepted notions of how truth may be determined, that is to say, to a deeper “epistemic”² level of truth-determination, based on notions which differ in different historical periods. A field of objects may be as narrow as, say, laboratory procedures for certain sets of experiments, or as broad as the moral life, but once demarcated, it will refer to an existing body of concepts and theories which sometimes will, and sometimes will not coincide with, or cross, those of particular sciences or disciplines. These epistemological criteria are not, however, the only sets of rules to which such practices respond.

Foucault goes on: “Discursive practices are not purely and simply modes of manufacture of discourse. They take shape in technical ensembles, in institutions, in behavioural schemes, in types of transmission and dissemination, in pedagogical forms that both impose and maintain them.” The rules involved here are those governing human relationships, and even in the most intimate one-to-one interactions, one possible way of describing these relationships is in terms of the dimension of power. Not necessarily one-sided or established power – between lovers, for example – power may take different forms and may shift constantly, but “power” is a term that is useful to Foucault as an operator for distinguishing the socially sanctioned (and not sanctioned) games that are human relationships and institutions, from the type of operator, described above, that is systematised knowledge.

What we have here is a perspective on the subject as enmeshed in historically specific rules of how to live, and of how to establish truth, but both these sets of rules will change over time, and what Foucault goes on to say at this stage about the “specific modes of transformation” of discursive practices (in the Course Summary to the 1970-1971 course *The Will to Knowledge*) is interesting for our purposes, and will need to be quoted in full:

the transformation of a discursive practice is tied to a whole, often quite complex set of modifications which may occur either outside it (in the forms of production, in the social relations, in the political institutions), or within it (in the techniques for determining objects, in the refinement and adjustment of concepts, in the

²Foucault defines episteme “as the system of concepts that defines knowledge for a given intellectual era” (ICCF, 9)

accumulation of data), or alongside it (in other discursive practices). And it is linked to them in the form not simply of an outcome but of an effect that maintains its own autonomy and a set of precise functions relative to what determines the transformation. (Ibid., 12)

According to this model, the dynamic of transformation rests predominantly with *power* in the case of change from *outside* the discursive practice; with the development of *knowledge* in the case of change from *within*, though this is variable (and from either in the case of change from “alongside”). At the same time, the pre-constituted discursive practices on which these forces of change operate retain a certain autonomy of their own in relation to them. One can almost hear Foucault arguing against the offstage voices of certain of his interlocutors at the time he was writing this, whose theories gave *preponderant* weight to one or other of the various forces of transformation (modes and relations of production; changes in mindset through the accumulation of knowledge, etc.). His placing of reference to these theories in parentheses here acknowledges that they have brought to light important features of what determines change in the way we think and enact our world, but also that each such deterministic theory has overplayed the role of its preferred aspects of reality with respect to those of competing theories.

What is clearly absent from all this dynamism, however, is a role for the subject. Foucault relativises the deterministic capacities of the different theories competing in the academic and political marketplace at the time of his writing, but agrees with them in minimizing the role of individual subjectivity. That any one individual may have been the originator of change in the relevant system of knowledge or of power, is beside the point. Innovation from within a system, even revolutionary, is coherent with the system itself, as is interaction between systems. Foucault makes a point of noting here, with regard to the principles of exclusion and selection that determine the boundaries of any particular discursive practice, that they:

do not refer to a (historical or transcendental) subject of knowledge that would invent them one after another or would found them at an original level; they point, rather, to an anonymous and polymorphous will to knowledge, capable of regular transformations and caught up in an identifiable play of dependence. (Ibid.)

Is this our subject? What is clear from this is what Foucault is arguing against, his wish to distance himself from conceptions of a grand “historical or transcendental” subject; but what he is arguing for, or rather making reference to, this notion of an “anonymous and polymorphous will to knowledge” is not Foucault at his clearest or most precise and he does not pursue this theme

(despite the fact that it is the title of the course).³ What is considered “common knowledge” at any one moment in history, underlying the polymorphous forms of specialised knowledge, is anonymous, but it is characterized by mechanisms rather than by “will”, which remains unexplained here (and in the text which follows). As mentioned before, the same kind of analytical clarity on the question of the subject that was already evident in his work on knowledge and power was something that would come later.

Earlier still however, in the 1960s, Foucault had been more concerned to demonstrate the subject’s lack of subjectivity, of any will, anonymous or otherwise; trapped between the realities of her life not yet described as “practices” – and the conceptual system that is knowledge/language. Commenting on Lacan, an influence at that time, he wrote that his importance derived from:

the fact that he had demonstrated, through the discourse on the mentally sick and the symptoms of his neurosis, the way in which it was the structures, the system of language itself (and *not the subject*) that spoke [...] Before each human existence, before each human thought, there is a system, a knowledge, that we then discover.⁴ (emphasis mine).

This structural (and structuralist) rigidity, though part of Foucault’s formation, is atypical of his work. By the 1970s he had largely left it behind; turning his attention to the way specific bodies of knowledge are produced, in relation to this epistemological framework, and to the ways in which life was organized and conducted in work, relationships and institutions. It is precisely because there is both a common, historically specific substructure underlying the formation of specific “knowledges”, and at the same time a number of heterogeneous practices in which this formation is played out, that individual subjects acquire their particularised knowledge. What is “known” by certain groups of people differs from what is known by others, and contamination is both systemic (what he refers to above as “transformation from alongside, from other discursive practices”), and productive of further discourse. Foucault was attempting to put some order into this multiplicity, and at the same time not allow his own “order”, his methods, to anchor all this flux to new determinations. The metaphors he uses for his own methods are well-chosen – archaeology for the buried, substructures of knowledge, - genealogy when his attention turned to the generative production of knowledge in the midst of life, so to speak. From the point of view of intellectual history, Gutting says that, given the exclusion of the “standard (subject-centred) approach” from

³ This sounds more like the problematic of earlier philosophers who inspired him. Foucault’s course titles have to do more with where his thought started out that year than with where it eventually led to.

⁴ *Entretien avec Madeleine Chapsal*, in ‘La Quinzaine Littéraire’, n° 5, May 1966, in *Antologia*, p.36

archeological method: “Its weakness is the obverse of its strength: the bracketing or decentering of the subject. The power of archaeology is apparent from what it finds in the conceptual structures that lie beneath and outside the consciousness of individual subjects.” (ICCF, 14). From a philosophical point of view, this constitutes not so much a weakness as a delimitation of an epistemological field from which the subject (as agent) is absent, appearing only passively. This separation, impossible in ancient philosophy which, however, was of no particular interest to Foucault during his archeological (that is, predominantly epistemological) period, is by no means unusual in contemporary philosophy.

The space of subjectivity that appears here, therefore, is still a limited one. It would seem to be contained in “the mode of *subjection*, the way the individual establishes his or her relation to moral obligations and rules.”⁵ (my emphasis). Nonetheless, Foucault’s conception implies also that the heterogeneous and changing nature of practices may engender an awareness that there are other ways of thinking and acting, and allow one to make choices among the available, preconstituted views; and, in some exceptional cases, to come up with new formulations. Though collaboration in one’s own subjection is required of the individual, she may also find ways not to collaborate, and in so doing a little power may pass into her hands. This is a small beginning of liberation from imposed conceptions. It is not thematized by Foucault as “subjectivation” at this point, however, but rather in terms of the production of knowledge-power (*pouvoir-savoir*).

3. The pre-constituted and the self-constituting subject

Some years later, at an intermediary point along the path from a focus on knowledge-power to a focus on the self, he described his ‘philosophical enterprise’ as a form of

criticism – understood as analysis of the historical conditions that bear on the creation of links to truth, to rules, and to the self [that] does not mark out impassable boundaries or describe closed systems; [but] brings to light transformable singularities. These transformations could not take place except by means of a working of thought upon itself. (PHS, 201)

⁵ Davidson, A. “Ethics as Aesthetics” (EAF), in *CCF*, p.126 Davidson translates *mode d’asujettissement* as ‘mode of subjection’, which seems to me the best of available alternatives. In *Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954-1984 Vol.I*, Rabinow, the editor writes: “Especially in early translations, *asujettissement* is often brought into English as ‘subjugation’; and its related verb, *asujettir* as ‘to subjugate’. Here, however, we opt for a neologism that signals Foucault’s technical, and more positive, usage. Hence *asujettissement* consistently appears as ‘subjectivation’; and *asujettir*, as ‘to subjectify’. EW1, p.xliv. Personally I think this unfortunate as Foucault uses his own neologism quite distinctly from the way in which he uses *asujettissement*.

The three axes “that constitute any matrix of experience” (Ibid.), and provide the framework for his work – those of knowledge, power and the subject – are presented in a different conceptual language here as “links to truth, to rules and to the self”. A link is a more flexible metaphor than an axis, and in this later conception, the transformational power that is ‘thought working on itself’ operates in two directions simultaneously, that is – on its object – the discursive practices that constitute the transformable ‘historical singularities’, and on the subject as thinking agent. Thus, in this notion of “transformable singularities”, the possibility of a passage from an objectified self to a self-constituting subject is already indicated, the passage from objectification to subjectivation.

This is not at all to say that the self can ever totally invent itself, there is no complete escape from the epistemic forces of one’s historically singular life, but that through thought, as the primary medium of the self’s relation to itself, one can gain an understanding how one’s life, and one’s thinking, have been shaped by the discursive practices of one’s time, and this change in perspective can engender a change in lived reality. Foucault has explored this possibility in various ways throughout his work, particularly in his work on forms of conduct and counter-conduct in the 1970s, which dealt with both conscious and inarticulate forms of counter-conduct or rebellion. The relation between objectified self knowledge – our application to self of “knowledge” that has been culturally imbibed – and a space of subjectivity, is in itself a relation that is both historically and discursively variable; and within it freedom may arise in the first instance as the possibility we have of enlarging that non-objectified space, in relation to ourselves and to others. This freedom may in turn give rise to a radical reconstitution of the self, and thereby a new subjectivity and a new ethics.

It is important to note, however, that the subject of whom Foucault speaks is rigorously not a transcendental Subject, not a reified Reason, or *Logos*, or Spirit, nor is it the existential subject of Sartre, as Foucault always felt that with Sartre’s notion of “authenticity” of finding one’s “authentic” self, some kind of subject that pre-exists experience, with some kind of essential characteristics, was reintroduced. In this later phase of his work, where he turns his attention to the subject, he retains his earlier opposition to essentialist conceptions of the self. In an interview given a few months before he died he says:

What I rejected was the idea of starting out with a theory of the subject – as is done, for example, in phenomenology or existentialism – and, on the basis of this theory, asking how a given form of knowledge [*connaissance*] was possible. What I wanted to try to show was how the subject constituted itself, in one specific form or another, as a mad or healthy subject, as a delinquent or non-delinquent subject, through certain practices that were also games of truth, practices of power and so on. I had to reject *a priori* theories of the

subject in order to analyze the relationships that may exist between the constitution of the subject and games of truth, practices of power, and so on.

[... The subject] is not a substance. It is a form, and this form is not primarily or always identical to itself.

You do not have the same type of relationship to yourself when you constitute yourself as a political subject who goes to vote or speaks at a meeting and when you are seeking to fulfil your desires in a sexual relationship. Undoubtedly there are relationships and interferences between these different forms of the subject, but we are not dealing with the same type of subject. In each case one plays, one establishes a different type of relationship to oneself. And it is precisely the historical constitution of these various forms of subject in relation to the games of truth which interests me. (ECS, 290)

There is a sense in which this seems to take us full circle, back to the subject (as “form” that has gained a little more agency) that is objectified in different ways through different discursive practices; a sense in which Foucault’s determination to avoid the creation of a theory of a substantive subject leads him to minimise whatever sense of unity the self-constituting subject, in its different roles may have. As if, in its relation to itself, the individual container of these different subjectivities, for example (his examples here) the political and the sexual, does not also constitute relations *between* these different subjectivities. Such affirmations have a hollow ring to them, in the sense that experience suggests we do make these connections. Murdoch certainly regarded them as fundamental to ethics, to our relation to ourselves.

There is another sense, however, in which this problem can be seen as one arising from the current juncture of his work, possibly to be taken up later. His method was always, when exploring a particular set of problems, to make note of those arising from them, requiring new concepts and new methods, and set them aside for further elaboration at the next available opportunity. Perhaps one indication of a possible unifying of subjectivities in one subject is through the use he makes of the notion of creativity, of an art of life. Foucault comments “What strikes me is the fact that, in our society, art has become something that is related only to objects and not to individuals or to life. ...] But couldn’t everyone’s life become a work of art? Why should the lamp or the house be an art object but not our life?” (OGE, 261) What he is not talking about however is the beautiful life-styles of the “beautiful people” who feel they already have all the answers to how to live (and the means). He is talking about work on the self, which may or may not be as austere as that undertaken by the Greeks, but will be as arduous. Certainly he saw this as an alternative quest to that of “authenticity”. “I think that from the theoretical point of view, Sartre avoids the idea of the self as something that is given to us, but through the moral notion of authenticity, he turns back to the idea that we have to be ourselves – to be truly our true self. I think that the only acceptable practical consequence of what Sartre has said is to link his theoretical insight to the practice of creativity – and not that of authenticity.” (Ibid., 262)

The possibility of creativity, as an art of living, was given, for Foucault, in the first instance by thinking differently. He held that to ‘think differently’ was the essential element of philosophy as an activity. Thinking differently about particular philosophical and historical problems, and thinking differently about one’s own thinking, are entwined activities, and constituted for him an art of (philosophical) living, a form of subjectivation, which came to matter more and more to him. In an interview in 1982 he said:

You see, that’s why I really work like a dog, and I worked like a dog all my life. I am not interested in the academic status of what I am doing because my problem is my own transformation. That’s the reason also why, when people say, ‘Well, you thought this a few years ago and now you say something else,’ my answer is ... ‘Well, do you think I have worked like that all those years to say the same thing and not to be changed?’ This transformation of oneself by one’s own knowledge is, I think, something rather close to the aesthetic experience. Why should a painter work if he is not transformed by his own painting? (ISR, 131)

Different conceptions of the art of philosophical living have inspired many individuals throughout the history of the West, ensuing in lifestyles of radically differing kinds. For the most part, however, these have involved individuals or small groups of people considered “unusual” either by virtue of extraordinary capacities or commitment, or by virtue of their eccentricity, or both. Socrates had already described the philosopher as *atopos*, atypical in precisely these ways, but at least for the Greeks his⁶ moral integrity, and the practices necessary to preserve and maintain it, were considered as exemplary models for society, unlike in present times.

4. The ancient and the modern subject

At a certain point in his studies, pursuing other themes, extensive contact with the writings of Antiquity, and a growing awareness of the variety, multiplicity, and assiduity with which practices of self-intelligibility and self-transformation were then practiced, induced in Foucault the desire to learn more of and from the Greeks. As Paul Veyne wrote: “Greek ethics is quite dead, and Foucault judged it as undesirable as it would be impossible to resuscitate this ethics; but he considered one of its elements, namely the idea of a work of the self on the self, to be capable of re-acquiring a contemporary meaning, in the manner of one of those pagan temple columns that one occasionally sees reutilized in more recent structures.” (FFE, 231)

But there were also other parallels that Foucault found interesting:

⁶ Moral integrity, along with so much else, was largely considered a male preserve at the time.

What strikes me is that 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. [...] The second thing is that ethics was not related to [...] any legal – institutional system. For instance the laws against sexual misbehaviour were very few and not very compelling. The third thing was that what they were worried about, their theme was to constitute a kind of ethics that was an aesthetics of existence.

Well I wonder if our problem nowadays is not, in a way, similar to this one, since most of us no longer believe that ethics is founded in religion, nor do we want a legal system to intervene in our moral, personal, private life. Recent liberation movements suffer from the fact that they cannot find any principle on which to base the elaboration of a new ethics. They need an ethics, but they cannot find any other ethics than an ethics founded on so-called scientific knowledge of what the self is, what desire is, what the unconscious is, and so on. I am struck by this similarity of problems. (OGE, 255-56)

The problems are of course dissimilar in as far as, for the Greeks, there was never any question of an ethics based on the hazardous ground of science – this is a problem particular to modernity; but this insight of Foucault's into the similarity of *negative* conditions, in the disassociation of the ethics of how one lives from religion and law,⁷ constitutes a further explanation, valid from the point of view of modernity, for a renewed interest in the Greeks. Greek philosophy contributed much to the development of law as the regulatory principle of civil society, but this was not the pastoral law of the centuries of Christian domination, which attempted to control and pervade every area of life. Foucault recalls Plato's opposition to a pastoral role for politicians in *The Statesman*, when he asks: "How, Socrates, could someone sit beside each individual at every moment of life, in order to prescribe exactly what is right for him?"⁸ Yet this pervasive presence of the 'shepherd -pastor' was precisely the legacy that, for Foucault, the medieval Church left to the pastoral State, a legacy that has been at least partly overturned in modern times. Against the metaphor of the shepherd for the politician's role in society, Plato offered that of the weaver, weaving all the different realities, and temperaments, into a web, but allowing others to take the roles of caring and supervising. Foucault paraphrases Plato, in *The Statesman* thus:

The activities of the shepherd exist, and they are necessary. Let us leave them where they are, where they have their value and effectiveness, with the doctor, gymnast, and teacher. Above all, let's not say that the politician is a shepherd ... the Pythagoreans [among the very few advocates of a pastoral state that Foucault found in antiquity] are deceived in wanting to emphasize the pastoral form, which may really function in small religious and pedagogical communities; they are wrong in wanting to emphasize it at the level of the whole city-state. The king is not a shepherd.⁹

⁷ At the same time, for moderns and Greeks alike, as fervently maintaining the need for law to regulate questions of public ethics.

⁸ Plato, *The Statesman*, cited in: *STP*, p.158n

⁹ *Ibid*, p.147

But if the Greek politician was not to prescribe exactly what was right for us, it was because we were expected to prescribe it for ourselves, by undertaking philosophical practice. That is to say, as a citizen one was expected to undertake the practices necessary to act as a *good* citizen, and what this meant included seeking out those wiser than oneself in order to learn from them the techniques that would help one to develop as a moral being; techniques of self-intelligibility and self transformation.

Foucault says that when the Delphic precept ‘know yourself’ “this *gnòthi seauton*, appears in philosophical thought, it is, as we know, around the character of Socrates” (HS, 4); and further, that what he calls the “Socratic-Platonic” expression of the care of the self – *epimeleia heautou*, “is referred to not only in the *Alcibiades*, although only the *Alcibiades* gives its complete theory.” It is in this text that the question “What is the self we must take care of?” (Ibid., 66) is clearly posed. In the pages that follow these remarks, Foucault adopts the same practice as the Greek text he is studying, in referring to the ‘self’ and the ‘soul’ interchangeably; and he summarizes the principle thus:

To care for the self one must know oneself; to know oneself one must look at oneself in an element that is the same as the self; in this element one must look at that which is the very source of thought and knowledge; this source is the divine element. To see oneself one must therefore look at oneself in the divine element: One must know the divine in order to see oneself. (HS, 70-71)

This “divine element” is associated in Plato with a notion of divinity and of ideal forms, outside of and pre-existent to the self, accessible to reason, in which they are mirrored. In later conceptions, particularly that of the Stoics, the “divinity” is directly identified with “universal reason”, the ordering principle of the universe, which manifests and is reflected in human thought. In these differing conceptions, however, the road to self-knowledge was deemed to be a long one, full of obstacles, and these obstacles were mostly located in less limpid parts of “the self”. The “self” in ancient texts, therefore, seems sometimes to indicate the divine element, or the portion of universal reason within the human being, and sometimes to indicate the human being in its entirety. This being the case, “self-knowledge” can refer to contemplation of this higher part of the self, or to investigation of what happens in what we can call the “lower” part of the self, where ignorance, false judgements and other unpleasant matters are said to abound. But the texts themselves rarely specify which of these notions of self is being used, and Foucault adopts the same practice. However, in as far as Socrates’ dialogues can be read as examples of philosophical practice, it appears to be the unlearning of false knowledge, of the world and of the self, that opens the door to true knowledge, the knowledge of one’s ignorance (or, for the Stoics, of the falsity of one’s

judgements); that provides the key to the ontological truth without which there is no truth at all. The human capacity for self deceit (and to be deceived) thus constituted the material on which many of what Hadot calls “spiritual exercises”, and what Foucault calls “techniques of the self”, were designed to operate. But among these techniques, those of self-examination (concerned with the whole individual human being), seem to recall for Foucault the image of an interior panopticon,¹⁰ the genealogy of whose forms he had attempted to trace through Christendom and beyond; and this was not what he was looking for in Greek philosophy. Another development struck him as more promising. He writes:

It seems to me that in the religious crisis of the sixteenth century – the great rejection of the Catholic confessional practices – new modes of relationship to the self were being developed. We can see the reactivation of a certain number of ancient Stoic practices. The notion, for example of proofs of oneself seems to me thematically close to what we find among the Stoics, where the experience of the self is not a discovering of a truth hidden inside the self but an attempt to determine what one can and cannot do with one’s available freedom. Among both the Catholics and Protestants, the reactivation of these spiritual techniques in the form of Christian spiritual practices is quite marked. (OGE, 276)

The distinction between types of spiritual practice that Foucault is drawing here is crucial to an understanding of his reading of the Greeks. The description of the Stoic “experience of the self” as “an attempt to determine what one can and cannot do with one’s available freedom” is an original formulation, with a vaguely Stoic ring to it; but it seems to suggest that for the Stoics “one’s available freedom” is some kind of given, whereas *achieving* that freedom is more generally considered to be the hard-won goal of Stoic practice, and the necessary groundwork of the moral life. In the context of what freedom means for the Stoics it is important to distinguish between that everyday human freedom which allows us to pursue moral good *or* evil, which they recognized as an attribute of human rationality¹¹; and the freedom of the guiding principle or *hegèmonikon* of that rationality, or the soul, from the traps of desire and aversion which might induce us into evil – a transformation of one’s life that required assiduous practice – which they pursued. There was in effect only *one* Stoic answer to the question of what to do with one’s freedom – pursue the moral good; the problem at the heart of Stoic subjectivation was to free the mind from its self-created obstacles in order to do that; but the “moral good” is not an operative term in Foucault’s vocabulary.

¹⁰ Bentham’s image of the watch-tower in the prison yard which allowed for surveillance at 360°; that Foucault took as his symbolic image of disciplinary control. See especially *Discipline and Punish*.

¹¹ “It is human beings who, thanks to their freedom, introduce trouble and worry into the world. Taken by themselves, things are neither good or evil, and should not trouble us. The course of things unfolds in a necessary way, without choice, without hesitation, and without passion.” Hadot, *The Inner Citadel*, p.107

Foucault clearly associates the search for a “truth hidden inside the self” with the Catholic confessional, with the introspection that he will then trace through its secular forms in the psychological sciences. Against this he sets the self-constituting Stoic practice of determining what to do with one’s freedom, some form of which he saw as ‘reactivated’ as a result of the Protestant Reforms, eventually for both Catholics and Protestants. His juxtaposition of the two types of practice, as *self-investigative* and *self-constitutive*, seems to suggest that they are not compatible, that they imply an irreconcilably different form of relation to the self, and yet it would be hard to ignore the central place that self-investigative techniques play in Stoic philosophical practice. How are we then to interpret this statement that the Stoic “experience of self is *not* a discovering of a truth hidden inside the self”? Clearly the “truth” of the self that the penitent Christian found through self-exploration was the truth of her sinfulness, and this is not the case with Stoic practice. But the Stoic practice of observing the formation of one’s own thoughts, or representations, of observing whether or not one’s way of representing reality to oneself is influenced by desire or aversion, by wishing things to be different, by a rejection of the nature of human life in this universe, is the self-investigative basis of that Stoic quest for freedom without which no transformation of the self could occur.

In fact, the very example Foucault gives of Stoic asceticism in this essay, that of Epictetus’ recommendations concerning how to take a daily walk as a *spiritual* exercise, is indicative of the *lack* of (Stoic) distinction between self-investigative and self-constitutive practice. The recommendations he refers to were that during one’s morning walk “one should try to determine with respect to each thing (a public official or an attractive woman), one’s motives, whether one is impressed by or drawn to it, or whether one has sufficient mastery to be indifferent.” (OGE, 276) This advice states quite baldly that it is through the examination of one’s motives, noting the presence or absence of envy, desire, or whatever else one finds there, that one can arrive at ‘one’s available freedom,’ here characterized as sufficient self-mastery to be indifferent. Epictetus therefore seems to assume that in identifying the motive – quite literally the movement within the self that takes the form of attraction (or repulsion) – one frees oneself of its hold, it is this that is self-mastery. Thus “the attempt to determine what one can and cannot do with one’s available freedom,” in this particular walking exercise, would seem to pass precisely through the discovery of one small, “hidden”, that is – not immediately apparent – “truth of the self”, of the order of small discoveries to be made one at a time. But the “truth of the self” discovered here is one small instance of the mechanistic movements of the mind – a mechanism from which one can choose to

free oneself; it is not original sin. The “self” to which Epictetus’ practice is addressed is one that contains both the higher (free) and the lower (unfree) parts of the self, dominated by the passions; and freedom arises from the inner discourse between these aspects of the self. The higher part of the self, the Stoic *hegemonikon*, or guiding principle, is identified with reason, the intellect, the soul.¹² If the ascetic practice of observing and retraining one’s own mind allows the *hegemonikon* to shape one’s inner discourse, the choice to pursue the moral good in one’s actions will follow.

In writing of the work on the self of contemplatives, and particularly philosophers, in the long intervening period between the Stoics and the Reformation, in the shadows of medieval Christian Europe, so to speak, Foucault says that “In Western culture up to the sixteenth century, asceticism and access to truth are always more or less obscurely linked”. Obscurely – presumably - in that very little is recorded of the types of ascetic practice adopted by philosophers in this period, as compared with the wealth of detail regarding such practices available in antiquity. This is partly to do with the sidelining of ascetic practices within Christianity in the Middle Ages. Individuals with ascetic leanings then had the choice of monastic withdrawal; eccentricity – if they were aristocratic enough to escape censure; or art; or scholarship, which was mostly lived, right down to and including Descartes, more as a form of contemplative ascesis (communicating to the world through the medium of written texts) than as a worldly profession.

Ironically, perhaps, it was the Aristotelian turn in theology, with scholasticism, and its hegemony over everything that counted as knowledge in medieval Europe,¹³ that allowed for the eventual separation of ascetic practice and access to truth, in that: “Theology is precisely a type of knowledge with a rational structure that allows the subject – as and only as a rational subject – to have access to the truth of God *without* the condition of spirituality. Then there were all the empirical sciences (sciences of observation, etcetera). There was mathematics, in short a whole range of processes that did their work. That is to say, generally speaking, scholasticism was already an effort to remove the condition of spirituality laid down in all of ancient philosophy and all [previous] Christian thought (Saint Augustine and so forth).¹⁴” (*HS*, pp. 190-191, my emphasis)

¹² Hadot writes of “a complete equivalence [in Marcus Aurelius] between five terms: 1. the self; 2. intellect (*nous*); 3. the power of reflection (*dianoia*); 4. the guiding principle (*hegemonikon*) and; 5. the inner *daimòn*. *IC*, P.123

¹³ There was, of course, a separate, though interlaced, genealogical development of the rise of science. The efforts of medicine to become academic-professional, for instance, and shake off the clutches of the medieval Church, was one important example.

¹⁴ The fact that, of all ancient philosophers, it was Aristotle who inspired scholasticism’s suppression of ascesis in favour of theology is no surprise here, in that he was, Foucault says, “the only philosopher in Antiquity for whom the question of spirituality was least important; the philosopher whom we have recognized as the founder of philosophy in the modern sense of the term: Aristotle. But as everyone knows, Aristotle is not the pinnacle of Antiquity, but its

The decisive step, however, the problematization of this separation, comes with Descartes:

Descartes, I think, broke with this [link to asceticism] when he said, ‘To accede to truth, it suffices that I be *any* subject that can see what is evident.’ Evidence is substituted for ascesis at the point where the relationship to the self intersects the relationship to others and to the world. [...] After Descartes we have a nonascetic subject of knowledge. This change makes possible the institutionalisation of modern science.

I am obviously schematizing a very long history, which is, however, fundamental. After Descartes, we have a subject of knowledge that poses for Kant the problem of knowing the relationship between the subject of ethics and that of knowledge. [...] Kant’s solution was to find a universal subject that, to the extent it was universal, could be the subject of knowledge, but which demanded, nonetheless, an ethical attitude – precisely the relationship to the self which Kant proposes in *The Critique of Practical Reason*. (OGE, 279)¹⁵

5. The divided subject of knowledge and ethics

In Kant’s article, “*What is Enlightenment*”¹⁶, published in the journal *Berlinische Monatschrift* in 1784, on which Foucault wrote a commentary under the same title, Kant defines Enlightenment as: “man’s emergence from his self-imposed immaturity.”¹⁷ This definition, so appreciated by Foucault, draws this conception of ethical practice very close to a Stoic commitment to taking full responsibility for one’s thinking and acting (for men only, given Kant’s misogyny), and it also reads like an attack on pastoralism, in conformity with his own Pietist moral sentiments. Kant (here quoted by Foucault) writes:

It is so easy to be immature. If I have a book to serve as my understanding, a pastor to serve as my conscience, a physician to determine my diet for me, and so on, I need not exert myself at all. I need not think, if only I can pay: others will readily undertake the irksome work for me. The guardians who have so benevolently taken over the supervision of men have carefully seen to it that the far greatest part of them (including the entire fair sex) regard taking the step to maturity as very dangerous, not to mention difficult (Ibid.)

exception.” (HS, p.17) This is pure provocation, but that there were consequences in the long term of Aristotle’s separation of “science” from “philosophy” is of course true.

¹⁵ See also HS, p.190: “Obviously the model of scientific practice played a major role in this: To be capable of truth you only have to open your eyes and to reason soundly and honestly... The subject only has to be what he is for him to have access in knowledge (*connaissance*) to the truth that is open to him through his own structure as subject. It seems to me that this is very clear in Descartes, with, if you like, the supplementary twist in Kant, which consists in saying that what we cannot know is precisely the structure of the knowing subject, which means that we cannot know the subject. Consequently the idea of a certain spiritual transformation of the subject, which finally gives him access to something to which precisely he does not have access at the moment, is chimerical and paradoxical. So the liquidation of what could be called the condition of spirituality for access to the truth is produced with Descartes and Kant; Kant and Descartes seem to me the two major moments.”

¹⁶ Kant, Immanuel, *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment* (1784)

¹⁷ Kant, cited in Foucault, (WE, 305)

But just as this indicates a connection between Stoic and Kantian conceptions of moral maturity there is also a rupture, in that for Kant, the question of the freedom of the subject was dependent on an act of will, not therefore, on the slow process of the care of the self. Foucault notes that “Kant defines *Aufklärung* in an almost entirely negative way, as an *Ausgang*, an ‘exit,’ a ‘way out’” (WE, 305) of this immaturity. Foucault says this is presented rather ambiguously as “an ongoing process; but he also presents it as a task and obligation”; and notes that “in any case Enlightenment is defined by a modification of the preexisting relation linking will, authority, and the use of reason.” (Ibid.) Foucault clearly appreciates Kant’s decisive, non-introspective mode of self-transformation, in the form of *moralisation by reason*, as it were. And most of all he appreciates the motto Kant suggests for Enlightenment “*Aude sapere*: ‘dare to know,’ ‘have the courage, the audacity, to know.’ Thus Enlightenment must be considered both as a process in which men participate collectively and as an act of courage to be accomplished personally.” (Ibid. 306)

Foucault points out that Descartes’ separation of revealed truth, inaccessible to the intelligence, which governed one’s relationship to God and to ethics; and scientific truth – knowledge of a domain of objects, including of the self as the thinking object – *res cogitans*; was profoundly dissatisfying to Kant. However, Kant’s attempt to reunite the subject of knowledge and the subject of ethics through the faculty of Reason ended up, Foucault says, leaving the subject split along different lines, as an empirical being trapped in causation, which manifests in inclination, and as the transcendent self. Foucault certainly did not share Kant’s thinking on inclination, especially in its strong form of “desire”; in fact, he saw desire, or rather pleasure (cleansed of its bad publicity, as it were) as a notion around which new moral theory could be constructed. However, one of his key reference points in his thinking about the subject, was what Cavell calls: “Kant’s formulation [... that]: Man lives in two worlds, in one of which he is determined (by being fated to the laws of causation), in the other free (to do what reason commands)” (CW, 127). Foucault’s (cumbersome, but explicit) term for this was [the human as] an “empirico-transcendental doublet.” (M&C, 329) Cavell says that Kant “does not deny the empiricist claim that our knowledge of the world begins with experience, but [...] he interprets ‘beginning with experience’ as invoking the passive (sensuous) side of human nature, requiring, in order to add up to what we call knowledge, the active (intellectual) side, organizing, forming, experience under the categories of the understanding, which turns out to be derived from the fundamental forms in which we make

coherent judgements of the world, individuated into stable objects with observable, changing properties, related to each other causally, and so on.” (CW, op. cit.)

This formulation is very far from the way in which the problem of the subject of knowledge is presented by Foucault in various of his texts, though there may be an echo of Kant’s historically immutable “categories” in Foucault’s historically mutable concepts, and of Kant’s ‘stable objects’ in Foucault’s “objectifications”. But perhaps his greatest debt to Kant is the focus on thinking as that activity which renders possible freedom from forces of determination, or objectification. The question of the relationship of ethics to knowledge remained problematic, however. Foucault asks:

How can I constitute myself as a subject of ethics? Recognize myself as such? Are ascetic exercises needed? Or simply this Kantian relationship to the universal which makes me ethical by conformity to practical reason? Thus Kant introduces one more way in our tradition whereby the self is not merely given but is constituted in relationship to itself as subject. (OGE, 280)

Foucault’s words here seem carefully chosen to avoid taking a position on contemporary debates about whether Kant’s “subject” is self-constructed or pre-existent to experience – “the self is not merely given” could mean that it *is* given, but not “merely”, or that it *is not* given. This question is not relevant to the use he wishes to make of Kant, which is to illustrate the way in which Kantian subjectivation is foundational to modernity, and it relies on the self-transforming power of thought, a notion which he shared. It also relied on a metaphysic that Foucault did not share, but which gave rise to a widely ramified genealogical descent in ethics, that is still flourishing in contemporary society. It is clear, however, that despite Kant’s attempts at solving the Cartesian problem of the divided subject, and the consequent division in philosophy – between epistemology (as the standard-bearer of philosophical work) and ethics (now an optional extra) – this division, and the varying attempts at overcoming it, remain at the heart of contemporary philosophy.

Foucault notes the irony of the fact that Descartes himself was in the position of practising philosophy as a form of meditation, as a reflection on the self as subject of knowledge, within a tradition that had come down from antiquity; and yet the results of his *Meditations*, the particular form of self-discovery that was the *cogito*, were to lead to the abandonment in mainstream philosophy of meditative practice, an ascetic practice, itself. Foucault writes:

we must not forget that Descartes wrote ‘meditations’ – and meditations are a practice of the self. But the extraordinary thing in Descartes’s texts is that he succeeded in substituting a subject as founder of practices of knowledge for a subject constituted through practices of the self.

This is very important. Even if it is true that Greek philosophy founded rationality, it always held that a subject could not have access to the truth if he did not first operate upon himself a certain work that would make him

susceptible to knowing the truth – a work of purification, conversion of the soul by contemplation of the soul itself. (Ibid., 278-79)

In writing of the Greeks, Pierre Hadot's work was a constant reference point for Foucault, though they did not always agree in their interpretations, and it may be useful here to recall his remarks on the connection between rationality and techniques of the self for the Greeks: "Logic, for instance, was not limited to an abstract theory of reasoning, nor even to school exercises in syllogistics; rather, there was a daily practice of logic applied to the problems of everyday life. Logic was thus the mastery of inner discourse. This was all the more necessary since, in conformity with Socratic intellectualism, the Stoics believed that the human passions correspond to a misuse of human discourse." (WAP, 135)

Similarly, for Hadot, ancient physics did not imagine itself to be laying down absolute truths about nature, but rather to be offering plausible explanations, and developing a capacity for dealing with problems methodically; research, for Aristotle and others, being a means to the highest pleasures. Hadot quotes Cicero, thus:

I do not think we need to renounce the questions of the physicists. The observation and contemplation of nature are a kind of natural food for the soul and the mind. We rectify and dilate [I read *latiores*] ourselves; we look down at human things from on high, and as we contemplate the higher, celestial things, we feel contempt for human things, finding them petty and narrow. The search for the largest things, as well as for the most obscure, brings us pleasure. If something probable presents itself to us in the course of this research, our mind is filled with a noble, human pleasure. (Ibid. 209)

As Foucault puts it: "The one who cared for himself [the practitioner of philosophy] had to choose among all the things that you can know through scientific knowledge only those kinds of things which were relative to him and important to life." (Ibid. 270) It may be hard for us, today, to imagine a world that, lacking instruments of verification concerning the microscopic and the macroscopic, may have had no *concept* of "objective" certainty; where the advancement of knowledge was a fascinating and inspiring branch of human activity, the highest such activity, but one in which the discovery of a probability regarding the natural world, as Cicero says, rather than a certainty, was a sought-after fulfillment. And it was precisely this Aristotelian scientific world of probabilities that Descartes set out to overthrow, grounding scientific thought in certainty. Nonetheless, for the ancients, lack of certainties did not mean lack of truths, in fact, it was one. Lack of certainty was seen as a truth of the human condition, of human experience; and as such, an important element of the truth that mattered in our lives, of the knowledge of ourselves that would teach us how to live.

6. Forms of reflexivity

As the question of the relation of the individual subject to truth came into focus for Foucault, the conceptual instruments that had allowed him to frame his analysis of the relations between particular discursive practices and the underlying “intellectual unconscious” of the era, or episteme, concepts that had been so useful in focusing on the interaction of knowledge and power, no longer seemed adequate to the new task. The fact that the focus of his attention had shifted from the modern subject to the subject in antiquity brought to light these limitations. Clearly, the lack of anything resembling the Cartesian notion of “objective certainty” in Antiquity,¹⁸ is an epistemological difference of considerable importance; but it is one that goes beyond the bounds of what Foucault had formerly described as epistemic difference. In the “ancient” perspective, the emphasis in processes of verification is collocated more on the experiential than on the logical plane; not in any way in the sense of disregarding logic, on the contrary, logic is crucial to the process of establishing truth; but in the sense that the danger of manipulating logic, using it to convincingly establish what is false, to both self and others, is held to be an essential aspect of the problem. In *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*¹⁹, Thomas Kuhn demonstrates how even the contemporary scientist, who may be passionately committed to a particular, well-established set of objective criteria for the assessment of “truth”, may find herself choosing to ignore the relevance of inconvenient empirical data where a risk is perceived that such data might throw the theories she is working with into disarray. This conceptual conservatism within specific discursive practices, which was also studied by Foucault in relation to the vested interests involved in the stabilisation of conceptual fields, such as those of psychiatry, law, and other academic disciplines, has been shown by both Kuhn and Foucault, and by others, to be an epistemological feature of the modern scientific mind, as evident among contemporary advocates of objective truth as it was among the green young aristocrats who Socrates chose to awaken from their conceptual muddles; but it is something that modernity has been reluctant to recognise, whereas for antiquity it was held to be one of the primary obstacles between the subject and truth.

¹⁸ “objectivity” and “subjectivity” for the Stoics, for example, meant an honest appraisal of the facts of the world, as opposed to an appraisal conditioned by subjective desires.

¹⁹ Kuhn, Thomas, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

The new conceptual instrument that Foucault introduces at this point in his research to allow him to focus on these different conceptions of the relationship between subject and truth is that of ‘forms of reflexivity’, a concept that expresses his shift from a strictly genealogical method to something resembling a form of hermeneutics (though this is not his description of his method, but of the contents of this study). During the 1981-1982 Course on *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* at the Collège de France, Foucault offers this explanation:

In the West, we have known and practised three forms of the exercise of thought, of thought’s reflection on itself; three major forms of reflexivity. [First,] reflexivity in the form of memory. This form of reflexivity gives access to the truth, to truth known in the form of recognition. In this form, which consequently leads to a truth in which one recollects, the subject is modified since in the act of memory he brings about his liberation; his return to his homeland and to his own being. Second, there is, I think, the major form of meditation, which is of course set out above all by the Stoics. This form of reflexivity carries out the test of what one thinks, the test of oneself as the subject who actually thinks what he thinks and acts as he thinks, with the object of the subject’s transformation and constitution as, let’s say, the ethical subject of truth.” Finally, the third major form of reflexivity of thought on itself is, I think, what is called method. “Method is a form of reflexivity that makes it possible to fix the certainty that will serve as a criterion for all possible truth and which, starting from this fixed point, will advance from truth to truth up to the organization and systematization of an objective knowledge. It seems to me that these are the three major forms [...] which in the West have successively dominated the practice of philosophy, or, if you like, the practice of life as philosophy. (HS, 460)

Just as the second of these forms is “set out, above all by the Stoics”, though versions of it exist throughout antiquity and beyond, he regards the first as set out, above all, by Plato, and the third by Descartes. There is no pretension to the historical accuracy of this schema on Foucault’s part, the three forms are called “major” to indicate that there are others that are minor, there are variations and overlaps; but, as with all objectifications – without the delineation of an object, in this case that of the forms of reflexivity – it is impossible to draw certain matrices of experience into focus. What the two ancient forms have in common, and what distinguishes them from the ‘method’ of modernity, is the fact that the rule that has always been considered to be at the root of philosophical practice, to “know yourself,” was indissolubly linked in the ancient world to the rule “take care of yourself”. Whereas, Foucault writes: “It seems to me that the Cartesian moment²⁰, again with a lot of inverted commas, functioned in two ways. It came into play in two ways: by philosophically requalifying the *gnòthi seauton* (know yourself), and by discrediting the *epimeleia heautou* (care of the self).” (Ibid.14)

The two ancient forms of reflexivity, on the other hand, while they both hold that self-knowledge and the care of the self are necessarily linked, use these two concepts, for Foucault, in epistemically different ways. In both cases however, the link between self-knowledge and the care

²⁰ He says of this term: “I know it is a bad, purely conventional phrase”. (HS, 14)

of the self is the notion of ‘conversion to self’ or turning to the self; Foucault lists: *ep’heauton epistrophein, eis heauton anakhorein, ad se recurrere, ad se redire, in se recedere, se reducere in tutum* (return to oneself, revert to oneself, review oneself, etcetera.) (HS, 248) The Greek expressions here are taken from Plato, the first of the Latin expressions from Marcus Aurelius, the other three from Seneca. In Plato, Foucault writes, this notion of *epistrophè*:

consists first of all in turning away from appearances.][...] Second: taking stock of oneself by acknowledging one’s own ignorance and by deciding precisely to care about the self, to take care of the self. And finally, the third stage, on the basis of this reversion to the self, which leads us to recollection, we will be able to return to our homeland, the homeland of essences, truth and Being. ... You see anyway that this Platonic *epistrophè* is governed first of all by a fundamental opposition between the world down here and the other world. Second, it is governed by a theme of liberation, of the soul’s release from the body, the prison-body, the tomb-body, etcetera. (HS, 209-210)

The self that one knows in this perspective is the metaphysically pre-established “true essence” of (human) Being, and the circular process of looking for and finding this true essence in the self, is thus defined as “recollection” as reawakening a lost memory. Though there is much in Plato’s reflections that continue to be of interest to Foucault, as an essentialist form of reflexivity, it does not readily constitute for him the type of pagan column that could be reutilised in a modern construction. Much more interesting in this respect is the Stoic form of “meditation”. Foucault writes:

First of all, the conversion found in Hellenistic and Roman culture and practice of the self does not function on the axis opposing this world here to the other world, as does the Platonic *epistrophè*. It is, rather, a reversion that takes place in the immanence of the world, so to speak, which does not mean, however, that there is not a basic opposition between what does and does not depend on us. However, whereas the Platonic *epistrophè* consisted in the movement leading us from this world to the other, from the world below to the world above, in the Hellenistic and Roman culture of the self conversion gets us *to move from that which does not depend on us to that which does*. What is involved, rather, is liberation within this axis of immanence, *a liberation from what we do not control so as finally to arrive at what we can control*. (Ibid. 210, my emphasis)

This question, that of learning to distinguish what does not depend on us from what does, is the crucial practice, the crucial element that distinguishes a this-worldly ascesis – for which the whole of the self is susceptible to transformation – from an other-worldly ascesis, like that of Plato, for which the superior part of the self is identified with logos and with the transcendent, at the top of a hierarchy of parts of the soul, from where it imposes its law on the “inferior” parts such as desire and impulse. As Hadot points out, since for the Stoics impulses and desires are located within the rational soul itself, and “even if they do have affective repercussions upon the soul, are, according to Stoic teaching, essentially judgements made by the rational soul, [then] Reason is not essentially good; rather, like impulses and desire, it can be either good or bad, according to whether it emits true or false judgements, which then determine conduct.” (IC, 88) Foucault refers

here not just to the Stoics however, but more generally to a ‘Hellenistic and Roman’ practice of the self, thus to a model of practice that was common to the differing metaphysical systems of the schools of Epicureans, Stoics, Cynics, etc. This is possible precisely because, while these practices were linked in each case to the specific metaphysic of the school, and to their specific beliefs about nature and the cosmos, the ways in which one worked with one’s own mind, to get it to give up its fantasies and accept reality, however defined, were similar, as were the goals of self-transformation.²¹ Philosophy was practice, one part of which was philosophical theory. The fundamental beliefs that counted for this model of *practice* were the empirical notions that each individual is a very small part of a larger whole (whether an ordered cosmos, as in the Stoics’ universal reason, or random, as in the Epicurean notion of atoms and the void), and that human beings possess the faculty of reason, with which they may (and therefore should) govern their lives. Expressed in modern terms, the empirical description of the human possession of reason leads, for the ancients, to the normative injunction that reason should govern our lives; and the empirical observation that each single person is a part of a larger whole, however conceived, leads to the norm that we take responsibility for ourselves and our interactions within this whole. This too is logos, but it may be construed as a logos that can be experienced through self-coherence, rather than a logos of pre-constituted form.

Foucault’s identification here of the distinction between the two forms of reflexivity that he calls “memory” and “meditation” provides an extremely useful key to understanding them as forms of subjectivation. However, the particular twist that he puts on the apparently uncontroversial phrase whereby conversion gets us to “move from that which does not depend on us to that which does”, so that it comes out as: “a liberation from what we do not control so as finally to arrive at what we can control” can be confusing. The point for the Stoics is that what depends on us is how we live our lives; that is, how we interpret the world (construct our representations of it), and how we conduct ourselves on the basis of those representations; and it is this that we should be concerned with, not worldly goods (such as health, or life itself) or status. By introducing this notion of “control” without explaining that “what we do not control” refers to *everything* outside of the self, and also to certain basic elements of the self, whereas ‘what we can control’ refers to our way of

²¹ Hadot writes that, despite considerable differences: Hellenistic schools all seemed to define ...[wisdom] in approximately the same terms: first and foremost, as a state of perfect peace of mind. From this viewpoint, philosophy appears as a remedy for human worries, anguish and misery, brought about, for the Cynics, by social constraints and conventions; for the Epicureans, by the quest for false pleasures; for the Stoics, by the pursuit of pleasure and egoistic self-interest; and for the Skeptics, by false opinions. Whether or not they laid claim to the Socratic heritage, all Hellenistic philosophers agreed with Socrates that human beings are plunged in misery, anguish and evil because they exist in ignorance. *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, p.102

being in ourselves and in the world, Foucault appears to create an impression of a Stoic concern with “controlling” aspects of our world *other* than our judgements and our behaviour.

Epictetus clarifies:

What depends on us are value-judgements (*hypolèpsis*), impulses towards action (*hormè*), and desire (*orexis*) or aversion; in a word, everything which is our own business. What does not depend on us are the body, wealth, honors, and high position in office; in a word, everything which is not our own business.(IC, 83)

Hadot’s comment on this is that “Here, we can glimpse one of the Stoic’s most fundamental attitudes: the delimitation of our own sphere of liberty as an impregnable islet of autonomy, in the midst of the vast river of events and of Destiny. What depends on us are the acts of our soul, because we can freely choose them.” (Ibid.)

The “immanence of the world”, for the Stoics, thus contains everything within and outside of us, but it is only what is within ourselves, and our conduct, over which we have any control. Therefore “liberation within this axis of immanence” can *only* refer to the acts of the soul. This passage, however, one of the most theoretically explicit passages in the entire course, is structured in such a way as to suggest that the “liberation from what we do not control so as to finally arrive at what we can control” has to do with the wider world, not just the acts of the soul. This shift of emphasis allows Foucault to mobilize the Stoics in support of his own theme of the continual reinvention of the self.

Ch. 2. The Genealogy of Ethics

1. The embodied subject

Analysing what kind of subjects we are began, for Foucault, with the modern subjects he encountered in his early years of work in psychiatric institutions, that is to say, the “mentally ill” and the supposedly “mentally sound” doctors and “experts”. These institutions provided a kind of cameo portrait of the disciplinary and “normalizing” practices of modern society, and of the way in which the internalisation of the appropriate concepts of normality, against which one was to judge oneself, was accompanied by the regulation of the body. As he observed, this tended not to mean a healthy diet and plenty of exercise, but rather the regulation of sexuality. When, years later, Foucault began to work on the history of sexuality, he did this not so much to write “the history of sexuality”, but because our sexuality is so important to who we think we are. Because of its role in how we experience ourselves as bodies, as body-minds, as it were; beyond gender, our sexual identity is now germane to our conception of ourselves. This is clearly equally true for the sexually active and the non-active, since sexual non-activity either represents an important choice (or an accepted or welcome circumstance), or else a source of suffering.

Foucault set out on the quest to discover whether or not, and to what extent, our sexuality had always figured so prominently in our subjectivity. Starting with the early modern period, from the late sixteenth century, he began tracing the genealogy of the separate concepts out of which, he found, the notion of “sexuality” had been constructed: those of “desire”, and of “the body”, and of “sin.” The association of these three objectifications, brought together in the Catholic practice of confession, and evident in the discourses developed by the Church, especially in the highly salacious instruction manuals for priests²² (on guiding confession) that Foucault quotes in *Volume 1 of The History of Sexuality*, induced a habit of self-examination among the “flock”, in principle the entire population, centred on a detailed analysis of the desires lurking behind even seemingly innocent thoughts and actions. This practice is what Foucault calls the “hermeneutics of desire”. The hermeneutics of desire is intended to reveal one’s “true self”, and as such it simultaneously constitutes a “hermeneutics of the subject” – it provides me with the key to understanding my subjectivity. The link between the foundational concepts of this practice and those of Freudian psychoanalysis, construed as a secular form of hermeneutics of desire and of the self, struck

²² Mostly sixteenth and seventeenth century texts.

Foucault very forcefully, and he was concerned to research, and reconstruct, the historical passages between the one set of concepts and the other.

He had already studied the way in which Protestantism and the scientific advances of the sixteenth century had led to a vast proliferation of scientific discourse in other fields; and his investigations of these revealed that science had not been reluctant to incorporate sexual relations and desire within its field, producing a considerable number of separate discourses that Foucault refers to collectively as *Scientia Sexualis*. Paradoxically, at the same time, the “self” studied by philosophy had mostly been construed more as a floating mind with a material (corporeal) adjunct; a troublesome body, that tries to drag the ‘subject’ back into that animality from which reason releases it, and must be controlled, not allowed to partake of subjectivity. Foucault was interested both in the different ways in which “sexuality” has been objectified historically, and in the modes of subjectivation these gave rise to; but all this is not really clear from the title given to the three volumes (originally conceived as five) of *The History of Sexuality*. In the Preface to *The Uses of Pleasure, Volume 2* of the series, he writes:

The project of a history of sexuality was linked to a desire on my part to analyze more closely the third of the axes that constitute any matrix of experience: the modality of the relation to the self. Not that sexuality cannot and should not – like madness, sickness, or criminality – be envisaged as a locus of experience, one that includes a domain of knowledge [*savoir*], a system of rules, and a model for relations to the self. However, the relative importance of the last element recommends it as a guiding thread for the very history of this experience and its formation; my planned study of women, children and ‘perverts’ as sexual subjects was to have followed on those lines.

I found myself confronted with a choice that was a long time in unravelling: a choice between fidelity to the chronological outline I had originally imagined, and a different line of inquiry in which the modes of relation to the self took precedence. (PHS, 204)

He made the second choice. The chronological outline he had followed in *Volume 1* had kept him within modern times, from the seventeenth to the twentieth century. But the decision to focus on the forms of relation to the self, forced him out of the periods he had originally intended to study, indeed out of this historical model, into immersion in epochs that were much further back, those of the Greeks and Romans. This served his purpose, he says, “both in order to address myself to periods when the effect of scientific knowledges and the complexity of normative systems were less, and in order eventually to make out forms of relation to the self different from those characterising the experience of sexuality” (Ibid.) Thus the analysis of modes of relation to the self anchored in sexuality led on to the exploration of other, and completely different, modes of relation to the self. His work on sexuality was therefore both a bridge to the study of these other modes, and significant in itself, in that sexuality remained for him the key to the relation to the self

as either a non-divided, or divided, or, in some cases, reintegrated body-mind; and it would become crucial to Foucault's later vision of a new form of ethics, or of *ethopoiesis*.

The term "hermeneutics" which Foucault used to describe the self-directed practices of the Hellenistic era in particular (which Hadot calls "spiritual exercises"), could also be used to describe the exegetic methods Foucault himself uses to investigate them; in as far as he attempts to let the texts he was studying speak with their own voices; and in as far as he made a genuine attempt to really listen to what they were saying, without, in the first instance, imposing a pre-constructed interpretive grid on his readings. This is very hard to do, of course, if at all possible, especially for such a systematic thinker as Foucault. Historical *singularity* remains however, his guiding thread; and if his self-formative intention was to learn something of what it might mean to think like a Stoic, if for no other reason than to provide himself, his thought's thinking of itself, with a new challenge; his scholarly intention was still genealogical, that is, ambitiously: "to try to situate, in an historical field as precisely articulated as possible, the set of these practices of the subject which developed from the Hellenistic and Roman period until now". (HS, 188)

2. Ethical configurations

The Introduction to *the History of Sexuality, Vol.2* is one of those moments in Foucault's work where a lot of theory is concentrated into a few very quotable pages; for this reason it is regarded, perhaps more than the book it introduces, as one of the most important of his texts, and is published separately in several anthologies. Still very much under the sign of genealogy, in it he sets up an entire methodology for analysing ethical systems. In the first place he draws a distinction between two different conceptions of ethics, as prescriptive "morality" and as practices of the self.²³ Morality is defined as concerned with the codification of sanctioned sets of values (a process involving recognized moral "authorities"), and their elaboration in specific rules; and with the different, institutionalised forms of enforcement of these rules – from family and school to magistrates and prisons – morality as it is viewed and experienced in human societies. This had been the focus of much of his former work, but it is not his current concern, except in as far as it

²³ In Murdoch's terminology on the other hand, "morality" is the global term she uses for *all* ethical practices, the more public codification of moral rules, as well as private moral reflection and practices of the self. The distinction is however not just one of terminology, as the relation of private reflection to historically prevailing moral codes differs significantly.

provides the historical framework for the relationship that the individual establishes between these acquired notions of morality and her own way of living, of thinking and acting. He now turns his attention to: “the manner in which one ought to form oneself as an ethical subject acting in reference to the prescriptive elements that make up the code” (UP, 26) The point he is making is that, with reference to any rule of conduct, there are many different ways in which one can observe the rule, or not observe it: consciously or unconsciously, willingly, or unwillingly, thoroughly or superficially, in accordance with or against one’s beliefs or feelings, and so forth; and that there are many different ways to (or not to) habituate oneself to behaving “acceptably”.

In order to analyse this he isolates four aspects of “the self’s relation to itself”; and he calls these: the “ethical substance”, the “mode of subjection”, the “work on the self” and the “*telos*”, or goal of ethical conduct. These theoretical instruments are designed to be able to elucidate different cultural situations. To exemplify this way of problematizing ethical practices he describes their variations with regard to one particular precept, one that is to be found in some form in most moral codes, that of fidelity in marriage.

He defines the determination of the ethical substance as “the way in which the individual has to constitute this or that part of himself as the prime material of his moral conduct”. In this context of the moral requirement of fidelity, one might, for example, conform to this practice by curbing one’s desires, because one thinks it important to observe society’s rules, whether or not one believes that the obligation in question – marital fidelity – is (for oneself) important. Alternatively, one could believe that marital fidelity is indeed morally necessary, that desire is a threat to it, and that one must therefore attempt to control, and preferably eradicate, sexual desire itself. In the first of these cases, the desiring self is not seen as a problem, except in as far as it may lead to unacceptable acts. Therefore what one requires of oneself is self control in the form of the exercise of will-power over one’s *acts*, not over one’s *desires* as such, and one must work to strengthen one’s will, and moderate, but not eliminate desire.

In the second case, the desiring self is itself the problem, one must therefore exercise constant vigilance, to try to extirpate desire; therefore even the “legitimate” expression of desire, within marriage, will be problematic in the subject’s relation to self. The third possible case he offers is one that may place a particular value on the marriage relationship, and on fidelity within it; and thus work to cultivate the feeling and expression of love for one’s partner.

One could therefore conclude that in the first case, the ethical substance, the part of oneself on which one must concentrate one’s efforts is intentionality (with regard to one’s acts); in the second case it is desire, and in the third it is sentiment. Foucault does not however actually specify

which “parts of the self” he is referring to, even though this is the defining concept of this part of his analysis. Such specifications are obviously problematical – intentionality is generally more associated with moral *agency* which works on “parts of the self” such as desire or sentiment that are often construed as “passive”; but although he regards such differences as important when comparing other philosophical approaches, such as those of Plato and the Stoics, or Kant and the empiricists, Foucault does not address himself to the difficulties involved in characterising “parts of the self” on this model he is putting forward. As they stand, the descriptions given above of different attitudes to a moral rule of marital fidelity could *all* apply to modern times, the most morally eclectic of all periods of human history, but one gets the impression that the model Foucault is setting up is designed to link these determinations separately to specific historical epochs.

Similarly, the descriptions of “modes of subjection”, or “the way in which the individual establishes his relation to the rule and recognizes himself as obliged to put it into practice”(p.27), would seem to have some degree of cross-cultural application: “One can, for example, practice conjugal fidelity and comply with the precept that imposes it, because one acknowledges oneself to be a member of the group that accepts it, declares adherence to it out loud, and silently preserves it as a custom.” This is the (Durkheimian) description of adherence to the rules of society, *not* for the sake of any commitment to the rules themselves, but because they represent a group identity, and social cohesion – “*We* do this, therefore *I* do this”, “My country – right or wrong”, as it were. This mode of subjection represents a form of conformist “morality” that is to be found (though perhaps never as the only form of morality in operation) in all societies. It is particularly common in societies where religion is largely based on cult practices and ritual observances, and where “correct” social behaviour is similarly ritualized, and incorrect behaviour punished. The second example Foucault gives is that one can practice conjugal fidelity “because one regards oneself as an heir to a spiritual tradition that one has the responsibility of maintaining or reviving”. Commitment to a spiritual tradition also requires conformity, but in a secondary, not a primary role; it is subordinate to a *genuine* conviction regarding the moral validity of the tradition. The type of relation to the self that this involves can also be found in many different societies, with differing metaphysics, but Foucault does not exemplify this. The third example he gives of mode of subjection is denoted “by offering oneself as an example, or by seeking to give one’s personal life a form that answers to criteria of brilliance, beauty, nobility, or perfection”, and here the reference is clearly to forms of moral and aesthetic perfectionism. The maverick forms of ethics in modern history.

No doubt there are many other modes of subjection that one could identify, but one in particular stands out by its absence from this three-part list. That is to say, that mode of relation to ethical codes whereby determining what is “correct” behaviour for oneself implies individual responsibility based on reflection; a mode occurring in societies where religion or philosophy either involve or tolerate contemplative practice. Given that the genealogical model for the study of ethics he presents here forms the introduction to a book on Greek and Roman ethics, one of the few historical situations where this unmentioned form of relation to the self is explored, this omission seems all the more curious. It may have to do with the fact that it could perhaps be better described as a ‘mode of accommodation’ to rules, than a mode of ‘subjection’ to them. In fact, this particular category of “mode of subjection” (*mode d’assujettissement*), as it is used here, is an awkward one, given the misfit between the term and its referent. *Assujettissement* implies subjection, even subjugation, that is, the presence of a coercive agent or agency, whether internal or external to the subject; and yet what he has just described are non-coercive modes of relation to the self.

Perhaps what we are witnessing here is a conceptual shift of Foucault’s that is working itself out through the text. The analysis of modes of conformity to rules of moral conduct began for him with his work on disciplinary practices, and their relation to self-coercive forms of internalisation of rules. In such a context “mode of subjection” was highly pertinent, but it is much less so in this more variegated realm of relations to the self. What was required was a concept that was broad enough to incorporate both the simpler, objectified forms of relation to the self, where the individual subject more or less absorbs the prevailing moral norms as inevitable; and, at the other end of the spectrum, a fully conscious relation to the self where the subject chooses to conform or not to conform to the rules, and also chooses the form of work on the self required to develop the kind of self that the subject wishes to be.

The term Foucault will invent for this purpose is “subjectivation” (*sujetivation*), which occurs, possibly for the first time, two pages on in the *Introduction*. (UP, 30)²⁴. “Subjectivation” includes all four of the aspects that he has so carefully separated here, and in fact, once this new concept has become consolidated within his work, Foucault will no longer need to break it down into its component parts. But for the moment, this breakdown is presented as an analysis of the component parts of “ethics”, from which the new concept will be constructed. It is possible that utilising

²⁴ UP, 30. Given that this text was published posthumously, and Foucault used the term in articles and interviews in his last years, it is impossible to clarify when he first used the term. Nonetheless, the process of conceptual elaboration leading from *assujettissement* to *sujetivation* is evident here.

“*mode of subjection*” in the weak sense of mere *acknowledgement* of obligation, as Foucault does here – as distinct from “mode” in the strong sense of the way in which one actually works on oneself in order to make that obligation one’s practice – may be just a theoretical strategy on Foucault’s part, serving the analytical purpose of demonstrating precisely the inseparability of moral attitudes and the correlative “ethical work” that constitutes the third element of this model. Though one gets the impression this was a discovery made in the course of this “exercise in thought”. Ethical work (the third element in his model) is, he says, what “one performs on oneself, not only in order to bring one’s conduct into compliance with a given rule [mode of subjection], but to attempt to transform oneself into the ethical subject of one’s behaviour”. In other words, the ethical work is the means by which both the second element, *the mode of subjection*, and the fourth and last element of this theoretical model, the *telos* of the type of self one wants to be, are achieved.

Using the same example of conjugal fidelity, Foucault exemplifies *ethical work* thus:

sexual austerity can be practiced through a long effort of learning, memorizing, and assimilation of a systematic ensemble of precepts, and through a regular checking of conduct aimed at measuring the exactness with which one is applying these rules. It can be practiced in the form of a sudden, all-embracing, and definitive renunciation of pleasures; it can also be practiced in the form of a relentless combat, whose vicissitudes – including momentary setbacks – can have meaning and value in themselves, and it can be practiced through a decipherment, as painstaking, continuous, and detailed as possible, of the movements of desire in all its hidden forms, including the most obscure. (Ibid., 27)

Now this seems to be a very odd collection of “practices”. Decodified from the Foucauldian, it appears to refer to, respectively, the Stoics, Christian conversion, Christian (including Kantian-pietist) self-repression, and psychoanalysis. The second of these is not a *practice* at all. Instead it refers to an *event* which is not named here; because what, other than a dramatic event, could provoke such a “sudden, all-embracing and definitive renunciation of pleasures”. The event, clearly that of Christian conversion which he describes in this way elsewhere in this text,²⁵ is one which *inaugurates* a series of practices designed to achieve sexual austerity, notably the “relentless combat” with the self (with desire) which he places third on this list. The fourth practice listed is what he has called the “hermeneutics of desire”, begun in the early Christian monasteries, and reborn, as it were, in psychoanalysis. The categories are designed to draw these practices in line with more recent historical epochs, and to draw out the contrast between these practices and the “ancient” practice he lists first. The latter does not readily suggest itself as a

²⁵ See also: *Society Must Be Defended*: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-76.

means of achieving sexual austerity with much likelihood of success. The reference here to techniques of memorizing useful precepts, and “measuring the exactness with which one is applying these rules” to one’s life, is clearly a description of certain techniques of the self used in Antiquity, and yet, in its selectivity (masking the notion of the *internal* relation of intellect and desire), it gives a very strange, aseptic and possibly distorted impression of what work on the self might have actually meant for the Greeks and Romans. The reason for Foucault’s choice of presenting this particular “ancient” technique of the self in this way may have to do with his insistence on the *intellectual* nature of ancient techniques of the self in general, in order to draw out the contrast with the specifically *psychological* nature of the confessional techniques of Christianity, and the disciplinary descendents of these confessional techniques in forms of clinical psychological practice.

As his work progresses, the pressure to define techniques of the self as *either* intellectual *or* psychological is constantly evident. This appears to mirror on another plane the mind-body dualism that still predominates in various ways in contemporary thinking in the West, and seems to be retained as an epistemic underpinning in his own work that is never fully thematized. And this despite the fact that there is no intellectual/psychological dichotomy in Stoicism, as he himself shows, though he constantly, as we will see, casts his description of their various disciplinary practices in an intellectualist light. Foucault never fully shook off the tendency to see techniques of the self that work directly on the psyche as self-judgemental; though there were in fact many such techniques in the ancient world, which he chooses not to problematize as “psychological”. This may leave us with the faintly disturbing impression that the Greeks were not given to investigating their own negative emotions, whereas this was clearly an important technique for them, and one which did not preclude a judicious use of self-blame; though this, of course, did not imply confirmation that one was bad to the bone; there was no “original sin”. Ironically self-blame *is* precluded as a technique of psychoanalysis, which has often much more to do with non-judgemental healing than with the normalization, based on negative self-judgement, of the psychiatric institutions of the nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries, with which Foucault was so familiar.

The fourth element, the *telos*, has to do with the fact that, Foucault says, a “moral action tends towards its own accomplishment; but it also aims beyond the latter, to the establishing of a moral conduct that commits an individual, not only to other actions always in conformity with values and rules, but to a certain mode of being, a mode of being characteristic of the ethical subject.”(Ibid.,

28) Here Foucault lists moral objectives (still with reference to the example of conjugal fidelity) which correspond to, and inform the work on the self, situating the specific practice in the broader context of moral finality. These finalities include self-mastery, tranquillity of the soul, and purification leading to salvation; but here again the *telos* corresponding to the event of Christian conversion is awkwardly put: “it can be a moral conduct that manifests a sudden and radical detachment vis-à-vis the world”. Here Foucault is conflating the symbolic *image* of conversion – Saul of Tarsus becomes St. Paul in a great flash of light – with the non-sudden *practice* of achieving a moral conduct of detachment from this-worldly passions, in the interests of personal salvation. Clearly conjugal fidelity is a moral conduct that can result from such a sudden event, ‘manifesting’ it in the weak sense of being a visible sign of such a change, as with other aspects of the convert’s life. The *telos* here is salvation, and conjugal fidelity more a means to that end than a manifestation (in the strong sense of *necessary* correlate) of conversion.

In “On the Genealogy of Ethics”, Foucault says of these four aspects that: “The first aspect answers the question: Which is the part of myself or my behaviour which is concerned with moral conduct? For instance you can say that in our society the main field of morality, the part of ourselves which is most relevant for morality is feelings. (You can have a girl in the street or anywhere, if you have very good feelings towards your wife.) Well, it’s quite clear that from the Kantian point of view, intention is much more important than feelings. And from the Christian point of view it was desire”. (OGE, 263) The question of “feeling” as the ethical marker of our society was something Foucault never thematized, though he sometimes used the informality of the interview situation to throw out a remark, as in this case, like this rather cynical one about twentieth century marriage, to indicate things he suspected, but – not having investigated them – he was as yet not prepared to argue for. Nonetheless, the observation that “moral feelings”, such as compassion, are important in modernity, whereas they were unimportant, even contrary to morality for Kant and for many of the Greek schools, is a potentially fertile one; but as “ethical substance” are they to count as moral agent or what moral agency must work with? “Desire” is clearly not the moral agent in Christianity, whereas intention is more usually agent than “substance” in Kant; so the category would seem to be more an experimental than a consolidated one. In the same text he goes on to say: “For the Greeks, the ethical substance was acts linked to pleasure and desire in their unity. And it is very different from flesh, Christian flesh. Sexuality is a third kind of ethic.” (Ibid., 263-64) This later version of “ethical substance” is more cohesive,

there is no confusion with moral agency, but as it stands it is only a partial description of what he defined as the prime *material* of [...] moral conduct.

I point out these awkward moments in Foucault's passage from one way of thinking to another not as criticism – he was himself the first to recognize that we all succumb to our own best ideas and want reality to draw itself in line with them – but as evidence of the way in which he would experiment with theoretical models, working them out as he went along, and then, without turning back to correct them, recognize their theoretical unproductiveness, and let them fall by the wayside. Much later, he would declare that what he had said on earlier occasions was mistaken, which was sometimes false modesty, but he usually meant it.²⁶ This particular theoretical model was used in the Introduction to *Uses of Pleasure*, and in the essay/interview *On the Genealogy of Ethics*, and then it disappears, leaving in its wake the much more theoretically productive concept of subjectivation. As he says, “all moral action involves a relationship with the reality in which it is carried out, and a relationship with the self” (UP, 28); and “subjectivation” is the concept that will allow him to build the bridge between historical conditions (the reality in which it is carried out) and individual variation in relations with the self, that he had been attempting to construct through the breakdown of aspects of ethics given above.

3. Moral code and moral practice

Since every morality includes both codes of behaviour and forms of subjectivation, an outside and an inside of human moral being, as it were, - one way of describing variation in moralities, in its historical and its interpersonal forms, is in terms of the emphasis placed on one or the other of these two elements. “[I]n certain moralities, the main emphasis is placed on the code, on its systematicity, its richness, its capacity to adjust to every possible case and to embrace every area of behaviour.” (UP, 29) The symbol, the prevailing image of such moralities is that of law, and law serves to determine, unequivocally, right and wrong, guilt and innocence. Musil illustrates this conception beautifully through the case of the sex-murderer Moosbrugger in *The Man Without*

²⁶ With regard to *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault remarked: “One of the numerous points where I was wrong in that book was what I said about this *ars erotica*. I should have opposed our science of sex to a contrasting practice in our own culture. The Greeks and Romans did not have any *ars erotica* to be compared with the Chinese *ars erotica* (or at least it was not something important in their culture). They had a *tekhnè tou biou* in which the economy of pleasure played a very large role. In this ‘art of life’, the notion of exercising a perfect mastery over oneself soon became the main issue. And the Christian hermeneutics of the self constituted a new elaboration of this *tekhnè*”, (OGE, 259)

Qualities. In commenting on those people left in that grey area described by the law and forensic medicine as cases of “diminished responsibility”; he writes:

Nature has a peculiar preference for producing such people in droves. *Natura non fecit saltus*, she makes no jumps but prefers gradual transitions; even on the grand scale she keeps the world in a transitional state between imbecility and sanity. But the law takes no notice of this. It says: *Non datur tertium sive medium inter duo contradictoria*, or in plain language, a person is either capable or not capable of breaking the law; between two contraries there is no third or middle state [...] Of course, there was not a single person in that vast crowded courtroom, the doctors included, who was not convinced that Moosbrugger was insane, one way or another; but it was not in a way that corresponded to the conditions of insanity laid down by the law, so the insanity could not be acknowledged by conscientious minds. For if one is partly insane, one is also, juridically, partly sane, and if one is partly sane one is at least partly responsible for one’s actions, and if one is partly responsible one is wholly responsible; for responsibility is, as they say, that state in which the individual has the power to devote himself to a specific purpose of his own free will, independently of any compelling necessity, and one cannot simultaneously possess and lack such self-determination.²⁷

Foucault says that with this type of morality, the individual must focus on learning the code, fitting observed examples, one’s own and those of others, into the scheme of judgements, so that “in these conditions, the subjectivation occurs in a quasi-judicial form, where the ethical subject refers his conduct to a law, or set of laws, to which he must submit, at the risk of committing offences that will make him liable to punishment.” (UP, 30) And he goes on to say that whilst Christian morality (moralities) cannot be reduced to this model “it may not be wrong to think that the organization of the penitential system at the beginning of the thirteenth century, and its development up to the eve of the Reformation, brought about a very strong ‘juridification’ – more precisely a very strong ‘codification’ – of the moral experience.” (Ibid.)

Foucault is a master of taking the philosophical step back from what he is saying (“it may not be wrong to think...”, etc.), but in fact he has amply documented this affirmation in other works previously mentioned. However, not only does he recognize the historical coexistence of different moralities, even of differing Christian moralities within the era in which Europe was the major stronghold of “Christendom”, but he has analysed and documented some of the ways in which prevailing systems of conduct, and the unwelcome constraints they put on individuals, provoke forms of counter-conduct that may contribute significantly to the eventual development of rival moral systems. This was one of the objects of his earlier genealogies, but it is important to bear it in mind here; also because when Foucault turns his attention to a new problematic, what has gone before can be read in a new light, but is never simply passed over. If now he turns to the inner face of morality, it is because his exploration of the outer face has brought him to this point. The inner

²⁷ Musil, Robert, *The Man Without Qualities*, p.262

face, and the new territory, is “what might be called a history of ‘ethics’ and ‘ascetics’, understood as a history of the forms of moral subjectivation and of the practices of the self that are meant to ensure it.” Or, put slightly differently:

a history of the way in which individuals are urged to constitute themselves as subjects of moral conduct [...] concerned with the models proposed for setting up and developing relationships with the self, for self-reflection, self-knowledge, self-examination, for the decipherment of the self by oneself, for the transformations that one seeks to accomplish with oneself as object. (Ibid. 29)

The language that he uses here is indicative of the theoretical shift that this important text exhibits. From his former perspective of looking at morality from the outside in, as it were, the “mode of subjection” obliged, or constrained, or even compelled individuals to “constitute themselves as subjects of moral conduct”. Here they are merely *urged* to do so, which is closer to “invited” than it is to “compelled”. And in fact, the examples he gives demonstrate that choice, and not constraint at all, motivates some of the forms of self-constitution described. The use of the verb “urged” is therefore a clear sign of this transitional moment in Foucault’s thinking. Interesting also is his insistence on technical language: “setting up and developing models for the relation of self to itself” is a rather instrumental metaphor for this process, designed to confirm what is in effect Foucault’s anti-naturalist stance. One of the (unstated) presuppositions underlying his work is that much of what we are is artefact, that we construct ourselves in relation to our cultures. Foucault does not spell this out however precisely because he is not interested in refuting or appraising the part that nature plays in our being; it is not his purpose to adopt a strictly ‘constructivist’ position as some kind of closure on a nature-culture argument that will be forever open; all he wants to do is to define his own area of interest, which is in looking at how we construct ourselves, leaving to others, with other passions, the question of just how much nature constrains culture in human being. When he was asked, for example, about “the distinction between innate predisposition to homosexual behavior and social conditioning”, Foucault replied: “No comment. [...] I just don’t believe in talking about things that go beyond my expertise. It’s not my problem, and I don’t like talking about things that are not really the object of my work. On this question I have only an opinion; since it is only an opinion, it is without interest.” (SCSA, 142) The metaphor of ‘technique’ is also useful to him in that it throws light on the *experimental* nature of many of the practices of the self that he describes, almost as a laboratory of the self. Practices of putting oneself into carefully “set up”, out of the ordinary situations, and then closely observing how the self relates to the non-ordinary.

Foucault suggests that in the case of moralities “in which the strong and dynamic element is to be sought in the forms of subjectivation [...] the system of codes and rules *may be rather rudimentary*. Their exact observance *may be* relatively unimportant, at least compared with what is required of the individual in the relationship he has with himself, in his different actions, thoughts, and feelings as he endeavours to form himself as an ethical subject.” (UP, 30, my emphasis) Foucault seems to be suggesting here some kind of probable historical correlate between weakness of codified morality and strength of subjective ethical practices; but – whereas he shows this to be true in the case he is about to explore, that of antiquity, where formalised law was a much simpler affair than it is today – the schema does not work in other historical circumstances, particularly the more recent – Romanticism, American transcendentalism, New Age moralities, to name but a few – all of which involve different, but nonetheless intense forms of moral subjectivation, formed in (and in opposition to) historical periods characterised by very strong bodies of law. What the Romantic and the contemporary “alternative” moralities have in common with Ancient ethics, besides certain kinds of practices of the self, is their social status as the prerogative of an educated (as opposed to socio-economic) “elite”. “Elite” in inverted commas, because many of the practices require a certain level of education, and this may correspond, as it did in Greece and Rome, to a privileged social caste, but not necessarily.

In both ancient and modern cases, and Foucault wanted very much to contribute to the development of new ways of being, new forms of moral subjectivity, the particular slant given to the notion of “how to live”, of a life worth living, is that of heightened awareness and of individual self-determination; both seen as requiring a commitment in time and energy to practices that may be of little interest to most people. Especially as simplicity in life-style, and moderation, or at least the application of specific criteria, in the consumption of food, drink, and material goods (with considerable variation as regards sexual practices), often figure highly among the fundamental practices of the self in these traditions. Foucault himself lived a fairly monastic life, of extreme discipline, with occasional excursions into a world of pleasures, preferably equally extreme. The extreme was of great interest to him, extreme discipline and extreme spontaneity, extreme work and extreme play, and the kind of courage necessary to live by one’s own lights, at the price of being ghettoized on the margins of “society”.

But whether moderation or excess is one’s instrument or goal, and whether the top or the bottom of the social ladder is one’s location, the resulting “elite” of practitioners is formed by personal inclination and consequent self-selection, not on the “elitist” basis of exclusion or of social

position. By virtue of the fact that an ethics based in practices of the self is one that makes sense only if it is chosen, not imposed, it will always be an ethics that exists alongside codified moralities; but as a place from which new perspectives on those codified moralities can be developed, and contributions to changing them be made.

4. The hermeneutics of desire

Much of Foucault's theory on historically different forms of ethical practice was formulated in the course of his readings of ancient texts, juxtaposing Greek, Roman and Christian conceptualizations of related themes, and concentrating particularly on the Stoics. According to Hadot both Stoics and Epicureans conceived of wisdom, the goal of philosophical practice, as "a way of life which brought peace of mind (*ataraxia*), inner freedom (*autarkeia*), and a cosmic consciousness." (PWL, 268)²⁸ In this context, inner freedom means freedom to direct one's life and actions according to reason, freedom from being driven by the passions, and inner peace also depends on this; so the techniques of the self through which one could learn to free oneself of the passions, particularly those for food, sex, and reputation, were of paramount importance. Foucault recognizes a certain historical continuity in the use of such techniques, particularly with regard to sex: "It is a fact that the pagan philosophers in the centuries before and after the death of Christ proposed a sexual ethics that was very similar to the alleged Christian ethics" (S&S, 179); and yet underlying this similarity is a world of difference.

In *The Care of the Self* he compares two texts, *The Interpretation of Dreams* written by Artemidorus in the second century C.E., to which Part 1 is dedicated, and St. Augustine's *City of God*. Artemidorus' book is a both a "theoretical treatise on the value of interpretive procedures ...[and] a technique of existence" (CS, 4-5), and as such, also a manual for utilising the interpretation of dreams, which may be diagnostic or predictive, in the interests of a healthy and good life. Foucault notes that there is no sense whatever here of sexual desire as being *intrinsically* wrong, even in the case of incest, dreaming of sex with a parent or child, for example, may be positive, in that it augurs wealth or strength, or negative, in that it augurs weakness. This depends mostly, and unabashedly, on who penetrates whom, or who plays the virile and who the passive role (he also notes that there appears to be no conception of reciprocal active-passive roles in

²⁸ Hadot says that "By 'cosmic consciousness,' we mean the consciousness that we are part of the cosmos, and the consequent dilation of our self throughout the infinity of universal nature."

treatises on sexuality in Antiquity). In other words, it is not desire that is intrinsically bad, but an unethical use of it. Penetration represents two contradictory aspects of male being, a precious manifestation of subjective power, as compared with the lack of subjectivity of the penetrated, as it were: women, slaves and boys; and a potentially dangerous drain on resources of energy. Therefore one must at all costs avoid being penetrated, and at the same time one must moderate one's practice of penetration. By comparison, Foucault writes:

Augustine's conception is still dominated by the theme and form of male sexuality. But the main question is not, as it was in Artemidorus, the problem of penetration – it is the problem of erection [with regard to the involuntariness and ghastly spasms described by Augustine....]

The principle of autonomous movements of sexual organs is called libido by Augustine. The problem of libido, of its strength, origin, and effect, thus becomes the main issue of one's will. It is not an external obstacle to the will [as for the Greeks]; it is a part, an internal component, of the will [...] Libido is the result of one's will when it goes beyond the limits God originally set for it. As a consequence, the means of the spiritual struggle against libido do not consist, as with Plato, in turning our eyes upward and memorizing the reality we have previously known and forgotten; the spiritual struggle consists, on the contrary, in turning our eyes continuously downward or inward in order to discover, among the movements of the soul, which ones come from the libido. The task is at first indefinite since libido and will can never be substantially disassociated from one another. And this task is not only an issue of mastership but also a question of the diagnosis of truth and illusion. It requires a permanent hermeneutics of oneself. (S&S, 182)

And the principle axis of this hermeneutics of oneself, as this text makes clear, is the "hermeneutics of desire", of which Augustine's *Confessions* was a foundational document. "As everybody knows" Foucault says "Christianity is a confession." (Ibid. 178) And this implies an obligation of truth-speaking, where truth is construed as both the truth of the book, of biblical revelation, and the truth of the self: "Everyone in Christianity has the duty to explore who he is, what is happening within himself, the faults he may have committed, the temptations to which he is exposed." And, sadly for the Christian, contaminated with original sin: "The more we discover the truth about ourselves, the more we must renounce ourselves; and the more we want to renounce ourselves, the more we need to bring to light the reality of ourselves. That is what we would call the spiral of truth formulation and reality renouncement which is at the heart of Christian techniques of the self." (Ibid)

Foucault's analysis of these, and many other ancient and Christian texts, lead him to the conclusion that what we are left with, schematically, at the end of the Middle Ages in Europe, is a prevailing Christianity in which philosophy as it was known to the Greeks, as a way of life, has largely disappeared. From now on, what is known as "Philosophy" will be what was previously thought of as philosophical discourse or theory, an empty thing for the Greeks, if it were to be

removed from the context of the philosophical way of life that had produced it, and that it served.

Those parts of this “philosophy”, which could now be put to serve another discourse, that of theology, were retained and, over time, reinterpreted accordingly; and some of the spiritual exercises which had constituted philosophical practice in antiquity were absorbed, in mutated form, in monastic practices.

The practice of self-examination in particular became more a form of self-inquisition. One begins to examine oneself with the *assumption* that one is in a state of sin; the question is thus that of identifying the sin, through a hermeneutics of desire (always considered a good place to start), and a more general attempt to catch oneself out in self-deception of various kinds. The great reforms of Protestantism in the sixteenth century, which introduced a more direct relationship with God, unmediated by the clergy or by religious authorities, did much to free Christendom from the political domination of the “Universal” Church, and to replace “blind obedience” with “rational obedience”, but on the plane of the inner relationship of the self to itself, they often served only to strengthen this self-inquisition; reinforcing the need to search for the motivation behind the act, even behind the imagined act, or the not-even imagined act. The barely perceived desire to commit a sin now becoming the sin itself, a sin of thought, behind and responsible for the sin of deed, committed, or not.

For Foucault, therefore, it was through the form of subjectivation practised by Christianity, particularly when Protestantism generalized and intensified this practice as primarily an *internal* form of confession, between self and self, or between self and God within the self, that one’s psychological interiority became a possible object of knowledge, and thus a constituent object of the psychological disciplines. Having identified ‘confession’ as the practice behind the concept of psychological interiority, it became something of a leitmotiv for Foucault. To be hunted out in various forms in diverse institutional practices – of law, of the family, of the school etc. In Volume 1 of *The History of Sexuality*, he says we have

become a singularly confessing society. The confession has spread its effects far and wide. It plays a part in justice, medicine, education, family relationships, and love relations, in the most ordinary affairs of everyday life, and in the most solemn rites; one confesses one’s crimes, one’s sins, one’s thoughts and desires, one’s illnesses and troubles; one goes about telling, with the greatest precision, whatever is most difficult to tell. One confesses in public and in private, to one’s parents, one’s educators, one’s doctor, to those one loves; one admits to oneself, in pleasure and in pain, things it would be impossible to tell to anyone else, the things people write books about. One confesses – or is forced to confess. (WK, 59)

This flight of rhetoric follows, as sometimes happens, upon one of Foucault's great insights; but his insight into the genealogy of confessing is here, as elsewhere, overplayed. 'Confessing' necessarily 'plays a part' in justice and medicine, and in family relationships, love relationships and education, varying in relation to the punitive and coercive powers of the society concerned. But it is as if Foucault is setting up a kind of "confessive hypothesis" here; in opposition to the "repressive hypothesis", a theory that he had defined and ardently criticized in this book. The "repressive hypothesis" is Foucault's catchphrase for his summing up of the consensus position of many disciplinary discourses, and much contemporary public opinion, to the effect that, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries "On the subject of sex, silence became the rule." (Ibid., 3) The confinement of legitimate sex to the marital bedroom, the negation of infant sexuality, the silence, were all "characteristic features attributed to repression, which serve to distinguish it from prohibitions maintained by penal law: repression operated as a sentence to disappear, but also as an injunction to silence, an affirmation of non-existence, and by implication, an admission that there was nothing to say about such things, nothing to see and nothing to know." (Ibid. 4) Against this hypothesis, Foucault argues that

since the end of the sixteenth century, the 'putting into discourse of sex', far from undergoing a process of restriction, on the contrary has been subjected to a mechanism of increasing incitement; that the techniques of power exercised over sex have not obeyed a principle of rigorous selection, but rather one of dissemination and implantation of polymorphous sexualities; and that the will to knowledge has not come to a halt in the face of a taboo that must not be lifted, but has persisted in constituting – despite many mistakes, of course – a science of sexuality. (Ibid. 12-13)

It is not, as this passage might suggest, but other texts would deny, that Foucault holds lightly the problem of the hard realities of sexual repression in modern times. It is rather that his sense of the power of opinions that have become commonplaces obliged him to attack those conventional views forcefully, and if that meant using exaggeration as a writing technique, so be it. In discussing the sixteenth and seventeenth century roots of this genealogy in his 1975 Course, *Abnormal*, he writes: The power exercised in spiritual direction does not therefore prescribe *silence and not-saying* as a fundamental rule; it posits it simply as the necessary auxiliary or condition of functioning of the wholly positive rule of *enunciation*. (A, 203) This more or less encapsulates what we are calling his "confessive hypothesis". However, a few lines before he had written:

Actually, we have a complex element in which silence, the rule of science or of not-saying, is correlative to another mechanism that is a mechanism of enunciation: You must say everything, but you must do so under certain conditions, within a particular ritual, and to a particular person. (Ibid., 202)

This is clearly a version that negates the repressive hypothesis *without* attempting to establish the contrary. Foucault often veers between highly cautious scholarly prose and the provocative grand statement, reserving his more florid prose for the latter. As, for example, when he couples the notion of confession with that of torture (“Since the Middle Ages, torture has accompanied it like a shadow, and supported it when it could go no further: the dark twins”. (Ibid. 59)). On the surface this seems to be just a gothic flourish in his writing, but beneath the notion that torture is never far from confession, like a “dark shadow”, lies all Foucault’s hostility to practices of self-examination. Clearly torture in historical reality often followed from a failure of confession, as an attempt to force it; but the practice of “confession”, a notion that Foucault recasts as a form of self-inquisition that stands as the model for the hermeneutics of desire, is not only and in all circumstances this. In many non-inquisitional cases, it may involve a serious attempt at honesty, at truth to the self, whatever the conceptual constraints informing the particular variant of the practice may be. Foucault never pretends to historical thoroughness, which in any case he holds to be impossible, because what he is doing is the history of thought, which, in tracing a genealogy of ideas, does not, and rightly, pretend to deal with “contradictory” cases. Nonetheless he is conflating two of his own categories here, in that he describes confession as a practice of subjectivation, whereas torture is external coercion. The fact that they may have often gone together historically, represents a contingent, not a necessary connection, but he seems to be implying instead that there might be some kind of necessary connection, that confession actually is a form of self-torture. This being said, Foucault’s insight into the “repressive hypothesis”, and its function as part of the contemporary episteme, were crucial to the systematic deconstruction of that episteme that his work has achieved. The delineation of this central mode of subjection of the medieval subject, and the tracing of the genealogical descendents of that mode through their various historical ramifications down to the present, was an enormous achievement. The historical analysis of the hermeneutics of desire proceeds with the observation that “The Middle Ages had organized around the theme of the flesh and the practice of penance a discourse that was markedly unitary. In the course of recent centuries, this relative unity was broken apart, scattered, and multiplied in an explosion of distinct discursivities which took form in demography, biology, medicine, psychiatry, psychology, ethics, pedagogy, and political criticism.” (Ibid. 33-34) In order to demonstrate the common genealogical root of these separate discourses Foucault put together a vast and varied collection of literary and scientific texts in support of his argument. With regard to some of the more colourful of these juxtapositions, Joel Whitebook points out that Foucault’s

connecting, for example, Victorian pornography with “the arcane tomes of Kraft-Ebbing and the clinical interviews of psychiatrists and social workers, in order to argue that there was ‘a veritable discursive explosion’ which overstimulated the population and created a hypersexualised society. This sounds more like Rio de Janeiro than Manchester, England in the nineteenth century”. (AI, 333)

5. *Homo psychologicus*

Ours is the only civilisation, Foucault says, to have produced an entire *scientia sexualis* and of course, the highest point of development of this sexual science was Freud and psychoanalysis. According to Whitebook, Foucault held that the psychological sciences were responsible for inventing “*homo psychologicus* - that is, a split subject with an inner world – as their object”. (AI, 314)

Foucault felt a particular solidarity for the “abnormals” and the marginalized of all times and places, and clearly, from the point of view of relations of power, psychological knowledge had the double function of external instrument of surveillance and control of the “patient”, and of rendering the patient a controller of herself through the interiorization of an image of self that was constructed on the basis of whatever “normality” was considered to consist in at the time. Thus, in the contemporary situation, “bourgeois normality [...] is equated with psychic health.” The psychologist’s gaze was thus another form of panopticon, the image that Foucault took from Bentham and used as a symbol of disciplinary power. Just as the Christian hermeneutics of desire had sexuality as its ostensible object, but in reality operated on the wider field of subjectivity, so psychology placed one’s sexual subjectivity at the centre of one’s understanding of oneself. Foucault saw psychiatry and psychoanalysis as being among the major instruments of knowledge-power; serving the purpose of “normalization”, of getting troubled individuals to interiorize external constraints. Of his antagonism to psychoanalysis in particular, Whitebook writes:

Foucault’s objection to the inwardly directed gaze rests on the unstated assumption that self-observation is, by its very nature, violent. Because *le regard* is considered intrinsically malevolent, there is no possibility of a non-objectionable split between an observing and an observed part of the self and a form of benign self-exploration (Ibid., 320)

Nonetheless, when the hermeneutics of desire itself led him to a greater need to analyse what goes under the name of “the subject”, and he turned his attention to what he describes as the slow

formation, in antiquity, of a hermeneutics of the self, what he found himself confronted with was precisely forms of benign self-exploration, in many of the techniques of the self.

The road to self-knowledge was seen in antiquity as strewn with obstacles that were both intellectual and psychological, though, as will become evident, Foucault tended to spend more analytical time on the intellectual aspects of ancient techniques of self-knowledge than the more explicitly psychological ones.

Whitebook also observes that there is an unresolved tension in Foucault's work between, on the one hand, a celebration of madness, usually in the form of mad genius: de Sade, Van Gogh, Nietzsche, Artaud, capable of making even bourgeois normality question itself; and on the other, the notion of a "dialogue with unreason". On the one side this would "undo the exclusion and stigmatization madness has suffered in modernity. On the other, reason would become richer, broader, and suppler by reintegrating the madness it had split off and disavowed." (Ibid. 321) There is a similar tension in his attitude to Freud, on the one hand seeing psychoanalysis as a more sophisticated practice of normalization, on the other recognizing that Freud opened up the possibility of a dialogue with unreason, in that "Freud went back to madness at the level of its *language*, reconstituted one of the essential elements of an experience reduced to silence by positivism."²⁹ But the potentially interesting theme of the dialogue with unreason was one that Foucault dropped early on. This is unfortunate in that psychoanalysis could perhaps have provided him with an important contemporary example of a sustained practice of self-knowledge and self-transformation, whatever *else* it is, in a world where there are not many such examples available. Whitebook points out that "What Foucault disregards when he tries to consign Freud to the tradition of medical psychiatry [...] is that analysts aren't primarily concerned with the question of diagnosis, but of *analyzability – or workability*, as many analysts would put it today. In fact, many analysts agree with Foucault's criticisms. Is a prospective patient capable of meeting the arduous and knotty demands [...] of the encounter with the dark side of the self]: can she or he be an interlocutor in the analytic dialogue with unreason, working to understand archaic mentation and affective states and putting them into words?" (AI, 327)

"Mentation" refers to the processes by which we learn to think, the formation of our mental activity, archaic mentation to the affective/intellectual processes in the earliest years of life, which psychoanalytic practice is designed to help the analysand return to. This is obviously a field of enquiry that is not Foucault's and, eclectic as he was, he could not have done everything; nor is there any suggestion that he should have tried. This being said, however, along with his hostility to

²⁹ Foucault, *Madness and Civilisation*, cited in Whitebook, op.cit, p.322

psychoanalysis, he tended to exclude from consideration the emotional aspects of how thought is constructed, in concentrating on the intellect-practice relation. Any serious consideration of a dialogue with unreason could not have excluded this dimension.

Ch.3. Body and Soul

1. The spirit and the flesh

THE VOICE OF THE DEVIL.³⁰

All Bibles or sacred codes have been the causes of the following Errors:

1. That Man has two real existing principles: Viz: a Body and a Soul.
2. That Energy, call'd Evil, is alone from the Body; & that Reason, call'd Good, is alone from the Soul.
3. That God will torment Man in Eternity for following his Energies.

But the following Contraries to these are True:

1. Man has no Body distinct from his Soul; for that call'd Body is a portion of Soul discern'd by the five Senses, the chief inlets of Soul in this age.
2. Energy is the only life, and is from the Body; and Reason is the bound or outward circumference of Energy.
3. Energy is Eternal Delight.

William Blake's three "Errors" summarize the conception of the antagonistic relationship between body and soul of much Christian theology, and the specific reference here was to the eighteenth century Protestantism that was his own personal source of suffering. Blake himself was a bold eighteenth century practitioner of religious, (hetero)sexual, and political counter-conduct, as such writing would suggest, for which he was much punished at home in Britain and also, as many given to principled individual positions were, in exile in revolutionary France.

As to the Catholics of the same epoch, or slightly earlier, Foucault, in referring to Habert's instruction manual for confessors, of 1748, writes: "For him, concupiscence begins with an emotion in the body that is a purely mechanical emotion produced by Satan. This bodily emotion causes what he calls a 'sensual enticement.'" ³¹ The notion of the body as a troublesome piece of organic machinery, capable of driving us if we fail to drive it, makes of the body something that is not to do with who we really are, but merely with what, morally, we have to contend with. This objectification, through which to read oneself, is central to the relationship of the self to itself in Christianity, but as Foucault has demonstrated, it remains central to much modern scientific discourse, even though this was developed in direct, often hostile, opposition to Christian belief.

³⁰ Blake, William, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, in *Poetry and Prose*, The Nonesuch Library, London, 1956, p.182 (first published 1793).

³¹ Habert, L., *Pratique du sacrement de penitence ou méthode pour l'administrer utilement*, Paris, 1748, cited in Foucault, *Abnormal*, Verso, Lon.-New York, 2003, p.190

What changes radically in more contemporary discourses is that Satan goes out, and anonymous biological forces come in.

Between Christian moral contempt for the body, and a scientific moral neutrality that nonetheless reinforces the notion of the power organic forces exercise over the mind, there flourished a phase of eighteenth-century romanticism, illustrated here by Blake's euphoric "Contraries" to the Errors of religion, in which the values of body (energy) and reason were equilibrated or, as here in Blake, reversed. This romanticism reflects a more unitary, almost Hellenistic conception of body and soul; though not of course the Greek and Roman preference for 'reason' as the locus of subjectivity. Instead the prevailing Christian conception of the ways in which the material body and the non-material soul are interwoven were by common accord of Platonic inspiration, but while it is true that the body was the prison of the soul for Plato, as Foucault reminds us, still the energy of Eros is God-given, and the form of Beauty, perceived in a beautiful human body, can open the eyes to the Good, as we will see with both Murdoch and Nussbaum. Certainly the desire of the lover for the beloved must be purified, but not crushed out of existence.

Instead for the Greeks, and also for the Romans writing in Greek, as Nussbaum notes with regard to her use of the word "soul" to translate the Greek *psuchè*, the term "does not imply any particular metaphysical theory of the personality. It stands, simply, for all the life-activities of the creature, and in the case of Hellenistic contrasts between body and *psuchè*, it is especially important to insist that no denial of physicalism need be involved, since both Epicureans and Stoics are physicalists. The contrast is simply between the material constituents of the organism and its life-activities, its states of awareness, and so forth." (TD, 13n) Of course, the philosophical schools analyse "the life-activities" of humans in different ways, and have their own definitions of the metaphysical characteristics of "soul," but with regard to the Hellenists, Nussbaum's clarification here would seem to stand as the lowest common denominator within these definitions.

Hadot remarks "that we must bear in mind that the word "soul" could have two meanings for the Stoics. In the first place, it was a reality made of air (*pneuma*) which animates our body and receives the impressions, or *phantasiai*, from exterior objects. ... [and in the second it refers to] that superior or guiding part of the soul that the Stoics call *hegemonikon*." (IC, 106) Both these two meanings refer to the "life-activities, states of awareness and so forth" of the human being, but when it is necessary to focus on the more physical, or the more intellectual or spiritual aspects, the more specific terms are employed. The former meaning has the soul as the activating principle, the dynamic transforming receptivity into activity, and its connotations are therefore qualified by

terms denoting both the physical (*pneuma*) and the mental (*phantasiai*) processes by which human beings take in, elaborate, and put back out, as it were. The latter refers to the more refined activity of reflection (*dianoia*), governed by the guiding principle (*hegemonikon*), but, as Hadot also notes: “there is no opposition, as the Platonists had held, between one part of the soul which is rational and good in and of itself, and another part which is irrational and bad. Rather it is reason – and the ego itself – which becomes either good or bad, as a function of the judgements which it forms about things.” (IC, 108-09) This is a vision of a dynamic soul that is situated in (or through), and not separable from, a specific body-and-mind with specific experiences, and a specific mode of elaboration of those experiences, through which the self forms itself.

Plato on the other hand was of course no physicalist, but even in his conception of the soul seeking its return to its original transcendent form, and escaping the prison of the body, as in the *Phaedo*, nonetheless, while still trapped in its immanent form in this life, body and soul formed a cyclic unity. In examining Plato’s view of the self that one must know, and that one must take care of, Foucault asks: “What then is this *heauton*[self], or rather what is referred to by this *heauton*? I will go immediately to the answer. The answer, as you know, is given a hundred times in Plato’s dialogues: ‘*psukhēs epimelēteon*’ (one must take care of one’s soul)”. (HS, 53) The self, he says, is therefore the soul, indicating a very different, though not *contradictory*, use of the term “soul” to that connoting the immortal entity trapped in the body. Foucault then analyzes this latter conception of soul as it is elaborated through dialogue in the *Alcibiades* thus:

What does it mean when we say: ‘Socrates speaks to Alcibiades’? The answer given is: ‘we mean that Socrates makes use of language.’ This very simple example is at the same time very revealing. The question posed is the question of the subject [...] that is to say, what subject do we presuppose when we evoke this activity of speech, which is the speech activity of Socrates towards Alcibiades? Consequently it involves drawing the dividing line within a spoken action that will make it possible to isolate and distinguish the subject of the action from the set of elements (words, sounds, etc) that constitute the action itself and enable it to be carried out. In short, it involves revealing the subject in its irreducibility. (HS, 54-55)

Foucault then reconstructs from the text this long argument about the soul using tools, and using the body as a tool, and asks: “Can we say that man, understood as a combination of soul and body, uses the body? Certainly not. Because the body, even as a simple part, even supposing it to be alongside the soul, as auxiliary, cannot be what uses the body. What, then, is the only element that uses the body, its parts and organs, and which consequently uses tools and finally language? It is and can only be the soul.” (HS, 55) But Foucault sets this argument up not, as it might seem, in order to consider the claim that the soul is a separate substance (an aspect of Plato’s work which does not interest him, nor does he bother to demonstrate its weaknesses), but rather to focus on

what does interest him here, which is this: “you will see that the soul we have arrived at through this bizarre reasoning around “uses” has nothing to do with, for example, the soul which, as a prisoner of the body, must be set free in the *Phaedo*; it has nothing to do with the soul as a pair of winged horses which must be led in the right direction, as in the *Phaedrus*; and it is not the soul structured in a hierarchy of levels which must be harmonized, as in the *Republic*.” (HS, 55-56) The rigid separation of soul and body in the *Alcibiades* turns out rather to be connected with the Greek word *chréstai*, translated here as ‘use.’ Foucault notes that it has many meanings, and in particular, in this dialogue from the text:

[in] the expression *ephitumiais krésthai*, the meaning is not ‘to use one’s passions for something’ but quite simply ‘to give way to one’s passions.’[...] So you see when Plato (or Socrates) employs this notion of *krésthai* [...] in order to identify what this *heauton* is [...] in the expression ‘taking care of oneself,’ in actual fact he does not want to designate an instrumental relationship of the soul to the rest of the world or to the body, but rather the subject’s singular, transcendent position, as it were, with regard to what surrounds him, to the objects available to him, but also to other people with whom he has a relationship, to his body itself, and finally to himself. We can say that when Plato employs this notion [...] in order to seek the self one must take care of, it is not at all the *soul-substance* he discovers, but rather the *soul-subject*. (Ibid. 56-57, emphasis mine)

This “bizarre” reasoning of Plato’s, as he puts it, leads Foucault to this radical interpretation (one that may bring the wrath of Classicists down upon his head), that although Plato only ever speaks of the soul as a substance, and as separable from the body, there is an *implied* distinction between the metaphysical construct of the soul, and the use Plato appears to make of the concept in relation to the care of the self. In this latter context, in which the “soul” is described as *using* the body, like the ghost in the machine (as contrasted with the person using whatever bit of itself is required – its mind to think, its eyes to see, its hand to work), Foucault says the argument is misleading, but that no contradiction appears to prevent the transcendent soul residing in the body from taking the temporal form of immanent, and as such, embodied, subject. On this reading, Plato’s soul-substance, which – as “the self one must take care of” – is *also* an embodied soul-subject, is thus very different from its genealogical descendent in the disembodied Christian soul-substance. (Clearly the Christian concept of “soul” also has other antecedents in Judaic, Roman and other historical lineages, besides the Platonic). Foucault’s interest in Plato here is however restricted to gaining a fairly superficial understanding of how such a major piece as Plato’s “soul” fits into the genealogical puzzle of human subjectivity. He dedicated relatively little time to this, given his antipathy toward the metaphysics; and he quickly moved on to what was of much greater interest to him in this respect, that is, to the Greco-Roman descent from these concepts, and the treatment the soul-subject, now recognised as such, received at the hands of the Hellenistic philosophers.

2. Cognitive passions

In alignment with their unitary view of body and soul, the Hellenistic philosophers held a similar view of emotion (or the passions, often synonymous in the literature³²) and reason. They were physicalists in that they had no concept of “the person” as detached from the body, or of the passions as driving, bodily forces that it was the place of reason (as an autonomous counter-force) to curb; the struggle with the passions was internal, not external to reason. From the moment of inception of any particular passion (as a reaction of the soul to an external event), and through all the stages of its development, bodily sensation and mental representation are interwoven in each one, and shape each other reciprocally. Marcus Aurelius describes the process thus:

This is how the passions are born, develop, and become excessive. First of all, there is an involuntary movement; a kind of preparation for and threat of passion. Then there is a second one, accompanied by a desire which we are still able to reject: to wit, the idea that ‘I have to get even because someone has done me wrong...’ Finally there is a third movement which can no longer be mastered [...] we must have revenge at all costs. The first shock to the soul cannot be avoided with the help of reason, any more than other reflex movements which happen to the body, such as yawning [...] reason cannot vanquish them, but perhaps habit and constant attention may attenuate them. The second movement, which arises from a judgement, can be suppressed by a judgement. (*Meditations*, IV, 43, in *IC*, p.117)

Note here that what will become a passion, if unattended to, begins with a shock to the *soul*, which is felt in the *body* as an involuntary movement: no separation. And whilst reason is powerless against the inevitable shocks that immersion in life provokes, from that moment on, reason is engaged in the formulation – and adjustment and reformulation – of desire; empowering, or disempowering, the passions. Nussbaum notes that already in Aristotle emotions are seen as having “a rich cognitive structure [...] they are not mindless surges of affect”. She explains that for Aristotle it is, for example, not possible to “describe the pain that is peculiar to fear, or say how fear differs from grief or pity, without saying that it is pain *at the thought of* a certain sort of future event that is believed to be impending.” And she goes on: “But if the beliefs are an essential part of the definition of the emotion, then we have to say that their role is not merely that of external necessary condition. They must be seen as *constituent parts* of the emotion itself.” (TD, 88, emphasis in original). In the cases of fear and anger, and also in the case of erotic desire, the

³² The term “emotion”, in its modern sense was not in use in Ancient Greece, therefore one finds the term generally translated as “passion” used for emotions that are relatively mild compared to those indicated in contemporary usage. Given that today the more generic term is “emotion,” of which “passion” refers to the subset of stronger emotions, I will follow Nussbaum’s practice of using whichever seems more appropriate.

thoughts formulated with respect to the object of desire or aversion were held to take precedence over the corresponding bodily sensations in determining one's desires and impulses to action. After spending several years exploring the lugubrious genealogies of 'the flesh', the encounter with this linking of desire to the imagination and to reflection, this precedence of the notion of 'pleasure' over blind bodily urges, must have been a pleasure in itself to Foucault. And, running counter, as it does, to the biologisation of desire in our contemporary world, and along with it the biologisation of human subjectivity; as a piece of conceptual material that could possibly be reworked outside of its original metaphysic, it would seem to have liberating potential. At this stage, however, what was needed for Foucault was to investigate its ancient genealogy.

Martha Nussbaum, in appreciating the ground-breaking work done by Foucault³³ in presenting philosophy (Hellenistic, but not only³⁴) as "a set of *techniques du soi*, practices for the formation of a certain sort of self... [and as engaged in] complex practices of self-shaping" (TD, 5); suggests that he underplays the fact that "what is distinctive about the contribution of the 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." Here she is using the definition of "philosophy" as what Hadot calls "philosophical discourse", that is, for Hadot and Foucault, as the *central* area of philosophy, but still one of a series of practices which he calls "spiritual exercises", and Foucault calls "techniques of the self". Nonetheless the remark is surprising, given Foucault's intellectual preferences and immense work on, and dedication to, philosophical discourse itself. One shared interest of these two very different philosophers however, is the notion of philosophy as therapy, though here inevitably their divergence in focus increased. In the opening sentence of her book, *The Therapy of Desire*, Nussbaum cites Epicurus, thus: "Epicurus wrote, 'Empty is that philosopher's argument by which no human suffering is therapeutically treated. For just as there is no use in a medical art that does not cast out the sicknesses of the bodies, so too there is no use in a philosophy, unless it casts out the suffering of the soul' Epicurus, *Us.221*" (Ibid., 13) She takes this concern with healing human suffering, expressed here by Epicurus but a common theme in Greek and Roman philosophy, as evidence of the emotion of compassion, which, she notes, seems paradoxical, given that: "These philosophers do not simply analyze the emotions, they also urge, for the most part, their removal from human life." (p.41) In

³³ From a different perspective to that of Hadot, with whom he maintained some dialogue.

³⁴ See Nussbaum, (TD, 49), "From Homer on we encounter, frequently and prominently, the idea that *logos* is to illnesses of the soul as medical treatment is to illnesses of the body."

this regard, the question that she poses for herself, “of considerable philosophical interest, [is] to understand on what grounds compassionate philosophers, committed to the amelioration of human life, [...] judge that the emotions should be removed from [it].” (Ibid.)

Foucault’s question was a different one. He was interested in Hellenistic philosophy as a form of subjectivation, and not so interested in this contradiction, noted here by Nussbaum, between the theoretical rejection of all emotion, and the fact that in reality, both Stoics and Epicureans cultivated compassionate behaviour, concerned as they were to console the grieving and to heal their own and others’ sufferings; and, in effect, also to teach what could be describes as compassionate practice. And yet, in a study of the forms of subjectivation intrinsic to Hellenistic philosophy, to Hellenistic work on the self, this does seem to be a strange oversight on Foucault’s part. Clearly there are significant problems here of the way in which the relevant concepts function within differing philosophical systems. Hadot points out that “it is not the case that the Stoic finds his joy in his ‘self’ [arguing against Foucault]; rather as Seneca says [in Letter 23], he finds it ‘in the best portion of the self,’ in ‘the true good.’” (PWL, 207) Clearly “joy”, so central an objective of Stoic practice, is for us today an “emotion”, though we would not describe it as a “passion”, the two terms being distinguished in modernity by the degree of calm or agitation manifested by the feeling. Similarly “the true good” is an attitude of concern for humanity which was a major *reason* for Stoic practice, but can it therefore be described as a *motivation*? “Reasons for” and “motivations” are in some language games interchangeable, in others (dualist systems) decidedly not so, because the change of concept involves crossing the (theoretically constructed) border between thought and emotion. If “the good” translates as “concern” for humanity, then in some language games, such as the one Nussbaum is using here, it translates also as “compassion”; in others it does not. This vast question can only be briefly noted here, in order to clarify this aspect of Foucault’s focus on Hellenistic philosophy, that is, the question of which concepts and practices that interested him, and which did not. What Foucault underplays is not, as Nussbaum suggests, the importance of argument and the search for truth in the *philosophical* art of life, but rather the way in which this philosophical art of life centred on a form of self-reading that in fact paid great attention to the emotions. Whether the purpose was to eradicate or transform them, the essential step in Hellenistic philosophy was to understand the emotions as a complex construct of ideas, desires and aversions, requiring investigation.

Foucault instead tends to take the ancients at their word (their many words, it is true) with regard to their objective of extirpating the passions, rather than looking at the actual techniques of self-transformation that they employed, many of which were in fact more concerned – as Hadot (who

did look at them), has amply demonstrated in his writings – with modifying, reshaping, the emotions, than with eradicating them. His disinterest in the introspection that such practice inevitably involves goes beyond a mere question of choice of philosophical argument however; it is a selecting *out* of material that is designed to reinforce an “intellectualist” reading of Hellenistic philosophical practice (in line with the prevailing view), but one that does not take into account the extent to which Stoic “intellect” contained features that today would be categorised as “psychological”. For the same reason, perhaps, Foucault has in effect selected out the Epicureans³⁵, as Nussbaum rightly notes, with their much more overtly “psychological” language and practice, from his study of the hermeneutics of the ancient subject. This may have to do with the lack, in Foucault’s own thinking, of a developed concept of a form of introspection that is *not* necessarily linked to guilt, either by conceptual affinity or in self-shaping practice. When he encounters such a concept, it does not escape his notice or his listings, but his sojourn in its company tends to be brief. (HS, 390-91)

3. Appetites and instincts

To return from the psychological to the biological, or from the passions to the appetites, so to say, it is this concept, that of “appetite” (*epithumie*) that the Greeks tend to use if they wish to refer to the more strictly physiological aspects of desire. Nonetheless desire is not biologised by this choice of word. As Nussbaum again points out, even “the bodily appetites – hunger, thirst, sexual desire – are seen by Aristotle [and Greek philosophers generally] as forms of intentional awareness, containing a view of their object.... Appetite is one form of *orexis* [desire], a ‘reaching out for’ an object,” (TD, 81) that is to say, appetite is merely a subclass of desire, and *not* the other way round. The driving force of animal need was seen by the Stoics (if not Epicureans) as merely that material on which the human imagination, and human reason, operate; not as a primary active force in itself.

³⁵ Of the 35 references, and 3 footnotes to Epicureans in *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 3 serve to contrast, briefly, Epicurean friendship with that (more thoroughly explored) of the Stoics, 6 contain comparative references to notions of knowledge, and 5 are to do with the pedagogic organization of the schools and the master-pupil relationship, partly in connection with Philodemus, the one Epicurean Foucault is interested in because of his work on *parrhesia*. It is not insignificant that *parrhesia*, as a notion, of frankness and truthful speaking, is concerned with one’s behaviour, not with introspection; though it depends on first finding truth in oneself. In the great majority of the remaining references, the Epicureans figure only in lists including the Stoics, mostly, and sometimes also Cynics and Sceptics. In other words, Foucault’s references to the Epicureans are all marginal with respect to the central argument of this course, the hermeneutics of the subject. Noteworthy by his complete absence from the text is Lucretius, the Epicurean whose records of his “relation to self” are so extensive and profound.

Foucault seems therefore to be on solid ground when he uses “appetite” and “desire” as synonyms in writing about certain Greek conceptions of desire and pleasure. Thus: “the appetite, Plato explains in the *Philebus*, can be aroused only by the representation, the image or the memory of the thing that gives pleasure; he concludes that there can be no desire, except in the soul, for while the body is affected by privation, it is the soul and only the soul that can, through memory, make present the thing that is to be desired and thereby arouse the *epithumia*.” (UP, 43) Or, as T.S.Eliot describes it, providing an example of the stirring that words, like the dangerous words of poetry, can provoke in us: “Mixing memory with desire, stirring dull roots with spring rain”³⁶.

The non-biological conception of desire had a very long, if varied, reign in philosophical thinking on the question, and before returning to Foucault’s encounter with the Greeks (in the following section), it will be necessary to recall another important part of his work, in which he traces the more recent genealogy of certain key conceptual shifts that have contributed to the contemporary biologisation of the passions, and therefore of the self. Perhaps the most paradoxical of all conceptions of desire, along the sliding scale of its collocations in the body or the mind, is the Christian conception that actually manages to locate desire within a “body” that is only quite incidentally material, for this Christian “body” is infused with non-material principles – “original sin”, “evil”, and even “Satan”. Conversely, the most extreme “bodily” conception, for which the body is genuinely held to be more matter than spirit, is that of much contemporary psychology, which sees desire as largely instinctual (and in some cases, as primarily neurological or even biochemical). Foucault, through his investigations of some of the genealogical developments that are antecedent to this biologised notion of the human, has demonstrated the force of this conception within the modern episteme, in the prevailing contemporary objectification of desire; and as a consequence, of the way in which this conception constitutes an important building block in the predominant mode of subjection in contemporary Western society.

It will therefore be useful here to look at one particular aspect of Foucault’s work, that on the emergence of a “scientific” concept of “instinct”, at “the point at which instinct enters the great taxonomic architecture of psychiatry at the beginning of the nineteenth century” (A, 139). Useful in that through it one may gain a greater understanding of our own contemporary self-readings, and also of Foucault’s extraordinary capacity to distance himself from concepts that are constitutive of his own epistemic formation, situate them in the networks in which they are or were operative, and clarify the particular force that the internalisation of such concepts entails for the

³⁶ T.S.Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909-1962*, Faber & Faber, London, 1989, ‘The Waste Land’, p.61

subject. “Instinct,” in contemporary usage, shares with the Greek use of “appetite,” (and with Blake’s use of “energy”), the connotation of some kind of moving force that is natural to our animal being, though, given that such words tend to be not merely descriptive, but also evaluative, “instinct” has much more power than the weaker “appetite,” and is made of darker, more problematic stuff, than the life-affirming vibrations of Blake’s energy. In its earlier history, however, the word did not have the deep-rooted zoological-physiological connotation it has since acquired.

Foucault has analysed part of the process by which it took on this connotation, appearing as a new objectification of what it is to be human. The role that this objectification of “instinct” then played in nineteenth-century modes of subjection, however, was not his primary concern at the time of his 1975 Course on *Les Anormaux*, at the Collège de France. Nonetheless, the role of this new objectification in contributing to the development of these new modes of subjection becomes apparent here. His focus in the 1975 course was on the key role that the concept played in the knowledge-power games developing, especially in France, at that time. Foucault examined the way particular concepts, such as “instinct”, emerged (as transformations of earlier usage) and were reinforced in the interaction of psychiatry, jurisprudence and penal practice. He also looks at how, in a cyclic process, the concepts strengthened the institutions making use of use them, and the institutions strengthened and further developed the concepts. Thus he asks: “What is this instinct?”, and answers:

It is an element that can function on two levels, or, if you like, it is a kind of cog that enables two mechanisms to mesh: the penal mechanism and the psychiatric mechanism. More precisely it enables the power mechanism – the penal system with its need for knowledge – to engage with the knowledge mechanism - psychiatry with its need for power. [...] In fact, the notion of instinct enables the legal scandal of a crime without interest or motive, and consequently an unpunishable crime, to be reduced to intelligible terms. Then, from a different angle, it makes possible the scientific transformation of the absence of a motive for an act into a positive pathological mechanism. This, I believe, is the role of instinct as an element in the game of knowledge-power.(A, 138)

In the preceding period, from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries in Foucault’s reconstruction, heinous crime was seen as ‘monstrous’ indicating that the perpetrator is an aberrant, not a “normal” human being. Through this objectification of the ‘monstrous’ self, the criminal was to read herself, or himself, as essentially non-human or only quasi-human, and therefore not entitled to be treated as a human being. The others, as “normal”, could derive satisfaction from the relative superiority this difference accorded them; a phenomenon that has by no means disappeared from contemporary ethical configurations. The element that has changed is that formerly monstrous

behaviour was considered to be indicative of the “delirium” that was the proof of madness, construed as a mental, not a physical, imbalance, and this entailed “interdiction” the loss of all citizen’s rights, and hence *unlimited* punishability. At the beginning of this early modern period, still in the juridical reign of the principle: “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,” the atrocity of the crime had to be matched at least, as symbol of retribution and in practice, by the atrocity of the punishment. The Age of Enlightenment, however, put public torture, as a barbaric accoutrement of *ancien regime*, behind it; in favour of a generalised “humane” practice of confinement of criminals and the mad, in prisons or other institutions. This re-humanized to some extent the objectifications of the “deviant” self, thus modifying the possible associated forms of subjectivation. The decision as to which institution was appropriate, however, depended on the madness or sanity (responsibility) of the individual in question. Foucault has discussed this history extensively elsewhere.³⁷

In *Abnormal*, Foucault analyses the perplexity produced by several legal cases where the perpetrator had no apparent motive for her (or his) crime, but at the same time demonstrated no forms of “delirious” behaviour other than the crime (unwitnessed) itself. In one case, of 1826, the defence lawyer calls in a doctor who “refers to an ‘irresistible direction,’ an irresistible affection,’ an ‘almost irresistible desire,’ and an ‘atrocious tendency *about whose origin we can say nothing.*’ (my emphasis) [...] The lawyer, Fournier, speaks of [...] ‘the influence of a violent passion’”, etc. Foucault comments here, with extraordinary perspicacity, that:

You can see that all these names, terms, and adjectives, et cetera, designating this dynamic of the irresistible, revolve around something named elsewhere in the text: instinct. Fournier speaks of a ‘barbarous instinct’, and Marc [the doctor] speaks of an ‘instinctive act’ or even of an ‘instinctive propensity.’ It is named in the defence plea and it is named in the consultation, but I would say that it is not conceptualized. It is not yet conceptualized and it cannot and could not be conceptualized because there is nothing in the rules of formation of psychiatric discourse of the time that allows this absolutely new object to be named. As long as madness was conceived in terms of error, illusion, delirium, and nonobedience to truth – as it still was at the beginning of the nineteenth century – then there was no place within psychiatric discourse for instinct as a brute, dynamic element. It could be named, but it was neither constructed nor conceptualized. (A, 129-130)

As Dr. Marc had put it, these phenomena had an origin about which they could say nothing. The term “instinct” had hitherto tended to denote a mental characteristic (of “unaccountable” origin) rather than “the brute, dynamic element” beginning to be connoted here. In the previous century, writing of the “*direct* passions of desire and aversion, grief and joy, hope and fear” (*Treatise of Human Nature*, 1739), the philosopher David Hume states that “The mind by an *original* instinct tends to unite itself with the good, and to avoid the evil, though they be conceiv’d merely in

³⁷ See for example: Foucault: *Discipline and Punish*, and *Psychiatric Power*.

idea”³⁸; and further: “Beside good and evil, [...] the direct passions frequently arise from a natural impulse or instinct, which is perfectly unaccountable.”³⁹ Instinct (or natural impulse), therefore, was of the mind, though it was both “original and unaccountable”; and this in the words of Hume, who was, among Enlightenment philosophers, the one who was most concerned, against both “rationalist” and religious conceptualisations, to see virtue and vice as rooted in our natural, animal being. At that time, as he wrote: “No distinction is more usual in all systems of ethics, than that betwixt *natural abilities* and *moral virtues*; where the former are placed on the same footing with bodily endowments, and are supposed to have no merits or moral worth attached to them”; (emphases in original) a position that he hotly contested, arguing that they “are both of them equally mental qualities”⁴⁰.

Foucault’s genealogical analysis of ‘instinct’ proceeds thus:

I think that there is the sudden emergence here of an object, or rather of a whole domain of new objects, of a whole series of elements that will be named, described, analyzed, and, bit by bit, integrated, or rather developed, within nineteenth century psychiatric discourse. These objects or elements are impulses, drives, tendencies, inclinations and automatisms. In short they are all those notions and elements that, in contrast with the passions of the Classical Age, are not governed by *a prior representation* but rather by a specific dynamic in relation to which representations, passions and affects have secondary, derivative, or subordinate status. (A, 131, my emphasis)

In other words, Plato’s notion, cited above, of the *primacy* of representation or mental image in the arousal of desire is here reversed, its place taken by bodily drives. What may seem hard to believe, looking back from the perspective of our contemporary episteme, is that this overthrow, by now so total, was taking place less than two centuries ago. Foucault has here identified some of the significant conceptual shifts in the process. One immediate implication of this redescription of instinct as a bodily force was that aberrant behaviour deemed to result from instinct was thus pathologised. Madness, that had been construed as a disorder “at the level of consciousness or grasp of truth” (A, 157) was hereafter gradually transmuted into mental illness, but this, like all ‘illness’, implied physiological origination. At this juncture, a person “who is mad, is someone in whom the demarcation, interplay, or hierarchy of the voluntary and the involuntary is disturbed”. This is a phenomenon that may be invisible in most circumstances, and may wear a mask of benign normality, thus making the old question about cool-headed madness irrelevant: “How can we speak of madness when we can find no trace of delirium?” (A, 157)

³⁸ Hume, David, *Treatise of Human Nature*, Prometheus Books, N.Y. 1992, p.438, (emphases in original).

³⁹ Ibid. p.439

⁴⁰ Ibid. p. 606

Foucault goes on: “You can see that everything is now reversed. It is no longer necessary to find a little element of delirium beneath the instinctive so that it can be inscribed within madness. Rather, behind any delirium we must discover the little disturbance of the voluntary and the involuntary that makes the formation of delirium understandable.” (A, 158) This dethronement of delirium as the hallmark of madness, and its replacement by behaviour that was disturbed in some possibly minor way, represented an enormous conceptual leap, and one which made the fortune of psychiatry, in more senses than one.

With delirium now dethroned, the next step in this genealogical process of concept mutation is a smaller one – not a reversal, rather a logical extension, but again one with vast consequences. For if a disturbance at the instinctive level underpins madness, and this can be identified through the study of behaviour, then all behaviour must now be studied, in order to determine what is “normal” and what is “abnormal”, or deviant. The field for psychiatry opens up to incorporate all forms of conduct, to determine what is symptomatic of disturbance, and what not, and psychiatry becomes, (and has largely remained), from around the 1850s according to Foucault, the arbiter of what conduct constitutes “mental health, and what constitutes “mental illness”. “Any kind of disorder, indiscipline, agitation, disobedience, recalcitrance, lack of affection, and so forth can now be psychiatrized.” (A, 161) In determining what constitutes “normal” behaviour, the *descriptive* function of the scientific discourse of psychiatry slides easily into a *normative* function that goes beyond its original collocation as partner to criminal law. The normalizing force of these psychiatric objectifications is obviously extensive. Many an individual, in many a social context experienced as in some way oppressive, would want to assert their own individuality by being simply, gloriously and healthily bad, without thus being labelled as “disturbed.” And so many have come to define themselves as “rebels,” or aesthetes, or outsiders, or whatever, as a result of choosing for themselves a form of subjectivation that is not based on the internalisation of the norms laid down by psychiatry, making of this resistance a true exercise in subjectivity. This clearly requires no awareness of the tiny part played by a conceptual shift in the meaning of “instinct,” and the contribution of this to the biologized objectification of the human being within the contemporary episteme. And yet it is Foucault’s revelation of these tiny parts, conceptual shifts on certain key words, that allows for an understanding of the inner mechanisms of epistemic change, and the consequences of these for our possible subjectivities. “Little crimes [...] and little mental illnesses; tiny delinquencies and almost imperceptible abnormalities of behaviour essentially constitute the organizational and fundamental field of psychiatry.” Or, in Foucault’s

brilliant metaphor: “The great ogre [of madness...] has become little Tom Thumb, the crowd of little abnormal Tom Thumbs...” (A, 163).

There follow several decades of consolidation during which “normal” and “abnormal” behaviours continue to be classified as substantively different; but inevitably, as the number of borderline cases grows, and with them the grey areas of categorisation, the whole bipolar structure begins to come apart at the seams, opening up the space for new theories that place human behaviours on some kind of continuum of healthy and sick, full of variables, exceptions, and surprises. And into that space sailed Freud, but coming from a different discursive development. Because, running parallel (historically) to these disciplinary and institutional reformulations that meet in the concept of ‘instinct’, were the developments in the domain of what Foucault has called the “hermeneutics of desire”, explored, as we have seen, in his *History of Sexuality*. Freud was the key player in the turn of the century game of knowledge-power in this field, but even before this, in the late eighteenth century, as Foucault writes: “The problem now is how this technology of abnormality encountered other processes of normalization that were not concerned with crime, criminality, or monstrosity, but with something quite different: everyday sexuality.” (A, 163)

Before consolidating itself in the field of medicine, Foucault says that psychiatry was initially concerned with “public hygiene” or the security of the community with regard to dangerous, or “potentially” dangerous individuals within it, and it has never lost this role.⁴¹ But subsequently, its remit was extended to include the analysis of normal as well as abnormal behaviours in different domains of life; and in the course of these studies the whole sector of what is “reproductive behaviour” from the standpoint of “public hygiene”, but is “sexuality” from a psychological and individual perspective, was delineated. This meant, as Foucault writes, that: “Sexual abnormality initially appears as a series of particular cases of abnormality.” However, he goes on, as the volume of case histories grew exponentially: “soon after, around 1880-1890, it emerges as the root, foundation, and etiological principle of most other forms of abnormality.” (A, 168). Foucault has shown that the contemporary form of the hermeneutics of desire, for which our “sexuality” marks our biological determination, but is at the same time still largely infused with the guilt associated with the earlier, metaphysical Christian concept of the “flesh,” leads to a hermeneutics of ourselves that leaves many people today with little chance of reading themselves as “normal,” healthy subjects of their own lives. In the coming together of this genealogy with those underlying

⁴¹ Further explored by Foucault in *Security, Territory, Population*.

the exterior, public domain of psychiatry and law, we all risk coming to see ourselves as, and therefore becoming, that crowd of little abnormal Tom Thumbs.

4. Desires and pleasures

“When St. Augustine in his *Confessions* recalls the friendships of his youth, the intensity of his affections, the pleasures of the days spent together, the conversations, the enthusiasms and good times, he wonders if, underneath its seeming innocence, all that did not pertain to the flesh, to that ‘glue’ which attaches us to the flesh.” (UP, 40)

With this comment, Foucault illustrates for us the most bone-chilling aspect of Christian austerity, whereby all human pleasures, without exception, are morally suspect. Augustine is of course not alone in thinking that while there are marked differences of quality and intensity, there are no clear borderlines between different forms of emotional experience, from an enthusiastic conversation to companionship, to sex, (and to spiritual ecstasy one might add, against Augustine). Philosophers, scientists and ordinary human beings can experience great difficulty in categorising intense forms of human experience as specifically physical, emotional, mental, or spiritual; and such experiences often serve as metaphors for each other – sexual orgasm (with a partner, in total attunement) is described as a sense of fusion, not just with the partner, but with the universe; and listening to the music of one’s most beloved composer, for example, is described as orgasmic. The question, however, the moral and philosophical question, is what value is placed on this multiform continuity of experience. A life-affirming one, as in the case of the Romantics, for example, and in very different ways of some Greek philosophers; or Augustine’s own, underpinned as it is by a total suspicion of the ubiquity of sin, and marked by his deliberately distasteful metaphor of the “glue” that attaches us to “flesh”.⁴² And the second question is how and where and why to draw dividing lines.

The Greeks and Romans, in recognizing the lack of definable borders between one form of pleasure, one expression of desire, and another, were concerned, precisely for this reason, to establish conventional borders, through philosophical reflection on the different forms that desire may take; both when, like Aristotle, they were concerned to validate certain forms of emotion and condemn others, and when, like the Stoics, they were committed to extirpating all passions. It was

⁴² (A metaphor that Sartre used for the *en-soi*, as Murdoch notes.) See § PT. II, Ch.2, 3. Existentialism.

of course conceptualised very differently by the Epicureans, but Foucault does not discuss this and their conceptions will not be discussed here. In general, pleasure, as opposed to desire, was seen as a relatively simple, dependent phenomenon, in that anything could be determined as pleasurable; what is determined as pleasurable depends on the representation that we make of it. And it is here, at the point of formulation of representations, that ethical reflection is necessary. For this reason Aristotle, Foucault tells us, in both the *Nichomachean Ethics* and in the *Eudemian Ethics*, draws a distinction between different types of “pleasures”: “It is not self-indulgent [*akolasia*] to ‘delight in’ (*charein*) colors, shapes, or paintings, nor in theatre or music; one can, without self-indulgence, delight in the scent of fruit, roses, or incense [...] For there is pleasure that is liable to *akolasia* only where there is touch and contact”.(UP, 40) In other words, the pleasures that are morally suspect are, inevitably, as they correspond to “the three basic appetites” of Plato’s *Laws* (UP, 49), those of food, drink and sex.⁴³ Aristotle makes a point, however, as Foucault tells us, of excluding the “noble” pleasures of massage and heat in the gymnasium from any taint of self-indulgence! This indulgence, or *akolasia*, is the extreme, and therefore negative, form of the *aphrodisia*⁴⁴, but in Greek thinking the existence of extreme forms is not sufficient to taint *all* forms of pleasure in relationship, sexual or otherwise; just as the existence of gluttony does not taint pleasure in wholesome food taken in moderation. On the contrary, finding pleasure in beauty, in harmony, in the gifts of nature is, certainly for Aristotle, one of the guiding principles of a life worth living.⁴⁵ Nonetheless, for Aristotle too recognition of the ease with which one crosses the undefined borders between “noble” pleasure, and ignoble self-indulgence meant that great attention to oneself was required, so that one could catch oneself at the crucial moment, as it were, in order not to be blown off one’s rationally chosen path to happiness. As a technique of the self, however, it appears in Aristotle only in this relatively rudimentary form of “wariness,” and not in the much more developed form of constant attention to the self – necessary to the conscious direction of one’s own actions, one’s life – that it will later come to take in Hellenistic philosophy. Foucault

⁴³ Foucault does not distinguish between Plato’s varying conceptions of “pleasure”, the “pure pleasures” of the *Philebus*, the strictures from the *Gorgias*, etc.

⁴⁴ “The *Suda* gives a definition of *aphrodisia* that will be repeated by Heyschius: *Aphrodisia* are ‘the works, the acts of Aphrodite’ ”, (cited in UP, 38); (a fickle goddess who liked to party, not a thundering God, though Foucault does not comment on this.) That is: “the acts, gestures, and contacts that produce a certain form of pleasure.” (UP, 40). Following the Greek practice of not rigorously defining the *aphrodisia*, Foucault uses it to refer to sexual acts and gestures in this loose way.

⁴⁵ Aristotle’s notion of the noblest pleasures (in connection with the theoretical life, as in Bk.X, *Nichomachean Ethics*), was not seen as relevant by Foucault in his explorations in *The Uses of Pleasure*, which had to do with sex and subjectivity; nor does it figure in *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*. However, Aristotle’s pragmatism on the question of more physical pleasures is evident in the remarks quoted by Foucault here.

describes what amounts to an application of this guiding principle of attention to the experience of pleasure, but does so by invoking another basic principle, that of ‘moderation.’ Thus:

To be sure, in the teaching and the exercise of moderation, it is recommended to be wary of sounds, images, and scents; but this is not because attachment to them would be only the masked form of a desire whose essence is sexual: it is because there are musical forms capable of weakening the soul with their rhythms, and because there are sights capable of affecting the soul like a venom, and because a particular scent, a particular image, is apt to call up “the memory of the thing desired” (Aristotle *NE* 1118a, cited UP, 41).

In other words, desire is of the imagination, whether it be of music or of love (as anger too is of the poisoned imagination). But desire in this conception (and others) is a much more complex phenomenon than pleasure. As we have seen, it is a reaching out (*orexis*) to pleasure, and it is the imagination that selects the particular pleasure, but at the same time, this reaching out always depends upon a lack. “It is true” Foucault says, “– Plato always comes back to the idea – that for the Greeks there could be no desire without privation, without the want of the thing desired and without a certain amount of suffering mixed in” (UP, 43). And it was nature that, on this view, produced desire as a means of satisfying the basic needs of hunger, thirst and reproduction, all three of which “are strong, imperative and intense, but the third one in particular, although ‘the latest to emerge’ is ‘the keenest lust’ [Plato, *Laws*, VI,783a-b]. Socrates asks his interlocutor in the *Republic* whether he knows of ‘a greater and sharper pleasure than the sexual.’ ”(UP, 49) (The reply is: “No, nor a madder” [*Republic* III, 403a].) The intensity of this pleasure was also nature’s work: “Nature intended ... that the performance of the [sexual] act be associated with a pleasure, and it was this pleasure that gave rise to *epithumia*, to desire”⁴⁶ (UP, 43). The vital force of all passion is thus a bodily force, but never such that it is distinct or distinguishable from the mental faculties that shape it. On the contrary, “the desire that leads to the act, the act that is linked to pleasure, and the pleasure that occasions desire” are linked in what Foucault calls “the dynamics that joined all three in a circular fashion.” (Ibid.) But in this circularity, the *ethical* point of entry is that of the imagination. It is the image, or representation, that we construct, that determines what is or is not a pleasure, what is or is not desirable.

It is not difficult to see, therefore, why Foucault concludes from the above references that: “The attraction exerted by pleasure and the force of the desire that was directed toward it constituted, together with the action of the *aphrodisia* itself, a solid unity.” (UP, 42) It is less easy to see, however, why, in contrasting this unity with the Christian conception of desire and pleasure epitomized by Augustine, he goes on to say:

⁴⁶ Foucault tends to use *epithumia* for “desire” rather than “appetite”.

The dissociation – or partial dissociation at least – of this ensemble would later become one of the basic features of the ethics of the flesh and the notion of sexuality. This dissociation was to be marked, on the one hand, by a certain ‘elision’ of pleasure (a moral devaluation through the injunction given in the preaching by the Christian clergy against the pursuit of sensual pleasure as a goal of sexual practice; a theoretical devaluation by the extreme difficulty of finding a place for pleasure in the conception of sexuality); it would also be marked by an increasingly intense problematization of desire (in which the primordial sign of a fallen nature or the structure characteristic of the human condition would be visible). (UP, 42)

This “intense problematization of desire” – as the damnation built into human nature and its elaboration in confessional practice – he has exhaustively demonstrated, both here and elsewhere; but the dissociation theorized here with regard to the “ethics of the flesh”, (as well as the later concept of “sexuality”) is directly contradicted by his own citation of Augustine’s *linking* his ‘innocent’ pleasures to ‘the flesh’, to sexual desire. This would seem to suggest, conversely, a Christian concept of the *unity* of pleasure and desire – in sin – or nature cursed by God, set against the Greek unity of pleasure and desire – in the immanence of nature, or in nature that is blessed as god-given. It would seem then that the moral devaluation of pleasure of which he speaks is due precisely to its *association* with sexual desire, rather than to any theoretical dissociation; and that rather than the “extreme difficulty of finding a place for pleasure in the conception of sexuality”, no such attempt was either made, or considered at all necessary, by earlier forms of Christianity. In the more recent history of Christianity, rebellion from the ranks (and evident counter-conduct), affected by liberal notions in general (and therefore other lines of genealogical development), in particular those relating to the pursuit of pleasure as an inalienable *right*, has forced the Catholic Church to confront the question of *possibly* acceptable sexual pleasures.⁴⁷ This has produced some very odd discourses, tied up in Jesuitical knots that the faithful can generally make neither head nor tail of, and therefore (apart from a slogan-wielding, chaste minority) largely ignore⁴⁸.

While Foucault was investigating the past *History of Sexuality*, and writing his three books on it, he was also imagining possible *future* histories of sexuality (or perhaps of post-“sexuality”), that would be lived through the different conceptualisations still in the process of formulation. New concepts were emerging as they will, and as he has shown that they will, from forms of counter-conduct being elaborated on the fringes of society. In the interviews in which he discusses this (which is virtually all we have), he introduces a new conceptual distinction of desire and pleasure,

⁴⁷ Indulgence in the taking of food was a pleasure the Church seems to have quietly given up on long ago, as less problematic.

⁴⁸ Italy, the country with (along with Ireland) the highest per capita Catholic population, has the world’s lowest birth-rate. The Church chooses not to comment on the implications of this in terms of “sinful” contraception.

which will be discussed later, which may have to do with the ambivalence of the theoretical dissociation introduced here. Already, however, his analysis of the hermeneutics of desire, under process of elaboration in these books, had set out to trace the shifting locus of subjectivity as it moved away from the mental/spiritual plane, where it had hitherto been exclusively collocated, at least until the seventeenth century, towards the material/biological plane where it is now widely collocated by science, and is, as such, reduced to a shadow of its former robust self. Philosophy and science, bedfellows for the Greeks and for many centuries, have steadily diverged since the 16th Century, as the quantity of scientific discourse has multiplied exponentially, and the quantity of philosophical discourse has diminished relative to the games of knowledge and power. Since Foucault's primary concern was to study those discourses wielding greater epistemic, institutional and formative power, this meant for him philosophy and religion up to the 18th Century, and starting in the 16th Century, science, in which the ghosts of religious discourse could often still be identified.

Foucault has amply demonstrated the significant role of the Catholic confessional in problematizing desire and making it central to introspective practice; he has not, however, demonstrated the dissociation of pleasure and desire that he hypothesizes here. Rather than dissociation, what his work does reveal in the different epochs is a significant difference of emphasis on the two parts of the coupled concepts of pleasure and desire. Put in his terms, it could be said that the Greek texts problematize *both* the pleasures and the desires of which they are the objects: Aristotle is concerned to clarify which pleasures are acceptable and which are not, Epictetus and the Roman Stoics are concerned with the modes of representation of pleasures, and so on; but, as Foucault himself says, always in the context of an assumed unity of desire and pleasure. As noted however, the most extensive ancient (and ethical but non-condemnatory) phenomenology of pleasure, that of Epicurus, he did not deal with. Conversely, the Christian texts express less interest in the pleasures themselves (other than to formulate a related hierarchy of damnability), and focus almost entirely, and obsessively, on the *problem* of desire. It is not that their *definitions* of the (inseparable) relation between pleasure and desire differ; it is that the problematization differs radically, in the fullest ontological sense given it by Foucault. That is to say: "the *problematizations* through which being offers itself to be, necessarily, thought – and the *practices* on the basis of which these problematizations are formed." (UP, 11, emphases in

original.) (The allusion here is to the fact that he considered both the ancient and the modern *hermeneutics of desire* to be central in different ways to the *hermeneutics of the subject*.⁴⁹)

Following Augustine, the founding father of this Christian genealogical line, Foucault uses “the flesh” to denote the Christian conception which problematizes the human body as inhabited by an evil force in conflict with “spirit” or “soul”, and he appropriates (usefully) the term *aphrodisia* to encapsulate the triad of desire, pleasure and sexual acts which form the Greek conception. Though he admits the considerable variations on the theme in different schools and epochs of ancient thought, and studies the changes in some of them, he says that in all cases the *aphrodisia* as such were not seen as the key “problem” in antiquity, they were part of nature, and he cites, among others, Rufus of Ephesus’ on this: “seeing that sexual activity was deeply and harmoniously grounded in nature, there was no way that it could be considered bad.” (UP, 48)⁵⁰ There was nothing, Foucault writes, “resembling the concern – which was so characteristic of the question of flesh or sexuality – for discovering the insidious presence of a power of undetermined limits and multiple masks beneath what appeared offensive or innocent. Neither classification nor decipherment.” (UP, 38)

On the contrary, though moderation was applauded in both traditions, given the danger intrinsic to all pleasure for the Christian tradition, moderation itself often appears therein as merely a grudging concession to the necessities of this tiresome body that one would rather do without, or as a sort of weak form of an ideal and absolute renunciation. For the Greeks on the other hand, moderation was a positive thing, and on occasion it could also be seen as an instrument for the *increase* of pleasure. The necessary relationship between bodily needs, desire and pleasure was thus pragmatically exploited: “Everyone knew” Foucault writes, “that pleasure was dulled if it offered no satisfaction to the keenness of a desire: ‘To my friends, meat and drink bring sweet and simple enjoyment [...]’, says Virtue in Prodicus’ speech as reported by Socrates, ‘for they wait till they crave them.’ And in a discussion with Euthydemus, Socrates remarks that ‘hunger or thirst or

⁴⁹ The term “problematization” has a range of connotations running from the epistemological to the methodological to the ontological. Epistemological uses refer to the epistemic underpinnings of concepts (madness, sexuality, instinct etc.), and the way in which these concepts are identified as new objects of a pre-existing discourse (thus modifying the discourse), or found a new discourse (paradigm change). Methodologically, this refers to a form of critique of theory rather than production of theory – Foucault’s own method of standing outside a particular discourse and examining its dynamic relation to the network of social and intellectual relations it forms part of. Ontologically it refers to the interiorization of such problematized discourse “through which being offers itself to be, necessarily, thought”; as he puts it here with a rare, Heideggerian flourish.

⁵⁰ He also notes that: “The desires that led to the *aphrodisia* were classed by Plato among the most natural and necessary; and the pleasures that could be obtained from the *aphrodisia* had their cause, according to Aristotle, in necessary things that concerned the body and the life of the body in general.” (UP, 48)

desire (*aphrodisiòn epithumia*) or lack of sleep are the sole causes of pleasure in eating and drinking and sexual indulgence, and in resting or sleeping, after a time of waiting or resistance until the moment comes when these will give the greatest possible satisfaction’.” (UP, 56) What was important, therefore, was to manage one’s pleasure activities in an appropriate way, with the proviso that this meant “natural” activities, however these were defined. Foucault saw this management of pleasure, particularly sexual pleasure, expressed as the principle of *chrésis aphrodision*: “the uses of pleasure”, as so significantly positive an attitude to one’s own sexual being, and its implications for the way one lives with oneself, and lives one’s life, that he took it as the as the title of this second volume of the *History of Sexuality*.

As to the “naturalness” of desire, here as elsewhere for the Greeks, description lends itself to particular forms of normative interpretation. Nussbaum says that for Epicurus, “nature is treated as a normative notion – opposed not to artifice, but to that which is puffed up, excessive, that which might well impede healthy functioning.” (TD, 105) And it would seem from these references that this principle had already been established (if not universally) in early antiquity. Foucault shows that this corresponds to a norm of self-work, in that “need” – what was natural – was “to serve as a guiding principle in this strategy, which clearly could never take the form of a precise codification or a law applicable to everyone alike in every circumstance. The strategy made possible an equilibrium in the dynamics of pleasure and desire: it kept this dynamics from “running way,” from becoming obsessive, by setting the satisfaction of a need as its internal limit”. (UP, 56) What was thus problematized by the Greeks was not so much the *status* of the natural phenomena of desire and pleasure, seen as ubiquitous in human life, but the way one was to relate to their being part of self. What Foucault wishes to draw out is this recognition that body and soul interact constantly, and that reflection, voluntary discipline, and care (*epimeleia*) are the keys to the relation of the self to itself, as opposed to the anguished inner battleground of Augustine in his *Confessions*, and the self-hating relation of the split self of Christianity. (Though of course, there are ancient, dualist antecedents for Christian ethics in Plato and the Neo-Platonists).

5. Forms of sexuality

In the contemporary episteme, sexual drive is attributed primarily to the body, though, since Freud, it is also held that the form this drive will take will generally be considered “normal” if the

child grows in “normal” circumstances, and “perverted” if the child experiences some kind of trauma at an impressionable age. There is a sense in which Plato’s conception of desire as stimulated by memory (non-conscious) and the re-evocation of old representations and images, finds an echo here (and Freud acknowledged his great debt to Plato’s Eros in theorising the libido), but the processes described in the modern conception are passive, more deeply unconscious ones, over which we have no control. Also, there was no concept (no problematization) of infant sexuality in the ancient world, and this concept is central to the widespread popularisation of Freudianism, producing a deterministic portrait of the adult human being as dominated by invisible forces; by the force of nature and by the arbitrariness of one’s early personal history, of which one is unaware, and therefore unable to control. The interiorization of this portrait of the human being produces a psychological self deprived of subjectivity. Freud was concerned, within his own paradigm, to find ways of reclaiming control of the self, notably through the long, self-transforming path of psychoanalytic practice. This path, available only to a privileged minority (as were the self-transforming practices of the free, mostly male, Greek citizens) is designed to help the individual free herself from the determinations that afflict her; to allow her to choose her life, but it is not designed to re-situate this individual self in that space of freedom and self-determination that the ancients enjoyed.

And whereas Freud *was* concerned to elaborate certain techniques of the self, Western science in general, and the non-therapeutic branches of psychology in particular (knowledge-power games that continue to proliferate in disciplines and sub-disciplines), clearly set themselves the task of finding the causes of “normal” and “abnormal” behaviour, not that of elaborating any such techniques of the self. With regard to possible forms of sexual expression, throughout the twentieth century, the categorisation of what is normal and what is abnormal underwent various changes, with more and more sexual practices being gradually moved from the “abnormal” to the “normal” camp, thus liberating many people from the constraint of reading themselves as abnormal. Most importantly, “homosexuality” shifted, in the West, from collocation in the “perverted” camp, where it remains for many non-Western societies, and large sections of Western society itself, to collocation in the “normal” (if minority) camp, which is now its official status in the liberal democracies, though full equality (which would depend on full “normality”) has in no way been achieved even here. As a form of human life, and of identity, however, it will always frustrate those scientists whose passion it is to discover whether or not everything human is “genetic” or neurological in origin (“hard-wired” in the ugly new metaphor of the current

objectification in English), in that it will never be possible to put all those aspects of a life that shape one's sexuality under a microscope, or into an epidemiological report.

Greek "sexuality" flouts nineteenth century notions of normality, and of "nature" in that it takes for granted that sexual attraction and romantic feeling are aroused (in men, who mattered) by beauty, the beauty of young girls, and more particularly of boys. Being aroused by such beauty therefore defines what is natural, but what one *does* about one's natural human desires is social, and central to ethical practice. Given that the ideal object of these desires are young boys for whose development one is responsible, it is a moral question of the highest priority (girls of the higher classes were out of bounds outside of marriage, slave girls had no choice in the matter – removing the exquisite pain of courtship from the game of love). Ancient Greece thus provides Foucault with a starting point from which to investigate the relation between form of life and coeval concepts of desires and pleasures *historically*, shaking off the contemporary pressure to ground all such investigation in whatever science can (or cannot) offer, as purported biopsychological universals. But this does not mean that he would substitute one set of universals for another. In a different context,⁵¹ Foucault wrote: "instead of deducing concrete phenomena from universals, or instead of starting with universals as an obligatory grid of intelligibility for certain concrete practices, I would like to start with these concrete practices and, as it were, pass these universals through the grid of these practices. This is not what could be called a historicist reduction, for that would consist precisely in starting from these universals as given, and then seeing how history inflects them, or alters them, or finally invalidates them." (BB, 3)

The method Foucault adopts is thus to look at things as concrete phenomena, therefore in their historical particularity, but carefully avoiding the type of historicist perspective which, rather than ridding itself of universals, merely investigates them in longitudinal studies, as opposed to studies without an axis of historical time. In the case under examination of his investigation of "desires" and "pleasures", this means that he sets aside current definitions of these terms, and classifications of forms of "sexuality," that purport to be universals. As well as methodically examining the varying uses and connotations of such key terms, another method he occasionally employs is that of making use of a particular concept – that of bisexuality in the example given below – outside of the context which generated it, thus demonstrating its inappropriateness in its displacement, and therefore its non-universality. Here he poses the deliberately anachronistic question:

⁵¹ In the 1978-79 Course at the Collège de France on *The Birth of Biopolitics*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, with reference to: "sovereignty, the people, subjects, the state and civil society [...] all those universals employed by sociological analysis, historical analysis, and political philosophy" (p.2)

“Were the Greeks bisexual, then?” And he answers:

Yes, if we mean by this that a Greek [read: a Greek male] could, simultaneously or in turn, be enamoured of a boy or a girl [...] but if we wish to turn our attention to the way in which they conceived of this dual practice, we need to take note of the fact that they did not recognize two kinds of “desire”, two different or competing “drives”, each claiming a share of men’s hearts or appetites. We can talk about their “bisexuality”, thinking of the free choice they allowed themselves between the two sexes, but for them this option was not referred to a dual, ambivalent, and “bisexual” structure of desire. To their way of thinking, what made it possible to desire a man or a woman was simply the appetite that nature had implanted in man’s heart for “beautiful” human beings, whatever their sex might be. (UP, 188)

Instead, as he shows in *The Uses of Pleasure*, the bi-something-ality, the duality, that constituted the fundamental Greek conception of difference in human character revolved around a completely different polarisation from that of the choice of the sexual object. And this had to do with characteristics of activity and passivity that were *symbolized* as a masculine/feminine difference, and were tendentially, but by no means exclusively, considered to be characteristic of actual males and females. In fact, the ease with which males could develop “feminine”, passive tendencies was one of the Greeks’ constant preoccupations. Foucault attributes the problematization of masculinity in sexual practice to “the principle of isomorphism between sexual relations and social relations. What this means is that sexual relations – always conceived in terms of the model act of penetration, assuming a polarity that opposed activity and passivity – were seen as being of the same type as the relationship between [...] an individual who dominates and one who is dominated, one who commands and one who complies”. (UP, 215) This “principle of isomorphism” is one that is found everywhere in the ancient world, underpinning differing pre-modern epistemes, but it merits only a passing reference in the *History of Sexuality*, where his focus was not on epistemological themes. It was instead extensively explored by Foucault in *The Order of Things*⁵² through the concept of “resemblance,” particularly in its Renaissance usage. According to this principle, the morphological similarity between the walnut and the brain, to take one graphic example, could not be an arbitrary one, and it would therefore lend itself to therapeutic investigation. By the same token (though not discussed by Foucault), the manifold phallic metaphors of rigidity, strength, straightness, uprightness (the sceptre of the law), and

⁵² “Up to the end of the sixteenth century, resemblance played a constructive role in the knowledge of Western culture. It was resemblance that [...] organized the play of symbols, made possible knowledge of things visible and invisible, and controlled the art of representing them. The universe was folded in upon itself; the earth echoing the sky, faces seeing themselves reflected in the stars, and plants holding within their stems the secrets that were of use to man” (OT, 19)

therefore a vertically organized social order, may all have their origins in this epistemic principle of isomorphism.⁵³

Since attraction to beautiful boys or girls was considered entirely natural, there was no blame attached to sexual relations with one's inferiors – women, and slaves of either sex; such relations were neutral in terms of the moral code, in that they mirrored the social hierarchy, though they were certainly not considered “uplifting”. For men only, of course; for a woman to have sexual relations with an inferior would constitute a violation of the social order, and an offence against both husband (father, brother etc.) and state. At least in classical antiquity, however, where this notion of isomorphism was more rigidly held, these were not potentially “ideal” erotic relationships; the ideal love relationship was held to be that between an older man (the lover, *erastes*) and a free adolescent boy, (the beloved, *eromenos*). But the *eromenos*, once he had grown a beard (the first use of a razor to shave off this beard was jokingly considered to mark the end of boyhood), had to become a man. “Hence” Foucault writes “the problem that we may call the ‘antinomy of the boy’ in the Greek ethics of *aphrodisia*. On the one hand, young men were recognized as objects of pleasure – and even as the only legitimate and honourable objects among the possible male partners of men [...] but on the other hand, the boy, whose youth must be a training for manhood, could not and must not identify with that role.”(UP, 221)

A complex moral problem, evidently, and in the first instance deontological, in that it was essential for the lover, whilst courting the boy, to ensure that the gratification that the boy would get from the relationship would be in the form of patronage, and advancement of his later career; and would certainly not be sexual gratification. Confined as the boy must be to the passive role, any sexual enjoyment on his part would risk “feminizing” him, stunting his growth into “active” manhood, and the possibility of his assuming the appropriate social role. As in all societies in which masculinity and social order are thought to maintain each other reciprocally, so too in Classical Greece socially sanctioned forms of sexuality were part of the formative model considered apposite to the development of an active male subjectivity. Though ensuring that the boy who was the object of pleasure took no pleasure himself from the *aphrodisia* must have caused many an ethical headache for the *erastes*.

Beyond the reciprocal, utilitarian aspects of the relationship, which, (as in all relationships) were considered entirely healthy; love, in the form of reciprocal affection, together with adoration and protection on the part of the lover, and respect and devotion on the part of the beloved, both justified and idealised the relationship. Thus, for example, Foucault tells us that Xenophon, in his

⁵³ See esp. Hérítier, F., *Masculin/Féminin*, La pensée de la difference, Paris, Odile Jacob, 1996.

Symposium, attributes to Socrates the notion of friendship – with its kindness, reciprocal attention and shared feelings – as the goal of *eros* and its pleasures. “Friendship [...] is not made a substitute for love, or something that would take over from it in due time [when the youth enters manhood – the traditional view at the time.] Xenophon makes it the very thing lovers should be enamoured of: *èrontes tes philias*, he says, employing a characteristic expression that makes it possible to save *eros*, to maintain its force, but without giving it a concrete content apart from the behaviour that results from the mutual and lasting expression of friendship.” (*Symposium* VIII, 18, cited in UP, 234) As the expression of a form of subjectivation, this view transforms a mode of relating that was basically utilitarian and deontological in early antiquity, into one in which the ever-present utilitarian aspect is subsumed to an ideal, that of friendship. A friendship which ennobles the lover by placing him more in the position of giver (of himself), than of taker of his pleasure (with compensation, as it were) from the boy; and at the same time is educative for the boy, providing him with a first experience of that adult friendship which was considered the noblest form (therefore male) of human interaction in ancient Greece.

6. Love, beauty, *sōphrosynē*⁵⁴

Besides the lover’s duties to the beloved in Greek society, he also had a duty to himself. The desire and/or the love he felt represented an important opportunity for work on the self; an opportunity not necessarily seen or welcomed in other cultures. On Foucault’s view, whether or not such self-work is actually seen as an opportunity, or practices of dutiful constraint or the rejection of such restraint are preferred, the way in which one lives one’s relationships, especially the most intense, is central to one’s subjectivation. So it was for the Greeks, who therefore preferred to live their relationships consciously. The relative poverty of their relationships with women however, as inferiors, meant that their self-forming and other-forming attention was almost exclusively directed to relationships with other men: to friendship with their peers, erotic relations with boys, and a passage, requiring very careful handling, between the two conditions. “Let us be quite clear”, Hadot says, “the love in question [...] is homosexual love, precisely because it is educative love.”⁵⁵(PWL 158) Foucault records the description in Plato’s *Symposium*

⁵⁴ *Sōphrosynē* was “the notion of ‘moderation’ [...] that characterised the ethical subject in his fulfilment.” (UP, 37)

⁵⁵ Relationships with women and slaves had to be handled authoritatively and justly, but were not grounds for soul-searching.

of Socrates lying quietly next to the beautiful Alcibiades (HS, 221) all night, to test his own resistance. This bizarre exercise was, among other things, considered an extreme form – Socrates putting all his considerable showmanship to didactic ends – of cultivation of *sōphrosynē*. In Foucault’s definition: “*Sōphrosynē* was a state that could be approached through the exercise of self-mastery and through restraint in the practice of pleasures; it was characterized as a freedom.” (UP, 78) As such, it was also another example of the principle of isomorphism operating in parallel between state and individual citizen.

Foucault notes: “freedom in classical Greek thought was not considered simply as the independence of the city as a whole, while the citizens themselves would be only constituent elements devoid of individuality or interiority. The freedom that needs establishing and preserving was that of the citizens of a collectivity of course, but it was also, for each of them, a certain form of relationship of the individual with himself.” (UP, 79) In *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, Foucault explores further this parallel between self-government and the government of the city in classical antiquity. He notes that the notion of the care of the self first appears in the *Alcibiades*, (HS, 96) in another context, that of Socrates’ training of this young aristocrat. “It was a world, then, in which relations between the status of the ‘preeminent’ and the ability to govern are problematized: the need to take care of oneself insofar as one has to govern others.” (HS, 44) The question for Foucault here was whether this self-mastery was part of the care of the self, or vice versa. His conclusion – that in Plato, self-mastery, because of one’s duty to the city, is predominant, but that this priority will be reversed later, in the more individualistic Hellenistic times – is in alignment with prevailing historical opinion; but what is interesting is his tracing of the inner mechanisms of these discourses and practices, and his constant awareness of the epistemic filters through which we read the ancients, and through which his own readers may read him. In citing the famous phrases from Aristotle’s *Politics* on the goodness of the state depending on the goodness of its citizen-governors: “The goodness of all is necessarily involved in the goodness of each”; Foucault notes that “the individual’s attitude towards himself, the way in which he ensured his own freedom with regard to himself, and the form of supremacy he maintained over himself were a contributing element to the well-being and good of the city.”(UP, 79) But Foucault seems always to have in mind the risk that this notion of self-mastery, viewed from a contemporary perspective, could seem to correspond to a Kantian struggle of the will (or soul, or reason), for mastery of the body (or inclinations, or desires) resulting (in the case of moral victory) in the exercise of the will in relation to moral codes. Foucault is therefore keen to explain that this is not the way he reads it. He makes a point of noting that: “This individual freedom

should not [...] be understood as the independence of a free will. Its polar opposite was not a natural determinism, nor was it the will of an all-powerful agency [God]: it was an enslavement – the enslavement of the self by oneself. To be free in relation to pleasure was to be free of their authority; it was not to be their slave.” (UP, 79)⁵⁶

In this reading of Socrates’ night with Alcibiades, however, it is *desire*, as the counterpart to self-mastery, and not love, that is problematized. The story is often told as if Socrates were the only protagonist, young Alcibiades having only a walk-on, or sleeping, part in it, though the fact that it was he that wished to seduce Socrates, and not the other way round, is crucial to the pedagogic value of the story. Were Alcibiades to figure merely as an object to be resisted in this exercise, the use made of him would be as opportunistic as if Socrates had succumbed to his charms.⁵⁷ But while this story of self-work is indeed about *sōphrosynē* on the one hand; on the other it figures in the ongoing discourse about the ideality of the man-boy relationship, and therefore about what love is. Foucault tells us that in the first dialogue of Plato’s *Symposium*, Pausanias differentiates “between two loves the one ‘whose only aim is the satisfaction of its desires,’ and the other which desires above all to test the soul.” (UP, 231) And yet, again, both of these are self-referential in a way that does not take the relationship with the other, the *eromenos* into account. Also, in both cases, love is reduced to desire. Xenophon’s solution to this is through friendship, as mentioned above. The Socrates of his *Symposium* is one who makes a radical separation between love of the body and love of the soul, and sees the attempt at combination thereof as doomed to failure: “when one loves ‘the body and the soul at the same time,’ it is the first that will dominate, and the fading of youth causes friendship also to wither away.”(UP, 234) These are the words that Xenophon gives to his Socrates, and against them he “outlines a conception of *eros* and its pleasures that would have friendship itself as the goal. Friendship [...] is not made a substitute for love or something that would take over from it in due time. Xenophon makes it the very thing lovers should be enamored of: *erōntes tēs philias*, he says, employing a characteristic expression that makes it possible to save *eros*, to maintain its force, but without giving it a concrete content apart from the behaviour that results from the mutual and lasting affection of friendship.” (UP, 234).

An emphasis on friendship is obviously a significant step away from mere desire and towards love in the conception of the erotic relationship, but not the only possible one. According to Foucault:

⁵⁶ Although, even if the metaphysics are different, it is no surprise that such a view would appeal to Kant.

⁵⁷ As in the unfortunate case of Gandhi spending a chaste night next to his beautiful niece.

“Platonic erotics is constructed very differently” (Ibid.), developing the theme of love not from a relational premise, but from the life the soul as it is lived through the body, so to speak. All sorts of discourses on love are discussed in the *Phaedrus*, and developed differently in the *Symposium*, that do *not* have the status of “true discourse”. But Foucault reads the discourse of Diotima in the *Symposium*, and “the great fable of the *Phaedrus*, related by Socrates himself”, as “*etymoi*, true discourses [...] which] set themselves apart because they do not pose the problem in the same [conventional] way; they carry out a certain number of basic transformations and displacements with regard to the game of questions that were traditional in discussions about love.” (UP, 235) From a question of amorous behaviour that is respectful of the required social symmetry, the question for Diotima and Socrates becomes: “ ‘What is the essential nature of Love, what are his characteristics, and then what are his works?’ An ontological inquiry and no longer a question of deontology” (UP, 236), as Foucault puts it. This involves a shift away from the focus on the love-object, as if the charms of the boy were the cause of love. “Diotima reproaches Socrates – and in fact all the authors of encomiums – for having [...] mistakenly attributed his [the boy’s] merits to love itself; the latter will manifest its characteristic truth only if that truth is sought in its nature and not in its object.” (UP, 236-37) This implies, as Foucault records from both the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium*, reflecting on “the ‘intermediate’ nature of love, the deficiency that characterizes it (since it does not possess the beautiful things that it desires [...]) it will also have to speak, as in the *Symposium*, of the way in which forgetfulness and remembrance of the supra-celestial vision are mixed in love, and of the long road of suffering that will lead it finally to its goal.” (UP, 236)

Foucault makes no comment at this stage on the fact that Plato is here taking the question in the two directions that he himself is most suspicious of as relations to truth: from pleasures back to desires, and from immanent to transcendent origin. But he picks up the question later, at the point at which the soul has attained freedom and self-mastery after the long hard journey described so movingly by Plato in the *Phaedrus*, commenting: “the struggle she [the soul] has been able to sustain against the violence of her appetites, she would not have been able to conduct it without a twofold relation to truth: a relation to her own desire questioned in its being, and a relation to the object of her desire recognized as a true being. Thus we see where ground is broken for a future inquiry into desiring man.” (UP, 244) So, the ground is thus broken, and much later, this “problematization of sexual behaviour would be reworked in terms of the concupiscent soul and the deciphering of its arcana.” (UP, 245) But in the meantime, as he says, the focus continues to be

on pleasures and their uses in Platonic erotics, as its many Greek and Roman descendents will testify.

This shift in emphasis has consequences for the way the love object, the boy, is thought of. The reference to the boy as a “true being” here refers to another of the “displacements” that Plato’s reflections provoked within this discourse; that by which the dissymmetry between the partners, though structural to the man-boy relationship, was no longer to be taken for granted, or was to be replaced by “the convergence of love,” Foucault says. For: “if Eros was a relation to truth, the two lovers could only be rejoined provided that the beloved too had been moved in the direction of the truth by the force of the same Eros.” (UP, 239-240). That is to say, if this motivation, the pursuit of truth and wisdom, comes to the fore, then the boy’s love of the older, wiser figure, reverses the relationship of lover and beloved. Foucault notes that the beautiful boy now loves “the old man with the ugly body”(UP, 241).⁵⁸ Hadot, writing on the significance of Socrates’ ugliness, notes that that the portrait of him in Plato is that of “a mediator between the transcendent ideal of wisdom and concrete human reality” and that as such, we “should therefore expect to see in Socrates a harmonious figure, combining divine and human characteristics in delicate nuances.” (PWL, 147) Instead of which his ugliness – like that of a Silenus, (“hybrid demons, half-animal, half-men” (Ibid. 148) was as legendary, as the battered old cloak he wore. In his eulogy to Socrates in the *Symposium*, Alcibiades describes him as like the little carved Sileni to be found in the shops; but, Hadot tells us, “if one opens up the little Sileni mentioned by Alcibiades, they turn out to be full of statues of Gods.” (Ibid.) To love the ugly old man with the beautiful soul represents, therefore, a longing for truth, and “in Diotima’s description” Hadot writes:

Eros is the desire for his own perfection, which is to say, for his true self. He suffers from being deprived of the plenitude of being, and he strives to attain it. When other men fall in love with Socrates/Eros, that is - when they fall in love with love, such as Socrates reveals it to them – what they love in Socrates is his love for, and aspiration toward, beauty and the perfection of being. In Socrates, they find the path to their own perfection.⁵⁹

This is Eros at his most refined, but Socrates also shares the all too human relish for the tales of Eros at his most monstrous – “good-for-nothing, shameless, obstinate, loud-mouthed and savage” (Ibid., 161) – when his clumsy attempts to achieve this “plenitude of being,” by satisfying his basest desires, are at their most unwise. The vision of reality, with all its warts, that Socrates always taught us to recognize, the reality of ourselves, could not fail to apply to “love,” and the

⁵⁸ In a footnote here (32), he refers the reader to Hadot’s work on Socrates and Eros (Hadot PWL).

⁵⁹ Ibid,

tension between this and our aspirations to truth and beauty was not something Socrates was ever going to allow us to forget or to neglect.

But the young boy Socrates talks of, the beloved who takes a crucial step in becoming the lover, “still does not know the true nature of that which he longs for, and he finds no words with which to name it; [...] he ‘throws his arms’ around his lover and ‘gives him kisses.’” (UP, 240) Socrates certainly appears to be stretching a point here in presenting this inchoate aspiring to *something* as a demonstration of a love of truth – “that is the same for both of them” Foucault records – ; nonetheless, Foucault sees the discourse as a whole as representing an important turning point; giving greater philosophical depth to notions of self-work that emerge from their background in the formative training of the archaic warrior, then of the Athenian citizen. A step away from behaviour governed by an ethos of formal relationships, towards behaviour governed by a relation of the self to itself, and at the same time to a relation to others whose behaviour is governed by a relation of their self to itself. As Foucault puts it, these texts “indicate a transition from an erotics structured in terms of ‘courtship’ practice and recognition of the other’s freedom, to an erotics centred on an ascesis of the subject and a common access to truth.”(UP, 244)

The importance of the boy’s beautiful soul over that of his beautiful body is also stressed, but Plato was not original in this. What is original in Plato, Foucault says, is that he bases the notion of the inferiority of bodies “not on the dignity of the boy who is loved, but on that which, in the lover himself, determines the nature and form of his love (his desire for immortality, his yearning for the beautiful in its purity, the recollection of what he has seen beyond the heavens).” (UP, 238) And importantly, in this context,

(and both the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium* are quite explicit on this point), he does not trace a clear, definitive, and uncrossable dividing line between the bad love of the body and the glorious love of the soul; however devalued and inferior the relation to the body compared with that motion toward beauty, and however dangerous it can sometimes be [...] From one beautiful body to other beautiful bodies, according to the famous formula of the *Symposium*, and on to the beauty that is found in ‘occupations,’ ‘rules of conduct,’ ‘the sciences,’ the motion is continuous, until one gazes at last upon ‘the vast ocean of beauty.’ (UP, 238-9)

And here at last Foucault shows himself to be conquered by the poetry of Plato’s vision, which connects desire and pleasure to love of beauty, and to the beauty of this love, this feeling, this aesthetic, in which the sense of beauty and love are experienced as the same thing, as inseparable and indistinguishable. Therefore it really doesn’t matter what the object is that provokes it: the dome of stars, the moral law, a mathematical solution, a cello solo, a beautiful body. What matters is that it is experienced, and that the experience takes us beyond the ephemeral components of the present moment to the sense of the value of life, and this, in whatever way our beliefs may

characterize it, is also experienced as the discovery of a truth. “For Plato, it is not exclusion of the body that characterizes true love in a fundamental way; it is rather that, beyond the appearances of the object, love is a relation to truth.” (UP, 239) So that if, by chance, it is the beautiful body that provokes this experience, then, also “for the *Phaedrus*. While it praises the courage and perfection of souls who have not yielded, it does not promise punishment for those who, leading a life devoted to honour rather than to philosophy, let themselves be taken by surprise, so that, carried away by their passion, they chance to ‘commit the thing’.” (UP, 239) No doubt it is the softening influence of the contemplation of beauty that renders the severe Plato less of a moralist on this occasion (be it only for honourable non-philosophers!). Beyond the ethics of socially responsible behaviour, to which both Plato and Foucault are committed in their utterly different ways; there is this ethics of commitment to both finding one’s truth and living it, and a sense that the two are intertwined. And in this rare but important moment there is an affinity between Foucault and Plato.

The conception of the self behind this extraordinary practice of erotic abstinence, whereby desire is actively cultivated, but in order to be sublimated and spiritualised, as in the tantric yoga developed even earlier in the East, is one that recognizes erotic desire as a powerful force that is part of human nature, and as such to be welcomed; but as an aspect of self that can be downgraded, as it were, to mere physical discharge, in which case it is used up in the physical act, taking some of the lover’s reserves of strength along with it; or can be upgraded, through retention and modification of expression, to love. But far from being modified merely by will-power and repression (always highly problematic techniques of the self), the route to this transformation is a surprising one.

In the *Phaedrus*, Socrates describes a “kind of madness ... which occurs when someone sees beauty here on earth and is reminded of true beauty. His wings begin to grow and he wants to take to the air on his new plumage. [...] So the point is that this turns out to be the most thoroughly good of all kinds of possession, not only for the man who is possessed, but also for anyone who is touched by it, and the word “lover” refers to a lover of beauty who has been possessed by this kind of madness.”(249a)⁶⁰ Socrates says that we cannot see wisdom, but that “as with everything else which is an object of love, wisdom would cause terrible pangs of love in us if it presented some kind of clear image of itself by approaching our organ of sight. But as things are, it is only beauty which has the property of being especially visible and especially lovable.”(250a)⁶¹ Coleridge

⁶⁰ Plato, *Phaedrus*, Oxford World Classics, transl, Waterfield, Robin, 2002, p.33

⁶¹ Ibid.,p.34

expresses this fusion of the visible and the loveable (as ‘feeling’), when he writes of the beauty of the sky: “Deep sky [...] is of all visual impressions the nearest akin to a feeling. It is more of a feeling than a sight, or rather, it is the melting away and entire union of feeling and sight.”⁶²

However, for Socrates, anyone who is “corrupted” will not be drawn “towards beauty as it really is. Instead, he gazes on its namesake here on earth, and the upshot is that the sight does not arouse reverence in him. No, he surrenders to pleasure and tries like an animal to mount his partner”. Whereas for those “surrounded by rays of pure light, being pure ourselves and untainted by this object we call a ‘body’ and which we carry around with us now, imprisoned like shellfish.” (250a)⁶³ When this awakened person “sees a marvellous face or a bodily form which is a good reflection of beauty, at first he shivers [...] and the sight also moves him to revere his beloved as if he were a god.” (251a)⁶⁴ The ugly Socrates, the butt of many a joke in the Athenian marketplace, who “ ‘spends his whole life,’ says Alcibiades, ‘playing the part of a simpleton and a child’ ”, (PWL, 148) could suddenly remove the mask, and reveal the ray of pure light. Hadot quotes Kierkegaard saying: “One can deceive a person for the truth’s sake, and (to recall old Socrates) one can deceive a person into the truth. Indeed, it is only by this means, i.e. by deceiving him, that it is possible to bring into truth one who is in an illusion.” (Ibid., 150)

Foucault says that the Socrates of the *Symposium* demonstrates the powers of “physical endurance, the ability to make oneself indifferent to sensations, and the power to absent oneself from the body and concentrate all the soul’s energy on oneself.” But that he does this in the context of erotic relationship, and his total self-mastery is what qualifies him “as the highest object of love to which young men might appeal, but at the same time, as the only one who can guide their love all the way to the truth.” (UP, 242)

⁶² Quoted in Grant, M. op cit, p.105

⁶³ Plato, *Phaedrus*, op.cit. pp.33-34

⁶⁴ Ibid.

Ch. 4. Bodies and Pleasures

1. The History of sexuality

The history of sexuality which Foucault set out to write, before, as he said on many occasions, getting bored with it, and moving on to more interesting things, was never, as the innocent reader might at first suspect, a “history” of “sexuality”. To write such a history would be to accept the notion that there is such a thing as sexuality that can therefore have a history, and this Foucault denied. What he did want to write was the history of the *concept* of sexuality and its operations: how it arose, from what social practices, how it became the object of so much discourse, how it entered into our way of reading ourselves and there became so crucial to our identity and to rendering us more docile and controllable.

In the same vein, Volume 1 of his trilogy on *The History of Sexuality* is called *The Will to Knowledge (La volonté du savoir)*⁶⁵, but this does not refer to any substantive “will”; not to the will of an individual, or to a characteristic of human beings in general. It is instead a sort of metaphor: the only knowledge he is concerned with here is knowledge of “sexuality”, and the “will” refers to what Foucault saw as a generalized pursuit of knowledge concerning human beings – that is to say, ourselves – as creatures characterized in the first instance by our sexual desires. Foucault had the intuition, and on investigation, the conviction, that this conception was so prevalent in modern Western society, that it functioned as an epistemic underpinning of both our human sciences and our way of understanding ourselves, and therefore living our lives. When he began this enquiry the prevalent notion regarding sexuality was, he says, that, up to the seventeenth century the “[c]odes “regulating the coarse, the obscene and the indecent were quite lax compared to those of the nineteenth century. It was a time of direct gestures, shameless discourse, and open transgressions, when anatomies were shown and intermingled at will, and knowing children hung about amidst the laughter of adults” (WK, 3). The Renaissance codpiece may stand (as it were) as sufficient symbolic confirmation of this. But, the theory (that called the “repressive hypothesis” by Foucault) continues: all of this was suppressed in the Victorian nineteenth century, pushing discourse on sexuality out of sight, and it was hoped, out of mind. Conversely, Foucault’s investigations revealed instead a steady increase in such discourse, and against the repressive hypothesis he argues that:

⁶⁵ The echo of substantive philosophical uses of the term “will”, in Kant, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche, three of his preferred authors, is misleading here.

since the end of the sixteenth century ‘the putting into discourse of sex’, far from undergoing a process of restriction, on the contrary has been subjected to a mechanism of increasing incitement; [...] the techniques of power exercised over sex have not obeyed a principle of rigorous selection, but rather of dissemination and implantation of polymorphous sexualities; and ... the will to knowledge has not come to a halt in the face of a taboo that must not be lifted, but has persisted in constituting... a science of sexuality. (WK, 12-13)

The high rhetoric here was a style Foucault used when faced with “common knowledge” of a particularly entrenched kind. It worked. Not in the sense that he won the argument against the repressive hypothesis, and not, as he had himself written with regard to Marx, Nietzsche and Freud, that he had merely added to or “multiplied the [interpretive] signs”, but in the sense that, as he said of those three titans: they have “changed the nature of the sign itself, and modified the way in which it can, in general, be interpreted.”⁶⁶ “Sexuality” was certainly among the key signs of the times that Foucault modified profoundly. It can no longer be used as a given. These concepts consecrated as ‘signs’ are pivotal to the interweaving of knowledge and power; and as he says: “[a]s to power relations themselves, to an extremely important extent, these operate through the production and exchange of signs.”⁶⁷

In Foucault’s reconstruction, the “science of sexuality” thus constitutes a kind of secular continuation of the form of “hermeneutics of desire” that had been introduced by the medieval Catholic Church through the practice of confession. In their various practices, each of these specific forms of introspection finds what it is seeking – the sin of desire in a Catholic context, the biological drives underlying sexuality in the laboratories, and one’s individual psychological variant of these drives in the troubled modern secular soul. In each case, by focusing our attention on something presumed to exist, and called sexuality, this “will to knowledge” simultaneously problematizes and invents it. That is to say, if I am not aware of having something called a sexuality, it is not a problem for me, and I can live without such knowledge, describing my experiences in other ways; but once I am in possession of such knowledge, it is also in possession of me, as it were – I cannot leave it out of my account of myself, to myself.

The moral codes of all societies impose prohibitions on sexual practice that differ greatly, though all are of crucial importance to social organization; but not all societies have a word that denotes “sexuality” and connotes both the species characteristic of being permanently characterized by sexual desire or its sublimations, and the individual characteristic of identity based on one’s particular, and psychologically fixed, variant among available themes: heterosexual, homosexual,

⁶⁶ “Marx, Nietzsche and Freud”, DE, pp. 596-597

⁶⁷ “Le sujet et le pouvoir”, DE, p.1055

bisexual, sadomasochistic, pedophile etc. For this reason, Foucault is particularly concerned *not* to give the impression that there is something real and universal – called “sex”, that needs to be discovered by removing the veil of the historically circumscribed “sexuality”. On the contrary:

We must not refer a history of sexuality to the agency of sex; but rather show how “sex” is subordinate to sexuality. We must not place sex on the side of reality, and sexuality on that of confused ideas and illusions; sexuality is a very real historical formation; it is what gave rise to the notion of sex, as a speculative element necessary to its operation. [...] It is the agency of sex that we must break away from, if we aim [...] to counter the grips of power with the claims of bodies, pleasures and knowledges, in their multiplicity and their possibility of resistance. (WK, 157)

His apparent insistence here on the precedence of concept over experience appears to verge on idealism, which, in the context of the anti-naturalist stance he takes can be hard to avoid. But Foucault would insist that in his study of “discursive practices” as *descriptions* of reality, in all their plurality and contingency, he makes no claims about the status of the reality that is the object of the discourse; other, that is, than the fact that it is in fact subject to various possible descriptions, as the empirical record of the *changes* in discursive practices confirms. Here he applies this “nominalist” method to “sex”, as he had previously, and infamously applied it to the concepts of “man” and “power”, declaring, for example that “man” did not exist before nineteenth century science invented him.⁶⁸ Clearly therefore, that certain human practices to do with bodily pleasures, the reproduction of the species, the basic institutions of human societies and their organization and prohibitions do all have to do with something we call sex is not what is at issue here. What is at issue is the *agency* of sex. For Foucault, it is the discourse on sexuality that places sex in the role of agent, rather than object, of such a significant part of these human practices.

2. Bodies and pleasures

The rallying point for the counterattack against the deployment of sexuality ought not to be sex-desire, but bodies and pleasures. (Ibid.)

⁶⁸ For a discussion of his “historical nominalism” see Flynn, “Foucault’s Mapping of History,” in CCF pp. 29-48. Flynn notes that for Foucault: “It is the historian’s task to uncover discursive and nondiscursive practices in their plurality and contingency in order to reveal the fields that render intelligible an otherwise heterogeneous collection of events. There is no foundational principle, no organising or final cause.” (p.40)

As near as one gets to a political slogan in Foucault⁶⁹ (and this is it), what we have is not “We shall overcome” or “*Venceremos*”, (though his work on prisons could perhaps be considered a contemporary “*A la Bastille, citoyens*”), but the enigmatic “bodies and pleasures”. What Foucault is attempting to do, with this “bodies and pleasures”, is to displace sexuality, construed as rooted in bio-psychological desire, from its central place in our relation to ourselves; and to replace it with something that is determined by thought, by choice; and yet to this something he gives the paradoxical name of “bodies and pleasures”.

“The deployment of sexuality”, against which “bodies and pleasures” should be our rallying point, was already a vast affair in his writings; part of “the great technology of power in the nineteenth [and into the twentieth] century” (WK, 140). This technology of power, which Foucault also calls “bio-power”, a term which has readily lent itself, to his regret, to use in polemics, involved “numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations” (Ibid.). Among these techniques, or “specific mechanisms of knowledge and power centering on sex” (WK, 103), Foucault listed four in particular: firstly, the hysterization of women’s bodies (he was not dealing with twentieth century techniques, when the medicalization of first childbirth, then pregnancy and conception, replaced hysteria in this scenario); secondly, the pedagogization of children’s sex, including “the war against onanism, which in the West lasted nearly two centuries”, and was to be conducted by parents, “educators, doctors, and eventually psychologists”; thirdly, the socialization of procreative behaviour, involving economic, medical and political intervention in the lives of couples and families; and finally, the psychiatrization of perverse pleasures. (WK, 104-105)

The “counterattack” against all this has therefore to do with resisting that subjugation, and that control, in all the domains in which they are manifest. But it must be more than this. Foucault says that, in general, “there are three kinds of struggle: those that oppose forms of domination (ethnic, social and religious); those that denounce forms of exploitation that separate the individual from what he produces; and those that combat everything that ties the individual to himself, and thus ensures his submission to others”.⁷⁰ These are not mutually exclusive, and often are mixed, but for him the first form typified the pre-modern era, the second form typified the nineteenth century struggles, and: “today, it is the struggle against forms of subjection – against the submission of subjectivity – that prevails more and more, even though the struggles against domination and

⁶⁹ Which is not to suggest that Foucault was not politically active, just that he avoided slogans.

⁷⁰ *Le sujet et le pouvoir, Dits et Ecrits* 306, p.1046

exploitation have not disappeared – on the contrary.”⁷¹ Resisting the deployment of sexuality is, in the first place, a struggle against a particular form of subjection, and as such it must be conducted on two terrains: outside and inside of the self. Outside, against the practices to which submission is required, and inside against that particular form of power which:

classifies individuals in categories, denotes them by their own individuality, attaches them to their identity, imposes on them a law of truth they have to recognize, and that others must recognize in them. It is a form of power that transforms individuals into subjects. There are two meanings to this word “subject”: that of the subject subjected to the other by control and dependence, and that of the subject attached to his own identity by consciousness or self-knowledge. (Ibid.)

What “bodies and pleasures” may therefore mean in this context of struggle is not immediately easy to see. As Foucault uses the phrase, it clearly refers to something that is tangential to the usual connotations of “bodies” or “pleasures”, and to make things more difficult, the notion operates in different ways on different levels. At the most concrete level, he uses it to refer to the culturally circumscribed phenomenon of certain sexual practices that were first popularized in gay and lesbian ghettos on the East and west coasts of the USA in the 1970s and 1980s. These were elaborated to explore the possibility of maximizing sexual pleasure using parts of the body other than the genitals; or, where the genitals are used, as in certain sado-masochistic (hereafter S/M) practices, they are used in such a way as to denigrate “virility” in favour of intense, but non-virile sensory experience.⁷²

At the ethical level, Foucault sees these practices, freely chosen, as a means of constructing a way of life and a new identity on one’s own terms; in other words, as a new and self-determined subjectivation, with its own social and political dimensions. “To resist” Foucault says, resistance “must be like power; as inventive, as mobile, as productive. [... Like power, resistance] comes from below, and distributes itself strategically.” (NSR, 267) When questioned on his own celebrated remark – that where there is power, there is resistance – he replied, and this is important, that: “I am not positing a substance of resistance in the face of a substance of power. I’m simply saying: where there is a relationship of power, there is a possibility of resistance. We are never trapped by power: one can always modify its hold, in determined conditions, and according to a precise strategy.” (Ibid.)

⁷¹ Ibid. p.1047

⁷² Halperin writes : “[S/M] involves the eroticization of non-genital regions of the body [...] And it finds other erotic uses for the genitals than stimulation to the point of orgasm. S/M therefore represents a remapping of the body’s erotic sites [...] a breakup of the erotic monopoly traditionally held by the genitals, and even a re-eroticization of the male genitals as sites of vulnerability instead of as objects of veneration.” *Saint Foucault*, p.88

Though the reference to pleasure in this context of resistance is explicitly sexual (nor is ‘bodies’ given any other interpretation or exemplification) Foucault nonetheless sees these practices as opposed to “sex-desire” and describes them as forms of “*déssexualisation*”. In discussing the “S/M subculture” he says:

We know very well that what these people do is not aggressive; that they invent new possibilities of pleasure in utilising certain bizarre parts of their bodies – in eroticizing this body. I think that here we have a sort of creation, of creative enterprise, one of the principal characteristics of which is what I call the desexualisation of pleasure. The idea that physical pleasure always comes from sexual pleasure, and the idea that sexual pleasure is the basis of all possible pleasures, that, I think, is really something false.⁷³

There is a kind of misfit here, which appears whenever Foucault discusses these problems⁷⁴, between the vastness of the problem, and the restrictedness of the proposal put forward. The problem – the sexualisation of the subjected subject – starts with suspicion about the sexual nature of the baby’s pleasure in sucking it’s bottle, and proceeds through all our acts, desires and dreams of phallic trains.⁷⁵ This sexualisation, as if in confirmation of Foucault’s observations, has been further highlighted in recent years by the transformation of the English adjective “sexy”, which from its obvious origins has now come to mean anything that is exciting, stimulating, new and original – it has almost come to substitute “good”, at least in the world of publicity and the media which dominates the contemporary imagination. It has also become internationalised as an untranslatable neologism in many languages.

Clearly Freud represented a major turning point in the history of this aspect of the present; and Foucault certainly saw him as a major innovator – as he says, as one who changed the way in which the signs he operates with may be used – but not as *ex novis*, as if out of nowhere. Rather, he saw him as having drawn together and reformulated a whole series of genealogical developments that led to this sexualising of the subject. And Foucault saw his own role in this, as historian of thought, as being that of an excavator of whatever genealogies had led to Freud. As he says, the “history of the deployment of sexuality, as it has evolved since the classical age, can serve as an archeology of psychoanalysis.” (WK, 130) He was not going to take on Freud theoretically, however, as the prime converter of everything long, hard and straightish into a phallus, nor was he going to hazard an attempt at discrediting psychoanalytic theory (apart from digging around its genealogical roots, perhaps) – which has in any case become partially

⁷³ « Michel Foucault, une interview : sexe, pouvoir et la politique de l’identité », *DE*, pp.1556-57

⁷⁴ Partly because they were often interviews for homosexual journals, more oriented towards practice than theory.

⁷⁵ With regard to Freud’s key role in this, Murdoch too, while respecting and drawing on his work, is highly sceptically of the sexualisation of the notion of the human his theories have promoted, as we will see.

“desexualised” over the years, from *within* its leading discourses and practice. Nonetheless, to describe “eroticizing the body” as a principal characteristic of desexualisation, and at the same time never describe any *other* characteristics of desexualisation, leads to some confusion. The word “erotic” for Foucault evokes the notion of *ars erotica*,⁷⁶ of an art of life, which he contrasted with the intrusive science of sexuality; whereas in ordinary usage today the sphere of reference of “erotic” tends not to go beyond that of exciting, as opposed to boring, sex; or its representations. This – many would no doubt agree – is a good thing, but it doesn’t make it any easier to see it as the central practice of a new form of *desexualised* subjectivation.

Halperin notes that “[t]he notion of “desexualisation” is a key one for Foucault, and it has been much misunderstood.”⁷⁷ He points out that Foucault’s use of desexualisation is partly due to the fact that the word “*sexe*” in French, connotes, along with the standard connotations in contemporary English usage, the genital organs. This would leave us with the meaning of “degenitalise” or “devirilise”, rather than desexualise, but this does not really clear up the confusion, as desexualisation, in either language (he discussed it in both), is about desexualising the self for Foucault, that is to say, it is both about rejecting classification on grounds of one’s sexual identity (and gender, if somewhat as an after-thought), and more importantly, about rejecting a form of self-reading, centred on one’s desires, that was self-judgemental. This being the case, whether one’s sexual pleasures are genital-centred or non-genital, genital mortifying as in some S/M practices, foot-fetishist, or whatever, would seem to make little difference to the form of subjectivation Foucault set himself to struggle against – that of a hermeneutics of the self based on the hermeneutics of desire.

His recasting of the term “pleasures” to carry the connotation of “freely chosen”, in juxtaposition with “desires”, which biology and psychology have laden with heavy connotations of being driven by forces outside of our control, is of course legitimate within the bounds of a form of discourse which recognizes that the concepts that we apply to selected bits of a complex reality are merely useful analytical tools, not existential truths. But there is a certain slippage between the two modes in Foucault’s use of these terms, as if to suggest that our choices of our sexual “pleasures” could

⁷⁶ In 1983, in “The Genealogy of Ethics”, EWF1, p.259, Foucault disclaimed what he had written about *ars erotica* in *The History of Sexuality*, saying: “One of the numerous points where I was wrong in that book was what I said about the *ars erotica* [...] The Greeks and Romans did not have any *ars erotica* to be compared with the Chinese *ars erotica* [...]” The disclaimer refers specifically to the Greeks and Romans, but it was also highly questionable in its other references, particularly as regards Indian practices.

⁷⁷ See David Halperin, *Saint Foucault*, p.88

be completely detached from our “desires” and determined intellectually, as an ascetic act of self-creation. This would of course be impossible to establish, and Foucault was not interested in either attempting to establish it, or in getting tangled in the controversy that such a claim, baldly stated, would provoke; but much that he said or wrote on the question tends to suggest this. What is happening, for example, in such sentences – and there are many – as: “What we must work on, it seems to me, is not so much to liberate our desires but to make ourselves infinitely more susceptible to pleasures”? (FWL, 137) This hovers around the borderline between these two uses. If one is familiar with Foucault’s argument in this connection, one will read into this a reference to his entire discourse on the deployment of sexuality and its capacity to incorporate the liberation of desires within its net; but this is an interview in a popular gay magazine *Le Gai Pied*, where not all of his readers can be presumed to think Foucauldian “desire” and “pleasure”. The unanswered question here is: what could it mean to make ourselves infinitely more susceptible to pleasures if one has *not* liberated one’s desires?

This ambiguity serves his experimental purposes, both theoretical and practical. Theoretically the ambiguity serves his own thought experiments, where thinking the impossible, breaking the historical and epistemic taboos on what can be thought, opens up new perspectives from which to read the world and the self. Practically it served the purposes he shared with those of his audience who were engaged in these practices rather than, or as well as, in academic discourse. It indicates a raising of the level of experimentation with bodies and pleasures from the bodily and social to the spiritual level, the level of self-transformation. Certainly Foucault was loved by communities who were stigmatised for their sexual practices, for whom the support of this eminent scholar gave a great sense of dignity. His analysis of counter-conduct has shown that even the least consciously determined resistance can bring about new and less oppressed forms of subjectivation; though perhaps the idea of a spiritual dimension to this, the idea of “self-transformation” needs to be kept for intentional processes – “for what is ethics, if not the practice of freedom, the conscious [*réfléchie*] practice of freedom?” (ECS, 284)

3. Queering the self

Foucault’s theoretical interest in the question of whether it is desire or pleasure that is problematized, together with his rejection of the various problematizations which treat them as a binary pair, dates from the beginnings of his investigations for *The History of Sexuality* in the early

1970s; but it was some time later that he began to see, or at least to discuss publicly, a connection with a new life-style, centred on sexual pleasures, that was at that time emerging in the United States. He used this to make of “bodies and pleasures” one of his various new objectifications, in this case in order to elaborate a discourse for this practice from the perspective of the participants, rather than of the scientific panopticon. This was welcomed, by the relevant community – whether he was actually read or just mythicized (as “Saint Foucault,” as Halperin so aptly put it), and just as he has been demonized elsewhere – to the point where Foucault has become indispensable to the further elaboration of discourse in and on this way of life.

This new identity, new subjectivation, born in the USA and quickly taken up in Europe, Australia, etc. has, however, taken for itself the symbolically more powerful sign of “queer”, leaving “bodies and pleasures” to the academics. “Queer”, which is applicable as an adjective (in standard English) to all oddity, but has for some decades been used as a disparaging noun to refer to homosexuals, has thus been reclaimed as a source of pride, rather than shame. In this sense, the queer movement follows very closely the lines laid down by “black pride” and “gay pride”, which had made giant strides in reclaiming the equal human dignity of those people that had been denied it.⁷⁸ In so doing, however, they had to some extent “normalized” themselves. Instead, the adoption of a queer identity, which incorporates a whole range of sexual practices and behaviours that confound the linking of identity to both gender and life-style – cross-dressing, camp, transsexuality, s/m, etc. –reclaims “abnormality”, again rejecting normalization⁷⁹; though there is a sense in which this quest for the acceptability of the “abnormal,” construed as defence and promotion of the enormous variation of human ways of being, extends the boundaries of the “normal”, making them very inclusive and elastic. (One wonders what Foucault would have had to say on the current international gay objective of the recognition of marriage.)

As a form of subjectivation, however, queering is much more radical than the claim of equality (normality) and civil rights. It requires much more honesty with oneself to reclaim difference than to reclaim sameness, and honesty requires courage. To “come out” as gay or lesbian takes courage, to come out as “queer” even more so, and this is surely the reason why Foucault saw much more potential for self-reconstruction in these practices than in the claims for civil rights; and yet at no stage does he tell us what – besides bodies and pleasures, which must be the easy part – the considerable self-work required for this transformation consists in. There seems to be a

⁷⁸ And which, in changing forms, continue to evolve.

⁷⁹ The feminist movement, active throughout the period and similarly responsible for introducing new forms of subjectivation, was more concerned with challenging “normality” than with normalization.

fundamental contradiction in the notion of freeing ourselves from self-definition based on “sexuality” (understood as labels corresponding to drives – hetero, homo, S/M, undersexed, frigid, oversexed, nymphomaniac, etc.) by the *sole* instrument of exploring our bodies and pleasures, with no need of any other techniques of the self, designed to further the self-transformation process that may be thus set in motion. “Coming out” can itself clearly be seen as a form of courageous truth-speaking, to the world and to oneself; as an important contemporary form of the ethical practice of *parrhesia*, the self-work which was to occupy Foucault so centrally in his final years, but in a different context; and yet he never explicitly makes this connection.

In terms not only of liberation, but crucially of self-construction, the case could be made that this *parrhesia* of coming out was ultimately far more self-transforming than bodies and pleasures.

Foucault does tell us that these body practices engender the establishment of communities, and new forms of friendship among their members; presenting them, therefore, as central to a new lifestyle in which one can freely construct oneself, and thus as the complementary social dimension to this form of subjectivation. Along with the (outer, individual) level of sexual practice and the (inner, individual) ethical level of self-work, there is thus this third level of social practice. In discussions on this, however, he appears to rely on our contemporary “common knowledge” that individuals derive strength and therefore courage from not being alone, in their ideas and in their practices; but he never undertook, or perhaps never had time to undertake, a scholarly study of this nascent form of subjectivation; and therefore never explored the two-way nature of the connections between private pleasures and community practices in contemporary reality. Nor did he ever draw directly on his extensive studies of Greek problematisations of the ethics of private pleasure and community relations. “Bodies and pleasures” is thus left carrying the responsibility for this work of self-reconstruction, a burden that seems too heavy for such a limited (if intense) practice.

4. Theory and practice

In the practices of gay and lesbian communities, the notion of bodies and pleasures has been joyfully taken up, but theoretically it has remained in limbo; as neither a fully-fledged theory, nor as the idea of one moment that will be discarded in another. This is because Foucault left it, at his death, at the stage of a sketch of an idea that would have to be thoroughly explored to determine

its operative potential. It would therefore be unfair to accuse Foucault of theoretical inadequacy on grounds of work he was unable to complete; but at the same time the problems with this idea require attention. “The rallying point [...] ought not to be sex-desire, but bodies and pleasures.” (WK 157) This juxtaposition of sex-desire and bodies and pleasures is evidently a juxtaposition of bodily driven “desire” and – despite the Foucauldian shifting of “bodies” from the one camp to the other – mentally determined “pleasures”. It is the individual and interpersonal imagination that invents and experiments with pleasures, not the deep, dark compulsion driving desire. But he is not suggesting some kind of ontological separation of desire and pleasure. Foucault’s major philosophical battle, running through all his work, was with the kind of essentialism that presents concepts as substances, as if “madness” or “sexuality” or “desire” or “pleasure” were universal realities that take on different historical forms. He insists that his entire method is nominalist, seeing concepts as meshes of historically specific discourses that need to be unravelled and understood in context, without any universal substance lurking beneath them.

The great difficulty here is that he uses ordinary words with non-ordinary sets of connotations, selecting the connotations useful to him, and substituting others, so that he *appears* to be creating new universals – Foucauldian sexuality is not “sexuality”, Foucauldian discipline is not “discipline”, Foucauldian pleasure is not “pleasure”, they are not their ordinary uses, but they *are* something else. That something else, in the case of the way “bodies and pleasure” is used as an injunction, may merely be a reference to a nascent historical practice that can be used strategically to counter the prevailing form of subjectivation - the hermeneutics of desire; and thereby to initiate a new one; but treating desire and pleasure *as if* they were two different things, rather than different modalities of description, leaves a world of problems – theoretical and practical – without any answers. Theoretically, if we are to abandon the bio-psychological notion of desire, with its outdated but persistent aura of guilt and sin, do we not need another notion of desire, in relation to the new notion of pleasure? Foucault says that “for centuries, people in general – but also doctors, psychiatrists and even the liberation movements – have always spoken of desire, and never of pleasure. “We must liberate our desire” they say. No! We must create new pleasures. Then perhaps desire will follow.” (DE, 1557) But is this then a different “desire”? And at the practical level, if the current mode of subjection has me experiencing my choice of pleasures as determined by my desires, do I not have to unlearn this mode of self-reading before I can believe that I can freely choose my pleasures? Is the intellectual decision to do so sufficient in and of itself to bring about a change in my subjectivation? In all his discussions of the relation of the self to itself,

Foucault never addressed these problems. He drew upon the Greeks, however, to reinforce his argument.

In contrast to medieval Christianity and to psychology – throughout its short history – both of which problematized desire almost exclusively, he shows that the Greeks problematized pleasures (he comments on different forms of problematization in Plato, Xenophenes, Aristotle, the Stoics, Epicureans, etc., providing many convincing examples⁸⁰). But while it is clearly true that the Greeks problematized pleasures, especially sexual pleasures, it is also true that much of that problematization had to do with their relation to existing ethical codes, and the kinds of moral balancing acts that the contradictions inherent in the satisfaction of their desires in the light of those codes involved. As Foucault says: “The goal of moral reflection on the *aphrodisia* was [...] to work out the conditions and modalities of a “use”; that is, to define a style for what the Greeks called *chresis aphrodision*, the uses of pleasure.” (UP, 53) Foucault specifically contrasts this with moral reflection designed to “establish a systematic code that would determine the canonical forms of sexual acts, trace out the boundary of the prohibitions” (Ibid.) etc. in other words, with Christian asceticism; but the context of these “uses of pleasure” was not the furtherance of enjoyment, as this juxtaposition might suggest – which seems to have been Foucault’s original working hypothesis –but sexual austerity, as he came to understand in the course of his studies. The problematic was always how to restrict sexual activity, keep it, at most, to what was considered a healthy regime, under the sign of moderation. This was of course a fairly rudimentary form of self-work, and we have seen how Foucault traced it through its deontological forms in early antiquity, through to its more ascetic forms in Hellenistic and Roman times.

The interesting question, however, is the connection between theory – in this case theoretical understanding of the way in which our thoughts shape our pleasures and desires – and ethical practice, a question at the forefront of both Epicurean and Stoic ascesis, but one that Foucault does not explore. There is a curious mismatch between his insightful discussion of Stoic conceptions of the self as *subject* (discussed in Ch. 5), where he shows their unitary conception of body and soul, and his shallower discussion of the techniques they use in relation to their pleasures and desires, where the *practices* in which this unitary conception – that is to say, where its significance as a *mode* of subjectivation is revealed – is disregarded. In effect, he describes (backing what he says, as is his scholarly practice, with detailed presentations) mostly those self-repressive practices that

⁸⁰ In particular in the three volumes of *The History of Sexuality*.

undoubtedly existed, but formed only a part (the most violent, the least refined, therefore possibly for beginners rather than adepts) of the techniques of the self elaborated by Stoics.

In various texts and interviews, he reiterates the view that, for the Stoics:

the problem is to learn through the teaching of a number of truths and doctrines, some of which are fundamental principles while others are rules of conduct. You must proceed in such a way that these principles tell you, in each situation, and, as it were spontaneously, how to conduct yourself. It is here that one encounters a metaphor that comes not from the Stoics but from Plutarch: “You must learn the principles in such a constant way that whenever your desires, appetites and fears awake like barking dogs, the *logos* will speak like the voice of the master who silences his dogs with a single cry.” Here we have the idea of a *logos* functioning, as it were, without any intervention on your part; you have become the *logos*, or the *logos* has become you. (ECS, 285-286)

This view, which presents Stoic practice as a form of self-programming, undoubtedly corresponds to one aspect of that practice: that of the necessity, in a basically oral tradition, of committing to memory the wise words that one hopes will guide one’s life; but with regard to working with one’s pleasures or desires, it is the only aspect of Stoic practice Foucault treats extensively, and the relation to the self it determines is one of the imposition of the will on one’s desires – not at all the reflective problematization of pleasure he was looking for. Such a problematization did indeed exist, the Stoics were indeed concerned with observing the work of the imagination in determining what was pleasurable, but their response was not merely one of the superimposition of a set of self-programmed principles, thus constraining desire. It was rather one of activating the intellect, through reflection on one’s representations of pleasure, in such a way that one’s desire itself would change, from the inside, as it were, rather than by imposition of the will, governed by a separate reason. In *this* sense one would become the *logos*, not by commanding oneself like a dog. This particular comment of Plutarch’s, seems to suggest that the Stoics saw the passions as one thing, like Plato’s unruly black horse, and the *logos* (as reason), as the charioteer, but this is not the case, and Foucault had elsewhere clarified the differences between the Platonic and Stoic conceptions. Plutarch himself wrote in different styles, either for different audiences or with a different focus, thus he also writes of the Stoics that: “they affirm that passion itself is reason, but depraved and vicious reason, which, as a result of bad and mistaken judgement, grows strong and vigorous.”⁸¹ In this perspective, working with one’s passions was thus construed as self-work that was *internal* to reason, involving reflecting on one’s judgements of pleasure and pain, and reformulating them. The memorized principles were of use in this, but in their *reflective* application to *each* judgement, in all its particularity. Pleasure in what life offered one spontaneously – beauty, health, security,

⁸¹ Plutarch, *On Moral Virtue*, 3, 441c, quoted in Hadot, *IC*, op.cit, p.108

random acts of kindness, etc. – was not a problem for the Stoics; what was problematized were precisely those pleasures that *were* seen as driven by desire, not chosen, and the pains that were driven by aversion, and the ethical consequences of succumbing to the unreflective representation of such pleasures and pains; for the unreflective life (and the unreflective desire) was not worth living.

There are of course pleasures that occur by chance or through a decision to experiment, that have no connection to a pre-existing desire, and Foucault proposes, as a technique of the self, experimenting with untried bodily pleasures – to see where it might take you – but if perchance it takes you to new desires, he is silent as to how this technique may then evolve. This is of course entirely consistent on a practical level with his rejection of the role of philosopher-prophet, of the philosopher stipulating solutions;⁸² and the second step he did envisage was in fact a lateral one, into the formation of communities around these pleasures, and forms of friendship. But whereas this stance legitimately releases him from offering practical solutions, it does not release him from the requirement of theoretical coherence regarding what pleasure not driven by desire can actually mean.

There was, for example, a form of theoretically coherent “pleasure” without desire for the Stoics, though this was never an objective in itself, merely a result of pursuing one’s only objective of a life lived in virtue⁸³ guided by reason. Seneca says:

Pleasure is not a reward for virtue, nor its cause, but is something added on to it. Virtue is not chosen because it causes pleasure, but if it *is* chosen, it *does* cause pleasure. (Cited in IC, 240)

The absolute and necessary key to this pleasure without desire was in *not* seeking it, was freedom from attachment; just as the key to pain without aversion was not running from it.⁸⁴ How is this possible? It requires a whole series of techniques, which can also be read, as Foucault tends to read them, as techniques of self-mastery within the framework of care of the self. What he calls “the Socratic imperative: ‘Take care of yourself’ which means ‘Found yourself in freedom, by mastering yourself.’ ” (DE, 1548). If the ultimate goal is wisdom and virtue however (and not,

⁸² “I never behave like a prophet – my books don’t tell people what to do. And they often reproach me for not doing so (and maybe they are right), and at the same time they reproach me for behaving like a prophet” (WK, 131)

⁸³ Robin Campbell, in the Introduction to his translation of Seneca’s Letters, writes that through Stoic practice, “we shall arrive at the true end of man, happiness, through having attained the one and only good thing in life, the ideal or goal called *arete* in Greek and in Latin *virtus* – for which the English word ‘virtue’ is so unsatisfactory a translation. This, the *summum bonum* or ‘supreme ideal’, is usually summarized in ancient philosophy as a combination of four qualities: wisdom (or moral insight), courage, self-control and justice (or upright dealing).” pp.15-16

⁸⁴ The Stoics loved these paradoxes, see also Seneca’s Letter LXII “the shortest route to wealth is the contempt of wealth” Seneca, *Letters from a Stoic*, p.16

clearly, if the goal is mastery over others within the State), then self-mastery means freedom from desire and aversion. And in effect, many of what Foucault calls the techniques of the self in antiquity were more to do with dismantling the pre-constituted self – with subjecting one’s ideas and impulses to merciless scrutiny – than with constructing a new one. The new self – like pleasure that is a by-product of virtue – tends to be conceived more as something that *follows* upon freeing oneself from the notions in which the old self is trapped than something intentionally constructed. This desire (if I may use the word) of Foucault’s to envision a process of self-construction without any acknowledgement of the need, precisely in the interests of that self-construction, to go through a process of dismantling the old self, comes through in all of his work, on sexuality and on other forms of relation to self, in interpretations of ancient philosophy and modern movements alike.

5. Liberation and self-construction

Foucault regarded sexual liberation movements as right in their immediate objectives of freeing one’s self, one’s relations and one’s life from repression, but wrong in overestimating what such liberation could achieve. The leading theorists of liberation⁸⁵ were, he thought, fundamentally mistaken in thinking that these immediate objectives would lead to freeing the self of one of its major obstacles, because they continued to see sexuality, sex-desire (now liberated, and possibly even more demanding) as central to one’s being. He did not deny the fact that the lives of so many, homosexual and heterosexual, were blighted by sexual misery, but was reluctant to attribute this to repression, and he admits that he has not discussed this in his work. When questioned on it he replied “You are right: we all live more or less in a state of sexual misery. That being said, it is true that this lived experience is never dealt with in my book [*History of Sexuality*].” (NSR, 258) He goes on to explain that: “It is not a question of denying sexual misery, but nor is it about explaining it negatively, by repression. The whole problem is to grasp the positive mechanisms which, in producing sexuality in such or such a way, bring about effects of misery.” (Ibid.)

What he means by this is that the sexual repression of modern times is not the *objective* of the power that brings it about, but rather a kind of by-product of its operations. He gives an example from an earlier period of modernity, that of the repression of infantile masturbation which took place at the beginning of the eighteenth century, and asks: “Must we admit that children’s

⁸⁵ He was reluctant to name names other than in the case of Reich, (see WK, 5)

masturbation suddenly became unacceptable for a developing capitalist society? This is the hypothesis of certain “Reichians” of late. It does not seem to me satisfactory.” (Ibid.) What was important in his view was rather the reorganization and intensification of relationships between children and adults: “it was childhood as the nursery of future populations. At the crossroads of body and soul, of health and morality, of education and training, children’s sex became both a target and an instrument of power. [...] The sexual misery of childhood and adolescence, of which our own generations have not yet freed themselves, derives from this, but this misery was not the aim; the objective was not prohibition. It was to constitute, through child sexuality which had suddenly become important and mysterious, a network of power over childhood.” (Ibid.)

This may well be true, and it may have required Foucault to draw attention to it, but the argument is strangely “structural” and rigid, as if he was arguing with the Reichians on their own ground of primary historical causes and secondary effects – with power and control as the objective, and repression as the by-product – instead of adhering to his more usual critical practice of undermining the theoretical ground itself by demonstrating the complex interweaving of causes and effects of knowledge-power from above, below, sideways and from multiple contingencies. A more “Foucauldian” methodology might have given more importance to repression as a phenomenon in its own right, regardless of its ancillary role in other mechanisms of power; and by the same token, perhaps more importance to liberation struggles in the context of the relations of the self to itself. And this without detracting from his main point, that liberating ourselves from this repression would not free us from entrapment in reading ourselves as primarily sexual subjects.

In pressing home this point, however, he again overlooks the need, in any process of self-construction, to deconstruct the self that is already there. Underlying the notion of liberation from *repression* (and differing from sister struggles of liberation from *oppression* in this), he found the ontological notion of a “true self” requiring liberation; but unlike a Platonic true self that was free of all desire except the spiritual, this *psychological* true self was still attached to its sexual desire. For Foucault there was of course no true self, there was always self in relation to the particularities of a life, and the objective was rather a truthful self, conscious and self-directed. Our individual subjectivation, or self-formation, could either be dependent on conditioning, on the objectifications that our particular historical and social situation inculcate in us, or we could stand back from these objectifications (such as sexuality, perversity etc.), liberate ourselves from them, and choose other objectifications, (such as “bodies and pleasures”, queerness, etc.), for ourselves.

(He did not address the fact that people do not “choose” to be hetero or homosexual.). This latter move, the important one if one is concerned with constructing, rather than liberating the self as Foucault was, may well have occurred as a consequence of the process of liberation, but by chance, rather than intention, in the way that all counter-conduct opens up new existential possibilities, and this did not go far enough for Foucault. He wanted to overturn what he saw as a limited, negative paradigm of repression-liberation, and replace it with an open-ended, positive paradigm of inventive oppressive power, and inventive, transformative resistance.

Self-construction requires that one’s acts, one’s life be determined intentionally, and certainly in his own life, Foucault did just that. He was bored by small talk and did not do dinner parties. He was interested in intense limit experiences, experiences that threatened to break down the pre-constituted self, and he did those.⁸⁶ The manner in which he experienced and intervened in the political realities of his time was utterly original, and reflected the values he had chosen for himself – the commitment to truth and truth-speaking above all – at whatever cost, and the costs in terms of the attacks he was subjected to were high. He was a philosopher in his own terms, almost unheard of in his day, which required philosophy to be a constant practice of questioning all received views, and of self-questioning. And he meant “bodies and pleasures” to recuperate the body – neglected by philosophy, tormented by religion, and colonized by science; and recuperate a human interest in sexual pleasures, somehow, but never clearly, detaching them from desire.

But this is the rhetoric, and the only way Foucault in fact recuperated “bodies” *theoretically* was as objects of pleasure, not in the much more profound sense in which the eternally problematic mind/body dualism of the West was addressed in Stoic or Epicurean discourse, for example. “Bodies *and* pleasures” therefore really indicates “bodies *as or for* pleasures”, and the one important concept it contains is the Foucauldian notion of pleasure as consciously chosen, not driven by desire. The ancillary question of the body’s colonization by science was a separate problem which he had analysed in the context of disciplinary and regulatory society.⁸⁷ He did not however put forward ideas for, for example, dealing with the hyper-medicalization of the body

⁸⁶ He writes: “some drugs are really important for me because they are the mediation to those incredibly intense joys that I am looking for, and that I am not able to experience, to afford by myself. I’m not able to give myself and others those middle-range pleasures that make up everyday life. Such pleasures are nothing for me, and I am not able to organize my life in order to make place for them. That’s the reason why I’m not a social being, why I’m not really a cultural being, why I’m so boring in my everyday life.” (ISR, 129)

⁸⁷ *Discipline and Punish, Security, Territory, Population, Abnormal*, etc.

today, as feminist theorists have done and continue to do, nor, having analysed them genealogically, did he express continued interest in such specific questions of bio-power.

His notorious antagonism to the movements of sexual liberation was, however, greatly overstated by his political opponents. What he most objected to in relation to these movements was their manifestation of the strength of the Freudian-Marxist paradigm he saw as ubiquitous in the time of his own intellectual development in the 1950s and 1960s, both in the universities and in the theoretical sphere of political opposition to any and all forms of oppression. And he saw Wilhelm Reich as pivotal in this:

between the two world wars there was formed, around Reich, the historico-political critique of sexual repression. The importance of this critique and its impact on reality were substantial. But the very possibility of its success was tied to the fact that it always unfolded within the deployment of sexuality, and not outside or against it. The fact that so many things were able to change in the sexual behaviour of Western societies without any of the promises or political conditions predicted by Reich being realized is sufficient proof that this whole sexual “revolution,” this whole “antirepressive” struggle, represented *nothing more, -but nothing less* – and its importance is undeniable – than a *tactical shift and reversal* in the great deployment of sexuality. But it is also apparent why one could not expect this critique to be the grid for a history of that very deployment. Nor the basis for a movement to dismantle it. (WK, 131, my emphases)

I have quoted this passage in its entirety because it shows many things about Foucault’s non-ordinary use of language, and the trouble he invites upon himself through it.⁸⁸ A “tactical shift” in ordinary language is something that *maintains* a particular strategy, not reverses it, so how can something be both “a tactical shift *and* [a] reversal in the great deployment of sexuality”? – only by having two different subjects for the two objects. He has shown that the “reversal” – sexual liberation instead of repression – still leaves us with a form of subjection based on sex-desire, and *as such* constitutes merely a tactical shift in the deployment of sexuality, but in whose tactics? Liberation is the objective of the *actual* persons in struggle, whereas the “tactical shift” is attributable to no one in particular, other, that is, than to the “deployment” itself. But Foucault himself has shown us that this “deployment” is an abstraction that covers multiple forms of agency, or of power-knowledge, that are uncoordinated among themselves, except by the chance coordination of their historical (and therefore epistemic) simultaneity. The linking of “tactical shift and reversal” therefore *appears* to attribute the maintenance of the deployment of sexuality to the sexual “revolution” itself, justifying the scepticism about its revolutionary nature that his use of inverted commas (“antirepressive”) suggests. This is clearly going to upset a lot of people, straight

⁸⁸ Edward Said, for example, in *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (1983), wrote: “Resistance cannot equally be an adversarial alternative to power and a dependent function of it, except in some metaphysical, ultimately trivial sense [...] The disturbing circularity of Foucault’s theory of power is a form of theoretical overtotalization. [...]” Quoted in Halperin, op.cit. p.21.

and gay, who give so much of their lives to this struggle, and see it as fundamentally life-changing. The statement that this struggle represents “nothing more, – but nothing less” than this, concedes that “its importance is undeniable”, but is structured so as to emphasize the derogatory “nothing more”.

The real target here is not, however, those participating in these struggles, of whom he genuinely approved, though he did not make this clear; but the theory which links the changes in “sexual behaviour” to “the political conditions predicted by Reich”. In this perspective, “all types of subjection are nothing but derived phenomena, the consequences of other economic and social processes: the forces of production, class conflict and ideological structures that determine the type of subjectivity one has recourse to.”⁸⁹ But for Foucault, whereas these “mechanisms of exploitation and domination” must be taken into account, the “mechanisms of submission did not constitute simply the ‘terminal’ [...] of other, more fundamental mechanisms. They entertain complex and circular relations with other forms.” (Ibid.) In other words, for Foucault, power and knowledge do not line up as base structures and superstructures in (dialectically) contrasting blocks, but they interact continuously in multiple ways, so that resistance must drop its dogmatism, and instead pay attention to all the apparently minor shifts in knowledge and in relations of power.

From this derives his own criterion of political practice: “I think that the ethico-political choice we have to make every day is to determine which is the main danger.” (GE, 256) The example he gives of this – from another context, that of psychiatry – refers to a critique of the anti-psychiatry movement (Robert Castel’s *La Gestion des risques*). He says: “I agree completely with what Castel says, but that does not mean, as some people suppose, that the mental hospitals were better than anti-psychiatry; that does not mean that we were not right to criticize those hospitals. I think it was good to do that because they were the danger. And now it’s quite clear that the danger has changed. For instance in Italy they have closed all the mental hospitals and there are more free clinics, and so on – and they have new problems.” (Ibid.) This is a political practice that requires close attention to the way everything changes everything, adapting strategies to the constantly changing dynamics of knowledge-power, domain by domain, rather than interpreting the changes through fixed schema applied to all domains.

In the domain of sexuality, Foucault certainly recognized that there had been “a veritable process of liberation at the beginning of the 1970s. This process was very beneficial, as regards the situation itself and as regards mentalities, but the situation has not stabilised. We must still, I think,

⁸⁹ “Le sujet et le pouvoir”, *DE*, p.1047

take a step forward. And I believe that one of the factors of this stabilisation will be the creation of new forms of life, of relationships, of friendship, in society, in art and culture; new forms will be established through our sexual, ethical and political choices.”⁹⁰ Struggles against submission, marginalisation or abnormalisation have taken myriad forms, but among them there is one particular form which does win Foucault’s approval. This is how he describes it: “by taking literally the discourses [of their oppressors], and turning them around, we see responses appearing in the form of a challenge: all right, we are what you say we are, by nature, sickness or perversion, as you wish. Well then, if that’s what we are, let us be it, and if you want to know what we are, we’ll tell you ourselves, better than you.” (NSR, 260) He gives as an example of this the homosexual literature which appeared at the end of the nineteenth century: “think of Wilde or Gide. It is the strategic reversal of the same will to truth.” (Ibid. 261) And with regard to women, who have been, he says, told for centuries: “ ‘You are nothing but your sex’ – [...] [n]ow the feminist movements have taken up the challenge, We are sex by nature? All right, let us be so, but in the singularity [of that nature], in its irreducible specificity. Let us draw the consequences and reinvent our own type of existence, political, economic, cultural [...] always the same move: starting from this sexuality in which they are colonised and coming through it towards other affirmations.” (Ibid.)

Foucault is surely right to appreciate this creative, self-creative form of struggle against the submission of subjectivity; but within the homosexual and women’s movements, this form of struggle – involving the creation of a separate life-style – is still relatively marginal compared to struggles for assimilation to society. Both women and homosexuals have for the most part rejected their marginalisation, rather than made an art of life out of it, denying significant difference in favour of equal dignity, equal normality, equal rights. And these paths too lead to important changes in the forms of lived subjectivity. Perhaps the link between these two forms of struggle is “pride”, holding one’s head up high as what one is, as a political subject and a subject of one’s own life, in the sense given to it first by “I am black and I am proud”, and then by gay pride. A sense which could be read as remarkably Humean in its connection of the feeling of pride to the sense of self. Hume, who already in the eighteenth century held the same view as Foucault on the non-existence of a *substantial* self, differs from Foucault’s anti-naturalism in that he believed that our sense of self was coextensive with the passions of pride and humility, which he saw as products of our nature, whereas for Foucault the sense of self emerges in our relation to the prevailing mode (or modes) of subjection, or to our resistance to this. Hume wrote:

⁹⁰ DE, p1555

we must suppose, that nature has given to the organs of the human mind, a certain disposition fitted to produce a peculiar impression or emotion, which we call *pride* : To this emotion she has assign'd a certain idea, *viz.* that of *self*, which it never fails to produce.⁹¹

Hume contrasted “pride” with “humility”, but what he meant by humility is much closer to what in twentieth, or twenty-first century English we would now call shame.⁹² To feel either pride or shame was to be conscious of ourselves for Hume, hence it is clearly better if our self-consciousness is one of pride, and not of shame. And both for women, who for centuries, if they showed any intelligence were considered to have a man’s brain in a woman’s (shameful) body, and for homosexuals, who for centuries were considered the epitome of shame, pride in one’s identity did indeed herald a major shift in one’s subjectivation; though this political and ethical move clearly does require, and was not generally given, a specifically Humean or naturalistic perspective.

Within the homosexual ghettos in the 1970s however, but breaking out, a whole section of the gay movement was very much concerned with equality, and civil rights. Of necessity, because in the USA the increasing tendency to come out of the closet had provoked a backlash in the shape of a forceful, concerted attack on their very survival, taking different forms in different states. In California in 1978, this took the form of Proposition 6⁹³ – an attempt on the part of homophobic “moral” crusaders to have all homosexuals thrown out of teaching and a whole series of other jobs. The campaign against it, led by the heroic Harvey Milk, the first openly gay political office-holder in the USA (Member of San Francisco’s Board of Supervisors) was a textbook example of a struggle against submission. But it required for its success an absolute insistence on *normality*, and it was magnificently fought and won. What this meant, according to so many of those who participated in it, was the real possibility of coming out, and holding one’s gay head up high. It meant pride in the most wholesome sense of self-respect that Hume gives it, not the facile, egotistical pride of those whom society has placed in a position of privilege. This in itself is, of course, no justification of Hume’s theory, which is not at issue here, but it introduces an interesting dimension to certain forms of subjectivation constructed through resistance.

Outside the ghettos, gender-identity and identity by sexual orientation were both being undermined in the 1970s by androgenous figures implanted in the popular imagination, like David

⁹¹Hume, *Treatise of Human Nature*, Prometheus Books, 1992 (1740), Book II, Part I, sec-V, p.287.

⁹² Various authors have noted that although the term Hume uses to indicate the opposite of pride is “humility”, given the way he describes its functioning, it in fact corresponds more to the passion of *shame*. See, for example, David Wiggins, *Ethics. Twelve Lectures on the Philosophy of Morality*, London, Penguin, 2006.

⁹³ A Proposition to change State law, banning homosexuals from a series of jobs.

Bowie, and Pattie Smith (as photographed by that extraordinary icon-maker - of the *self*-possessed androgenous woman, and of the gorgeous male body – Robert Mapplethorpe); and in the 80s and 90s, after Foucault’s death, by “idols” of mass culture, like Prince and Michael Jackson, mixing images of pretty boy, prima donna and polymorphous sexuality (as well as racial stereotypes – that other identity straightjacket). As Prince’s song, *Controversy*, puts it so clearly:

Am I black or white? Am I straight or gay? - *Controversy*
Do I believe in god? Do I believe in me? – *Controversy*
I can’t understand human curiosity – *Controversy*
Was it good for you? Was I what you wanted me to be? - *Controversy*

The late twentieth century in the Western world offered so many of these instances of fundamental change in the conception of the sexualised subject and mode of subjection (to the increasing horror of Islamic and Christian conservatisms, and other identity-fixing modes of subjection), that it seems surprising that Foucault commented so little on them, not even, at least on record, on the epoch-changing struggle of Harvey Milk and the gay community of San Francisco. It is true, as Foucault says, that sexual liberation remains within the discourse on sexuality, but it fundamentally changes the way that discourse is put together, and this he did not recognise. In particular with regard to the characteristic of guilt, so crucial to the hermeneutic of desire, that confession fomented, and psychoanalysis tries to dismantle. If liberation can strike a blow at guilt, the rock on which the hermeneutics of desire is constructed, is not this the demolition that will allow for the recreation of the self? He asks: “does it make any sense to say, ‘Let’s liberate our sexuality’? Isn’t the problem rather that of defining the practices of freedom by which one could define what is sexual pleasure and erotic, amorous and passionate relationships with others? This ethical problem of the definition of practices of freedom, it seems to me, is much more important than the rather repetitive affirmation that sexuality or desire must be liberated.” (ECS, 283) But can it not also be argued that *definitions* of the practices of freedom by which we can *define* what is sexual pleasure and erotic, etc. – are something we can do without?

Halperin, in taking up Foucault’s theme of freedom as positive, as “freedom to”, rather than merely as the liberatory negative of “freedom from”, writes: “If to come out is to release oneself from a state of unfreedom, that is not because coming out constitutes an escape from the reach of power: rather coming out puts into play a different set of power relations and alters the dynamics of personal and political struggle. *Coming out is an act of freedom, then, not in the sense of liberation but in the sense of resistance.*” (SF, 30) Coming out is certainly resistance, but it is *also*,

and not insignificantly, liberation, and *both* are self-forming acts. Resistance is an exercise of courage and political will, liberation is the joy of it, the space in which to be one's new self.

Ch. 5 The Aesthetics of Existence

1. Love and friendship

Foucault did not thematise “love”, and almost never speaks of it except in reference to its place in certain Greek conceptions; instead he speaks of friendship as the ideal form of relationship, in which love can flourish, and an aesthetics of existence can be created. The long quotation below, from what was considered an authoritative Romantic work on love, Stendhal's *Love* of 1821, reveals, through Stendhal's attempts at definition, some important ways “love” was objectified in early nineteenth century Europe. Stendhal's reflections are situated along the same axis as Foucault's discussion of “bodies and pleasures”; they are concerned, that is, with the attitude we have to our pleasures seen as shaping the attitude we have to our lives. Here too is an aesthetics of existence, but of a very different kind:

I want to establish exactly what this passion is, whose every genuine manifestation is characterized by beauty. There are four different kinds of love:

1. Passionate Love. This was the love of the Portuguese nun, that of Heloise for Abelard [...]
 2. Mannered Love, which flourished in Paris about 1760, [...] A stylized painting this, where the rosy hues extend into the shadows, where there is no place for anything at all unpleasant – for that would be a breach of etiquette, of good taste, of delicacy, and so forth. A man of breeding will know in advance all the rituals he must meet and observe in the various stages of this kind of love [...] Admittedly, if you take away vanity, there is very little left of mannered love, and the poor weakened invalid can hardly drag itself along.
 3. Physical Love. You are hunting; you come across a handsome young peasant girl who takes to her heels through the woods. Everyone knows the love that springs from this kind of pleasure, and however desiccated and miserable you may be, this is where your love-life begins at sixteen.
 4. Vanity love. The great majority of men, especially in France, both desire and possess a fashionable woman, much in the way one might own a fine horse – as a luxury befitting a young man. Vanity, a little flattered and a little piqued, leads to enthusiasm. Sometimes there is physical love, but not always; often even physical pleasure is lacking. [...] Although physical pleasure, being natural, is known to all⁹⁴, it is only of secondary importance to sensitive, passionate people. [...]
- Some virtuous and sensitive women are almost unaware of the idea of physical pleasure; they have so rarely [...] exposed themselves to it, and in fact the raptures of passionate love have practically effaced the memory of bodily delights.⁹⁵

Mannered love, by Stendhal's own admission, virtually collapses into Vanity love, so we have three kinds of love: the passionate (rarely physical), the physical (rarely passionate) and,

⁹⁴ “all” refers, of course, to men, the model of humankind. The sub-category of women may (as follows above), or may not be referred to.

⁹⁵ Stendhal, *Love*, London, Penguin, 1975, pp.43-44

mannered-vanity love. This latter forms a continuum of which the positive pole is an aesthetics of existence, deemed to enshrine “sensibility” and refinement (as does passionate love), the negative is its foppish parody. Reading this classification in twenty-first century Europe, what is immediately shocking is what amounts to a description of rape presented as the most “normal” of practices; the right of exaction of upper caste boys on lower caste girls, made more humiliating by the paltry value put on “the act”, and compared to the “passionate” love accorded to women of the same caste. Caste, because it is by one’s “blood” that one’s rank is established, but more than that, because the lower classes are virtually dehumanized, as they must be to be so treated. The very same act that would be a heinous crime against a “lady”, is merely an amusement when committed against a “peasant girl”, because “nobility” comes in the blood, without good blood, good family stock, one may be hunted as an alternative to grouse. Nonetheless, even the lady may be possessed, “as a luxury befitting a young man.” The aesthetics of existence that contains all three forms is one in which sensibility to the beautiful, in art, manners and nature, is paramount. Nature “red in tooth and claw” is simply excluded, along with any sensibility the poor peasant girl might have to being brutalized. This society, a residual version of what Foucault calls the “society of blood,” (WK, 147) owed its survival, in transitory form, to the aspirations of the rising bourgeoisie to mix their blood and their manners with aristocracy. Before then, Foucault writes, the

blood relation had remained an important element in the mechanisms of power, its manifestations and its rituals. For [such] a society [...] blood constituted one of the fundamental values. It owed its high value at the same time to its instrumental role (the ability to shed blood), to the way it functioned in the order of signs (to have a certain blood, to be of the same blood, to be prepared to risk one’s blood), and also its precariousness (easily spilled, [...] too readily mixed, capable of being quickly corrupted), A society of blood [...] where power spoke through blood: the honor of war, the fear of famine, the triumph of death, the sovereign with his sword, executioners, and tortures; blood was *a reality with a symbolic function*. We, on the other hand are in a society of ‘sex,’ or rather a society ‘with a sexuality’: the mechanisms of power are addressed to the body, to life, to what causes it to proliferate, to what reinforces the species, its stamina, its ability to dominate, or its capacity for being used. (Ibid.)

As Foucault puts it however, despite the “new procedures of power that were devised in the classical age and employed in the nineteenth century”; and “[w]hile it is true that the analytics of sexuality and the symbolics of blood were grounded at first in two very distinct regimes of power, in actual fact the passage from one to the other did not come about [...] without overlappings, interactions, and echoes.” (WK, 149) Stendhal lived and wrote in the intermediary period between these two societies, with their different symbolics, while the society of blood was in steep historical decline, displaced by the rise of democracy and the incursion of the state in the life of body and mind. Foucault’s detailed studies of these incursions, of particular genealogical lines of

knowledge-power, have meant, inevitably, that he has been able to analyse only some of the multifold “overlappings, interactions and echoes”. His methods are premised on the fact that this is an inevitable consequence of any choice as to where to draw the (always artificial) boundaries around an object of historical study.

What he does, however, draw attention to, is the nightmare that occurred when the population controls of the disciplinary society, in its most advanced form, fused with a revival of the symbolics of blood, in Nazism. “Nazism was doubtless the most cunning and the most naive ... combination of the fantasies of blood and the paroxysms of a disciplinary power. A eugenic ordering of society, with all that implied in the way of extension and intensification of micro-powers, in the guise of an unrestricted state control (*étatisation*), was accompanied by the oneiric exaltation of a superior blood [...] It is an irony of history that the Hitlerite politics of sex remained an insignificant practice while the myth of blood was transformed into the greatest bloodbath in recent memory.” (WK, 149-50)

Foucault’s comments on Nazism are brief, and have largely to do with the relevance of the analysis of separate genealogical lines and – against currently prevailing notions of predictability based on structurally modelled analyses – of the extraordinary alchemy of the historical encounters between certain of these genealogical lines. His comments, though brief, reflect his insistence on this plurality and contingency in the unfolding of history, and also therefore, of the objectifications by which we live. They have to do with our understanding of the monsters, big and small, that history creates, and how the sciences – importantly both physical and social – must now count Nazi eugenics among their variants. His more detailed investigations tended to concentrate, however, on the scientific, legal and administrative texts of specific domains in specific eras, and not the literary texts, though often they would support many of his hypotheses.⁹⁶ In the case of the citation from Stendhal above, the concept of “love” presents another facet of the “society of

⁹⁶ He writes that “For a long time in Western society, everyday life had no access to [literary] discourse except [...] transfigured by the fabulous; it had to be drawn out of itself by heroism, exploit, adventures, Providence and grace [...] marked by a touch of impossibility. [...] The further removed from the ordinary, the more the tale had the force of enchantment or persuasion. As of the 17th Century, [...] another art of language was born whose task was no longer to sing the improbable, but to make appear what had not appeared – what could not or should not appear [...] Thus a new imperative was formed that would then constitute what could be called the immanent ethic of Western literary discourse [...] to seek out what is most difficult to perceive, what is most hidden, what is the most uncomfortable to say and show, eventually the most forbidden and scandalous. [...] Literature thus forms part of the great system of constraint by which the West has obliged everyday life to put itself into discourse, but it occupies a special place in this: intent on seeking the everyday beneath itself, on breaking through limits, on brutally or insidiously revealing secrets [...] it tends to put itself outside the law, or at least to take upon itself the accusation of scandal, transgression or revolt.” (DE, 251- 253). Literature is of course, much more than this. For Iris Murdoch, a practitioner, it had more to do with freedom than constraint. But it was not an object of study for Foucault, and his remarks are limited to the correspondences he sees between literature and the confessing “society of sex”.

blood” in decline, in which reverence for the symbolic blood that runs in noble veins is accompanied by maintaining a well-guarded distance from the real thing. It is a society that eats a lot of meat, but is aware of no slaughterhouses, even to mention such things would be “bad form”. Stendhal describes “the debate” on love that pits bourgeois romantic sensibility against aristocratic insensibility in the drawing rooms that were the corridors of power of the time. In *Love* he explains this as concerned with “the question of whether it is better to approach women in the manner of Mozart’s Don Juan or in that of Werther”⁹⁷. He writes that “Love *à la Werther* opens the mind to all the arts, to all sweet and romantic impressions, moonlight, the beauty of the woods and of painting, in a word, to the feeling of enjoyment of the *beautiful*, in whatever form it presents itself, even the humblest.”⁹⁸ By contrast: “Don Juan disclaims all the obligations which link him to the rest of humanity. In the great market-place of life he is a dishonest merchant who takes all and pays nothing. The idea of equality is as maddening to him as water to a rabid dog; this is why pride of birthright becomes Don Juan’s character so well. With the idea of equality of rights vanishes that of justice – or rather, if Don Juan comes of an illustrious stock, such vulgar notions would never have entered his head; and I am ready enough to believe that a man who bears a historic name is more disposed than another to set fire to a city for the sake of boiling himself an egg.”⁹⁹

It is interesting that Stendhal uses “justice” here (ironically) in the same way as Foucault uses it analytically in describing pre-modern societies based on the notion of “justice” in the hands of kings, their power to take life, and therefore control the lives of their “inferiors” through laws made in their own image. And Stendhal’s reaction is indignantly bourgeois (mercantile): against the metaphor of Don Juan as a dishonest merchant he defends “fair play”, thus: “a habit of fair-dealing appears to me to be, bar accident, the surest way to happiness; and our Werthers are not rogues.”¹⁰⁰ In affirming his belief that the Werthers are happier than the Don Juan’s, he writes: “Unlike Werther, for whom realities are shaped by his desires, Don Juan’s desires are imperfectly satisfied by cold reality, as in ambition, avarice, and the other passions.”¹⁰¹ Here “desire” is clearly an act of the imagination, and the desire that is “love” illuminates all of reality, whereas the desire that is lust consumes itself and renders reality banal.

⁹⁷ Stendhal, op.cit, p.204

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid, p.207. It is also interesting that Stendhal’s (burn a city to boil an egg) version of Hume’s famous comment – that a man (any and every man) would rather see the world destroyed than scratch his finger, is attributed by Stendhal not to human nature, but to aristocratic culture.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, p.206

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

Nearly two centuries later, despite all the negative effects of the “deployment of sexuality” documented by Foucault, at least the socially sanctioned permission (the other face of obligation, not discussed by Foucault) to see oneself as a sexual being has meant that love and lust, separated with such exquisite pain by Stendhal, have been allowed to fuse, as this (intentionally Platonic) passage, from a novel of Iris Murdoch’s, testifies:

She had never experienced *presence* so vividly before, the total connection with another being, the interpenetration of bodies and souls, the intuitive absolute of mutual giving, the love of two gods. [...] Now they were living in an ecstasy to which happiness was irrelevant. [...] She had been re-created, given new being, new pure flesh, new lucid spirit. She could perceive the world at last, her eyes were cleared, her perceptions clarified, she had never seen such a vivid, coloured, detailed world, vast and complete as myth, yet full of tiny particular accidental entities placed in her way like divine toys. She had discovered breathing, breathing such as holy men use, the breathing of the planet, of the universe, the movement of being into Being.¹⁰²

This discovery of oneness with nature, with the universe, takes in and goes beyond young Werther’s romanticism, it goes as far as Plato in the *Phaedrus* – “when someone [the lover] sees beauty here on earth and is reminded of true beauty. His wings begin to grow and he wants to take to the air on his new plumage ... [When we were with the gods, we] were surrounded by rays of pure light...” etc.¹⁰³ The problem, of course, under discussion in this text of Plato’s, is that when those feelings are experienced only in and through the sexual act, the sexual act can become one’s goal, and one is then chained to its erratic nature and one’s own craving. Whereas, in Greco-Roman cultures, if one learns to be free of one’s cravings, the intense experience of oneness can occur at any moment, and when it passes, it leaves serenity in its wake.

When asked to comment on the differences between the veiled erotics of “heterosexual” literature and the explicit sex of “homosexual” literature, Foucault gave this interesting reply:

The experience of heterosexuality, at least since the Middle Ages, has always consisted of two axes; on the one hand, the axis of courtship in which the man seduces the woman, and, on the other hand, the axis of the sexual act itself. Now the great heterosexual literature of the West has had to do essentially with the axis of amorous courtship, that is, above all, with that which precedes the sexual act. [...]

In contrast, the modern homosexual experience has no relation at all to courtship. This was not the case in ancient Greece, however. For the Greeks, courtship between men was more important than between men and women. (Think of Socrates and Alcibiades.) But in the Christian culture of the West, homosexuality was banished and therefore had to concentrate all its energy on the act of sex itself. Homosexuals were not allowed to elaborate a system of courtship because the cultural expression necessary for such an elaboration was denied them. The wink on the street, the split-second decision to get it on, the speed with which homosexual relations are consummated: all these are products of an interdiction. So when a homosexual culture and literature began

¹⁰² Iris Murdoch, *The Book and the Brotherhood*, Penguin, London, 1988, p. 168-9. (The Heideggerian accent is also intentional.)

¹⁰³ Plato, *Phaedrus*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002, pp.33-34

to develop it was natural for it to focus on the most ardent and heated aspect of homosexual relations. (SCSA, 149-50)

In thus explaining this aspect of homosexual culture, Foucault also explains why there is no attempt at a reconceptualisation of “love” in his work, but rather a concentration on friendship. It also throws light on his reconceptualisation of “pleasure”, and on the links he sees between friendship and pleasure as forms of resistance, resistance in which a life-style is created, an aesthetics of existence. At times, there is a labyrinthine circularity in this, as when he says that homosexuals “have to invent, from A to Z, a relationship that is still formless, which is *friendship*: that is to say, the sum of everything through which they can give each other *pleasure*.” (FWL, 136) But then “pleasure” turns out to include: “affection, tenderness, friendship, fidelity, camaraderie, and companionship, things that our rather sanitized society can’t allow a place for without fearing the formation of new alliances and the tying together of unforeseen lines of force.” (Ibid.) He goes on “I think that’s what makes homosexuality “disturbing”: the homosexual mode of life, much more than the sexual act itself. To imagine a sexual act that doesn’t conform to law or nature is not what disturbs people. But that individuals are beginning to love one another – there’s the problem.” (Ibid.) It is interesting that this list of characteristics does not differ radically from any contemporary description (even Christian) of what constitutes a good love relationship. What Foucault is saying here is that homosexuality is less threatening to the fundamentalists of heterosexuality if it is merely about sexual pleasure, not about relationship. But that is exactly what sexual liberationists in the gay movement have been saying, in claiming their right to be considered “normal”, to marriage, etc.

Against these claims, what is important for Foucault is non-institutionalised relationship. He asks: “What is it to be ‘naked’ among men, outside of institutional relations, family, profession, and obligatory camaraderie?” And answers: “It’s a desire, an uneasiness, a desire-in-uneasiness that exists among a lot of people.” (Ibid.) Foucault here eloquently expresses his own preference, and his feeling that this desire-in-uneasiness is the source of creative and self-creative power is implied. He himself was on a path of self-creation which involved the exploration of pleasure on the one hand, and on the other, intense philosophical self-questioning and a commitment to truth-speaking in the political sphere, a truly multi-faceted aesthetics of existence. And yet he seems to assume that those who share his commitment to sexual pleasure also share his reading of it as a new ascesis, from which those more interested in sexual liberation from the point of view of human rights, including the right to adopt the heterosexual model of marriage should they so wish,

have excluded themselves. Despite his stated preference for the Stoics over the Epicureans, in his writings on sexual liberation he rejected the kind of choice the Stoics made – to practise their “techniques of the self” whilst living in conformity with the norms governing ordinary life – in favour of experimenting with the more typically Epicurean ascetic choice to live in a community that sets itself apart from ordinary life. This was not his own chosen life-style however. He moved between the two worlds of conformity and non-conformity, though he never spoke of techniques appropriate to a self who is obliged to, or chooses to, move between these two worlds – the reality of many.

In “*Sexe, pouvoir et la politique de l’identité*”¹⁰⁴ he says that from Antiquity onwards, friendship was a very important social relationship, implying reciprocal responsibilities and deep affection; but that “from the 16th and 17th centuries, one sees this type of friendship disappear, at least within masculine society. And friendship begins to be something else.” (Ibid., 1563) It was also discouraged, regarded as dangerous, in a series of institutional contexts, among which he lists: “the army, the bureaucracy, the administration, the universities, the schools, etc.” (Ibid.); contexts in which intense friendships disturbed their smooth functioning. Foucault hypothesizes that homosexuality became a problem at that time because friendship was disappearing, so that relations between men became suspect. The re-establishment of friendship thus becomes a new goal, but “it would be contradictory to apply to this end, and to this type of friendship, the model of family life [...] The question of knowing what type of institutions we must create is a crucial one, but I cannot give a response. Our task, I believe, is to try to elaborate a solution.” (Ibid., 1554-55)

The partial solutions Foucault did come up with involved the reinvention of pleasure, but the process is a complex one. Because, on the one hand he says (for once conceding a positive role to desire): “We must understand that with our desires, through them, new forms of relationship are established, new forms of love and new forms of creation. Sex is not a fatality; it is a possibility – that of acceding to a creative life.” (Ibid., 1555) But on the other hand, this new ascesis of pleasure seems to revolve around pleasure, to have its beginning and its end in pleasure. In other words, this is the exact opposite of the way pleasure is stimulated, but never consumed, in those rare ascetic practices that use the risk-laden instrument of sexual pleasure, such as tantric yoga, where complex techniques, involving long training, divert the energies so produced to spiritual ends.

¹⁰⁴ DE, 358, pp.1554-1565

Besides sexual pleasure the other form of pleasure Foucault advocates is that of drugs, which “should become an element of our culture.” (Ibid. 1557) He goes on: “We should manufacture good drugs – capable of producing very intense pleasures.” Like sex, drugs too have been used in many ascetic and spiritual contexts, usually preceded by fasting and other forms of preparation of body and mind to offset the deleterious effects that all drugs are known to have. The aim is to exploit the altered states of consciousness they produce in order to open out the possibilities of other ways of knowing. In this respect, they serve to dismantle the “old self” with its fixed convictions, leaving space for a new self to develop, or else shaping that new self. Even in rock culture, however, where drugs are extensively and casually used for pleasure, it is well known that the price of every high is coming down again, often a lot further down than one was ready for, as the death-rate in this culture shows. Some consideration of this aspect of drug-use, the relationship between human fragility and powerfully disorientating experience, perhaps needs to be included in the hypothesis. Foucault’s comments on this were, however, restricted to a few casual remarks. Whereas he was able to study in detail the techniques of the self used in Antiquity, this was clearly not possible for contemporary developments that were still indistinct in their outlines, so we have very little evidence of the *ways* in which he saw the pursuit of pleasure as constituting such a technique (other than in leading to friendship), or even more than this, as he put it “making pleasure the crystallizing point of a new culture.” (STSW, 160) In *Saint Foucault*, however, Halperin describes certain aspects of the practices of the San Francisco gay community that was Foucault’s main point of reference.

2. The self in San Francisco

One aspect of the San Francisco gay bathhouse codes, as described by Halperin, is anonymity. This means that people can enjoy each other physically, without any of the worries and moral responsibilities attached to relationship. It being clear at the outset that this is not love, nor is it pretending to be, that reciprocal expectations go no further than this encounter, certainly frees one to engage in reciprocal pleasure-making and pleasure-taking. There is freedom to enjoy oneself here, and with others, but this is not a freedom that necessarily transforms the self in any other way, so in what sense can this be construed as self-constructive? Since these pleasures can be had both within relationships and outside of them, and relationship is always a terrain for ethical work, on the self and with and through the other; what is gained here seems to be rather the peace of

mind that non-relationship gives, saving one's time and energies for other things. This is in no way to be under-valued and may count, at least hypothetically, as a valid motivation for consensually anonymous sexual encounters, but more on a pragmatic than an ascetic level. No former society has had such arrangements (with the possible and dubious exception of men and temple prostitutes, and "temporary" marriage in Islam), and the absence of such a possibility is surely one of the main practical reasons for sexual abstinence in almost all known historical forms of ascetic practice: relationships tend to be messy and time-consuming. Unless they are seen as part of one's spirituality, or creativity, or intellectual development, they can easily take a great deal of time and energy away from one's intellectual, spiritual or creative interests. Many non-ascetics, very many, settle, as they have always done, for relationships of convenience of various kinds, and dedicate to them as little time and energy as is necessary for their own purposes. The ethics of this are troublesome, and honesty in reciprocal use of each other's bodies can be seen as morally far superior than the traditionally hallowed social practices designed to manage such needs – marriage (at least the obligatory and the hypocritical kinds) and prostitution.

Foucault, however, does not discuss this aspect of bathhouse practice. The anonymity, in a relatively small community (and almost anywhere if you happen to be Foucault), is unlikely to be rigorous, but it is the principle – of "no expectations beyond this encounter" – that anonymity protects, that matters here. Maybe this communitarian semi-anonymity also means that one can meet on an anonymous terrain in the bathhouse, and possibly also on an interpersonal terrain outside, and thus explore the possibilities of relationship, without prior commitment. It is not difficult to see that, as he says, this could contribute to promoting "relations with multiple intensities, variable colors, imperceptible movements and changing forms." (FWL, 137) Certainly the "hetero"sexual liberation of the 1960s and '70s, which featured a collective decision to replace an outmoded moral code of monogamous fidelity with a moral code of "open" relationships, in which sexual jealousy was the new arch-sin, floundered on the fact that people experienced enormous difficulty in converting a rational decision not to be jealous into an emotional reality. Many people, in retreating from this hard frontier of new morality to the more comforting principle of "consecutive" monogamy, then suffered from a sense of failure, and related to themselves and each other as traitors to the cause; marriage became the greatest betrayal. The guilt, by a brutal twist of historical fate, had shifted from recognition of one's sexual being to recognition of one's emotional fragility in relationship.

In commenting on the Greek "care of the self" Foucault writes: "The care of the self is ethical in itself; but it implies complex relationships with others insofar as this *ethos* of freedom is also a

way of caring for others.” (ECS, 187) And further that “[the] care of the self always aims for the well-being of others; it aims to manage the space of power that exists in all relationships, but to manage it in a non-authoritarian manner.” It is not difficult to see the correspondences between these intentional practices of ancient ascesis, and Foucault’s sketch of the outlines of a modern ascesis; what differs radically, however, is the fact that, in the Greek context: “the care of the self also implies a relationship with the other insofar as proper care of the self requires listening to the lessons of a master. One needs a guide, a counsellor, a friend, someone who will be truthful with you.” (Ibid.) Although the relationship of master and disciple or pupil is clearly not one that Foucault would see as re-inventable or as in any way desirable, perhaps friendship in this deeper sense, of reciprocal care and truthfulness, in a shared perspective of the importance of care of the self, constitutes the major, under-developed theme of this new ascesis.

3. Asceticism and ascesis

As Arnold Davidson notes, “Foucault thought of ethics as that component of morality that concerns the self’s relationship to itself.” (EAF, 126) This is how Foucault himself describes it when taking it as axiomatic that “morality” is that domain of our lives most easily recognized by modern conceptualisations of human life, and since “morality” tends to emphasize moral codes, space needed to be created within it for this “other” aspect, that of the self’s relation to the self. But in Foucault’s own conceptualisation, it is rather “morality” that is a component of ethics, because one’s relation to oneself determines one’s relation both to others and to whatever moral codes regulate the society one lives in. As he says, “The care of the self is ethically prior in that the relationship with oneself is ontologically prior” (ECS, 287); which, taking the care of the self to mean moral reflection on one’s individual responsibilities, is the position of any ethics which places these before, and not after, moral code. But the relation to self may be unlike this, it may be one where subjectivity is circumscribed, diminished, by “certain games of truth, whether [...these are] truth games that take the form of a science or refer to a scientific model, or truth games such as those one may encounter in institutions or practices of control” (Ibid. 281); and Foucault dedicated many years to studying these more entrapped forms of subjectivation. As he says, “a person ‘does not begin with liberty, but with the limit.’ [...though] the encounter with the limit creates the opportunity for its transgression”. (Ibid.) “Transgression” may begin with some form of counter-conduct, and may or may not develop into a more conscious form of rebellion. These are

different forms of subjectivation, and the latter may at the same time involve a new, self-formative relation to the self. The “care of the self” or “asceticism” that he dedicated his last years to however, involved a more conscious, reflective, relation to the self, concerned with its own freedom, and hence with a way of working with, overcoming one’s *internal* limits, not just with the attempt to remove or alter external limitations to the development of self. With regard to the relationship between (homosexual) asceticism and pleasure, he writes:

Asceticism as the renunciation of pleasure has bad connotations. But asceticism is something else: it is the work one performs on oneself in order to transform oneself or make the self appear which, happily, one never attains. Can that be our problem today? We’ve rid ourselves of asceticism. Yet it’s up to us to advance into a homosexual asceticism that would make us work on ourselves and invent - I do not say discover - a manner of being that is still improbable. (FWL, 137)

Here Foucault uses two versions of the same term, attributing the negative connotations (evoking gloomy images of self-mortification) to “asceticism” and the positive image of self-work to asceticism. This juxtaposition implies, though it is carefully not made explicit, a kind of antithesis between self-work (asceticism) and the renunciation of pleasure (asceticism). Whereas lines have traditionally been drawn between asceticism on the one hand – Greek, Oriental, Christian, and the indulgence in pleasure on the other, Foucault wishes to redraw the lines, placing Christian anti-pleasure asceticism on one side (which we’ve got rid of), and Greek problematization of pleasure, together with Foucauldian exploration of pleasure as a way of life, on the other. Not, certainly, in any false terms of a historically impossible correspondence, but in terms of a commitment to “work on ourselves” in order to “invent [...] a manner of being”. But while it is true that Greek asceticism was very different from Christian asceticism, (accepting Foucault’s use of the terms), it is not true at all that the renunciation of bodily pleasures was merely a variable historical feature of self-work, or that it could be separated from Greek asceticism, as we have seen.

There have been historical forms of self-work which placed a high value on certain forms of pleasure, rather than renouncing it – English Romanticism – think of Blake and Shelley (Byron was a more dubious case), nineteenth century aestheticism, etc. Before Foucault, pleasure had sometimes been instrumental to asceticism, but it had never been its object. In Oriental forms, the *use* of pleasure is generally associated with theories of energy and its various qualities, and in assuming control of these energies, re-channelling sexual energies for spiritual purposes for example. In Romanticism, the use of pleasure is often connected with the recuperation of one’s natural, animal being, and with freedom from constraint, allowing one to develop one’s full

potential. Foucault does not write about these practices¹⁰⁵; and historically they are few, far between, and not Greek or Roman. Conversely, in myriad forms, the renunciation of that pleasure which is construed as inseparable from desire is a persistent feature of both ancient and Hellenistic techniques of the self, of almost all Oriental practices; and of many other practices scattered throughout Western history.

Ironically, given Foucault's preoccupations, there is one very specific reason for the ubiquity of this practice within traditions of self-work, and that is precisely to split off pleasure from desire, but this pleasure is not generally conceived as sexual. Only when one is free of desire, the argument runs, can one experience Platonic bliss, or the Epicurean pure pleasure of existence, or Stoic joy, or Buddhist Enlightenment, or cosmic consciousness. The ultimate goal, at least of the Stoics, is the good life, and this meant living in virtue. But it also, as if by a glorious paradox, meant the freedom to live each moment fully – whatever each moment brings – assenting to the way things are and not struggling against them constantly with desires and aversions; and this opens the door, closed by our turbulent minds, to what may then be experienced as real, free, pleasure.

In a strong sense this letting things happen and welcoming them, whatever they are, is the *opposite* of *intentionally* “creating” a way of life, or “constructing” the self; it is just that, since a life not moved by desire and aversion is so extraordinary, in effect, the philosophical self *is* self-constructed, the philosophical way of life *is* something out of the ordinary, but this is incidental to the goal, it is not the goal itself. It is an art of life, but an art of life without artifice, as it were; like the Stoic art of whole-hearted “assent” to the way things are.

And as to the Epicureans, Hadot says :

philosophy consists in knowing how to seek pleasure in a reasonable way. In fact, this means seeking the only genuine pleasure: the pure pleasure of existing. For all people's misfortune and suffering comes from the fact that they are unaware of genuine pleasure. When they seek pleasure they are unable to find it, because they cannot be satisfied with what they have; or because they seek what is beyond their reach; or because they spoil their pleasure by constantly fearing they will lose it. [...] The mission of philosophy and of Epicurus was therefore above all therapeutic: the philosopher must tend to the sickness of the soul, and teach mankind how to experience pleasure. (WAP, 115)

The way the Stoic, Marcus Aurelius put this was:

Love only the event which comes upon us, and which is linked to us by Destiny. (VII, 57)

¹⁰⁵ He mentions the case of Dandyism, which he treats very briefly in *What is Enlightenment?*, where he speaks of Baudelaire, but mostly in another connection. See below.

The second of these two linked statements of Marcus Aurelius marks the theoretical disagreement between Epicureans and Stoics, the first marks their agreement. Epicureans didn't believe in Destiny, their universe was random while that of the Stoics was ordered by the *logos* that is nature. Perhaps in part for this reason, the Epicureans imposed a certain order on their own on their lives, ideally living in separate communities dedicated to the practice of their philosophy; whereas the Stoics lived – dedicated to the practice of their philosophy – in the midst of ordinary life. But the central tenet of their philosophical practice was the same: “Love only the event which comes upon us” means to find one's pleasure in pure existence, in the present moment, and to desire only that, because that – one's judgement in relation to the present moment, the Stoics would say – is the only thing that truly depends on us, it is the place where we are free.

Perhaps the most interesting problematisation in this context, was the Stoic *discipline* of desire. Interesting because, unlike the Christian and psychological *hermeneutic* of desire, it is not centred on guilt and self-blame. It regards our mistaken judgements about what is truly pleasurable and painful as a result of the way we have been (mis)taught to read our world; to place, for example, an entirely false value on the Imperial purple cloak, as Marcus Aurelius would have it, failing to see that it is just the hair of the sheep, dipped in the blood of molluscs. Perhaps the combination of the two words which provoked in Foucault an allergic reaction – “discipline” and “desire” – prevented him from seeing in this particular pagan column a potentially useful prop in the construction of a new self, whatever the epoch. Not with the same historical criteria, of course, but as a way of introducing calm reflection to the agitated iconography of desire, as an exercise of freedom. Desire, as Foucault himself pointed out, was always more to do with the imagination than the body for the Greeks; but in the case of the Stoics, as we have seen, it was part of the faculty of reason.

4. An aesthetics of existence

Modernity is often characterized in terms of consciousness of the discontinuity of time: a break with tradition, a feeling of novelty, a vertigo in the face of the passing moment. And this is indeed what Baudelaire seems to be saying when he defines modernity as “the ephemeral, the fleeting, the contingent.” But, for him, being modern does not lie in recognizing and accepting this perpetual movement; on the contrary, it lies in adopting a certain attitude with respect to this movement; and this deliberate, difficult attitude consists in recapturing something eternal that is not beyond the present instant, nor behind it, but within it. (WE, 310)¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁶ Baudelaire quote is from *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, London, Phaidon, 1964, p.13

Let us suppose we said Yes to one single instant: we have thereby said Yes not only to ourselves but to the whole of existence. For nothing is sufficient unto itself – neither in ourselves, nor among things – and if, just one single time, our soul has vibrated and resonated with happiness, like a stretched cord, then it has taken all eternity to bring about that single event. And, at that unique instant of our Yes, all eternity was accepted, saved, justified and affirmed.¹⁰⁷

Becoming aware of the present means becoming aware of our freedom.¹⁰⁸

That modernity has accelerated our perception of the passage of time is by now a commonplace, but amongst poets and philosophers it has a long history. Awareness of life as “nasty, brutish and short”, as Shakespeare puts it, has always been the framework within which the value of life must be sought, or created, which comes to much the same thing. Foucault here focuses attention on the fact that for Baudelaire, it is in capturing the eternal in the only place it can ever be found, within the present moment, that defines for us how to live in modernity, just as Nietzsche describes it here, and just as Marcus Aurelius made it his practice, in Antiquity. Because in these matters, two thousand years slip away when we read the Greeks; whatever and whenever our present moment may be, the question of how to live in the present moment, within and in the knowledge of the flux of time, returns. Our thinking and our subjectivation, on the other hand, change, radically, as Paul Veyne puts it: “From one age to another, problems are not similar, any more than is nature, or reason; the eternal return is also an eternal departure (he [Foucault] had been fond of this expression of [René] Char’s); only successive valorizations exist.” (FFE, 226) Which is a view Foucault shared with Paul Veyne, but he also held that the practice of making those valorizations persists, and this practice is ethics. As Veyne himself says “People can no more prevent themselves from valorizing than from breathing, and they do battle for their values.” (Ibid. 230) This view was shared by Iris Murdoch, who writes, from a different angle: “language itself is a moral medium, almost all uses of language convey value. This is one reason why we are almost always morally active. Life is soaked in the moral, literature is soaked in the moral.” (LP, 27) This ethical awareness was at the root of philosophy in antiquity, of philosophy as a reflective way of life, whereas in modernity, its relegation to the status of an optional branch of an academic activity marked the kind of philosophy that did not interest Foucault, or Murdoch. But whereas Murdoch believed that existence *was* in any case aesthetic, and ethics had to do with taking responsibility for seeing and shaping it, Foucault believed that the aesthetic of existence was to be constructed.

¹⁰⁷ Nietzsche, *Posthumous Fragments*, late 1886-Spring 1887, 7, 38, quoted in Hadot, *IC*, op.cit, p.144

¹⁰⁸ Marcus Aurelius, *Discourses*, XII, 26, 2, quoted in Hadot, *IC*, op.cit p.132

With regard to the philosophical life, Arnold Davidson makes a distinction “between the notions of a way of life and a style of life. In the ancient world *philosophy itself* was a way of life, a way of life that was distinct from everyday life, and that was perceived as strange and even dangerous.” (EAF, 131-32) He cites Hadot’s remarks on the philosopher’s literal “love of wisdom”, an attitude “which is foreign to the world, that makes the philosopher a stranger in it.” And, Davidson continues: “Given this basic characteristic of philosophy itself as a way of life, there were, of course, different philosophies, what I shall call different *styles of life*, different styles of living philosophically. Each philosophical school – Stoic, Epicurean, Platonist, and so on – represented a style of life that had a corresponding fundamental inner attitude.” (ibid., 132)¹⁰⁹ These differences in style, in inner attitude, occur at the level of the philosophical schools, and also at the level of individuals, with their different intellectual and aesthetic temperaments. Epictetus, Seneca, and Marcus Aurelius were very different Stoics, just as Baudelaire, Nietzsche and Foucault are very different representatives of the modern world. Elective affinities, however, of intellectual and aesthetic temperament, may generate new ideas; and, in remarking on Foucault’s love of Seneca, Paul Veyne writes that “indeed there is an affinity between Foucault’s elegance as an individual and the elegance that characterized Greco-Roman civilization. In short, classical elegance privately served as Foucault’s image of an art of living, a possible ethics.” (op.cit. 225) Now, Paul Veyne is clearly not talking about jackets and togas, Foucault’s elegance lies in his gestures, his acts, his thoughts, his words, all of which constitute an art of life. And yet Foucault’s insistence on the aesthetics of existence has been much misunderstood, as if he might perhaps have meant jackets and togas.

This has partly to do with what is in effect a passing reference to dandyism in *What is Enlightenment*. In this important text, mostly on Kant; after reading Baudelaire’s essay on his friend, Constantin Guys, *The Painter of Modern Life* Foucault writes “modernity for Baudelaire is not simply a form of relationship to the present; it is also a mode of relationship that must be established with oneself. The deliberate attitude of modernity is tied to an indispensable asceticism.” (WE, 310) Baudelaire himself had written that “dandyism in certain respects comes close to spirituality and to stoicism” (sic) and defined the dandy as one who elevates aesthetics to a living religion, so that the dandy’s very existence stands as a reproach to the responsible citizen of the middle class.”¹¹⁰ Given Stoic attitudes to responsible citizenship in antiquity it is hard to see,

¹⁰⁹ Italics in original. Hadot quote from *Critical Inquiry*, 16:3 (Spring 1990)

¹¹⁰ “These beings have no other status, but that of cultivating the idea of beauty in their own persons, of satisfying their passions, of feeling and thinking [...] Contrary to what many thoughtless people seem to believe, dandyism is not even an excessive delight in clothes and material elegance. For the perfect dandy, these things are no more than the

transposed to modernity “reproaching the responsible citizen of the middle class” as a Stoic attitude. Certainly the notion of seeing the eternal in the present is a Stoic attitude, but Dandyism, with its turning oneself (as opposed to one’s *life*) into a work of art, is not. Foucault clearly appreciated Baudelaire’s anti-conformism, as Baudelaire appreciated that of the dandies, and their living out of a desire to recreate themselves, however shallow that may have been; but Foucault redefines dandyism in a way that might have surprised and flattered its adherents. He writes: “To be modern is not to accept oneself as one is in the flux of passing moments; it is to take oneself as object of a complex and difficult elaboration: what Baudelaire, in the vocabulary of his day, calls *dandysme*.” (WE, 311) Foucault’s description of Baudelaire says much of his affinity with the *poète maudit*, who like himself was a *parrhesiast*, a teller of uncomfortable truths, and not a dandy. He writes: “Modern man, for Baudelaire, is not the man who goes off to discover himself, his secrets and his hidden truth; he is the man who tries to invent himself. This modernity does not ‘liberate man in his own being’; it compels him to face the task of producing himself.” (WE, 312) Hadot remarks however, in connection with Foucault’s neglect, in his discussion of the Stoics, of their commitment to “go beyond the self, and think and act in unison with universal reason” (PWL, 207), that “by focusing his interpretation too exclusively on the culture of the self, the care of the self, and conversion toward the self – more generally, by defining his ethical model as an aesthetics of existence – M.Foucault is propounding a culture of the self which is *too* aesthetic. In other words, this may be a new form of Dandyism, late twentieth-century style.” (PWL, 211). The language Foucault, like Baudelaire, uses here is provocative, in the sense of utilizing exaggeration, and even the outlandish statement to provoke thought, to disturb complacency. This is of course a valid philosophical use of language in the non-academic sense, a standard practice of Nietzsche’s, who stands behind Foucault in this respect. But it is a writing technique Foucault did not use so often in his extensive academic work, where the hypotheses and analyses are elaborated with meticulous rigour. Thus, in *The History of Sexuality*, and in the courses at the Collège de France, Foucault methodically relates what he means by the “aesthetics of existence” to the valorizations of the periods he is discussing; so for Classical Antiquity he cites Socrates in the *Gorgias* [506d-507d], thus: “ ‘The virtue of each thing, a tool, a body, and, further, a soul and a whole animal, doesn’t come to be present in the best way just at random, but by some structure and correctness and craft (*taxis, orthotes, techne*) [...] Then a soul with its proper order is better than a disordered soul? It must be. But now the soul that has order is orderly? Of course it is. And

symbol of the aristocratic superiority of his mind.” Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life*, cited in Wikipedia: “*Dandyism*”.

the orderly soul is temperate? It certainly must be.” (UP, 90) The love of order and harmony, and the intellectual conviction that the cosmos is ordered, as is everything in it, shine out from this text of Plato’s, that as Foucault notes here, “links moderation with the beauty of a soul whose order corresponds to its real nature”. But this order also linked individual moderation – good governance of the self – with the role of the Athenian citizen to whom the text is addressed, and hence the good governance of the polis. Foucault describes the self-mastery that would achieve the required moderation as “this prior condition of ‘ethical virility’ that provided one with the right sense of proportion for the exercise of ‘sexual virility’; and he adds that sexual virility in its turn was modelled on ‘social virility’, that is to say: “the relationship of domination, hierarchy, and authority that one expected, as a man, a free man, to establish over his inferiors.” (Ibid., 83)

Despite this, in a chapter with the neatly-crafted title of *Alcibiades goes Wilde*, O’Leary writes: “I will present the *prima facie* case that Foucault ‘aestheticizes’ the Greeks of the Classical period by presenting their sexual ethics primarily in terms of their desire to create an aesthetic effect, rather than in terms of their desire to achieve and maintain political mastery in the *polis*.”¹¹¹ What is curious in this statement is that it refers specifically to the chapter in *The Uses of Pleasure* cited above, where Foucault methodically avoids such a false opposition between “‘political mastery’” and “‘sexual ethics’”, speaking rather of their “‘isomorphic relationship.’” Also, whereas Foucault was explicitly studying the complementary nature of these different aspects of philosophical concern in the classical period primarily from the perspective of the form of relation to the self they epitomized, it is suggested here that he made pronouncements about the historical facts, and rather silly ones at that – such as suggesting that “‘aesthetic effect’” was more important to Greeks of the Classical period than their relation to the *polis*! Here again, however, some of Foucault’s own remarks in interview may be to blame for this type of interpretation, particularly where brief comments on the beautiful life serve as asides to the point he is making – as here in contrasting Stoic ethics to later, normalizing techniques:

The principal aim, the principal target of this kind of ethics was an aesthetic one. First this kind of ethics was only a problem of personal choice. Second it was reserved for a few people in the population; it was not a question of giving a pattern of behaviour for everybody. It was a personal choice for a small elite. The reason for making this choice was the will to live a beautiful life, and to leave others memories of a beautiful existence. I don’t think we can say that this kind of ethics was an attempt to normalize the population. (OGE, 254)

¹¹¹ Timothy O’Leary, *Foucault and the Art of Ethics*, London-New York, Continuum, 2002, pp.39-40

There is an etymological problem behind this in that, as O’Leary himself points out that “there is a great deal of overlap, particularly in the Classical era, between the ideas of beauty and moral worth. Indeed a single word covers both meanings – *kalos*.”¹¹² He also notes that “English translators consistently give ‘fine’ for *kalos*, whereas their French counterparts prefer ‘beautiful’.”¹¹³ It is true that Foucault is speaking in an unguarded way here, presenting some remarkably effete Stoics, and that he is also deliberately playing on this ambiguity, making use of a certain “semantic slipperiness” as Andrew Thacker¹¹⁴ put it. But his more considered thoughts about the Stoics were expressed elsewhere (and clarify the relation beauty/good). Thus, in discussing “the [Stoic] subjects free choice of exercises, when he finds he needs them [...] within the framework [not] of a rule of life but of a *tekhne tou biou* (an art of living)”; Foucault says that “Making one’s life the object of a *tekhne*, making one’s life a work – a beautiful and good work (as everything produced by a good and reasonable *tekhne* must be) necessarily entails the freedom and choice of the person employing this *tekhne*.” And explains: “The philosophical life [...] as the life as defined and prescribed by philosophers as the life obtained thanks to a *tekhne*, does not obey a *regula* (a rule): it submits to a *forma* (a form). It is a style of life, a sort of form one gives to one’s life.” (HS, 424) Paul Veyne tells us that “Style does not mean distinction here [or elsewhere in Foucault]; the word is to be taken in the sense of the Greeks, for whom an artist was first of all an artisan and a work of art was first of all a work.” (FFE, 231) No doubt for this reason, “Julia Annas insists that the best translation of *techne* is not ‘art’ but ‘craft’.”¹¹⁵ Though whether or not, in these matters of translation, semantic slipperiness is always worse than semantic rigidity may be hard to determine.

The variation in the meaning of “aesthetics” from the fourth century B.C.E. Platonic conception to the second century C.E. Stoic conception is perhaps best expressed by Hadot, in an essay on Marcus Aurelius, with his meticulous attention to gross and subtle conceptual shifts. Thus:

In the place of an idealistic aesthetics, which considers as beautiful only that which is rational and functional, manifesting beautiful proportions and an ideal form, there appears a realistic aesthetics which finds beauty in things just the way they are, in everything that lives and exists. (PWL, 190)

¹¹² O’Leary, op. cit. p.53.

¹¹³ Ibid. p.55

¹¹⁴ In “Foucault’s Aesthetics of Existence”, *Radical Philosophy*, 63, Spring 1993, pp.13-21, cited in O’Leary, op.cit.

¹¹⁵ Cited in O’Leary, op.cit. p.55

5. Stoic “intellectualism”

One case in which Foucault’s occasional semantic slipperiness is unhelpful is that of his comments on the Stoic “Experience of a pleasure one takes in oneself. The individual who has finally succeeded in gaining access to himself is, for himself, an object of pleasure.” (CS, 66) He did acknowledge, a few lines later, that “This pleasure, for which Seneca usually employs the word *gaudium* or *laetitia*, is a state that is neither accompanied nor followed by any form of disturbance in the body or the mind”; and also that such pleasure, worldly pleasure or *voluptas*, is contrasted with *gaudium* by the Stoics. Hadot’s criticism of the rather un-Stoic spiritual onanism of this passage is well-known, and his reiteration of the reasons for which such ambiguity is usually avoided by translating *gaudium* as “joy”, and *voluptas* as “pleasure”. But: “most importantly, it is not the case that the Stoic finds his joy in his ‘self;’ rather, as Seneca says, he finds it in ‘the best portion of the self,’ in ‘the true good’. [...] Seneca does not find his joy in ‘Seneca,’ but by transcending ‘Seneca’.” (PWL, 207)

Hadot describes this self as a “transcendent self”, but, to avoid possible confusion with the *substantive* transcendent self, or soul, of the Platonists, it might also be described as a “transpersonal” or “superpersonal” self, in that thinking and acting “in line with universal reason” was the *same* for everyone: “For the Stoics there is only one single reason at work here, and this reason is man’s true self” (Ibid.). In either case, it is precisely in escaping from the egoism of one’s everyday obsessions with one’s desires, aversions, and concern for one’s reputation that one frees oneself to reason from this impersonal perspective.

After listing Stoic exercises designed to achieve this, Hadot writes:

I can well understand Foucault’s motives for giving short shrift to these aspects, of which he was perfectly aware. His description of the practices of the self – like, moreover, my description of spiritual exercises – is not merely an historical study, but rather a tacit attempt to offer contemporary mankind a model of life, which Foucault calls “an aesthetics of existence.” Now, according to a more or less universal tendency of modern thought [...] the ideas of “universal reason” and “universal nature” do not have much meaning any more. It was therefore convenient to bracket them. (Ibid. 208)

In this connection, Arnold Davidson writes: “Indeed I would claim, following Hadot, that one of the most distinctive features of that care of the self studied by Foucault in volume 3 of *The History of Sexuality* is its indissociable link with this cosmic consciousness; so that one places oneself in the perspective of the cosmic Whole.” (EAF, 129) But it can also be argued that Foucault did have another option, which he didn’t take, which was to separate those Stoic techniques of the self

which no longer have any relevance, those specifically concerned with aligning one's reason with "universal reason", the perspective of the cosmic Whole, from those other techniques, such as Epictetus' three disciplines: the discipline of assent to the present moment (à la Baudelaire, or Nietzsche), the discipline of desire and the discipline of active impulses¹¹⁶, all of which are primarily concerned with learning how one's mind constitutes its representations and acts upon them, and with freeing oneself from entrapment in its automatisms in order to make one's *conscious* choices about them. For the Stoics this freedom will, automatically, draw one's thoughts in line with universal reason, but this does not tie these techniques exclusively to this belief. Similar techniques for the contemplation of one's own thought processes and intentionality exist in other traditions, without a necessary link to a concept of universal reason, but the Stoic techniques represent possibly the finest exposition of this form of introspection in Western philosophy. At the same time, as Davidson also points out, Foucault's "concern with the history of the present [...] need not, and should not, lead us to transform the [Stoic] intensity of the relation to the self into the modern estheticization of the self" (Ibid. 134); something very different from an aesthetics of existence.

This again raises the question of whether this form of introspection, this self-work, are more usefully described as intellectual or psychological. Foucault treated it as intellectual, aligning himself in this with a long tradition of Stoic exegesis, and he approved of it for this reason. But this question is connected to that of the figure of the sage, as the model of self-work to which the Stoics aspired, the model of attainment to which that work was directed. Davidson insightfully notes that "[the] figure of the sage is notably absent from Foucault's writings on ancient philosophy, and it is precisely this absence that permits him to pass too smoothly from ancient to modern experiences of the self." (Ibid. 136) Davidson sees this as evidence of the obstacles, particularly that of the notion of the cosmic consciousness of the sage, in the way of any contemporary reformulation of Stoic techniques. Nonetheless, referring to Hadot's writing on the sage, he notes that along with this aspect, "Hadot does acknowledge that the figure of the sage in ancient thought corresponds to a more acute consciousness of the self, of the personality, of interiority." (Ibid. 138) However, Davidson continues, "the internal freedom recognized by all the philosophical schools, 'this inexpugible core of the personality' is located in faculty of judgement, not in some *psychologically thick form of introspection*." (Ibid. my emphasis) In supporting Foucault's reading of Stoic intellectualism, Davidson is here using this notion of psychological introspection as Foucault does, in such a way that it carries with it the aura, if not

¹¹⁶ See discussion in Hadot, *Inner Citadel*.

the explicit connotation, of the exploration of one's sinfulness or guilt, of obsession with one's emotions, that figure so greatly in two of the major forms of inner examination that together made up the hermeneutics of desire, respectively the Catholic confessional and its secular genealogical descendent, psychoanalysis.

But would it not be possible, on this grid, to read certain forms of inner exploration practiced in antiquity – that of Epictetus' discipline of desire for example, and the versions of this to be found in Seneca or Marcus Aurelius – as *psychologically thin* forms of introspection, in that they are very much concerned with the psychological, and not merely the logical, life of the mind, but in ways in which guilt has no significant place? This “acute consciousness of the self, of the personality, of interiority”, to which the sage has attained, is precisely the result of long-self-observation, of observation of one's desires and aversions, of fixation with one's own ‘personality,’ of the self-justificatory narratives we all create when in doubt about the appropriacy of our behaviour, and so forth. One does not free oneself of all this by simply reciting wise words to oneself, but by long, patient work, unpicking persistent habits of thinking, feeling and acting one by one. This is the work of Epictetus' disciplines, and they may be worth a second glance as indications of possible forms of self-work for modern times. “Even if, as Cicero claimed, the true sage is born perhaps once every 500 years, nevertheless, the philosopher can attain at least a certain relative perfection.” (Ibid.)

What Stoic “intellectualism” is taken to mean, tends to be coloured today by the post-Kantian habit of distinguishing the psychological realm of human life, from the specifically non-psychological realm of the intellect; and this is compounded in logical empiricism by a strict distinction between the logical and the psychological. And yet none of the various Greek uses of “reason/soul”, as distinguished from “body/passions”, share this rigid Kantian distinction, as Foucault himself has pointed out. Certainly “the faculty of judgement” is the locus of the higher part of the self, the soul, or reason, the Stoic *hegemonikon*; but this reason is not Kant's reason, devoid of, even antithetical to emotion. Ancient reason tends to contain certain emotions, at very least the motivation to the good; and in some schools of thought, all emotions are present in reason, as pure or corrupted forms of desire or aversion, as we have seen. For the Greeks to separate reason from the psyche made no epistemological sense, as Hadot has amply demonstrated in his works, most extensively in his analysis of Epictetus' “discipline of desire” in *The Inner Citadel*. The inner exploration of one's representations and judgements – necessary in order to

gain mastery over them – was not directed to judgements that were cool and detached, but to judgements about what we desire and what we hate. They could not therefore be distinguished as either specifically “intellectual” or “psychological,” they derive from a reason that is imbued with passions, and attempt to transform vitiated reason into pure reason, from within. Despite his extensive reading of Hadot, where this question is frequently addressed (though this detailed analysis of Epictetus was published only after his death), Foucault never undertook to deal directly with this fundamentally unitary aspect of the Stoic relation to the self.

Ch. 6. Hermeneutics and non-hermeneutics of the self

1. *Homo antiquus*

When Foucault turned his attention fully to Greek and Roman techniques of the self, he discovered what he saw as, finally, non-judgemental forms of self-questioning. In discussing the Greek and Roman techniques of the self and their relation to underlying philosophical conceptions he constantly stresses that they are not directed, as in Christian confession and clinical psychology, to discovering dark truths hidden under surface layers of apparently rational thought. In Plato, however, in the place of this dark “true” self, behind the daytime ego; he encountered a “true self” of pure form and other-worldly beauty. And in his reading of the philosophical discourses of more recent centuries he found greatly varying conceptions of the self, some of which acknowledged some form of historical or cultural conditioning, but most of which assumed some variant of the notion that behind the ego – construed as the immediate *sense* of who one is – there is an “authentic” self waiting to be uncovered and allowed to realise its “true” nature.

Underlying all of Foucault’s investigations into philosophical conceptions of the self was his strong rejection of this notion that there is some form of *a priori* self to be discovered behind the everyday ego, once the obstacles to that self-discovery have been removed; and it is in this investigative spirit that he approached the Hellenistic period of ancient philosophy, that which seemed most likely to him to reveal a conception of a self that is not pre-constituted, and thus where one might find the elaboration of practices of a philosophical life designed to *constitute*, or perhaps at least reconstitute, the self.

With regard to the self of psychoanalysis, Freud, in comparing psychoanalysis to sculpture as opposed to painting, liked to quote Leonardo’s famous antithesis between painting, which operates *per via di porre*, and sculpture, which operates *per via di levare*: “ ‘Painting, says Leonardo, works [by] apply[ing] a substance [...] where there was nothing; sculpture, however, proceeds [by] tak[ing] away from the block of stone all that hides the surface of the statue contained in it.’ ” Taking sculpture as his model for his clinical work, Freud says that the great difficulty in applying this technique was the resistance that the stone-block-self puts up against the removal of its protective outer strata, as it were, the way “ ‘the patient clings to his disease and thus even fights against his own recovery [a point Plato emphasizes in telling the allegory of the Cave] which alone

makes it possible to understand his behaviour in daily life.’ ”¹¹⁷ Reading this for Cavell brought to mind his own reading of Plato’s allegory of the Cave, and his appreciation of the importance, for philosophy, of investigating the interweaving of thought and desire that he finds in both these two vastly influential thinkers. Precisely this investigation, with Plato and Freud as its main sources, was also a central theme of Iris Murdoch’s philosophical reflection, as we will see. Cavell refers to Wittgenstein’s thoughts on the same question, thus: “I should add, in recounting the crossing of paths in Freud and Wittgenstein, that I am less satisfied with Wittgenstein’s well-known mottoes for understanding the resistances of philosophers to his [Freud’s] methods, as when he speaks, for example, of their being misled by grammar. This to my mind obscures what it is that philosophers want from their ratiocination, a matter Wittgenstein also wishes, of course, to bring to light.”¹¹⁸

Foucault, a philosopher with great resistances to Freud’s methods, is explicit about what he wants from his own ratiocination, and from those of others, especially the Greeks. As he says of the way he sees philosophical work: “This transformation of oneself by one’s own knowledge is, I think, something rather close to the aesthetic experience. Why should a painter work if he is not transformed by his own painting?” (ISR, 131) Though he has chosen painting as his metaphor here, he could, of course, equally well have spoken of sculpture, in that it is the work of creative self-expression in art that, as in philosophy, he sees as a work of self-transformation; if, that is, it is lived in a certain way. Nonetheless, on Leonardo’s definitions, it is the metaphor of the painter that works for Foucault (as that of the sculptor works for Wittgenstein), – Foucault’s preferred method of self-transformation (experienced as aesthetic) was ‘*per via di porre*’, by way of creating the self; though as a philosophical method, this would, as he says, involve the “transformation of oneself by one’s own knowledge.”

In the first lesson of his 1982 course on *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, he says: “The question I would like to take up this year is this: In what historical form do the relations between the ‘subject’ and ‘truth’ [...] take shape in the West?” (HS, 2) This is the question which gives the course its title, but in reality the course is more narrowly focused on the historical form of the relations between the “subject” and the “truth of the self” in the ancient world, with a number of comparative references to Christianity, and few to the modern West. In this sense, the course title

¹¹⁷ Freud, “*On Psychotherapy*”, quoted (without further reference) in Cavell, S., *Cities of Words*, p.294

¹¹⁸ Ibid. Murdoch agreed with Wittgenstein on the seductiveness of Freud’s theory, and the dangers of the “total” vision it presented, quoting W.H. Auden’s comment that “Freud was not so much an idea as a whole climate of opinion.”

is a complete misnomer, as he saw ancient practices of the self as essentially *non-hermeneutic*, in contrast to the “hermeneutic” practices of Christianity and psychology. This is unlikely to have been irony; more probably it had been his original intention to follow the changes through from antiquity to modernity. As we have seen, the analytical model that Foucault sets up starts with a basic division of philosophical conceptions into those traceable exclusively to the Greek precept *gnothi seaton*, or “know yourself”, and those traceable to the interlacing of this principle with that of *epimeleia heautou*, or the care of the self. The former of these is retained in modern philosophy, whereas the latter was predominant in antiquity, though what exactly that means, and how it changes, will have to be very carefully delineated.

The model of relationship of the self to itself that Foucault has studied most intensively is that of the Hellenistic Stoics; a model that “comprised a set of practices designated by the general term *askésis*.” But this “asceticism” has no connotation of self-punishment as it often has had in subsequent uses. Foucault writes that “philosophical asceticism looks with suspicion on those figures who point to the marvels of their abstinences, their fasts, their foreknowledge of the future.” Instead, in Hellenistic use it connotes a process of self-training that is directed to learning, in the first instance, what we need in order “not to let ourselves be overwhelmed by the emotions”. And he asks: “Now what do we need in order to keep our control in the face of the events that may occur?” And answers that for the Greco-Romans: “We need ‘discourses’ *logoi*, understood as true and rational discourses. Lucretius [following Epicurus] speaks of *veridica dicta* that enable us to ward off our fears and not let ourselves be crushed by what we believe to be misfortunes.” (HS, 498) Marcus Aurelius, he tells us, refers to memorised “true discourses” as “a surgeon’s kit, which must be always ready to hand.” (HS, 499) The role of these discourses will be Foucault’s main point, what he sees as the most important of Hellenistic techniques of the self. Though citing Lucretius in *this* context however he did not study Epicurean techniques of the self in any detail; though Hadot and Nussbaum both remark on this curious exclusion, given his interest in “pleasure” construed not as a problem but as a potential technique of the self.¹¹⁹

For him the Stoics represented the best example in Western history of self-transformation through techniques that were based on an interiority of rational discourse, that, as such, can be set against the ‘self-inquisitorial’ interiority of Christianity, and, even more insidiously, of Western science. Insidiously because there is no acknowledgement on the part of modern science that it too has metaphysical foundations; grounded as it is in sets of principles and methodologies that, though

¹¹⁹ In Hadot, (PWL) and Nussbaum, *Therapy of Desire*, respectively.

they have been overturned often enough in the history of scientific thought, are generally held to be eternal, transhistorical – for the duration, that is, of the period of their dominance. The early phase of Foucault’s work had dealt with this. And just as religious discourse lays claim to “absolute truth”, science claims, with splendidly convincing arguments, to have a direct line to “objective” truth; and in this way, the “truths” of contemporary biological, psychological and social sciences intrude heavily in contemporary relations of the self to itself. Contemporary scientific “truth”, however (unlike earlier periods of modernity), was never fully problematised by Foucault from the perspective of subjectivation. In the *Course Summary to The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, Foucault lists three principle Stoic techniques of the self, and these are:

[firstly listening:] a set of rules for correct listening (the correct posture to adopt, the way to direct one’s attention, how to retain what has been said);
[secondly writing:] taking notes on the reading, conversations, and reflections [...]; keeping notebooks [...] which must be read from time to time so as to reactualize their contents;
[and thirdly habitual reflection:] taking stock of oneself, but in the sense of exercises for memorizing what one has learned. This is the precise and technical meaning of the expression *anakhòrèsis eis heauton*, as Marcus Aurelius employs it: going back into oneself and examining the ‘wealth’ one has deposited there; one must have within oneself a sort of book that one rereads from time to time.(HS, 500)

These three techniques can also be read as three aspects of one principal practice – that of listening to (and reading), annotating and reflecting on the “true discourse” of the teacher; but whilst there is no disagreement among scholars concerning the vast importance of this practice for the Stoics, there may be considerable disagreement on his suggestion that Marcus Aurelius’ notion of ‘taking stock of oneself’ implied only, or even primarily, checking one’s thoughts and acts against memorised “true discourses”. Foucault’s insistence on this version runs through many of his writings on the Stoics¹²⁰, orienting the descriptions he gives of apparently different practices. With regard to these three techniques he says, for example:

There is then a whole set of techniques whose purpose is to link together the truth and the subject. But it should be clearly understood that it is not a matter of discovering a truth in the subject or making the soul the place where truth dwells through an essential kinship or original law; nor is it a matter of making the soul the object of a true discourse. *We are still very far from what would be a hermeneutics of the subject*. On the contrary, it is a question of arming the subject with a truth he did not know and that did not dwell within him; it involves turning this learned and memorized truth that is progressively put into practice into a quasi subject that reigns supreme within us. (HS Summary, 501, my emphasis.)

¹²⁰ Note, for example: “for the Stoics, truth is not in oneself but in the *logoi*, the teachings of the masters. [...] In the philosophical tradition inaugurated by the Stoics, *askesis* means, not renunciation but the progressive consideration of self, or mastery over oneself, obtained not through the renunciation of reality but through the acquisition and assimilation of truth.” (TS, 258)

This appears to be a description of Stoicism as a form of self-programming, and though he does explore other Stoic techniques, it is this technique that he constantly returns to, and places at the centre of his reconstruction of the relation of the Stoic self to itself. The way in which Foucault presents his case here reflects a method of writing that he uses repeatedly. He reminds us what Stoic (in this case) practice is *not*, utilising phrases which encapsulate in shorthand the relevant Platonic and Christian conceptions from which he wishes to differentiate that of the Stoics. These have been previously established, through meticulous scholarship, and are identified as two forms of “hermeneutics of the subject”. He then says what the object of the practice in question *is, as if* this flowed by the logic of contraries from what it is not; when in fact no reason why this third set of techniques of the self could not be a third form of hermeneutics is established. It could be argued, conversely, that whether or not, for the Stoics, these techniques are: “a matter of making the soul the object of a true discourse” – depends on how “soul” (a key word in Foucault’s argument here) is defined. If “soul” has Christian, or Platonic, connotations, then certainly not; but the Stoic conceptions that are generally translated as “soul” have very different connotations, and Foucault himself often uses “care of the self”, which he says is the fundamental Stoic practice, and “cultivation of the soul” interchangeably. The Stoics were certainly far from a Christian hermeneutics, but it is arguable whether or not they employed no form of hermeneutics at all. The only “quasi-subject that reigns supreme within us” for the Stoics is the *hegemonikon*, the guiding principle, which, according to Hadot (referring to the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius), is the equivalent of the self, the intellect (*nous*), the power of reflection (*dianoia*), and the inner *daimòn*, and that all of these terms indicate the soul.¹²¹ The “putting into practice” of “learned and memorized truth” is certainly *one* of the activities of the *hegemonikon*, but it is generally considered that it is the *hegemonikon* which adopts this practice, *not* the practice that *constitutes* the *hegemonikon*, or the “quasi-subject” within us.

The “wealth” deposited within the self to which Marcus Aurelius refers can be interpreted, as it is by Foucault here, as memorized teachings; but if it is regarded as experiential verifications of the truth value of those same memorized teachings, the practice would not then be one of self-programming, but perhaps something more resembling a hermeneutic of the self.¹²² Among

¹²¹ Cf. Hadot, IC, pp. 113 and 122-123

¹²² Note also (TS, 238): “The Stoics spiritualized *anakhòrèsis*, the retreat of an army, the hiding of an escaped slave from his master, or the retreat into the country away from the towns as in Marcus Aurelius’s country retreat. A retreat into the country becomes a spiritual retreat into oneself. It is a general attitude and also a precise act every day; you

contrasting interpretations, there is that of Foucault himself, during the same course at the Collège de France. In referring to Seneca's letter 52 to Lucilius in which he speaks of "the mental restlessness and irresolution with which we are naturally afflicted [... which is] basically what we call *stultitia*" he notes that for Seneca, "no one is in such good health (*satis valet*) that he can get out of (*emergere*) this condition by himself. Someone must lend him a hand and pull him out". (HS, 130); and this lending a hand and pulling is, he says, the role of the teacher. "Henceforth the master is no longer the master of memory. He is no longer the person who, knowing what the other does not know, passes it on him [...] Henceforth the master is an effective agency (*opérateur*) for producing effects within the individual's relationship to his constitution as a subject." (HS, 129-130) The implication here is that there are two phases in the Stoic teaching process; phases that are not necessarily chronological, this may depend on the progress of the student, or aspirant. A phase in which the teacher functions as "master of memory" providing the student with gems of wisdom to be learned and mentally reiterated; and a psychagogic phase, in which the teacher's role is basically that of "pulling" the student into wakefulness, by "producing effects within the individual's relationship to his constitution as a subject."

But if learning is conceived of in this way, not as memorization of truths *revealed* by others, as in Christian practice, but rather as emerging from that condition of "restlessness and irresolution with which we are naturally afflicted," then that aspect of teaching which involves *transmitting* "truths" can only be an instrumental one; serving the purpose of diverting the mind from its habitual mechanisms in order to allow it to know, and therefore transform, itself. Any form of "transformation" brought about by the assimilation of other people's finest ideas, will still be more fragile than the more radical form of transformation brought about by the capacity to know how one's own mind works, to know the self. And it is this interpretation which seems to stand in logical correspondence with the Stoic texts Foucault is referring to, though he draws different, even conflicting, inferences from this at different times. It is also an interpretation which would seem to provide for a greater field of operation for the "individual's relationship to his constitution as a subject", than the mere memorisation and recall of learned truths.

retire into the self to discover – but not to discover faults and deep feelings, *only* to remember rules of action, the main laws of behaviour. It is a mnemotechnical formula." (emphasis mine. Foucault does not justify this crucial "*only*")

Foucault then provides a very lucid and detailed explanation of *stultitia*, “this morbid, pathological condition one must rise above”; which, he says, is a “commonplace in Stoic philosophy, starting especially with Posidonius.” (HS, 131) It is the condition we are in:

when we have not yet taken care of ourselves [...] The practice of the self has to deal with *stultitia* as its raw material, if you like, and its objective is to escape from it [...] The *stultus* is open to the external world inasmuch as he allows [...] unexamined] representations to get mixed up in his own mind with his passions, desires, ambition, mental habits, illusions, etcetera, so that the *stultus* is someone who is prey to the winds of external representations and who, once they have entered his mind, cannot make the discrimination, cannot separate the content of these representations from what we will call, if you like, the subjective elements, which are combined in him.

[...] The will of the *stultus* is not a free will [...] What does it mean to will freely? It means willing without what it is that one wills being determined by this or that event, this or that representation, this or that inclination. To will freely is to will without any determinations, and the *stultus* is determined by what comes from both outside and inside [...] the *stultus* wants several things at once [...] The *stultus* wants something and at the same time he regrets it. Thus the *stultus* wants glory and, at the same time, regrets not leading a peaceful, voluptuous life, etcetera. (HS, 131-132)

The fundamental point, the foundation of Stoic work on the self, so clearly described by Foucault here, is the fact that we are all *stultus*. Our *stultus* self is the starting point, and until we have cultivated this raw (and frankly, stupid) material of ourselves, we will be constantly prey to the winds of representations. If we cannot discriminate our freedom from inner states that are determined by “passions, mental habits, ambition” and so forth, we have no freedom, no real subjectivity; and it will take much observation of the actual self, in its actual *stultitia*, or ignorance, to learn to discriminate, and thus to free the self. It should already be clear from this small part of Foucault’s account of Stoic writings on the ‘pathological’ condition of the unfree, just how much work the Stoic philosophers must have done on the “raw material” of their own selves in order to come to this understanding of the complex processes by which, in their description, “representations” or concepts formulated outside the self are fused with passions, with illusions, with mental habits etcetera; forming a trap of “determinations” from which they must liberate themselves. And it is by virtue of their *own* experience that they are in a position to guide other aspirants to the happiness of a free and rational life, to take on the role of the “other” who lends a hand to those setting out on the path. As Foucault says “Between the *stultus* individual and the *sapiens* individual, the other is necessary” (HS, 133); and this “other” is precisely the “one who lends a hand”, the effective agent. “This effective agent who puts himself forward is, of course, the philosopher. The philosopher, then, is this effective agent. And this idea is found in all the [Hellenistic and Roman] philosophical tendencies, whatever they are.” (HS, 135) In this exposition, Foucault follows the Stoic texts very closely, but then adds a reflection of his own. He asks: “Now what object can one freely, absolutely, and always want?” The traditional answer to

this, for the Stoics, has always been ‘the good’ – the moral intention to always do what is right, and therefore to work on the self in such a way that one will always want the good. Instead Foucault answers his own question thus: “It goes without saying that the object, the only object that one can freely will, without having to take into consideration external determinations, is the self. [...] To escape from *stultitia* will be precisely to act so that one can will the self, so that one can will oneself, so that one can strive towards the self as the only object one can will freely, absolutely, and always.” (HS, 133)

What does this mean? That the *sapiens* self “wills itself” as opposed to willing the good? No explanation of this radical redescription of the goal of Stoic philosophical practice, or what it may mean to “will the self” is given here or at any point by Foucault, though it is presumably linked to his interest in the self-constructive aspects of Stoic practice. There is nothing controversial in describing Stoic practice as self-constructive, or at least self-reconstructive; but in suggesting that this was the *goal* of their practice, as opposed to instrumental to, and a welcome adjunct to, the pursuit of the good, Foucault distances himself from their texts (and from other interpreters). Clearly philosophers will always take what they want from other philosophers, and leave the rest, and Foucault is transparent (unlike others) in this aim. What is very curious in Foucault’s chosen selection of Stoic techniques is that he emphasizes the technique which seems least reworkable (even unthinkable) in a contemporary context – that of memorizing the wise words of the ancients – and de-emphasizes those techniques of self-knowledge that would seem to have so much more potential in the contemporary world, among which that of *prosoche*, or attention.

2. *Prosoche* – attention to the self

Both Foucault and Hadot, along with many other scholars, consider the practice of attention to the self, or *prosoche*, as the fundamental Stoic practice, by which thought is made to function as an operator of self transformation. Hadot describes this attention as “continuous vigilance and presence of mind, self consciousness which never sleeps, and a constant tension of the spirit”; thanks to which the philosopher “has ‘at hand’ (*procheiron*) the fundamental rule of life: that is, the distinction between what depends on us and what does not.” This attention, directed to the self in the present moment, “is, in a sense, the key to spiritual exercises. It frees us from the passions, which are always caused by the past or the future – two areas which do *not* depend on us”. (PWL, 84) Foucault presents an example, taken from Seneca’s evening reflections on his day (a practice

that was important for Pythagoras, and since then throughout antiquity), of two instances where Seneca sees himself not to have been fully vigilant, and therefore to have behaved inappropriately. The two cases were those of “arguing too intensely with ignorant people [... and] vexing, through reproaches, a friend whom one would have liked to help improve.” (CS, 62) Seneca is dissatisfied with what he saw as his own unskilful behaviour in these situations, but his self-examination does not serve to fuel guilt, self blame or remorse; on the contrary, it serves “to strengthen, on the basis of the recapitulated and reconsidered verification of a failure, the rational equipment that ensures a wise behaviour”, as Foucault rightly comments; but this is a statement of objectives, *not* a description of a technique, and with techniques, the important question is *how* are they supposed to work. With regard to this passage from Seneca, he writes that:

For Seneca, the problem is not that of discovering truth in the subject but of remembering truth, recovering a truth that has been forgotten. Second the subject does not forget himself, his nature, origin, or his supernatural affinity, but the rules of conduct, what he ought to have done. Third, the recollection of errors committed in the day measures the distinction between what has been done and what should have been done. Fourth, the subject is not the operating ground for the process of deciphering but the point where the rules of conduct come together in memory. The subject constitutes the intersection between acts that have to be regulated and rules for what ought to be done. (Ibid.)

This is one of the rare passages where Foucault says what for him the subject *is*, (as well as what it is not). This subject as the “intersection” of rules and acts must be among the most skeletal, the least active, and the least individual in the entire history of portraits of the subject. It is not even “the operating ground for the process of deciphering”, but merely “the point where the rules of conduct come together in memory.” However, it is difficult to apply this four-part schema of “the subject” to the example above, taken from Seneca, from which Foucault purports to have abstracted it. Regarding the first point, he says that “For the Stoics, truth is not in oneself but in the *logoi*, the teachings of the masters. One memorizes the statement one has heard, converting the statement one hears into rules of conduct.” (Ibid., 238) So far, so good, but how can Seneca apply the rules in this case? It is clear that his “forgetting” of the rules of conduct was momentary; and this is all that “memory” can provide him with. It cannot also provide him with rules governing the *application* of these rules, as it were, to the multiplicity of specific cases that he will encounter; and it is *this* that is his problem, as it is in *all* rule-based cases of moral reflection where the appropriate moral choice is not immediately obvious. (For this reason, reflection on the *circumstances* of the forgetting could therefore have been considered useful). Seneca sensed, for this is a matter of moral *sensitivity* (a rigid belief in *duty* might have seen him complimenting himself for reproaching his friend for his misdemeanour), that his attempts to implement the rules

were clumsy, unskilled; but it is not measuring the distance between rule and conduct that will provide him with the key to improving his conduct in the future. It is rather the case that his self-training must result in virtue, that is, in a morally transformed character, if his immediate response in such situations is to be skilful; and the Stoics certainly saw their philosophical practice as the cultivation of virtue, but, it can be argued against Foucault here (and by Foucault elsewhere), this requires self-awareness in relation to the precepts, rather than merely committing them to memory.

Foucault also seems to assume, perhaps because Seneca does not speak of it, that there would be no emotion attached to this “verification of a failure”, which, unless Seneca is already a “sage”, something he himself denied, seems unlikely. He therefore fails to ask himself what place those emotions which correspond to mental events, such as self-praise or self-blame in this case, may have in Stoic techniques of the self. This is all the more curious in that the Stoic conception of “desire” and “aversion” as functions of “reason”¹²³, not as forces opposed to reason, as in other philosophical conceptions, would seem to provide a much richer ground for an ethics of self constitution than this rather sterile and unconvincing model of trained obedience to rules that Foucault presents here. Curiously, though he treats only the Hellenistic Stoics, his descriptions often seem to correspond more to the practices of the classical Stoa. In his introduction to Seneca’s *Letters*, Campbell remarks that by comparison with the Hellenistic Stoics, “early Stoicism had a forbidding aspect which went far to explain its failure to influence the masses. [...] It stifled and repressed ordinary human emotions in striving for *apatheia*, immunity to feeling”¹²⁴. Modes of striving for indifference to indifferent things had become more diversified and approachable in Hellenistic times. The Hellenistic Stoic model of reason however, as we will see, precludes the binary division of the psychological and the rational dimensions of the human being, a division that Foucault appears to cling to and even reinforce, though he reformulates it through a binary model of his own construction.

As to the second point he makes: “Second the subject does not forget himself, his nature, origin, or his supernatural affinity, but the rules of conduct, what he ought to have done.” – Let us note what Marcus Aurelius has to say about this:

¹²³ Foucault uses “Stoic” to refer to the Hellenistic Stoics, and not to the Stoics of classical antiquity; he does not therefore consider more “classical” concepts of evil as a distortion or failure of reason, and he makes no reference to the exegesis of conceptual differences within “Stoicism”.

¹²⁴ Campbell, R. “Introduction” to *Seneca: Letters from a Stoic*, Penguin, London, 1969, p.17

“He who doesn’t know what the world is doesn’t know where he himself is, either. He who doesn’t know for what purpose the world exists, doesn’t know who he is himself. Whoever doesn’t know the answer to one of these questions is unable to say for what purpose he himself exists.”¹²⁵

In other words, for Marcus Aurelius, and this is something all Stoics shared, the “rules of conduct” would be empty and meaningless if they did not reflect one’s knowledge of the world. Without that knowledge of the world, which *includes* the “nature”, “origin” and “supernatural affinity” of the subject, the subject “is unable to say for what purpose he himself exists;” that is to say, there can be no notion of “rules of conduct” in isolation from an understanding of one’s place in the larger scheme of nature. The practice of evening reflection on one’s conduct throughout the day that is so important to the Stoics is equally important in many other traditions; but what makes it particularly *Stoic*, is perhaps not so much the reflection in itself, but the presence of mind (*prosoche*) that is brought to that reflection. The practice of evaluating one’s actions in the light of one’s concepts of moral right and wrong, (and one cannot *not have* such concepts) tends, for all non-sages, to lead to a feeling of satisfaction or of dissatisfaction with the self, and this feeling tends to translate into self-praise or self-blame. Only that “continuous vigilance and presence of mind, self consciousness which never sleeps, and a constant tension of the spirit” to which Hadot refers, will allow one to watch these feelings in their arising, and therefore to intervene between the feeling and the resulting self-judgement – a perturbation in itself, whether positive or negative – thus exercising one’s freedom. Foucault speaks of Seneca’s dissatisfaction as if it were emotionless. But it is *this* that is the result of *prosoche*: Seneca’s capacity to use self-approvation or disapprovation judiciously in the present moment of his evening reflection, without becoming embroiled in self-love or self-hatred for what he has done that morning, in past time, is what reveals the *constancy* of his attention.

Another exercise which reflects this attention more closely, is what Foucault describes as “the necessity of a labour of thought with itself as object [which ...] should have the form of a steady screening of representations”; and as he says, this “represents both a general principle and an attitudinal schema” (TS, 238). He notes that, in order to formulate this requirement, Epictetus refers to Socrates’ aphorism that “An unexamined life [*anexetastos bios*] is not worth living”, and comments:

In reality, the examination Socrates was talking about was the one to which he intended to subject both himself and others apropos of ignorance, knowledge and the non-knowledge of ignorance. The examination Epictetus is

¹²⁵ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 8.52, quoted in Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, p.197

talking about is completely different: it is an examination that deals with representations [...] it should be made clear that the control point will not be located in the origin or in the very object of representation, but in the approval that one should or should not give to it. (CS, 63-64)

The affirmation here that this practice is *completely* different is both very strong and arguably misleading, in that Socrates' objective, through his dialogues, is to demonstrate not only that we are ignorant *in general* (and ignorant of our ignorance), but precisely that the *specific representation*, or expressed thought, that is the object of any one dialogue derives from our ignorance, and is therefore, as Epictetus would put it, not worthy of approval. Socrates teaches a dialogical method of examination of concepts or representations (by whatever name), and Epictetus an introspective one, but both demonstrate the non-adherence to reality of the representations under examination. Both are intellectual techniques, and the difference is more in method and cultural context than in objective, though the life-styles they relate to are indeed very different. Uncharacteristically, Foucault is here using a difference in terminology to radicalise a difference in the form of *examination* that clearly exists, but that may be more technical than substantive.

To take an example dear to both Socrates and Epictetus, the representation of 'death' as an 'evil', is merely ignorance (false judgement). We do not know if death is a good thing or a bad thing, and in judging it as bad we express our ignorance. Both Socrates and Epictetus want to help their interlocutor to free themselves of this false judgement about death, or to "withdraw approval" or "assent" from it, in Stoic terms. In Socrates the technique is that of discourse between two (or more) people – a spiritual teacher and an aspirant philosopher; whereas in Epictetus this "external" discourse is maintained through the schools, but the main purpose of the schools themselves is to teach the aspirant philosopher to hold this dialogue with herself, to develop an *inner* discourse between parts of the self, in which the role of spiritual guide is taken by the highest part of the self, moral reason.

As Foucault goes on to say: "When a representation enters the mind, the work of discrimination, of *diakrisis*, will consist in applying to it the famous Stoic canon that marks the division between that which does not depend on us and that which does" (CS, 64); and death is clearly in the category of representations of 'that which does not depend on us'. Rather than "completely different", it might be more appropriate to say that Epictetus' teachings were an elaboration of techniques for putting Socrates' aphorism, to know oneself, into practice in relations of the self with itself. As Epictetus himself put it: "Just as Socrates used to say that an unexamined life is not worth living, so we must never accept an unexamined representation." (Cited in IC, 97)

But Foucault goes on to say:

In the former case [of what does not depend on us] the representations will not be accepted since they are beyond our understanding; they will be rejected as not being appropriate objects of ‘desire’ or ‘aversion’, of ‘attraction’ or ‘repulsion.’ This inspection is a test of power and a guarantee of freedom: a way of always making sure that one will not become attached to that which does not come under our control. (CS, 64)

This rather equivocal affirmation complicates the picture. As we have seen, the Stoics do not set apart “what does not depend on us” by virtue of the fact that this is “beyond our understanding”; but rather because, unlike what *does* depend on us, we need to recognise that there is *nothing* we can do about what is independent of us (wealth and illness, inspiring desire and aversion reciprocally, being two of the typical examples offered by the Stoics of this category). In other words, the problem is not merely a *cognitive* one, it is desire and aversion, as *part* of reason, that produce “unexamined representations”, and this fundamental Stoic technique of discrimination serves to truly understand, to *see*, case by case as these come into our mind, that aversion to the way things actually are, and the desire for them to be different (unless making them different is truly a possibility of ours) is a foolish waste of energy. Coming to a full understanding of this may indeed lead to self-mastery, but to describe this process as “a test of power” has a very un-Stoic ring to it. It seems to suggest that strengthening the self is an objective *in itself*, as opposed to a means to serving the moral reason. And further, if as he says freedom guarantees that we “will not become attached to that which does not come under our control”, one wonders whether this implies that it is appropriate to become attached to what *does* come under our control, to what is *within* our understanding.

The impression that this is Foucault’s reading is further reinforced in that at no point hitherto (or throughout this book, *The Care of the Self*) does he discuss the fact that “what does depend on us” for the Stoics, is the *value judgement* that we attach to each simple representation. On this view, there is no such thing as a *representation* which is “beyond our understanding”. Representations are the cognitive response to impressions received passively from our senses (which do *not* depend on us – they are given), to which we apply value judgements which may be true or false. It is these value judgements that depend on us; and in this sense we may have ‘understood’ (judged correctly), or ‘misunderstood’, (judged incorrectly); but in neither case is “attachment” to a representation ever “appropriate”. “My father has disinherited me.”, for example, is one of Epictetus’ examples of a representation that is objective (does not depend on us) and requires assent (not attachment). Adding “this is terrible”, on the other hand, would constitute a value judgement that *does* depend on us; and on this theory it is this, the value judgement that we are

afflicted by, not the simple representation of the event, and therefore we should not assent to this subjective representation. “I accept this as fate has determined it for me” would be the more appropriate response.

On Foucault’s version, the “screening of representations” to which Epictetus refers (using the metaphors of the vigilance of the night watchmen or the coin tester) means “to keep constant watch over one’s representations, or to verify their marks the way one authenticates a currency” (CS, 64). Epictetus uses the metaphor to apply to the judgements we make concerning our representations, and in many of the examples given by him, like the one regarding the disinherited person above, these are of an *emotive* order. Foucault on the other hand seems to imply, backed by many statements like the one above, that this process of verification is purely *cognitive*; that it refers, in some unexplained way, to the accuracy of the representation itself. But what can it mean not to accept a representation? At the cognitive level, the choice as to whether we ‘accept’ a representation or not is limited to the *values* that we attribute to an empirical representation; we cannot, as humans, *not accept, not have* a representation of ‘death’ for example, which is part of our human world. Certainly its *meaning* is beyond our understanding, but what this means is that all we can accept or reject are the negative (or positive) values we attribute to it. The evaluation is cognitive, but the cognition is evaluative, and it is *evaluation* that requires attention.

For the Stoics, the attribution of value is connected in human beings with the emotions, with fear, desire, aversion, etc. And it is in coming to an understanding of the role of emotion in judgement that we can become free of its power. It is not by a merely cognitive process, or by exercising will-power to impose learned precepts on ourselves, that we achieve self-mastery. The parts of the self that take part in our inner dialogue may be *metaphorically* separated, for the Stoics, into “reason” and “passions”, but not if ‘reason’ is construed along current Western lines as emotionless ratiocination. It seems strange that Foucault has chosen not to thematise this important relation between concept and feeling in Stoic thought. It is as if he is trying to intellectualise a practice of the self which instead *uses* the intellect to work on another level of consciousness; a practice that encourages *attention* to one’s mental state, experienced as the locus of much more than just the intellectual faculties. It is *detailed* attention to one’s interiority, *prosoche*, that is the key to the Stoic disciplines of assent and desire, and the key to freedom from the oppressive hold of the passions. Hadot says that even in the midst of suffering (a mental state with which we will inevitably have to work), if attention is focused *just* on the present moment, then in “the miniscule

present moment, which, in its exiguity, is always bearable and controllable, attention increases our vigilance” (IC, 85); and increases our freedom.

Attention is precisely the practice, *par excellence*, that holds one in the present moment, and, essentially, is itself a factor of what happens in that present (just as its absence, in inattentive reactivity, is a factor, and the principle component of unfreedom). If I am attentive to the anger that I am experiencing, for example, the anger becomes the object of my attention, simultaneously therefore my attention is removed from the object of my anger, and returned to myself, to the movement of my mind.¹²⁶ Focusing on the object (which the angry mind interprets as the “cause” of its anger) augments the anger. The angry mind is known for its tendency to go into overdrive, adding reason after reason to justify itself and stoke up the anger; it is a mind that is unstable and unfree. All this is diffused, at least in part, if one’s attention is shifted to the anger itself, viewed as an aspect of the self in the present moment. So one’s anger is part of “what comes under one’s control”, but attachment to it would be one’s moral downfall, the failure of reason in the face of irrationality.¹²⁷

Intellectual activity is an essential exercise of reason, an essential part of Stoic self-work, but it is something that automatically takes the mind *away* from attention to the unfolding of the present moment, even if it is to *thinking* of its implications. Attention inserts a pause between what the Stoics call impulse to action (*hormè*) and action itself, into which reason can enter. Attention and thinking are different and complementary mental practices, even though the latter will usually come into play as soon as the former has provided it with new representations. And *this* reflection, the intellectual activity that follows upon the practice of attention to the self, is a self-transforming practice. Without the practice of attention, however, the proliferation of thoughts produced by the angry (jealous, anxious, etc.) mind can result in strengthening the conviction that the anger is justified, and sometimes in taking the further step of giving one’s anger the moral status of

¹²⁶ Cf. Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, IX, 42

¹²⁷ When Foucault deals with Stoic texts on anger, he notes that “When you look at these treatises on anger you see that the question of anger is always a question of the anger of the head of the family towards his wife, his children, his household or his slaves. Or it is the anger of the patron towards his clients or those dependent on him, or of the general towards his troops, and of course, of the Prince towards his subjects. That is to say, the question of anger, of being carried away by anger or of the impossibility of controlling oneself – let’s say more precisely: the impossibility of exercising one’s power and sovereignty over oneself insofar as and when one exercises one’s sovereignty or power over others – is situated precisely at the point of connection of self-control and command over others” (HS, 374). This is valuable historical comment. Clearly, in patrician society, inferiors were not allowed to express anger against superiors, therefore patrician anger is the most compelling model of it for the Stoics, and it is necessarily connected to power, because of their commanding position in society. Nonetheless, their interest in dealing with anger was also, in fact, primarily, for the sake of their own souls, and only as a result of this work with themselves would the expression of anger through power be modified, and society benefit. Foucault does not explore this.

“righteous indignation”. A practice that may reinforce the self-deceiving character structure (locked in false judgement of indifferent things), not transform it. This is not in any way to suggest there is no moral place for righteous indignation, but it is to suggest that attention needs to be paid to what that indignation is composed of *as well* as reasoned argument. Whether or not rational analysis would also condemn the ‘cause’ of the anger is not relevant here – rational reflection on what action to take in the face of injustice was another fundamental Stoic principle – but it is only the person who knows how to transform her own anger that is truly capable of such moral reflection.

Hadot provides us with what can be read as a possible clue to Foucault’s interpretation of Epictetus. He writes:

As is well known, the Stoics held that only those representations should be accepted into the mind which they called *kataléptikai*, a term which is usually translated as ‘comprehensive’. This translation gives the impression that the Stoics believed a representation to be true when it ‘comprehends’, or seizes the contents of reality. In Epictetus, however, we can glimpse a wholly different meaning of the term: for him, a representation is *kataléptiké* when it does not go beyond what is given, but is able to stop at what is perceived, without adding anything extraneous to that which is perceived. Rather than ‘comprehensive representations,’ then, it would be better to speak of ‘adequate representations.’ (IC, 84)

Foucault’s interpretation then, would seem to correspond to the notion of “comprehensive representation”, which suggests that the judgement made of the reality in question must be accurate, must leave nothing out; whereas on Hadot’s version – “adequate representation”, suggests rather that all that one can *truly* say about death, for example, is that it is death; not that it is good or bad, final end or rite of passage, or whatever; for all of these are value judgements. Given that all such judgements pertain to “what does not depend on us”, and that philosophical practice for Epictetus requires that we be concerned only with what does depend on us, that is: “the acts of our soul, because we can freely choose them,” (Ibid.) Hadot’s gloss seems closer to the central theme of Epictetus’ *Discourses*, than whatever translations Foucault is using.¹²⁸ In an earlier text of Hadot’s, however, that Foucault had read (the citation above is from *Inner Citadel*, which was published after Foucault’s death), he himself had used “objective” rather than “adequate” for *kataleptike*, though clearly with the same gloss: “The Stoics’ notorious *phantasia kataleptike* – which we have translated as “objective representation” – takes place precisely when we refrain from adding any judgement value to naked reality”. (PWL, 187-88) Hadot gives us a

¹²⁸ Foucault refers to : Souilhé, *Collection des universités de France*, but not in direct quotation.

clear illustration, taken from the *Discourses* of Epictetus, of how “the soul develops an inner discourse [that ...] constitutes judgement.” (IC, 84):

In the same way as we train ourselves in order to be able to face up to sophisticated interrogations, we ought also to train ourselves to face up to representations (*phantasiai*), for they too ask us questions.¹²⁹ For example, let’s say we formulate within ourselves the contents of the representation. “So-and-so’s son is dead.”

This representation is asking you a question, and you should reply:

“That does not depend on the will, and is not something bad.”

“So-and-so’s father has disinherited him. What do you think of that?” Reply: “That doesn’t depend on the will, and is not something bad.”

“He was very hurt by it.” Reply: “That does depend on the will, and is something bad.”

“He put up with it bravely.” “That depends on the will, and is something good.”

Epictetus continues:

If we acquire this habit, we will make progress; for we will give our assent only to that of which there is an adequate (*kataléptiké*) representation. (Ibid. 84-85)

This is a training exercise, what Epictetus calls (in Hadot’s translation), an “exercise-theme”, and it is interesting to note that Epictetus does not suggest that it is in any way easy to adopt this attitude in the face of human tragedy and suffering. The ‘good’ response to a grave personal problem is not described as *indifference*, but rather as “He put up with it bravely”, which is a much more humanly imaginable response than the unattainable indifference to “indifferent” things (i.e. things determined by fate, not moral will) of the sage. Epictetus’ comment with regard to progress indicates an underlying assumption that the trainee, the aspirant to wisdom, will many times respond to human suffering, her own and that of others, by saying ‘This is a bad, sad, or tragic thing’. What will happen, however, with practice, is that the aspirant, by firstly practising attention to her own representations, that is to say, the concepts through which her feelings (bad, sad, tragic) are given expression, will learn to enter into discourse with herself regarding these representations, and see them as attributing value judgements to things determined by fate or chance, and therefore not as adequate representations of the way things are in themselves. There is no knowing, to take another of Epictetus’ examples here, whether losing an inheritance is a good or bad thing, it may be just the wake-up call so-and-so needed to reorient her wayward life, and discover happiness. Hadot has written elsewhere that: “The Stoic experience consists in becoming sharply aware of the tragic situation of human beings, who are conditioned by fate. [...] The result of this is that people are unhappy, because they passionately seek to acquire things which they cannot obtain, and to flee evils which are inevitable. There is one thing, and only one, which does depend on us and

¹²⁹ Note the reference to Platonic-Socratic philosophical training given as standard practice, and its extension with respect to representations.

which nothing can tear away from us: the will to do good and to act in conformity with reason.” (WAP, 127)

Interestingly, Foucault cites exactly the same passage (above) from the *Discourses* of Epictetus in *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, in the context of distinguishing Christian techniques of the self from Stoic ones. He comments on this passage: “It can be seen that the aim of this control of representations is not to decipher a hidden truth beneath appearances, which would be the truth of the subject himself. Rather he [Epictetus] finds in these representations, as they appear, the opportunity for recalling a number of true principles concerning death, illness, suffering, political life, etcetera. By means of this reminder we can see if we are capable of reacting in accordance with such principles – if they have really become, according to Plutarch’s metaphor, that master’s voice which is raised immediately the passions growl and which knows how to silence them.” (HS, 503-04) It is hard to imagine what Foucault thinks this means in reality. Does he think the Stoics did not mourn their loved ones; or if they did, did they see themselves as hopelessly lacking in self-mastery? There seems to be some lack of imagination complementing the intellectual sophistication of Foucault’s methods, some disconnection between his grasp of their words and lack of grasp of their practices. Reading Seneca, or Marcus Aurelius, directly, one feels oneself in the company of fellow human beings; extraordinary ones, but with recognisable feelings that are absent from Foucault’s accounts of them.

Foucault’s presentation of Stoic techniques in *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* is more subtle than that in the earlier *History of Sexuality*, (though still in the service of the distinction between Christian (and scientific) “psychological” and Stoic “intellectual” practices), but still doesn’t put the meat on the bones, as it were, of how these practices were carried out by actual human beings. In the midst of mourning for a loved one, and, to Stoic thinking, non-sages *will* mourn, one might draw strength from reflecting on the necessity of death, and the absurdity of railing against it; but it is hard to imagine one calmly reciting principles to oneself, and attempting to verify whether one is capable of reacting in accordance with them. Foucault expresses greater sympathy with Hellenistic concepts of the *therapeutic* function of philosophy when it is more directly concerned with the body. He describes Epictetus’ attitude to his disciples thus: “He takes them to task for coming to him not in order to be treated (*therapeuthèsomenoi*) but in order to have their judgements amended and corrected (*epanorthòsontes*). ‘you wish to learn syllogisms? You must first attend to your ulcers, and stay your flux, and arrive at peace in your mind.’ ” (CS, 55) And yet

Foucault himself continues to insist on the *absolute* primacy of “correcting judgements” in Stoic practice. He notes that there is “something paradoxical” about this Stoic concern for the body, in that “it is inscribed, at least in part, within an ethics that posits that death, disease, or even physical suffering do not constitute true ills and that it is better to take pains over one’s soul than to devote one’s care to the maintenance of the body. But in fact the focus of attention in these practices of the self is the point where the ills of the body and those of the soul can communicate with one another and exchange their distresses”. (CS, 56) Precisely. Because the paradox lies not in the Stoic *concern*, but in the reality of the lives about which we must be concerned.

3. Stoic reason and providence.

The accounts of Foucault, Hadot, and other scholars concur in affirming that the presuppositions underlying the Stoic conception of nature are that it is ordered by the precise logic and harmony that they call the *logos*, or “universal Reason”; that “God is nothing other than universal Reason,” in Hadot’s words, and that “Human Reason is an emanation or part of this Universal Reason.” (IC, This being the case, Foucault asks the following question: “What can the Stoics mean when they insist on the need to organise all knowledge in terms of the *tekhnè tou biou*, to direct the gaze on the self, and when, at the same time, they associate this conversion and inflection of the gaze onto the self with the entire course of the order of the world and with its general and internal organization?” (HS, 260) And he seeks for answers to this problem in Seneca’s *Natural Questions*. In this text Seneca sees an initial obstacle to an understanding of the place of the self in the world in the prevailing myths of what constitutes human greatness in the popular imagination of the time: “only seeing human greatness in what are always fragile victories and uncertain fortunes.” (HS, 264)

Seneca asks:

What is great down here? Is it crossing the seas in fleets, planting our flags on the shores of the Red Sea and, when we lack land for our devastation¹³⁰, wandering the ocean in search of unknown shores? No: it is seeing the whole of this world with the eyes of the mind and having carried off the most beautiful triumph, triumph over the vices [...] What actually is there to wish for when our eyes return to earth from the sight of celestial

¹³⁰ Alexander the Great described as a forerunner of George Bush. In his letters to Lucilius also, Foucault says, “he regularly expressed his opposition to the verbosity of chronicles and their praise of great men like Alexander, who he particularly detested”. Against these, he puts forward exemplars of self mastery, “Cato’s modesty is an example. Scipio too is an example, leaving Rome in order to secure his town’s freedom, and retiring modestly, without glamour, to a villa.” (HS, 264)

bodies, and find only shadows, as when one passes from a clear sun to the dark night of dungeons? What is great is a steadfast soul, serene in adversity, a soul that accepts every event as if it were desired [...]. What is great is to see the features of fate fall at one's feet; it is to remember that one is a man; it is, when one is happy, saying to oneself that one will not be happy for long. What is great is having one's soul at one's lips, ready to depart; then one is free not by the laws of the city but by the laws of nature.¹³¹

In this passage the metaphor for the return to earth from the contemplation of the celestial bodies is that of “the dark night of dungeons”. What is great down here in the shadows is to know that if one is happy, one will not be happy for long. This is a description of a world that is hard, and of the glory of freedom from obsessive preoccupation with its hardness. A few pages later Foucault gives the contrasting description of the “Stoic need to know nature” as a form of knowledge that “involves grasping ourselves again here where we are, at the point where we exist, that is to say of placing ourselves within a wholly rational and reassuring world, which is the world of a divine Providence”. (HS, 278). At first glance, though it is easy to substantiate this perspective with citations from Stoic texts, this sounds more like the “best of all possible worlds” of Voltaire’s *Candide* than the Stoic awareness of suffering. What sense can be made of this apparent contradiction?

Foucault appears to regard it as a kind of logical failing, and moves on to arguments that are more central to his investigation, but a further exploration may have shed light on the matter for him. That nature has its own logic, in which humans have their place, is clear in all Stoic writings; as is the notion that the contemplation of nature will reveal to us our true, very tiny, place in the grand scheme of things. But what characterizes human beings is this capacity for contemplation, which reflects the logic of nature. Reason, the faculty which allows for contemplation, thus paradoxically teaches us our cosmic insignificance, and our grandeur, at one and the same time (recalling Kant’s “sublime”). The world is thus wholly rational for the Stoics, as Foucault says, but if this is held to be reassuring, access to this highly refined reassurance¹³² comes only through the *understanding* that behind the apparent chaos of contingency, behind the pain of perceived injustice and tragedy, there is yet order. This is very far from the more densely emotional reassurance of a Christian notion of “Providence”, the reassurance that, though this life is punishment for our sins, there will be a better life beyond death, a thought which provides some spiritual comfort in this life. Nonetheless, there are points in common in the Stoic and Christian uses of the word “providence”. In addition to a certain overlap between the notion of providence and that of destiny, Hadot points out that the Stoics also needed to respond to contemporary religious and socio-political needs, in

¹³¹ Seneca, *Natural Questions*, cited in HS, pp.264-265

¹³² With which the emotion known in contemporary English as “stoical” shares some, but not all, connotations.

that “the daily life of people in antiquity was punctuated by religious ceremonies. Moreover, prayers and sacrifices would have no meaning if there were no current and individual providence”. However, he also points out that the references made to “the figures of the gods deliberating over the fate of an individual, or the figure of the *daimòn*, are nothing but mythical, imaginative expressions, intended to render the Stoic conceptions of Reason and Destiny more alive and personal.¹³³” Along with a careful juxtaposition in relation to popular mythology, Stoic writings also expressed an ongoing polemic with other philosophical schools, in particular with the Epicureans. In this context “providence” figured as the notion of a rationally ordered universe in competition with the ‘dust of atoms’ which is how Marcus Aurelius described, or derided, Epicurean cosmology. He asks:

Are you unhappy with the part of the All which has been allotted to you? Then remember the disjunction: either providence or atoms. (*Meditations*, IV,3,5, in IC, p.147)

Hadot remarks that this disjunction was used by the Stoics to assert that whether you believed in cosmic order or cosmic chaos, you still had to live like a Stoic. Marcus, addressing the Epicurean, writes:

Consider yourself fortunate if, in the midst of such a whirlwind, you possess a guiding intelligence within yourself (XII, 14, 4)

But within the notion of an ordered universe, the Stoics entertained various hypotheses about how providence might actually function. Again, from the *Meditations*:

Either the universe’s thought exercises its impulse upon each individual. If this is so, then accept this impulse with benevolence.
Alternatively, it gave its impulse once and for all and everything else occurs as a necessary consequence. Why then, should you worry?
Finally, if the all is god then all is well. If it is random, don’t you, too, act at random. (IX, 28, 2, in IC, p.151)

Three splendid lines, three cosmologies, one ethics. The disjunction occurs between the first two which presuppose some form of “providence”, and the third, the Epicurean vision of a random universe. Hadot notes that the first two are both compatible with the Stoic system, and that between them the relationship is not one of disjunction, “but are what historians of logic call ‘subdisjunctions’” (IC, 152) In other words, the two hypotheses are not absolutely, but only relatively exclusive of each other. This constitutes a form of recognition that a line cannot be

¹³³ Hadot, (IC, 159-60) “He lives with the gods who constantly shows them a soul which greets that which has been allotted to it with joy; it does everything that is willed by the *daimòn* which Zeus has given each person as an overseer and a guide, and which is a small parcel of Zeus. It is nothing other than each person’s intellect and reason.” Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* V,27, in (IC, p.160)

firmly drawn between what is a direct result of providence, and what is merely indirect and derivative. For example it was a Stoic belief that malevolence was a necessary consequence of the gift of freedom, and not directly planned (*Meditations*, XI, 18, 24). However, what this providence is, in both cases, is an ordering principle inherent in nature, in the cosmos, and therefore in human life. It is a “providence” that is entirely without a “provider”. The preference for this term, rather than something like “the principle of order”, may thus have to do with making one’s own the perspective that everything that happens must happen, accepting – welcoming – the way things are as right, and therefore ultimately good. Describing the “ordering principle” as “providence” provides an accessible *metaphor* for this *normative* correspondence of ethics and physics. There is no god in Stoic theory, but there is much use of god as a metaphor for the agency of this agent-less ordering principle that is the *logos*; and also as a useful conceptual bridge for those who remain attached to notions of godhead. Though god’s role in the texts is metaphorical, not theoretical, in a world in which there were believers and non-believers, belief in the gods was seen as neither an advantage nor an obstacle to ethical practice, to the practice of philosophy.

4. Conversion to self

In the *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, Foucault describes the ‘nucleus’ of the Hellenic care of the self thus: “We must turn away from everything that turns us away from our self, so as to turn ourselves around towards our self. This is the great image of turning around towards oneself underlying all the analyses I have been talking about until now. [...] All these images, then, of turning around towards the self by turning away from what is external to us – clearly bring us close to what we could call, perhaps anticipating a bit, the notion of conversion”. (HS, 206-07). With this he constructs a first step to the identification of “conversion” with “the care of the self”. The next (exegetical) step is to cite various terms employed in Greek and Latin, such as *epistrephein pros heautou* and *convertere ad se*, both of which can be used for “turning towards the self [or] converting to the self” ”, (Ibid. 207). He then constructs a bridge between these concepts and modern conceptions of conversion thus:

“it would be quite wrong to view and gage the importance of the notion of conversion only in connection with religion. [...] the notion of conversion is also an important philosophical notion [...] and] is also crucially important in connection with morality. And finally we should not forget that from the nineteenth century the notion of conversion was introduced into thought, practice, experience, and political life in a spectacular and we

can even say dramatic way. One day the history of what could be called revolutionary subjectivity should be written. (Ibid. 208)

That there are links between political and religious conversion, as practice and as concept, is not a new idea, one of which a thorough-going genealogical analysis, might indeed prove interesting. But what seems surprising here is the suggestion of a continuity between the Greek concept of “conversion to self”, read as “care of the self”, and the religious and political concept of conversion, though the apparent discontinuity in the use of the term seems so forceful. This (having sown the seed of the idea of continuity) he acknowledges, immediately returning to the question of the discontinuity between the ancient and Christian concepts of conversion. “Christian conversion”, he writes, “for which Christians use the word *metanoia*, is obviously very different from the Platonic *epistrophè* [and the Hellenic *convertere ad se*]. You know that the word itself, *metanoia*, means two things: *metanoia* is penitence and it is also radical change of thought and mind.” (Ibid. 211) The point about this radical change is firstly that it is sudden and drastic; and

“Second, in this conversion, this Christian *metanoia*, this sudden, dramatic, historical-metahistorical upheaval of the subject, there is a transition: a transition from one type of being to another, from death to life, from mortality to immortality, from darkness to light, from the reign of the devil to that of God, etcetera. And finally, third, [...] there is an element that is a consequence of the other two [...], and this is that there can only be conversion in as much as a break takes place in the subject. A fundamental element of Christian conversion is renunciation of oneself, dying to oneself, and being reborn in a different self and a new form which, as it were, no longer has anything to do with the earlier self in its being, its mode of being, in its habits or its *èthos*. (Ibid. 213)

This major discontinuity in relations of the self to the self may occur in conversion to Christianity, but also, for the Christian believer, in conversion to a newer, more profound vision, engendering a radical break with one’s old self. Conversely, in ancient philosophy one finds references to (Foucault lists): self-correction, transfiguration, transformation etc. but not to a radical break with self. He writes: “If there is a break – and there is – it takes place with regard to what surrounds the self. The break must be carried out with what surrounds the self so that it is no longer enslaved, dependent, and constrained.” (Ibid.) On the contrary, the gaze must be constantly turned to the self, observing the self. It remains the case, however, as Foucault observes, that the tension involved in this notion of turning to the self which is also a ‘return’, means that it is never

completely clear or resolved whether the self is something to which you return because it is given in advance or an objective you must set for yourself and to which you might finally gain access if you achieve wisdom. Is the self the point to which you return through the long detour of ascesis and philosophical practice? Or is the self an object you keep always before your eyes and reach through a movement that in the end can only be bestowed by wisdom? (Ibid. 213-14)

And here he is referring to Hellenistic antiquity, where the question, so dear to Foucault, was a more fluid one – as to whether the ‘self’ is a pre-constituted, an *a priori* self – or whether it is constituted through practice, and ultimately only attainable through “wisdom”, a concept that opened lots of interesting spaces. It was a question that Foucault did not find a definitive answer to in his extensive readings of the texts. Perhaps he considered it irresolvable, or perhaps he chose to steer clear of taking a position in philological debates among Classical scholars, which was not within his sphere of expertise. Certainly he recognised that there were many individuals in Antiquity, Platonists and others, committed to these practices of the self, who did believe in a pre-constituted self to which they must find their way back. But he wished to keep open the possibility that there may have been others without such pre-conceived ideas, who believed rather that understanding how to live came through a relationship to the self that involved certain practices – practices that had been tried, tested and recommended by men (mostly) of proven wisdom, who were exemplars of how to live and, no less importantly, of how to die, like Socrates himself. Though the pre-constituted self to which one returns had been of fundamental importance to Plato; for Stoics, Epicureans etc. Foucault surmised that whatever opinion they may have held on the matter, this was not really the main point. The point was rather the philosophical life, the moral life, to which concepts were a useful support, or else they got in the way.

Foucault then makes a useful distinction (in daunting neologisms):

If conversion (Christian or post-Christian *metanoia*) takes the form of a break or change within the self, if consequently we can say that it is a sort of trans-subjectivation, then I would propose saying that the conversion of the philosophy of the first centuries of our era is not a trans-subjectivation. [...] Conversion is a long and continuous process that I will call a self-subjectivation rather than a trans-subjectivation. (Ibid. 214)

Foucault attributes this analysis of the difference between *epistrophè* and of *metanoia* to his reading of Hadot’s work on the question (despite differences in terminology). Both scholars, whilst working from different perspectives, and with different objectives, concur in seeing the separation of philosophy from spirituality, from the necessity of work on the self, as the end result of a long process begun in the first centuries of the Christian era. Both engage in meticulous analysis of the way in which changes in the meaning and use of single concepts figure in the larger picture of historical change. Hadot in particular demonstrates the way in which the use of the word *Logos* enabled what he describes as a messianic religion to present itself, and in part transform itself, as ‘philosophy’:

Since Heraclitus, the notion of the *Logos* had been a central concept of Greek philosophy, since it could signify ‘word’ and ‘discourse’ as well as ‘reason’. In particular, the Stoics believed that the *Logos*, conceived as a rational force, was immanent in the world, in human beings, in each individual. This is why, when the prologue to the Gospel of John identified Jesus with the Eternal *Logos* and the Son of God, it enabled Christianity to be presented as a philosophy. The substantial Word of God could be conceived as the Reason which created the world and guided human thought. (WAP, 238)

Starting with the *Logos*, many of the key concepts, and practices of Greek philosophy underwent conceptual sea-changes in the imperial Roman period of Christianity. In particular, “With this assimilation of Christianity to a philosophy, we see the appearance within Christianity of spiritual exercises – practices that were proper to secular philosophy” (Ibid. 241) This being the case, Hadot poses exactly the same question that preoccupied Foucault: “If ancient philosophy established such an intimate link between philosophical discourse and the form of life, why is it that today [...] philosophy is usually presented as above all a discourse, which may be theoretical and systematic, or critical, but in any case lacks a direct relationship to the philosopher’s way of life?” The answer he gives is, in the first instance: “The causes of this transformation are primarily historical: it is due to the flourishing of Christianity.” (Ibid. 253) Clearly, his exploration of this involves the analysis of a whole series of historical events and processes, and of conceptual shifts that cannot be recalled here; but the guiding line is that “Christianity, particularly in the Middle Ages, was marked by a divorce between philosophical discourse and way of life.” Some of the spiritual exercises of Antiquity had been incorporated-transformed into the way of life of monasticism, but this was increasingly separated from the practice of theoretical discourse, even within the monastery itself. What remained of theory:

in particular the discourses of Platonism and Aristotelianism [...] separated from the ways of life which inspired them, [...] were reduced to the status of mere conceptual material which could be used in theological controversies. ‘Philosophy’ when placed in the service of theology, was henceforth no more than a theoretical discourse; and when, in the seventeenth and especially the eighteenth century, modern philosophy conquered its autonomy, it retained the tendency to limit itself to this point of view. (Ibid. 254)

These developments were amply treated by Foucault in his early work, as has been said, and the recuperation of philosophy as not just discourse, but as the central practice of a way of life was his mission, in which the notion of “conversion to self” played its role. He cites Marcus Aurelius on this turning to self thus: “It is in order not to let ourselves be carried away by the eddy of futile and vicious thoughts. If we must turn away from others, it is so as better to listen solely to the internal guide.” (*Meditations*, III, 4, cited HS, 222) This, as he notes, is clearly an exercise in concentration, “an exercise by which all the subject’s activity and attention is brought back to this tension that leads him to his aim.” And he goes on: “In no way does it involve either opening up

the subject as a field of knowledge (*connaissances*) or undertaking the subject's exegesis and decipherment." (HS, 222) Certainly Marcus Aurelius was neither a Christian nor a Freudian, but Foucault (habitually) fails to comment on the significance of this "internal guide"; not in terms of whether it is an entity or not, the metaphysical question is not at issue here, but what it means as *ethical practice*. Instead, he interprets Marcus Aurelius as proposing a "teleological concentration. [...] It involves keeping before our eyes, in the clearest way, that towards which we are striving and having, as it were, a clear consciousness of this aim, of what we must do to achieve it and of the possibility of our achieving it." (Ibid.) This reads rather like a version of Stoicism written for an American course on "how to achieve your goals in life", such is his determination to insist that it does *not* involve "taking oneself as an object of knowledge." (Ibid.)

Foucault's own goals were of course very un-American. These goals always involved the creation of a non-conformist life-style, but what was at the centre of this "aesthetics of existence" changed over the years; the principle shift being from an orientation to questions that involved society as a whole to questions affecting groups of people on the fringes of society, which is where he always situated himself. This may have to do with the link he wanted to establish between "conversion" and "care of the self". Bernauer and Mahon¹³⁴, in discussing Foucault's ethics, note the enthusiasm he expressed for the work of Deleuze and Guattari thus:

Foucault calls their work "a book of ethics, the first book of ethics to be written in France in quite a long time," and by ethics he means a stylization, "a life style, a way of thinking and living." The distinctiveness of Deleuze and Guattari's ethics of stylization at our peculiar juncture in history is to incite us to struggle against fascism – certainly fascism of the historical variety which so successfully moved so many, "but also the fascism in us all, in our heads and in our everyday behaviour, the fascism that causes us to love power, to desire the very thing that dominates and exploits us. As the Christian was provoked to drive sin from the soul, our distinctive task, our modern ethical task, is to 'ferret out the fascism'".¹³⁵

Deleuze and Guattari, supported by Foucault, set out to invent an ethics, a life-style that would implicitly counter our "interior fascist", construing this fetishisation of power historically rather than psychologically (thus the title *Anti-Oedipus*), in direct contrast to Freud's construal of it as part of the human condition. For her part, Murdoch, whilst rejecting the possibility of any ontological or biological status for "evil", sees much that is useful to ethical reflection in the Plato-inspired Freud's analyses of the empirically evident, and ubiquitous, human propensity to badness (which clearly takes on different historical forms). Whether, historically, we read our interior badness as error, or sin, or fascism, the ethical problem of how to deal with it remains. For

¹³⁴ Bernauer, J., and Mahon, M., "Michel Foucault's Ethical Imagination.", in CCF, pp.149-175.

¹³⁵ Cited, CCF, p. 163, from: Foucault, "Preface to Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus, Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983.

Murdoch, remarkably Stoic in this, though she never made the connection, this must be done through developing attention, and essentially – attention to both *self* and *other*. Her description of this practice, as we will see, bears considerable resemblance to the Stoic *prosoche*. For Foucault on the other hand, this must be done through inventing a life style. Through a series of exegetical moves: from “know yourself” to “take care of the self” to “conversion” to “an aesthetics of existence”, he attempts to draw parallels between his own ethical thinking and that of the Hellenistic Stoics. Both Murdoch and Foucault however, were keen to stress the relativity of the “truths” of science, and counter the enormous capacity of the current domination of knowledge-power to biologise the subject, shaping one’s mode of relating to oneself. As Bernauer and Mahon eloquently put it, paraphrasing Foucault: “An ‘esthetics of existence’ resists a ‘science of life.’ To think human existence in esthetic categories releases it from the realm of scientific knowledge.” (MFEI, 163) Thus far Murdoch would agree. They go on: “It liberates us from endless self-decipherment and from subjecting ourselves to psychological norms.” The Foucauldian perspective they are describing here corresponds, in this respect, to what Murdoch calls “existentialist” in the broadest sense. A perspective which sets “total freedom” against the “determinism” of scientific thinking. Against both these perspectives, in defence of an idea of freedom from our own bad habits, inside and outside of the self, and all they represent, Murdoch will pose a third alternative, of attention, as we will see. But for Foucault, within the life-style he wanted to create and did create, the technique of the self which concentrates his vision of ethics is that of *parrhesia*, construed as speaking the truth, at whatever the cost, to which we must now turn.

5. *Parrhesia*

In commenting on Foucault’s last course at the Collège de France, a few months before his death in June 1984 (published 2008)¹³⁶, its editor, Frédéric Gros, writes of the temptation that will be felt to see it as his philosophical testament, affirming that it does indeed lend itself to such an interpretation. For Gros, Foucault situates the whole of his own critical work in the practice of which Socrates, “at the very roots of philosophy” (CV, 314), was the first and greatest exemplar,

¹³⁶ Foucault, *Le Courage de la Vérité. Le Gouvernement de Soi et des Autres II, Cours au Collège de France, 1984*, Paris, Gallimard Seuil, 2008, hereafter: original French edition, all translations mine: (CV); Translated English edition : *The Courage of Truth*, Palgrave MacMillan, Hampshire, U.K., 2011, hereafter: (CT)

that is, the commitment to the particular form of truth-speaking¹³⁷ denoted by Foucault with the term *parrhesia*. The key to Foucault's understanding of this term, and the philosophical way of life to which it refers, is given in the title of this last course: *The Courage of Truth*. It is a commitment to speaking the truth no matter what, which goes beyond the commitment to finding the truth, or truths. The parrhesiast will lose friends, influence, status, freedom, and even her life, rather than lie, or go against what she believes in. Of Socrates' consistent refusal, regardless of the notorious consequences, to have anything to do with the underhand political power games of fifth century Athens, Foucault says that it is "an example of *parrhesia* that will long remain a model of philosophical attitude in the face of power: the *individual resistance* of the philosopher." (GSA, 199, my emphasis.) Foucault also read Plutarch's account of Plato's encounters with the harsh political realities of Sicily as another demonstration of the individual resistance of the philosopher, in this case Plato himself; and Plato's own writings on this, especially in his Letter VII, as an important reflection on *parrhesia*. (GSA, Lessons 9th-23rd February). Despite Plato's avowed pessimism regarding the possibilities for truth-speaking in political systems – disallowed under tyranny, and dangerously collapsing into demagoguery and chaos in democracy – when called upon to take the role of adviser to Denys, Tyrant of Syracuse (the elder Denys first, and subsequently the younger), Plato at first saw it as an opportunity "to bring truth-speaking into play in the political order"; and also, Foucault notes, to show that he was capable not only of *logos*, of philosophical discourse, but also of *ergon*, of action. (GSA, 201) However, after a series of daunting vicissitudes, lies and malevolence, when forced to choose between flattery (false-speaking), and risking his life, Plato remained true to the model of courageous truth-speaking of Socrates, his teacher. Foucault records that when "invited" to an audience with Denys, the Tyrant of Syracuse, and asked to comment on his rule, Plato "told him a number of true things [...] which so upset the tyrant that he conceived a plan, which he did not carry out, to kill Plato. But Plato had understood this, and had accepted the risk." (CV, 13) (Though he then *wisely* decamped hastily from Sicily!)

Foucault's study of *parrhesia* spanned the three courses at the Collège de France from 1981-1984, the last three years of his life. It is the last of the long series of studies undertaken by Foucault on the relation of the subject to truth, which he claimed as, in all its facets, the central concern

¹³⁷ Foucault translates *parrhesia* sometimes with *dire-vrai*, sometimes with *franc-parler*, roughly with 'truth-speaking' or with 'frankness'. Truth-speaking is clearly the overriding concept, of which frankness is one variant in particular circumstances. My own use will attempt to adhere to the particular connotation relevant to context. See also Latin translation: *libertas*, (HS, 382-88).

throughout his work. *Parrhesia* appears briefly in *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, which was more concerned with “inner” than “outer” discourse, in the form of a discussion of the “true discourses” that the aspiring Stoic pupil must learn from his master. This discourse, however, must be taken on trust, and accepted passively, the master standing as guarantee of its truth. Therefore it is only when we turn to the master, Foucault says, that the question of what to actually *say*, what *constitutes* true discourse, appears. It is in this context that the question of *parrhesia* arises, of speaking the truth that matters, the truth that arises from inner freedom and is necessary “for conveying true discourse to the person who needs it to constitute himself as a subject of sovereignty over himself and as a subject of veridiction on his own account.” (HS, 372) Thus Foucault outlines two distinct sets of techniques for master and disciple in Stoic practice. Clearly, until the disciple has mastered inner discourse, she will not be in a position to teach others. But there is one sense in which the aspirant philosopher must already behave like a master, in that in relation to non-philosophers, she must constantly endeavour both to speak the truth, and to gauge the appropriateness of her words to the circumstances in which she speaks, or chooses to keep silence.

Although the master *must* be a parrhesiast, Foucault points out that it is *not* a pedagogic method. Interestingly, though Socrates’ life was the ideal model for *parrhesia*, he made much use of *irony* as a teaching method. Foucault describes this as “a game in which the master pretends to know nothing in order to lead the disciple to formulate that which he didn’t know he knew. In *parrhesia* on the other hand, as if it were a real anti-irony, the truth-speaker throws the truth into the face of his interlocutor; a truth so violent, so abrupt, uttered in such a cutting and definitive way that the other can do nothing but stay silent, or choke with rage, or else completely change register, which meant, in the case of Denys faced with Plato, attempted murder.”(GSA, 54) In effect, as Foucault says, this is not only anti-ironic but also anti-pedagogic, as the interlocutor will not only *not* be led to *discover* the truth, but is presented with it in a form “he will not be able to accept, that he will reject, and that may lead him to further blindness and injustice, even madness.”(Ibid.) What Foucault describes here is obviously a limit-case, and certainly there are non-violent cases of *parrhesia*, but he speaks of it in such a way that this element of challenge, even of aggression, comes to the fore¹³⁸; and most importantly, in such a way that the consideration of the *effects* of

¹³⁸ Of the Cynics, his main model of *parrhesia*, Foucault writes: “We can say that the Cynic is a sort of benefactor, but he is essentially, fundamentally, and constantly an aggressive benefactor, whose main instrument is, of course, the famous diatribe. We have a number of texts, examples and descriptions of this: the Cynic gets up in the assembly – whether this is a theatre, a political assembly, in the middle of a festival, or just simply on the street corner, or in the

true-speaking has no real bearing on the practice of it. To use a philosophical language alien to Foucault, he sees *parrhesia* as a form of deontological and anti-utilitarian, anti-consequentialist practice, though not in the way that this dichotomy is usually presented. As a practice that can be extrapolated from the historical forms in which it arose (which are in any case various), in Foucault's reading, this is a deontology that maintains that *no* effects are ever truly predictable; and therefore that the contingent in history may include, as *ethical* practice, the throwing of a truth into the arena, as it were, and allowing it to do whatever work it will do. This notion that truth hurts, but is ethically necessary, is of course central to much provocative art, used by authors such as Bataille, Blanchot and the "Theatre of Cruelty" of Antonin Artaud, all of whom were important reference points for Foucault.

In looking at early expressions of *parrhesia* in Greek literature, Foucault analyses Euripides' *Ion* from this perspective. Ion is the illegitimate son of Creusa, the fruit of her being raped by Apollo. She abandoned the child to his fate, but Apollo saved him and took him to Delphi where he grew up as a temple slave, in ignorance of his parentage. Before the dramatic events which reveal this and restore her son to her, Creusa, indifferent to the risk she incurs, castigates Apollo – himself the child of his father Zeus' rape of a mortal woman – for what he has done. Foucault describes her brave protest as a ritual proclamation of injustice, of the recrimination of the weak against the injustice of the powerful, as a disregard for prudent self-protection. "[P]ublicly, before all, in the light of day, in the face of the light that shows them up, [the victim] addresses the strong man, and declares the injustice he has perpetrated." (GSA, 124) He says that this ritual act of the weak against the injustice of the strong resembles other rituals, not necessarily verbal, in other societies, giving the example of hunger-strikers in contemporary India. He describes this as "the ritual act whereby he who can do nothing, faced with he who can do everything" (Ibid.) gives due importance to the fact that he, as a powerless human being, has been the victim of an injustice perpetrated by he who can do everything. In this, Creusa's action can also be read as a form of counter-conduct, of individual resistance to power. Such demonstrations of "the courage of truth" were central to Foucault's idea of ethical-political practice in general, and also of the "individual resistance" that he believed should be the role of the philosopher.

market – and he speaks out and attacks. He attacks his enemies, that is to say, he attacks the vices afflicting men, affecting those he is speaking to in particular, but also humankind in general." (CT, 279)

The whole of Foucault's 1982-1983 course at the Collège de France, on *The Government of Self and Others*, situates the question of subjectivation and truth-speaking in the context of political power, mostly in relation to classical antiquity through to Plato. Speaking, as Foucault says, is a public act, and as such "the notion of *parrhesia* [...] is in the first instance fundamentally a political notion." (CV, 9) Foucault divides the early history of the concept into two periods which he calls "the Periclean moment of *parrhesia*", situated in the second half of the fifth Century, and the "Socratic-Platonic moment", which he situates in the first half of (and throughout) the fourth century B.C.E. (GSA, 312) What he calls the Periclean moment is primarily one of political discourse, on the values and dangers of freedom of speech (for aristocrat and *hoi polloi*), and on the relations of the individual with the State and its institutions. Clearly much of Plato's work is directly concerned with these themes, but it is also in Plato, often through the words of his Socrates, that a major shift in the conception of *parrhesia* occurs; a shift towards the ethopoietic¹³⁹, as it were. Foucault identifies this discussion of *philosophical parrhesia* in Plato's Letters VII and VIII, and in the *Phaedo* and the *Gorgias*; as well as most obviously in *The Apology*. He describes this as "a displacement of the spaces and forms of exercise of *parrhesia* [...which is] no longer the political scene in itself [...] it is philosophy." (Ibid.) Not at all in the sense that politics is lost to view; but in the sense that this progressive displacement "brings about a certain inflection in philosophical discourse, in the practice of philosophy, [and] in the philosophical life." (Ibid. 313) This move is one that sets the philosopher apart, as *atopos*, "he is no longer simply, no longer only, no longer exactly a citizen among others and a little ahead of the others[...]; *parrhesia*, this function which consists in saying freely and courageously what is true, is displaced, little by little [...] towards the exercise of philosophy." (Ibid. 313-14)

This displacement also implies (elaborated by Plato-Socrates in the *Phaedo*) a new relationship between truth and discourse, such that "truth must be not so much a sort of psychological prerequisite to the art of oratory, but, at each instant, that which the discourse relates to." (Ibid. 304) And this means that rhetoric, rather than persuading by force of argument, must function instead as a form of psychagogy; that is to say, as a means of leading souls through discourse: "(*la conduite des âmes*) *dia tôn logôn (par les discours)*" (Ibid.) This discussion appears at the end of the 1982-83 course, preparing the way for his next and last course, *Le courage de la vérité*. In introducing this he says that the political theme had to some extent distanced him from his "immediate project: the ancient history of practices of truth-speaking in relation to oneself." But, he goes on:

¹³⁹ For Foucault *ethopoiesis* (from Plutarch) is "the transformation of truth into *ēthos*". ("Self Writing" in EWF1, 209)

on the other hand, this drawback was compensated for by the fact that the return to *parrhesia* in the field of political practices brought me back to a theme that had, after all, been constantly present in my analysis of the relations between the subject and truth: that of the relations of power and their role in the game of subject and truth. With the notion of *parrhesia*, originally rooted in political practice and in the problematization of democracy, and subsequently developed in the sphere of personal ethics and the constitution of the moral subject [...] we have, putting it very schematically, [...] the possibility of posing the question of the subject and truth from the point of view of the practice of what we can call the government of oneself and of others. [...] The articulation between the modes of veridiction, the techniques of governmentality, and the practices of the self, is basically what I have always tried to elaborate. (CV, 9-10¹⁴⁰)

In this lifelong project, analysis of the modes of veridiction under consideration has taken two basic forms, the epistemological (to which the early years were largely dedicated)¹⁴¹ and what Foucault calls the alethurgic (*alèthurgique*). The former, Foucault says, has to do with “the structures pertaining to the different discourses that are given and received as true”; while the latter has to do, “in its conditions and forms, [with] the type of act by which the subject, speaking the truth, *manifests* herself, and by this I mean: she represents herself to herself and is recognized by others as speaking the truth.”(CV, 4). In other words, his focus is no longer on the internal or situated logic that gives credibility to any given discourse, but on the form in which “the individual constitutes herself and is constituted by others as a subject holding a truthful discourse.” (ibid.) This focus, as will by now be evident, requires a methodology that is more hermeneutic than structural, but in the sense that Foucault accepted – with regard to the *texts*, not as a hermeneutics of the self. In his treatment of the only Epicurean text he discusses at any length – Philodemus’ *Peri parrhésias* – one reason for his disinterest in the Epicureans emerges in connection with his rejection of hermeneutic practices of the self, which he sees as “confessional.” He stresses the vertical transmission of the “truth” in this tradition, in the shape of the words of the master, going right back to Epicurus (reference to a body of texts, transmitted orally or in writing through a series of masters, is of course common to many spiritual/philosophical traditions); but says that here this is accompanied by “a series of intense, compact, and strong horizontal relationships within the group. [...] *Parrhésia* circulates in this double, vertical and horizontal organization [...] and] becomes the practice and mode of relationship between the students themselves.” (HS, 390) The students are encouraged, or required, to meet as a group before the master, and “to say what they are thinking, what is in their hearts, to tell of the faults they have committed and the weaknesses for which they still feel responsible or to which they feel

¹⁴⁰ Translations from this book are mine.

¹⁴¹ Foucault’s “archeology” as Gros says “consisted in bringing to light the discursive organization structuring constituted bodies of knowledge.” (CV, 314)

exposed.”¹⁴² Foucault comments: “And this is how we find – for the first time, it appears, quite explicitly within this practice of the self of Greco-Roman Antiquity – the practice of confession.” (HS, 390) Though he recognizes that it is “completely different from the ritual, religious practice of confession [... by which] you acknowledged your guilt. No, here it is something completely different: it is an explicit, developed, and regular verbal practice by which the disciple must respond to this *parrhèsia* of the master’s truth with a certain *parrhèsia*, with a certain open-heartedness, which is the opening of his own soul that he puts in contact with the others’ souls.” (Ibid., 390-391) What is important in this practice is not blaming self or others, “but also encouraging the others not to have an attitude of refusal, rejection, and blame towards themselves, but one of *eunoia* (benevolence).” (Ibid.) Even so, it is not one of the techniques of the self which Foucault appreciated.

Foucault writes that there are four basic modalities of truth-telling in antiquity: prophecy, wisdom, teaching, and *parrhesia*. The prophet, by definition, does not speak in her own name; and the sage is not required to speak at all: “nothing obliges him to share his wisdom, to teach it, or demonstrate it. This accounts for what might be termed his structural silence.”¹⁴³ (CT, 17) (Foucault takes Heraclitus, who lived in silence, as a model here.) On the other hand the teacher or technician, who has learned a *tekhnē*, “is obliged to speak the truth, or at any rate to formulate what he knows and pass it on to others” (Ibid., 24) But Foucault points out there is no risk-taking in this pedagogic discipline, no *courage* of truth. None of these three modalities of truth-speaking are, therefore, that of *parrhesia*; although the parrhesiast, as in the case of Socrates himself, may also be a sage. However, whereas the sage may choose to remain silent because *he knows*, “Socrates remains silent by saying that he does not know, and by questioning anyone and everyone in the manner of the parrhesiast.” (Ibid. 27) The point about this philosophical truth-telling, is that the truth it is concerned with will only be that which is “relevant for, is able to articulate and found a truth-telling about *ethos* in the form of *parrhesia*. And to that extent, we can say that, only up to a certain point, of course, wisdom and *parrhesia* merge.” (Ibid. 28) They may however, also come together in as far as the courage of truth need not be reckless, it is unwise to take risks that serve no ethical purpose. Foucault notes that Socrates repeats this many times in the *Apology*: “By encouraging you to take care of yourselves I am useful to the whole city. And if I

¹⁴² This might appear as an antecedent to the “confessional” practice of the Cultural Revolution in China, were it not for the fact that it was *not* intended to shame the fallen, but as a benevolent aid to self-discovery.

¹⁴³ Foucault tends to allow for many forms of *parrhesia*, but only one form of sage.

protect my life, it is precisely in the city's interest." It is important to note here of course, that this caution may, and was so dramatically in his own case, be overridden by *parrhesiastic* considerations. However, the care Socrates takes of himself, "leads him to concern himself with others, but in such a way that he shows them that they in turn have to be concerned about themselves, about their *phronēsis*, about *alētheia*, and their *psukhē* (reason, truth, and the soul.)" (Ibid., 90) In fact, Foucault says, Socrates defined his "courageous truth-telling, as a truth-telling whose final objective and constant concern was to teach men to take care of themselves." (Ibid. 110).

In the *Laches*, Socrates questions eminent political and military leaders, Laches and Nicias, men of proven physical courage, and also of courage in their speech. Foucault notes that this is one of the few texts in the whole of Western philosophy "to pose the question of courage, and especially of the courage of truth." (Ibid. 124) He says that the ethics of truth is frequently thematised, but usually with regard to the purity or purification of the subject: "From the Pythagoreans to modern philosophy, there is a whole cathartics of truth." And the *cathartic* (a choice of term which in this context sounds unpleasantly purgative) he defines as "the subject's purification as condition of being able to be subject of truth". (Ibid. 125) But he says that there is another question of the struggle for the truth, which is different from purification, and has to do with "[w]hat type of resolution, what type of will, what type of not only sacrifice but battle is one able to face in order to arrive at the truth?" (Ibid.) Although Foucault is setting up a distinction here, in effect, much of the philosophical discourse he classifies as "purification" as a means of access to truth uses the same type of battling terminology for the struggle with the self, but Foucault does not comment on whether or not he sees these as compatible aims. Or rather, at a certain point he says: "There is, of course, a history of the metaphysics of the soul. There is also – which is, up to a point, the other side and also alternative – a history of the stylistics of existence". (Ibid. 162) In other words, he concedes that the two philosophical pursuits *may* be two aspects of the same pursuit, but they may also be alternatives; and the general tenor of his writing clearly suggests a preference for the latter hypothesis, or rather for the latter as a *choice* of philosophical life.

The *Laches*, he writes (much of which consists of a dialogue regarding the education of children), is a good starting point for an exploration of the question of the ethical relationship of courage and truth. In his lengthy discussion of the text however, there is in fact very little on *parrhesia*. Instead he moves on to a discussion of the themes of the care of the self and of the metaphysical reality of

the soul in the *Laches* and the *Alcibiade* respectively, pointing out that where the soul is the object of the *Alcibiade*, it is the *bios*, our lives, that is the object of the *Laches*. As such, he considers this text to be “the starting point for a whole philosophical practice and activity, of which Cynicism is, of course, the first example”. (Ibid, 128) Here Foucault is beginning to outline this philosophical genealogy that most interested him, and grounding it, perhaps surprisingly, in a particular reading of Plato. He notes that “the *Alcibiades*, starting from the principle of the need to give an account of oneself, proceeds to the discovery and establishment of oneself as a reality ontologically distinct from the body [...] explicitly designated as the soul.” (Ibid. 159) In this context, taking care of oneself means taking care of one’s soul. “In the *Laches*, on the other hand, [...] the establishment of oneself no longer takes place in the mode of discovery of the *psukhē* as a reality ontologically distinct from the body, [but] as a way of being and doing [...] of which one has to give an account throughout one’s life. What has to be accounted for, and the very objective of this activity of accounting, is how one lives and has lived.” (Ibid. 160) Clearly Plato himself saw these two texts as expressions of different aspects of the *same* vision of the care of the self, but different texts inspire different developments, and the *Laches* will serve Foucault as an antecedent to the thinking of the Cynics, and to the radical stylisation of their lives, that was so close to his heart. With regard to the exposition in the text of the “courage of truth”, he presents this in the form of Socrates’ courage in questioning such eminent men, and the courage of the latter in submitting to his questioning, knowing, as they do, his reputation for not letting go “until his interlocutor has been led (*periagesthai*: led as by the hand, taken around) to the point where he can give an account of himself. [...] He will be asked to give an account of himself, that is to say, to show the relationship between himself and logos (reason). [...]” (Ibid. 143-44) In other words, the form of *parrhesia* presented here is the courage of allowing your life to be put into question, and of putting that of others into question. What this represents, Foucault says, is “the emergence of life, of mode of life as the object of Socratic *parrhesia* and discourse, of life in relation to which it is necessary to carry out an operation which will be a test, a testing, sifting.” (Ibid. 145)¹⁴⁴ This mode of truth-telling therefore “does not mark out the site of a possible metaphysical discourse”, but rather its “role and end is to give some kind of form to this *bios* (this life, this existence).” (Ibid., 160) He summarises the distinction he is making thus:

¹⁴⁴ The only other reference to courage is the fact that, questioned by Socrates, neither Laches or Nicias could define what courage is.

In this comparison of the *Alcibiades* and the *Laches* we have the point of departure of the two great lines of Socratic veridiction in Western philosophy. From this first, fundamental, and common theme of *didonai logon* (giving an account of oneself), a [first] line will go to the being of the soul (the *Alcibiades*), and the other to forms of existence (the *Laches*). [...] And this famous ‘accounting for self’ which constitutes the objective stubbornly pursued by Socratic *parrhesia* – and here is its fundamental ambiguity, which will leave its mark in the entire history of our thought – may be and has been understood as the task of having to discover and tell of the soul’s being, or as the task and work which consists in giving some kind of style to existence. I think this duality of ‘being of the soul’ and ‘style of existence’ signals something important for Western philosophy. (Ibid. 161)

Foucault goes on to say that he is trying to uncover some of the archaic features of “what could be called, in a word, the aesthetics of existence. [...] I wanted to try to show you, and myself, how, through the emergence and foundation of Socratic *parrhesia*, existence (*bios*) was constituted in Greek thought as an aesthetic object, as an object of aesthetic elaboration and perception: *bios* as a beautiful work.” (Ibid., 161-62) He remarks that this aspect of the history of subjectivity has always been overshadowed in philosophical discourse by the metaphysics of the soul; and, on the other hand, also by the “privileged study of those aesthetic forms devised to give form to things, substances, colors, light, sounds, and words.” (Ibid., 162) At this point he goes on to write, so shortly before his death, a response to these conceptions of aesthetics which could also be read as his own epitaph:

we should recall that man’s way of being and conducting himself, the aspect his existence reveals to others and to himself, the trace also that this existence may leave and will leave in the memories of others after his death, this way of being, this appearance, this trace have been the object of his aesthetic concern. They have given rise to a concern for beauty, splendour, and perfection, a continual and constantly renewed work of giving form [to his existence], at least as much as the form that the same men have tried to give to the gods, temples or the song of words. This aesthetics of existence is a historical object which should not be neglected in favour of a metaphysics of the soul or an aesthetics of things or words. (Ibid.)

He traces the care of the self in this sense back through the Greek tradition, to long before Socrates, affirming that, in the form of a concern for a beautiful existence it was already a dominant theme in Homer and Pindar. What he wanted to identify however is the point where he believes the concern for truth-telling fundamentally modified the concern for living a beautiful life. This point, for him, is Socrates:

what I would like to recover is how truth-telling, in this ethical modality which appeared with Socrates right at the start of Western philosophy, interacted with the principle of existence as an oeuvre to be fashioned in all its possible perfection, how the care of the self, which, in the Greek tradition long before Socrates, was governed by the principle of a brilliant and memorable existence, [...] was *not replaced but taken up*, inflected, modified, and re-elaborated by the principle of truth-telling that has to be confronted courageously, how the objective of a beautiful existence and the task of giving an account of oneself in the game of truth were combined. (Ibid., 163, my emphasis.)

I have quoted extensively here because it seems to me that these few pages recording the Lesson of the 29th February contain Foucault's manifesto; and of the frequent summations of the purpose of his work that he gave, this seems to me the most heartfelt. Nonetheless, the thesis that appears here is sketched in rather than established. He has not before (to my knowledge) presented this view of pre-Socratic Greece as so dedicated to "the principle of a brilliant and memorable existence". What he does here, with one bold Foucauldian stroke, is to compound Homeric heroism, care of the self, and *parrhesia* with his own conception of the stylisation of life (perhaps Achilles-Foucault rather than "Saint Foucault"). At this juncture he neither attempts to substantiate this nor calls upon scholarly reference to back him up; the exploration of this idea, of course, was work still to be done, and tracing the genealogy would, as he says "require a whole series of studies". (Ibid.) It must have been very hard for him to know that just when he has finally got to the point his life's work seems to have been leading to he would be unable to develop it further. He does acknowledge that the two lines of philosophical development he outlines here are often linked, but stresses the fact that the relationship between them is never a necessary one, that rather it is "sufficiently flexible for it to be possible to find a whole series of completely different styles of existence linked to one and the same metaphysic of the soul." (Ibid. 164) And the reverse, of course, is equally true.

In the rest of the course he refers to various moments in the heritage of philosophy as a style of existence, in the Stoics, and in Christian asceticism, but the development that most interested him was that of the earliest Cynics. Because it is for the Cynics that creating a very particular and anti-conformist mode of life is explicitly centred on the absolute requirement of speaking the truth; and it is to this that he now turns his attention. Foucault notes however, that in fact, "at the beginning of Christianity there was a noticeable interaction between Cynic practice and Christian ascetism." (Ibid. 182) He gives the example of the Cynic philosopher Peregrinus, who was also a Christian, and who, Foucault says, (according to the Emperor Julian) was by his own choice, "burnt alive at the Olympic Games [...]. So Peregrinus is a Cynic who passed through Christianity, or a Christian who has become a Cynic." (Ibid., 181) He also describes the Franciscans, with their poverty, wandering and begging, as in some ways the Cynics of medieval Christendom; and he outlines some other lines of development within Christianity, but mostly in the form of rough drafts for possible future studies. Foucault also makes some mention of other modes of life, of more recent history, where the courage of truth is central to an "alternative" life-style, such as those of revolutionary and militant activity. In its various post-Enlightenment forms revolutionary activity

has never been *only* a political project but always also a mode of life; one which rejected excessive wealth and the superfluous and valued simpler life-styles, and it has also been a fierce form of truth-speaking. He does not, however, explore these avenues further. (Ibid., 182-186)

The available evidence on Cynic lives and thinking is mainly from the narratives of commentators, especially from later, Greco-Roman writers: Diogenes Laertius, Dio Chrysostom and Epictetus, all in some way looking back to classical antiquity as a kind of Golden Age of philosophical thinking and practice. This attitude was, Foucault says, also evident in satirical or critical texts, such as those of the Emperor Julian. The Cynics themselves were mostly not writers. In fact, Foucault tells us, their “connecting up of truth-telling and mode of life [...] is all the more noteworthy for taking place immediately as it were, without doctrinal mediation, or at any rate with a fairly rudimentary theoretical framework.” (Ibid. 165) Or rather, there is a framework, but it is of much less importance than in Platonism, or the Hellenistic schools; what is always clear however is that “the Cynic is constantly characterised as the man of *parrhesia*.” (Ibid., 166) According to an anecdote of Diogenes Laertius, Foucault relates that when asked what is most beautiful in men, Diogenes (the Cynic) replied that it is *parrhesia*. This notion is paramount too in Epictetus’ famous Discourse 22, where, Foucault says, Epictetus’ depiction of Cynicism, read through the filter of his own Stoic thinking, takes it to what could be seen as the “extreme consequence [of both disciplines] (radical asceticism)”. (Ibid. 167). Foucault notes, however, that Epictetus’ description is idealised, not really an account of what was an under-documented historical reality of several centuries beforehand. He appreciates Epictetus’ metaphor for the Cynic as a kind of spy, however, “sent ahead as a scout, in advance of humanity, to determine what may be favourable or hostile to man in the things of the world [...] because he will return to tell the truth, without] letting himself be paralysed by fear.” (Ibid.)

Foucault says that the stereotypical picture of the Cynic – without worldly goods or shoes, with a minimum of food and clothing, unwashed and sleeping, like the iconic Diogenes, in a barrel in the street – does in fact seem to be in accordance with what we know of their thinking. He says that the Cynic mode of life is characterised by very precise rules of behaviour that manifest the virtues of courage, temperance and wisdom; and that this “mode of life as the reduction of all pointless conventions and all superfluous opinions is clearly a sort of general stripping of existence and opinions in order to reveal the truth. For example, there is Diogenes’ famous gesture, recounted so frequently in Antiquity, of masturbating in public and saying: But why are you so scandalized, since masturbation satisfies a need, just as eating does. I eat in public, so why should I not satisfy

this need also in public?" (Ibid. 171) As with all anti-conformist provocateurs, the Cynics were, not surprisingly, vilified as much as they were admired, precisely because they revealed truths about human beings that are generally masked by convention. And convention, or conformity, provide a way of believing in the truth of the mask, which is precariously maintained; so that threats to it are fiercely rejected. At the same time, this simplified way of life reveals, Foucault says,

in their irreducible nakedness, those things which alone are indispensable to human life or which constitute its most elementary, rudimentary essence. In this sense, this mode of life simply reveals what life is in its independence, its fundamental freedom, and consequently it reveals what life ought to be.

[...] In short, Cynicism makes life, existence, *bios*, what could be called an alethurgy, a manifestation of truth. (Ibid. 171-72)

As an exemplar of a less radical brand of Cynicism Foucault recalls the Roman, Demetrius, of whom Seneca spoke so highly, and who was known for rejecting large sums of money offered him by Caligula. Demetrius was however, "a man of culture [and Seneca says, of great eloquence], certainly far removed from all those street preachers to which the image of the Cynic was often reduced." (Ibid., 194) Despite living very simply, Demetrius' world was that of the Roman aristocracy. He was spiritual counsellor to one Thræsea Paetus, and when the latter was ordered by the Emperor to commit suicide, Demetrius went into exile with him, and stayed with him through his dying. (Ibid.) At the other extreme was someone like Peregrinus, a traveller and vagabond who would preach in Rome "to the *idiotai* (those without culture or social and political status)". (Ibid. 195) This variation in life-styles is reflected also in the accounts of the Cynics, which often contrast an "ostentatious, noisy and aggressive Cynicism which denies the laws, traditions and rules, [... with] the value and merits of another, measured, thoughtful, well-bred, discreet, honest, and really austere Cynicism." (Ibid. 198) Interestingly, as Foucault points out: "One of the important themes of Cynicism was that the impulse towards philosophy basically did not require culture, training or apprenticeship. One is essentially a philosopher by nature, and is born a philosopher." (Ibid. 198) This notion, perhaps more than others, grounds Foucault's argument regarding the divergence of philosophical development. Though philosophy is always in the first place the philosophical *life* in antiquity, it is generally the case that philosophical *discourse* is central to that life. Only in the case of the Cynics is speaking the truth so separable from philosophical discourse¹⁴⁵; and this minimising of the requirement of discursive capacity, and maximising of the commitment to a truthful way of life, regardless of intellectual capacity or

¹⁴⁵ Foucault writes: "Cynicism [...] seems to have been, at least to a large degree, a popular philosophy. And to that extent we can understand its theoretical poverty." (Ibid. 204)

erudition, was of course so important to the form of spiritual democratisation brought about in the Roman world by early Christianity. The words of the Cynics were more about how to live than about metaphysics, and even the critical Emperor Julian said of the early Cynics, referring to Diogenes and Crates: “Their deeds preceded their words. Those who honoured poverty [...] demonstrated that they were the first to despise their patrimony [a reference to the fact that Crates gave away all the goods he had inherited from his family; M.F.]: those who prized modesty [still Diogenes and Crates; M.F.] were the first to practice simplicity in everything”. (Ibid. 200).

There is a sub-theme here which Foucault does not take up regarding the fact that erudition itself can be such a fascinating game that it becomes not only not helpful, but actually an *obstacle* to the philosophical life, as further erudition becomes instead the goal. For Murdoch, Plato’s discussion of the dangers of *writing*, as opposed to the spoken word, in his Seventh Letter, was precisely to do with writing as a distraction from the primary goal of living in virtue; which was also one reason why, in his own teaching, he made such use of (memorable) parables or myths: the cave, the black and white horses, etc. (as is the case in many spiritual traditions.)¹⁴⁶ Foucault notes too that the Cynics “are less concerned with teaching a doctrine than with passing on schemas, then to pass on these schemas of life the Cynics make use not so much of a theoretical, dogmatic teaching as of above all models, stories, anecdotes, and examples.” (Ibid. 208)

In this context, what Foucault does take up, and this will be his last “problematization”, to which the Cynics are crucial, is what he calls the question of the “two ways” of philosophical practice. He mentions earlier conceptions of two ways of life, for example (and differently), in Parmenides, and Xenophon (cf. p. 206); but these pose a philosophical or virtuous way of life against a non-philosophical or non-virtuous counterpart; whereas the Cynics evaluate two *philosophical* ways against each other. Thus, for the Cynics:

There are two ways, one of which is lengthy, relatively easy, and does not call for great effort, which is the way by which one achieves virtue through the *logos*, that is to say, through discourses and learning them (through school and doctrinal apprenticeship). Then there is the other, short way, which is the difficult, arduous way which rises straight to the summit over many obstacles and which is, as it were, the silent way. Anyway it is the way of exercise, of *askesis*, of practices of destitution and endurance. (Ibid. 207)¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁶ Another reason is, as Murdoch also says: “Certain parables or stories undoubtedly owe their power to the fact that they incarnate a moral truth which is paradoxical, infinitely suggestive, and open to continual reinterpretation.” (V&C, 91)

¹⁴⁷ These two ways: often characterised as that of the householder and that of the ascetic, constitute a basic spiritual choice in Eastern (Hindu and Buddhist) philosophy; where it is recognised that the “short way” is too tough a choice for most people.

Foucault notes that this distinction is frequently attributed to both Diogenes the Cynic, and to Crates, his first and most important disciple, the “short cut” also being known as the way of the dog – “a dog’s life” always having been a favoured metaphor for the Cynic choice of life on the streets, without possessions.¹⁴⁸ The longer way he calls that of the “traditionality of doctrine”, which was so important “for passing on philosophical doctrines like Platonism and Aristotelianism – and for Stoicism to a certain extent”. Foucault says that alongside this way, “Cynicism – and, it should be said [rather unwillingly], Epicureanism to a certain extent – practiced what could be called, not a traditionality of doctrine, but a traditionality of existence.” (Ibid., 209) Whereas the traditionality of doctrine is concerned with “reactualising a core of original thought in the present”, the traditionality of existence recalls

elements and episodes of lives – of the life of someone who really existed or of someone who existed mythically, without it really mattering which – , elements and episodes which are now to be imitated, to which life must be given again, not because they have been forgotten, as in doctrinal traditionality, but because now, today, we are no longer equal to these examples, because a decline, a decadence have removed the possibility of our doing as much. (Ibid.)

Foucault says that what emerges from this is the picture of the philosophical hero. That the Cynics produced philosophical heroes there is no doubt; but up until now, Foucault has shown us that this was through the possibility of our observing directly the heroism with which the Cynics could lead a life of destitution and humiliation; through the paradox of the great dignity involved in their humiliation (also a spiritual lesson of Christ). Perhaps, just as the Emperor Julian despaired of the possibility of such heroism in the Roman Empire, and harked back to classical Greece, so Foucault despairs of such a possibility in the present; so that for both it is historical, rather than actual figures which must be the models. This philosophical hero, he says “is no longer the sage, but he is not yet the Christian holy man or ascetic.” (Ibid. 210.) He says that Cynicism, “as the essence of philosophical heroism ran through the whole of Antiquity and made it, whatever its theoretical poverty, an important event not only in the history of forms of life, but in the history of thought.” However, he also goes on to say: “This philosophical heroism formed what could be called a legendary dimension, a philosophical legend which modelled in a particular way how the philosophical life has been conceived of and practiced in the West up until now” (Ibid.) It is perhaps not so easy to see to what, or to whom, he is referring here. Certainly many philosophers have been persecuted for their *parrhesia*, their absolute commitment to truth, throughout the

¹⁴⁸ And as with “blacks”, “niggers”, “queers”, and other terms used to insult particular groups of people, the Cynics were probably the first (recorded), to adopt an insult and make of it a reference to self to be proud of.

history of philosophy. But with the exception of a few more ascetically inclined, these are not philosophical heroes in the “tradition of existence” as outlined by Foucault, but rather “heroes” in the tradition of doctrine (and whereas some may have liked the idea of “philosophical heroism”, others may have heartily disliked it). Their lives have largely been dedicated to the reactivating and reformulating of doctrine, or even drastically rewriting it; and preferably from the comfort of their armchairs. This being said, it takes away nothing from the valid and interesting proposition he is making here: to create

a history of philosophy which would not be a history of philosophical doctrines, but a history of forms, modes, and styles of life, a history of the philosophical life as a philosophical problem, but also as a mode of being and as a form of both ethics and heroism. (Ibid.)

Foucault says that all of this obviously comes to an end at the beginning of the nineteenth century, when philosophy becomes a teaching profession. Though when this happens, “with the result that the philosophical life, philosophical ethics, philosophical heroism, and the philosophical legend no longer have a *raison d’être*, the moment when philosophy can no longer be entertained except as an historical set of doctrines, is also the moment when the legend of philosophical life receives its highest and last literary expression.” (Ibid., 210-11) And this, he writes, is Goethe’s *Faust*. Sadly, he takes it for granted here that his readers know exactly what he means; his explanation might have proved interesting. (In Hadot’s fine essay on *Faust*¹⁴⁹, it is the intensity of *life* lived in the present moment, heightened by love, that comes to the fore, in relation to the Stoic practice of living in the *present* (as the only thing that depends on us); in direct opposition to any illusory preoccupation with heroism or how one might be remembered. But as we saw earlier, Foucault underplayed this aspect of Stoic practice.) Nonetheless, he concludes that “[p]hilosophical heroism, philosophical ethics, will no longer find a place in the practice of philosophy as a teaching profession, but in that other, displaced and transformed form of philosophical life in the political field: the revolutionary life. Exit *Faust*, and enter the revolutionary.” (Ibid. 210)

The theme that he has identified in Cynicism, that of “manifesting the truth, of practising alethurgy, the production of truth in the form of a life” (Ibid, 218), Foucault now redescribes as the theme of the “true life”. This, he says, was important in ancient philosophy, but is no longer important in contemporary philosophy; and it has now, since the nineteenth century, been taken up instead in political ethics. In analysing the components of the original Greek conception of a “true

¹⁴⁹ Hadot, “ ‘Only the Present is our Happiness’: The Value of the Present Instant in Goethe and in Ancient Philosophy”, in *PWL* pp.217-38.

life”, in his penultimate lesson he goes back to Plato and discovers there, that the concept of “true love” – *alēthēs erōs*, (without citation¹⁵⁰) is inextricably linked with the concept of “true life” (*alēthēs bios*). He has time only to mention this here however, noting that “it would be a very interesting and vast domain to study.” (Ibid. 221) (In a different philosophical context and language, and for different purposes, this will in fact be an important theme of Murdoch’s). Among the reasons he lists for the effective loss of the *bios philosophikos*, the philosophical life, in modernity – besides the developments internal to philosophy itself and its institutionalisation as a teaching profession – there is the fact of “the confiscation by religion of the theme and practices of the true life”, of which, as we have seen, Hadot had also spoken at some length. Furthermore, he writes, the “institutionalisation of truth-telling practices in the form of a science (a normed, regulated, established science embodied in institutions) has no doubt been the other major reason for the disappearance of the theme of the true life as a philosophical question, as a problem of the conditions of access to the truth.” (Ibid. 235) Even though, for so many philosophers the problem of the philosophical life has been of cardinal importance – Foucault mentions, Montaigne, Kant, Spinoza¹⁵¹, – it has certainly been, in general, “neglected; it has constantly appeared as surplus in relation to philosophy, to a philosophical practice indexed to the scientific model.” (Ibid. 236) The final legacy of Cynicism was, he says, that

it raised the grave problem, or rather, it seems to me that it gave the theme of the philosophical life its cutting edge by raising the following question: for life truly to be the life of truth, must it not be an *other* life, a life which is radically and paradoxically other? [...] Maybe – and again forgive the schematism, these are hypotheses, dotted lines, outlines of possible directions for work – it could be said that with Platonism, Greek philosophy since Socrates basically posed the question of the other world (*l’autre monde*). But, starting with Socrates, or from the Socratic model to which Cynicism referred, it also posed another question. Not the question of the other world, but that of an *other* life (*vie autre*). It seems to me that the other world and the other life have basically been the two great themes, the two great forms, the two great limits within which Western philosophy has constantly developed. (Ibid., 245)

Everything that leads up to this suggests that what he means by “other life” on the Cynic model, and as he reluctantly acknowledges, also of the Epicureans, is a radically alternative life-style; and as we have seen, wherever he has encountered these, in Antiquity or on the fringes of modernity, they have signified for him a commitment to living in the truth. In this bipartite schema of Western

¹⁵⁰ In *The Uses of Pleasure*, Ch.5, he had discussed the relation between “true love” and “true being” in Plato in an ontological, not in an existential sense.

¹⁵¹ In *Hermeneutics of the Subject* Foucault, commenting on “the first nine paragraphs of Spinoza’s *Treatise on the Correction of the Understanding*, notes that it is clear here “how in formulating the problem of access to the truth Spinoza linked the problem to a series of requirements concerning the subject’s very being: In what aspects and how must I transform my being as a subject? What conditions must I impose on my being as subject so as to have access to the truth, and to what extent will this access to the truth give me what I seek, that is to say the highest good, the sovereign good?” (HS, 27)

philosophy however, there would seem to be no place for the Stoics, who fit into neither category, though he spent more time in their company than that of any other ancient philosophers.¹⁵² In agreement with prevailing scholarly opinion on this, he himself has shown, in *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, that they were not focused on the *other world* but were committed to living in truth in *this* life, *bios philosophikus*; yet at the same time they rejected the *other* specifically anti-conventional life. For the Stoics it didn't matter what form one's life took, that was not the point. On the contrary, accepting one's life for whatever it was, and living it as well as possible was a first principle (in the case of the Stoic Emperor, Marcus Aurelius, for example, he looked up to the slave, Epictetus, who had been the teacher of his own teacher, Rusticus, as a spiritual master¹⁵³). But again as Foucault has shown, the Stoics lived in a completely *other way*, a philosophical way. Their philosophical way of life was about living truthfully, and attention to the self and the care of the self were also first principles. As Foucault had previously shown, there is a strong *aesthetics of existence* here, but at the same time the *deliberate* adoption of a radically *other* life style was excluded.

At this juncture however, Foucault seems quite sceptical of the Stoics level of commitment to the philosophical life, and for precisely this reason. He compares Stoic recommendations to practice frugality and moderation rather than poverty and destitution with the "other life" commitment of the Cynics unfavourably. Referring, for example, to Seneca's advice to Lucilius to: "For a few, three or four days, sleep on a pallet, and eat as little as possible [... he writes: it] is, if you like, a *virtual* exercise. Cynic poverty is a real poverty which carries out a real stripping of possessions." (Ibid. 257, my emphasis.) What is interesting is that here, as elsewhere, Foucault never records having actually experimented with any of these practices, to gain some idea of what really happens to the subject in the process; in order to determine whether they do add up to just a *virtual* game or may actually have some transformational role in the relation of the self to itself. Asceticism, as he knows in theory, does not reveal its truths to thought experiments. Clearly this would not be the investigative strategy of those classicists who situate their interests in the "doctrinal tradition", making no pretence of an *experiential* interest in techniques of the self; but this is not the case of Foucault. He goes on, in a phrase in which both adjectives and rhythms indicate where his approval and disapproval lie: "You can see that the typical poverty of the Cynic life is not the

¹⁵² To take a modern example, Empiricism might also be hard to fit in to this schema.

¹⁵³ And as Foucault notes, "Seneca, an extremely rich swindler, expounds at length on the idea that the true life is a life of virtual detachment with regard to wealth."! (Ibid. 257)

virtual poverty of an attitude, as in Seneca. Nor is it a middling poverty of the kind Socrates accepted. It is a real poverty of dispossession, an indefinite poverty endlessly at work on oneself.” (Ibid.) This is undeniable, though poverty is of course not an *end* for any of these philosophers, but rather a *means*; as he says, a way of working on the self. And in all spiritual traditions, because what he is talking about here is philosophy as spirituality, it is generally recognised that the less one has of possessions and entanglements the more devoted one can be to transforming the self, to a virtuous life. But it is similarly recognised that the most extreme path is beyond the capacity of most people, and democratising spirituality means elaborating paths, and techniques of the self, that are accessible to all those who wish to live in truth, but also in their societies. As with erudition, there is also a risk of self-satisfaction in great ascetic achievement,¹⁵⁴ which different forms of engagement with *the other* may attenuate. In discussing the variegated “unselfing” spiritual force of Eros in this respect, Murdoch writes that, for example: “Falling in love made you discontinuous from yourself”. (MGM, 547)

Foucault began his studies of ancient philosophy with a tripartite division of forms of reflexivity which he denoted as memory (largely Platonic), meditation (on the Stoic model), and method (roughly scientific modernity). This was a first move away from a predominantly epistemological and genealogical orientation towards alethurgy; that is to say, from a philosophical preoccupation with truth as impersonal knowledge to a philosophical preoccupation with truth as the relation of the self to itself. At the point when his work in progress was interrupted by his untimely death, it centred on a bipartite division between the tradition of doctrinality, linked to the metaphysics of the soul, and the tradition of existence, linked to philosophy as a life-style centred on *parrhesia*, the courage of truth. Foucault would certainly have anticipated all sorts of crossovers between the two traditions he delineates here, which would be interesting to examine as such. And – given his general preference for tripartite schemas – had he been able to explore the “two great themes, forms, and limits of Western philosophy”, they may well have generated at least a third form, able to better accommodate the “meditation” model of the Stoics. Murdoch says that “To do philosophy is to explore one’s own temperament, and yet at the same time to attempt to discover the truth.” (OGG, 337) This was so clearly true of Foucault, but more than this his work was his mode of self transformation. While he clearly did not place himself in the *other world* line of philosophy, the

¹⁵⁴ This is why Socrates near contemporary, the Buddha, who had lived an even more extreme version of the Cynic life-style for many years, as a result of his Enlightenment, invented the Middle Way – between extreme asceticism and full immersion in the world.

other life tradition would have to be broadened considerably from the description he gives here if it is also to include himself. In fact he does broaden it out, but only by placing it *outside* of philosophy; and also by quietly dropping from the picture the particularly difficult requirement of radical asceticism, retaining only the requirement of forceful, proselytising, truth-telling. Thus, in the contest of what he calls Cynic “militancy” (recognising the anachronism), he writes that it:

will employ harsh, drastic means to shake up the people. [...] it claims to take on conventions, laws, and institutions. It is a militancy that claims to change the world. [...] What gives this Cynic activity its historical importance is also the series in which it is inserted: the activism of Christianity, which is at the same time spiritual battle, but battle for the world; other movements which have accompanied Christianity: the mendicant orders, preaching, movements which preceded and followed the Reformation. In all these movements we find the principle of an open militantism. Revolutionary militantism of the nineteenth [century]. The true life as an other life (*une vie autre*), as a life of combat, for a changed world.” (Ibid., 303n)

In the parrhesiastic descent however, though not *philosophical* heros, many of the heroes of our own times – the journalists, the magistrates, the bloggers and other activists who risk all to tell the truth – are clearly parrhesiasts, in Foucault’s definition, as he was himself; and in reality he was as close to them, operating in opposition, but from *within* society, as he was to the communities creating radically *other* lives on the outside. As Han says: “Later Foucault spoke in his own name and addressed his readers as a parrhesiast, whose life, personal engagement, and even the manner in which he handled the coming of his own death testified to its authenticity.” (AF, 202)

PT.II: Iris Murdoch

Ch. 1. The Subject of Knowledge and the Subject of Ethics

1. Fact and value

Much of Iris Murdoch's work, like that of Foucault, was concerned with the artificial divisions wrought by philosophy in its study of the human being between, in his terms, the subject of knowledge and the subject of ethics. But whereas Foucault's first concern for many years was with how ethics figured in the relationship between knowledge and social practice, Murdoch's centre of philosophical gravity was always the moral individual, and the possibilities of deepening our moral understanding. The particular formulation of the divided self which was her immediate starting point was the fact/value debate in analytic philosophy, that is, the separation of fact (*knowledge* of, therefore proper to epistemology), from value (construed as belonging to experience, not 'knowledge', and proper to ethics – the latter having been rendered almost a sideline of mainstream philosophy in twentieth century Britain¹⁵⁵). "Facts" themselves were never matters of certainty on the prevailing view in Anglo-American philosophy at the time. This was reserved, in the words of A.J. Ayer, whom she quotes, to "relations of ideas", that is "the *a priori* propositions of logic and pure mathematics, and these I allow to be necessary and certain only because analytic." The quotation from Ayer continues thus:

Propositions concerning empirical matters of fact, on the other hand, I hold to be hypotheses, which can be probable but never certain. And in giving an account of their validation I claim also to have explained the nature of truth [...] I require of an empirical hypothesis, not indeed that it should be conclusively verifiable, but that some possible sense experience should be relevant to the determination of its truth or falsehood. If a putative proposition fails to satisfy this principle, and is not a tautology, then I hold that it is metaphysical, and that, being metaphysical, it is neither true nor false, but literary senseless.¹⁵⁶

The broad thrust of Ayer's analytic broom sweeps out from the realm of sense all "ethical" propositions (apart from any *descriptive* reference they might contain to empirically ascertainable "facts"), and along with them go the vast mess of "senseless" utterances that make up so much of human life. He was much less ruthless with "empirical matters", however. Having thus despatched metaphysics, and established that only the analytically – or logically – necessary can be "true", he admits a form of "determination of truth or falsehood" for those matters with which natural

¹⁵⁵ Despite the Aristotelean 'Virtue ethics' of one current within that community

¹⁵⁶ Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, (1936), quoted in Murdoch, *MGM*, p.41

science concerns itself, strictly speaking only as probability, but in its continued development, mainstream analytic philosophy has drawn closer and closer to regarding the scientific world of *probability* as very probable indeed. Certain recent ‘analytic’ passions for ethology and the neurosciences would rather seem to have fallen into the epistemic trap Wittgenstein describes in *Tractatus*, 6.371: “The whole modern conception of the world is founded on the illusion that the so-called laws of nature are the explanations of natural philosophy.”

As regards the task of philosophy proper, Ayer goes on “The propositions of philosophy are not factual, but linguistic, in character [...] We may say that philosophy is a department of logic.” (Ibid.) The resulting abdication of *philosophical* responsibility for ethics, and the consequent *de facto* shifting of the *grounding* of that responsibility onto the broad shoulders of natural science, with its “probable” theories of “the facts”, clearly runs the risk of granting philosophical credibility to the “scientific” theory of the moment; the respectability and the *gravitas* given to behaviourism in its multifold applications being a case in point. In her tracking of twentieth century philosophical developments, Murdoch notes that this formal, linguistic, foundational stance of analytic philosophy was “before their time, often suggestive of structuralist aims and modes of reflection” (MGM, 42). However, in the form given by Ayer, above, she sees it as deriving from what was then a very common misreading of Wittgenstein, and particularly of his injunction at the end of the *Tractatus* (7), that “What we cannot speak about [including the ethical] we must pass over in silence”. Of this she writes (among the first commentators to perceive or clarify this): “Wittgenstein’s silence *indicates* the area of value. Ayer’s use of the distinction between fact and value deliberately *removes* value.”(MGM, 43). In the same way, Wittgenstein’s observation at *P.I.* 580 that “An inner process stands in need of outward criteria” says something about the inner process, it doesn’t discard it. For her, Wittgenstein uses these words metaphorically, whereas many took them as determinative. As she says “Wittgenstein has had many followers in the analytical tradition, most of whom he would regard as having misunderstood him.” (Ibid., 41) And further: “Immediate followers of Wittgenstein, including Gilbert Ryle translated his admittedly obscure reflections into a form of behaviourism: only the outer is real.” (Ibid., 157) She feels that, with regard to the “inner”, Wittgenstein is warning us that “in attributing roles to it [we may] make philosophical mistakes.” And with regard to literal interpretations of Wittgenstein’s metaphors, giving rise to theoretical constructions claiming his patronage, she notes “As often in philosophy a growth of mutually supporting metaphors may seem to add up to a position which has been argued for.” (Ibid., 156-57) Of Ayer, a major

contributor to the making of the Anglo-analytic picture of morality, she writes that he “divides the mental region between overt public conventions (which govern that inward utterance of words which is all that ‘thinking’ can properly consist in) and obscure private phenomena, devoid of ‘meaning’, except possibly as material for psychological study.” (NP, 46-7). On this argument, the public conventions can, through their necessary expression in language, be thoroughly analysed, and where errors in logic occur in them these can be shown. At the same time psychology must find ever more scientific methods for making some sense of the messy area of the phenomena it attempts to study. “One of Wittgenstein’s aims” on the other hand, as Murdoch writes, “was to remove philosophy from the vicinity of science, particularly of psychological science”. (MGM, 158)

Early in the twentieth century however, some years before both Wittgenstein and Ayer, G.E. Moore had already overturned the traditional philosophical preoccupation with how value is determined, the question of what can be said to be ‘good’; and this time not solely from an epistemological perspective, but as simultaneously an argument *within* moral philosophy. In *Principia Ethica*, 1903, he set out to show that ‘good’ has no *fixed* meaning, it is definable only according to specific and varied types of *evaluation*. Although Moore himself still “treated moral remarks as expressions of moral insight [...] and he had clung to the idea that they were in some sense factual” (ME, 62), Murdoch says that his argument “transformed the central question of ethics from the question, ‘What is goodness?’ – where an answer was expected in terms of the revelation of some real and eternally present structure of the universe – into the question – ‘What is the activity of “valuing” (“or commending”)?’”, where what is required is to see what is in common to people of all ages and societies when they attach value to something.” She notes “This phrase ‘to attach value’ is itself significant of the change of attitude”, indicating that the philosopher’s attention is now directed to “the familiar human activity of endowing things with value.” This, she says, represents a definitive breach with metaphysical ethics. It also absolves moral philosophers of any obligation to defend or live by a particular conception of ethics; on the contrary it requires their *professional* neutrality. Reflection on “What things are good?” then became “a matter for the moralist, and not for the philosopher.” (Ibid., 60).

Murdoch was concerned to identify and scrutinise the moves in this development, which for her did indeed eliminate an old source of confusion, but at the heavy cost of devaluing philosophical ethics. The next major step, on Ayer’s view, and in alignment (and interaction) with the views of

the Vienna school of “logical positivism”, was the conclusion that, since no ethical or metaphysical statement is ultimately verifiable, and since such statements do not constitute empirical hypotheses, they cannot be considered cognitively meaningful. Only *cognitive* meaning is the direct concern of philosophy, therefore “ethics” takes on the status of, at best, a dependent relative. A further development from this was the idea that what ethical statements expressed was merely emotion. As Murdoch says: “They did not have *descriptive*, or factual meaning [cognitive], they had *emotive* [noncognitive] meaning” (ME, 61); a notion that was pivotal to the development of ‘noncognitivism’ in contemporary ethics. This dualistic notion was far from Murdoch’s own view. She herself speaks frequently, as we will see, of “the moral content of cognition and the ubiquity of evaluation” (SZ, 97). Paradoxically perhaps, whilst contesting the notion of the mind as something separate from the body, this rigid analytic separation of the realms of the cognitive and the noncognitive nonetheless demonstrates a real affinity for the sensible/intelligible divide. The difficulty of squaring this position with both the rationality and the relationship to facts that were evidently at work in moral *reasoning* subsequently found its way back into analytic philosophy, Murdoch says, largely “as a result of two other philosophical developments: first, the notion that meaning should be analysed not in terms of method of verification, but in terms of *use*, and second what might roughly be summed up as ‘the disappearance of the mind’.” (ME, 61).

The notion of meaning as use obviously calls to mind Wittgenstein, but Murdoch thinks that it also “arose independently in the field of ethics, as a development and refinement of the emotive theory. Ethical statements were now said, not to express emotion, but to evoke emotion and more generally to persuade.” (Ibid.). This, however, represents a conceptual shift in the use of “use” itself, from Wittgenstein’s analysis of the way the meaning of particular words changes according to *particular* uses, to the supposition that a whole group of moral concepts are *used* psychologically, both to express emotion (therefore noncognitively) and also to persuade, calling the cognitive faculty into play in the service of emotion. (Reason as slave to the passions, as it were). Alisdair MacIntyre, who sees “emotivism” as *the* most pernicious trend running right through twentieth century philosophy, says that Stevenson (for MacIntyre its principal advocate) “asserted that the sentence ‘This is good’ means roughly the same as ‘I approve of this; do so as well’, trying to capture by this equivalence both the function of the moral judgement as expressive of the speaker’s attitudes and the function of the moral judgement as designed to influence the hearer’s attitudes (Stevenson, [*Facts and Values*] 1945, ch.2)”¹⁵⁷ The moral judgement is thus seen

¹⁵⁷ MacIntyre, A., *After Virtue*, 2004 (1981), Duckworth, London, p.12.

as simultaneously emotive and ‘prescriptive’. Murdoch herself refers only in passing to Stevenson’s work in marking its place in this genealogy of moral concepts. The view it put forward however, which reduces the huge area of ethical thought and conduct to one aspect of it, was a cornerstone of R.M. Hare’s more sophisticated version of ‘prescriptivism’, and it was this more complex theoretical structure she was most concerned to dismantle, as will become evident.

A further development in modern philosophy that Murdoch felt to be significant in this respect was what she describes as a “revolution in our attitude to psychological concepts”, and among these, principally the concept of ‘mind’ itself, which was rather ruthlessly “disappeared”. She writes: “The arguments in *The Concept of Mind* [Gilbert Ryle] are largely demonstrations that we are not really referring to inner mental happenings when we speak of intelligent activity; it is assumed almost by the way that there are no such happenings.” (NP, 43). In effect, Ryle’s book, famous for caricaturing the Cartesian mind/body dualism as that of “the ghost in the machine”¹⁵⁸, contains many statements in which the mind is pictured as a kind of epiphenomenon of behaviour. He writes: “It is being maintained throughout this book that when we characterize people by mental predicates [e.g. as thoughtful, imprudent, judicious] we are not making untestable inferences to any ghostly processes occurring in streams of consciousness which we are debarred from visiting; we are describing the ways in which those people conduct parts of their predominantly public behaviour.”(Ryle, p.50)¹⁵⁹ And further: “I am arguing that in describing the workings of a person’s mind we are not describing a second set of shadowy operations. We are describing ... the way in which parts of his conduct are managed.” (Ibid, p.49) Ryle’s intentionally provocative statements are indicative of the two reasons Murdoch gives for the abandonment of the notion of “mental event”, that is: “because we cannot find it”: (Ryle’s “shadowy operations” and “ghostly processes”); and because: “we do not need it”. (NP, 43). Before the philosophical advent of the notion that meaning lies in *use*, the ‘mental event’ was *needed* to create the “meaningful entities which should also be the basis of language.” (Ibid). But this function of mind in the production of images, representations, etc., this active role in the production of language, was more or less dispensed with once it was seen, from this perspective, “that what determines the

¹⁵⁸ Though in fact, as Hacking points out, although for Descartes mind and body were indeed distinct substances, and he wondered how they interact, he was nonetheless “very cagey about the relationship of mind to body. He did not like the ancient formulation that ‘I am in my body as a pilot in his ship.’ Instead he wrote that “I am most tightly bound to my body, and as it were intermingled with it, so that it and I form a unit.” (Quoted *HO* 223)

¹⁵⁹ Ryle, G., *The Concept of Mind*, Penguin, 2000 (1949).

use of words about the mind are features of the overt context; the rigidity that creates meaning lies in the social framework and not in the relation to an inward utterance.” (NP, 44).

For Murdoch, Ryle demonstrates effectively those public conventions that govern certain ‘cognitive repertoires’, such as the function of naming (through which one also *identifies* one’s “feelings” in relation to observable sensations), and other features of what he calls the “silent soliloquies” that constitute thinking. The act of meaning is here equated with a matching of the public symbol, particularly linguistic, with the private ‘feeling’. However, if the available public symbols do not seem adequate, Ryle presents this as simply a problem of insufficient vocabulary, resolved by further learning (construed as a more extensive assimilation of public symbols). In focusing in this way on the *act of meaning*, Murdoch points out that no distinction is made between this and the *mental event*, which is simply allowed to disappear. Against this, she contends that “there *are* mental events which have a perfectly definite character and one which is not to be either scattered into the context or identified with a physical concomitant.” In responding to some of Ryle’s examples she observes that though there may indeed be no significant mental event when recognising something as red, or even possibly when feeling jealous¹⁶⁰; in the case of feeling morally responsible for “a particular thought” what is at issue is precisely a specific mental event. She gives the example of Gwendolen, in George Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda*, who hesitates before throwing a lifebelt to her detested husband, who subsequently drowns. Murdoch comments that “it matters very much to her to know whether or not at that moment she intended his death.” (TL, 36). No such troubling mental events occur in the amiable world of *The Concept of Mind* however. Here Ryle is set on establishing that “consciousness is a myth”, not, he says, in the sense that we live unconscious lives; on the contrary, with regard to “specifically human behaviour – behaviour, that is, which is unachieved by animals, infants, and idiots [sic!] – we should ... notice the fact that some sorts of actions are in one way or other concerned with, or are operations upon, other actions.”(p.182) These actions he often refers to as “higher order actions” (a kind of evolutionary super-attribute?), and they include all forms of ‘conscious’ response to others acts and all ‘reflection’ (though he dislikes and would not use this word, a metaphor he attributes to Locke; he also avoids use of all terms of ‘thinking’, or places them in inverted commas, in a way that recalls Derrida’s use of “deconstructed” words *sous rature*¹⁶¹. “Self-consciousness” he writes, “if the word is to be used at all, must not be described on the hallowed para-optical model, as a

¹⁶⁰ Though Murdoch says this she would probably, along with Shakespeare’s *Othello*, have regarded jealousy as something of a mental event.

¹⁶¹ See § p. 205

torch that illuminates itself by beams of its own light reflected from a mirror in its own insides. On the contrary it is simply a special case of an ordinary more or less efficient handling of a less or more honest and intelligent witness.”(p.186) This reduction of self-regarding moral reflection to the ‘more or less efficient handling of a less or more honest and intelligent witness’ may seem all the more remarkable in that it was published just four years after World War II, and the holocaust; though, as Murdoch notes “*The Concept of Mind* does not discuss sincerity and self-deception.”¹⁶² (IM, 128).

What Murdoch is saying with the example from *Daniel Deronda* is not at all that consciousness, or the mind, has the kind of ontological existence Ryle is so concerned to demolish, but that what is crucial in human moral life is precisely our *experience* of the activity of Ryle’s undefined ‘witness’; and further - what it can mean for this metaphorical ‘witness’ to be “less or more honest”. As she says “The further we move away from the situation where the *descripta* are ‘ordinary’ experiences, the harder it may be to find suitable descriptive terms in the public language. And this will be the case whether the experiences concerned are ‘thoughts’ or inward bodily sensations or sensation of the ‘external world’. (NP, 49). In fact, for her there are no clear borderlines: “Sensations” she says, “considered as experiences, may of course approximate toward being ‘thoughts’.” (Ibid., 48)

Ryle, however, is equally scathing of these concepts: “experiences” he writes, is “a plural noun commonly used to denote the postulated non-physical episodes which constitute the shadow-drama on the ghostly boards of the mental stage.” (Ryle, p.63) The question of performing an action is resolved, in this perspective, in the same way, whether the action is a technical or moral one. Giving the example of a boy who ties the wrong kind of knot (a boy-scout activity), Ryle says the question “had nothing to do with the occurrence or non-occurrence of any occult episode in the boy’s stream of consciousness; it was the question of whether or not he had the required higher-level competence, that of knowing how to tie reef-knots.” (p.69) Ryle draws a parallel between this type of mental operation and moral “higher-level competence” thus: “The fears expressed by some moral philosophers that the advance of the natural sciences diminishes the field within which the moral virtues can be exercised rests on the assumption that there is some contradiction in

¹⁶² Murdoch writes: “The world of *The Concept of Mind* is the world in which people play cricket, cook cakes, make simple decisions, remember their childhood and go to the circus, not the world in which they commit sins, fall in love, say prayers or join the Communist Party.” (SRR 78-79) The latter of course describes aspects of how she saw herself (except the prayers). Since she too was an Oxford don, the limitations of the range of moral concern of Ryle and other colleagues was particularly apparent to her.

saying that one and the same occurrence is governed both by mechanical laws and by moral principles, an assumption as baseless as the assumption that a golfer cannot at once conform to the laws of ballistics *and* obey the rules of golf.” (p.78) This bold statement is an example of what Murdoch calls the technique, common in both everyday thinking and much of philosophy, of suppressing a premise in order to reach an apparently “logical” conclusion. The premise suppressed here appears to be that what “morality” consists in is sets of rules governing actions, the learning and application of which, like all “higher-order” operations, is relatively straightforward, perhaps involving the assimilation of something like what Hume calls the “steady and general point of view”.

Another key theoretical device used to separate the dimension of fact from that of value in the empiricist tradition that Murdoch refers to also derives in its contemporary form from Moore, who in turn explicitly reworks another notion taken from Hume. Moore took up the argument from Hume to the effect that an “ought”, or a moral judgement, cannot, logically, be derived from an “is”, or a description of a state of affairs. Moore looked at the specifically *linguistic* aspect of this operation: the equation, for example, of a descriptive “this is pleasurable, legitimate, etc.” with an evaluative “this is good” (in so far as these “descriptive” terms relating to “facts” can be considered non-evaluative). This notion, that a given state of affairs – the facts – leads directly to a conclusion about what “ought” to be done, Moore called the “naturalistic fallacy”, though this name is misleading, giving the impression of the rejection of any stance grounded on a conception of nature, whereas it simply champions one conception of nature against another, again following Hume. Hume had attacked the Aristotelean and teleological concept of *Nature*, prevailing in Europe until the seventeenth century, for which the way something *is*, its “nature”, does indeed indicate how it *ought* to be, and by extension what it ought to do; and similarly *Nature* is that universal entity in whose own “nature” the nature of all the single entities of which it is composed are manifest. On this view, therefore, the determination of what was morally right had to be based on the relevant ontological dogma. Against this Hume invoked the biological/psychological *nature* of human beings (investigated in his aptly named *Treatise of Human Nature*), which included a capacity for moral reflection made manifest in the habits and customs of human societies. Moore’s notion of “naturalistic fallacy” supported the latter conception of nature over the former, though Moore parted from Humean tradition in attributing a particular status to moral concepts like the “good”.

Murdoch writes that the argument “to the effect that we cannot derive values from facts is the most important argument in modern moral philosophy”. (ME, 64) It is, however, an argument that has been put to very different uses. One form of the argument which appears in Wittgenstein is the following: “The sense of the world must lie outside the world. In the world everything is as it is, and everything happens as it does happen: *in* it there is no value” *Tractatus*, 6.41. Wittgenstein’s argument (here and elsewhere) draws attention to the preponderance of this mistake, Moore’s “naturalistic fallacy”, of believing our values to be somehow inherent in the substance of the world; and yet Wittgenstein believed this *logical* error to be so common among us that the making of the error might need to be considered as part of what it is to be human, and therefore in itself to be a “fact” of some importance, even though the values that people consider to be inherent in the world differ, and are articulated in a multiplicity of ways. If this is the case, however illogical the premises of moralities may be, there can be no unified account of what morality *is*, only of what moralities *are*, and possibly of what they do appear to have in common, of their family resemblances as Wittgenstein might put it. Murdoch points out that the very different use to which the fact/value argument is put in “the stripped and behaviouristic account of morality” functions by connecting the strictly logical argument “with a much more general and ambiguous dictum to this effect: that you cannot attach morality to the substance of the world.” (Ibid., 65). This argument was presented as ‘anti-metaphysical’, something Murdoch saw as more a statement of intention than an achieved result. Though attractively cogent on the logical plane, that is: you cannot *find* morality in the substance of the world, the argument contains the prescriptive: “you cannot *attach* morality to the substance of the world”. An argument that leaves out of account the fact that “many people who are not philosophers ... do think of their morality in just this way... They think of it as continuous with some sort of larger structure of reality, whether this be a religious structure, or a social or historical one.” (Ibid., 65) An interpretive structure which does indeed, in their view, allow them to *find* value in the substance of the world. (She also remarks elsewhere that “The ordinary person does not, unless corrupted by philosophy, believe that he creates values by his choices. He thinks that some things really are better than others and we are capable of getting it wrong.” (SGOC, 380)

Contemporary moral philosophy (she says, writing in 1957) saw the view of one’s “moral system as a sort of fact, and not as a set of values which only exist through ... [one’s] own choices” (ME, 66) as retrograde, pre-scientific or overtly ideological (whether religious or political). The only antidote to this that would preserve the overarching contemporary values of freedom and

reciprocal respect was held to be the view of morality as grounded on individual autonomy and choice. In effect, the predominant forms of contemporary philosophy, the deontological and utilitarian theories that underpin the social and judiciary systems of the modern democracies, all hold to the principle of autonomy; and regard morality as centred on the individual (who is enjoined to consider the interests of others from various perspectives), and as fundamentally a question of the choices we make regarding our actions. The individual “is entirely free to choose and responsible for his choice. His morality is exhibited in his choice, whereby he shows which things he regards as valuable.” (Ibid., 70) Should these be informed for us, as individuals, by one metaphysic or another that is our personal right, but such reflections belongs to the private sphere.

What she sees as happening here is that the *philosophical* arguments have been meshed with a *moral* argument that was particularly forceful in those post-Holocaust, Cold War times. There was an understandable fear of totalitarian moralities, a fear that, Murdoch says, “is to be found ... in many existentialist writers – and it may be found [earlier], at what I take to be one of its sources, in that great pamphlet of Liberalism, Mill’s *Essay on Liberty*.” (Ibid., 66). She notes that in “our own liberal society”:

we approach the world armed with certain general values which we hold *simpliciter* and without the assistance of metaphysics or dogmatic theology – respect for freedom, for truth, and so on. We study the facts and we make our choices in the light of the facts and our values. Our disagreements among ourselves concern the application of principles – our disagreements with other societies concern what principles to hold. There are, of course, persons and groups among us whose morality is *not* conceptually simple, but metaphysical and dogmatic (for instance some Christians and all Communists) – but these people are in the minority.” (ME, 67).

Here she contrasts two views of morality. That prevailing in modern democratic societies, indeed the ethical basis of these societies, she calls “the Liberal view”, an ethical view based on the epistemological distinction which took root in the seventeenth century between a public, scientific and verifiable “truth” and a private metaphysical “truth”. A view which has become a norm that is both epistemic¹⁶³ and *ethical* in “our” society. Against this, the view of morality as integral to, and inseparable from, a wider vision of reality she calls “the Natural Law view” (ME, 70), a view which prevailed in the West before the seventeenth century, where it remains as a (variable, but often powerful) minority perspective, and one that still prevails throughout the non-Western world. On this view: “The individual is seen as held in a framework which transcends him, where what is important and valuable is the framework, and the individual only has importance, or even

¹⁶³ See discussion of Foucault’s analysis of conceptions of truth in seventeenth century, § p.xx

reality, in so far as he belongs to the framework.” Within such a framework, the moral task of the mere individual is to transform his or her being in accordance with the “reality which transcends him. To discover what is morally good is to discover that reality, and to become good is to integrate himself with it.”(Ibid.) For the Christian the transcendent reality is God, and the Natural Law is God’s Law; for the Marxist, what is good is the teleological goal of history itself, the ultimate withering away of the state and the realization of *human* freedom, which required a dedication to that end so total that the freedom of the present *individual* must be sacrificed to it. Self-sacrifice, even martyrdom, may in both cases be seen as the highest good. For Murdoch, the problem with the liberal view is that whilst it may indeed be the most appropriate ethical stance for our society in our time, a stance which includes the desire to render universal, in a global society, the values of freedom, both individual and collective, and of reciprocal respect, it cannot be said to define what morality *is*. At the time Murdoch was writing, the Soviet Union – whose ideology, though no longer identifiable with that of Marx, was nonetheless clearly included in her ‘Natural law’ category – dominated half of Europe and other parts of the world with a distinctly non-liberal morality. She says that “What the modern moral philosopher has done is what metaphysicians in the past have always done. He has produced a model. Only it is not a model of any morality whatsoever. It is a model of his own morality.” (ME, 67)

The distinction she is outlining here is not just one of philosophical perspective, she says “it is a difference between two types of moral outlook”; noting that in our society people often do not fit squarely into one or the other type of outlook. Many, who prize reciprocal respect and tolerance as conducive to peace within society, at the same time do hold that “moral values are real and fixed”, and one or other “Natural law” view may best represent them. The ethical view that “we are unable to discriminate between different types of morality, except in terms of difference of act and choice”, rests on the questionable epistemological view for which “all moral agents are seen as inhabiting the same world of facts”. Against this view of morality she argues that:

it is possible for differences to exist as total differences of moral vision and perspective... The Liberal concentrates his attention on the *point of discontinuity* between the chosen framework and the choosing agent – and it is this moment of discontinuity which the modern philosopher has tried to catch in a formula. But for the individual, whether he be a Marxist or a Christian, who takes up a Natural Law point of view ... there is no axiom of discontinuity. The individual’s choice is less important, and the interest may lie in the adoration of the framework rather than in the details of conduct. And here if the Liberal philosopher just goes on insisting that the moral agent is totally free by definition and is responsible for endowing the framework with value, and that ‘ought’ cannot be derived from ‘is’, this merely results in a colossally important difference of outlook being left unanalysed. (ME, 71)

What Murdoch concludes from this is that the current preoccupation with analysing moral concepts through the words they find expression in is indeed the correct task of moral philosophy, but that the task “has been too narrowly conceived. We have not considered the great variety of concepts that make up a morality.” (ME, 73) And in the first instance, the supposition that the ‘facts’ can be established from a neutral perspective is fundamentally mistaken. “Moral differences” she writes, “can be differences of concept as well as differences of choice. A moral change shows in our vocabulary. How we see and describe the world is morals too – and the relation of this to our conduct is complicated.” (Ibid.)

The central moral concept of freedom is a case requiring particular attention in this regard. Whereas for the liberal thinker “freedom” implies “an open freedom of choice in a clear situation” for the adherent of a Natural Law perspective “it lies rather in an increasing knowledge of his own real being, and in the conduct which naturally springs from such knowledge.” (ME, 70) Interestingly, this latter description could also apply to Kant’s rational agent, the very individual whose morality is defined by her autonomy, and yet who, in discovering herself to be an autonomous subject, finds herself free to obey the dictates of Reason in the form of the Moral Law. Murdoch notes this Kantian authorship of these two different strands of moral philosophy, the former embraced by liberals, the latter rejected. “Kant” she writes, “who says that the moral will is autonomous, and that morality cannot be founded on anything but itself [... describes] only one type of view of morality – roughly a Protestant; and less roughly a Liberal, type of view.” (Though in fact, whereas all liberals uphold *some* concept of moral autonomy, only Kantians see this as implying that morality is founded on nothing but itself). However, she goes on, “Kant himself is the source not only of this Liberal morality, but also of a modern version of its opposite, which I shall call, with an old name, Natural Law morality” (ME, 68), by which she means, as said above, the view that “the individual is ... held in a framework which transcends him”, and to which his moral self must respond; whether this framework be God, or cosmic harmony or the *Logos*, as in earlier forms of her category of “Natural Law”, or Kant’s Moral Law, or some other deep structure of the universe. Whereas Kant’s “autonomy” is of Reason, and specifically excludes desire as constitutive of mixed or heteronomous (therefore not moral) motivation; other concepts of autonomy, the utilitarian, for example, specifically *include* desire in moral reflection. In the intervening centuries since Kant, his titanic attempts to give shape to “the Moral Law” in the form of maxims that were universalisable has resulted in principles which have become part of the framework of democracy and the constitutions of modern states, but in the process these principles have become detached from Kant’s metaphysics.

This detachment, or displacement of important concepts, Murdoch saw in the context of a more general process both of changes in moral outlook, and of the reworking of privileged themes in moral philosophy. With regard to the latter she writes: "It seems fairly clear that much of the criticism of traditional metaphysics, which modern philosophy has made its task, must stand." (VC, 71) In particular she considered legitimate "the elimination of hypostatized and non-observable 'qualities', 'sentiments' or 'acts of will' which might have been thought to be bearers of moral value [and were often polemically juxtaposed]" (Ibid., 79). She felt that useful work in undermining these concepts, with their pretension to have identified some deep structure of human life, had been done, but that (then) recent developments in linguistic philosophy had taken a different direction from that set out by Wittgenstein. The "lesson of Wittgenstein", she writes, is that there "may be no deep structure". A lesson which "has not yet been taken enough to heart by those who want to reduce morality to a single formula." (ME 74) The reduction of morality to a single formula - to choices or acts of will, to normative mechanisms, whether they are based on a deep structure of "sentiments" or of Reason, for example, makes it easily manageable in theory, but it does so by leaving out of account aspects of the moral life which don't fit the chosen formula. Taking Wittgenstein's lesson seriously would also mean applying it to other, more contemporary theories however: "In addition there is the task of criticising types of modern quasi-philosophy or semi-scientific metaphysics which seek to present the human mind as enclosed within social, historical, or psychological frames. I have in mind a great variety of views deriving from a study of Marx, Freud, the behaviour of calculating machines, and so on." (ME, 71) Yet again, the pictures that these theories produce may be extremely insightful, the interpretive grids they place on reality may result in impeccable analyses leading to laudable moral practices, but if they are thought of as constituting a framework of inevitable laws then the unintended consequences of the constraints imposed on human freedom by all such determinisms can be, and have been seen to be, frightening. Her own broader definition of moral freedom does not, however, deny these systems of belief their place: "our freedom is not just a freedom to choose and act differently, it is also a freedom to think and believe differently, to see the world differently, to see different configurations and describe them in different words. Moral differences can be difference of concept as well as of choice." (ME, 72-3).

2. Moral Concepts

Murdoch writes:

when we leave the domain of the purely logical we come into the cloudy and shifting domain of the concepts which men live by – and these are subject to historical change. This is especially true of moral concepts. Here we shall have done something if we can establish with tolerable clarity what these concepts *are*. We should, I think, resist the temptation to unify the picture by trying to establish, guided by our own conception of the ethical in general, what these concepts *must be*. (ME, 75)

This reads like a plea for genealogical clarification and vigilance in the use of theoretical models, or at least for recognition of just how difficult it is *not* to create unified pictures from our own particular selection of what is morally relevant in the world of facts. Her stress on what concepts *are* does not, however, imply what they are as fixed signs; it is linked, as here, to the fact that they “are subject to historical change”, and *as such* they need to be clearly delineated. (That she also insisted on the importance of elements of ahistorical continuity in the moral preoccupations of human beings, that may in fact be masked by the concepts, does not change this. She writes: “At a superficial level history fashions morals, at a deep level morals resist history.” (MGM, 223). As a method focusing on language at the empirical rather than the structural level, analytic philosophy should, in theory, allow one to circumvent the search for universal formulae and the attempt to determine “what these concepts *must be*”; but, as we have seen, Murdoch did not feel it had altogether resisted this temptation.

She describes, with apologies to those who did not hold it, as “the current view” in philosophy in Britain (her own historical starting point), one that holds that “the moral life of the individual is a series of overt choices which take place in a series of specifiable situations. The individual’s ‘stream of consciousness’ is of comparably little importance, partly because it is often not there at all (having been thought to be continuous for wrong reasons), and more pertinently because it is and can only be through overt acts that we can characterise another person, or ourselves, mentally or morally.” (VC, 77) The notion that the stream of consciousness is “not there at all” she traces back to Hume, and we have seen how Ayer, Ryle and others constructed the behaviourist or act-centred view of morality she describes here. These elements, she believed, were then compounded in the Anglo-American mainstream - seminally in Hare’s *The Language of Morals*, (1952) - with the Kantian notion that “a moral judgement, as opposed to a whim or taste preference, is one which is supported by reasons held by the agent to be valid for all others placed as he [is].” (VC, 77). In other words, the criterion of universalisability (which has separate antecedents in the empiricist tradition) is essential if any moral judgement or prescription is to be counted as such.

This, she writes, “has been powerfully argued, especially by Mr. Hare [...]. Here we may get the full force of what is meant by a philosophical model. We are being asked to conceive of a structure of would-be universal reasoning as lying at the core of any activity which could properly be called moral.” (Ibid., 85)

Murdoch did not accept this view. She cites as just one interesting case causing problems for this and any universalist model of morality that of Napoleon, who does not think that others should do as he does. Whatever the reasons for this (and there may be several – a sense of destiny, a sense of the need to act despite incomprehension, etc.) he comes to the conclusion that what is morally correct for Napoleon is not so for anyone else. It may be argued that this is an anachronistic or Homeric exception, but there can be no conclusive evidence that no valid moral reflection guided his actions; the virtues of courage and prudence are, after all, often at odds with each other, different societies favouring one or the other, and conceptualising them differently. It would however, Murdoch writes, be possible to “force the situation into the model ... but” she asks “whatever is the point of doing so? To do so is to blur a real difference, the difference between moral attitudes which have this sort of background and those which do not.” (Ibid., 86) The blurring of differences, was philosophical anathema to Murdoch, as it had been to Wittgenstein. But leaving aside cases of this kind which simply do not fit the philosophical model, she points out that there are also cases of forms of moral outlook, some of which can claim philosophical expression, that are “unconnected with the view that morality is essentially universal rules.” (Ibid., 87) Among these she lists: “moral attitudes which emphasize the inexhaustible detail of the world, the endlessness of the task of understanding, the importance of not assuming that one has got individuals and situations ‘taped’, the connection of knowledge with love and of spiritual insight with apprehension of the unique.”(Ibid)

The moral language she is using here immediately takes one into a different world of imagery and thought, and inevitably into a different philosophical universe, and yet one developing across the same post-Kantian years (though not to any significant degree in Britain). She cites as moral attitudes of this kind, though differing greatly among themselves: “certain idealist views, certain existentialist views, certain Catholic views”. The fact that such moral outlooks have largely been connected with the idealist descent from Kant has meant that they have received little attention in England, which she finds not only regrettable, but bound to skew any analysis of what may be considered to fall within the bounds of ‘morality’ and what to lie outside. Views of morality focusing primarily on inner struggle, of the relationship of the self to itself as Foucault would put it, are frequently attacked, or dismissed, by philosophers defending a universalist perspective (she

cites Gellner who regards moral universalism as rational, and existentialism, for example, as irrational, and connected with “disreputable things such as the *Führerprinzip*, *credo quia absurdum*, and romantic love.” She notes, however, that even Gellner does admit that such philosophies must nonetheless count as moralities. (VC, 89n) This poses a problem for moral universalism in its attempt to generate rules (its necessary expression) that are sufficiently general (and sufficiently liberal) to be incorporative of differing conceptions of ethics, and yet sufficiently specific not to be mere tautologies. She notes, for example, Hare’s expression of irritation with “‘the oldest and most ineradicable vice of moralists – the unwillingness to make moral decisions’.” (Hence the search for Golden Rules and other such simplifications.)” (quoted VC, 83) For Murdoch on the other hand, universalism is itself part of a particular *vision* of the way the world *ought* to be, rather than the way it is. A vision in which “[t]he insistence that morality is essentially rules may be seen as an attempt to secure us against the ambiguity of the world.” (VC, 90) Against this, she argues: “There are times when it is proper to stress, not the comprehensibility of the world, but its incomprehensibility, and there are types of morality which emphasise this more than is customary in utilitarian Liberal moralities.” (Ibid.)

That moral codes functioning in this regulatory way have always been essential to human societies (both in practice and psychologically) is not at issue here; the philosophical problem she is concerned with is the reduction of the vast sphere of the moral life to this codifiable dimension of it; as if morality in the form of rules could somehow also secure us against the ambiguities of the inner life. Not surprisingly, the whole conceptual area of the “inner life” is fraught with difficulty, and that throughout history it has been congenial to the talking of nonsense is something with which Murdoch agreed. (She felt that, although Wittgenstein’s statement, at *Investigations* 580, that “An inner process stands in need of outer criteria” was clearly a *logical*, and not a moralistic dictum, it may also have had moral implications. She says that “‘Do not try to analyse your own inner experience’ (*Investigations*, II xi, p.204) may be seen also as a suggestion that one should not attach too much significance to (probably egoistic and senseless) inner chat! Silence becomes the inner as well as the outer person.” (MGM, 157) Cavell – who believed that the *Tractatus*, written as it was before and after the First World War, had to do with “taking the measure of one’s sense of compromise with injustice, or rather with imperfect justice, in one’s life within actual institutions” – expressed this intuition of Murdoch’s more fully: “*Philosophical Investigations* may be seen [...] as a further way of responding to the, let’s say, absolute responsibility of the self to itself – not now as the fixed keeping of its counsel of silence in and about what cannot be asserted or explained (‘said’), but through the endless specification, by exemplification, in the

world (of and with others) of when words are called for and when there are no words. Call this the absolute responsibility of the self to make itself intelligible, without falsifying itself". (CHU, xxvii)

The analytic distinction between the spheres of the logical and psychological, aiming at clarity and avoiding nonsense, has, Murdoch says, tended to associate the concept of 'inner life' with "private psychological phenomena, open to introspection" (VC, 78), about which nothing verifiable can be said. On this view, the concept of "verification" is itself fixed in relation to "outer" criteria, and thus as inapplicable to inner events. There is however, she goes on, another possible conception of the "inner life", as involving a "private or personal vision which may find expression overtly or inwardly. There has, I think, been some tendency for the discrediting of the 'inner' in the former sense to involve the neglect of the 'inner' in the latter sense." The data she is interested in are not blind psychological urges of the former type, but rather phenomena of the second type. These are "either overt (conversation, story-telling), or if introspectable [they] are identifiable and in principle exposable (private stories, images, inner monologue)". (VC, 80). Here she introduces what in her own thinking about ethics will be a key concept, that of "personal vision". The shift in focus she is proposing, from moral choice to the moral vision *underlying* our moral choices, also implies a shift in the concept of "verification", which can no longer be tied to the "outer". We have truth-criteria for our own thoughts and feelings and those of others. "We have various methods of verification. We can examine our own states of mind and test them, [...] we need not accept them at their face value (do I really intend this act, do I really love this person?) [...] Our 'innerness' may be elusive or hard to describe but it is not unimportant or (necessarily) shadowy. Of course these inward happenings are not (in the sense attacked by Wittgenstein) significance-bestowing processes of meaning, or intermediaries, prior to or essential to thinking or speaking." (MGM, 265)

In other words, while she has always considered the denial of any ontological status to these inner processes to be a useful move, this does not, and for Murdoch *must* not, imply that they are no longer of philosophical interest. On the contrary, in allowing the question of the metaphysical status of "innerness" to be put aside, its moral importance may come more clearly into focus. The moral agent, as the free and autonomous author of her own choices, is in the first place a particular human being, and neither the theoretical problem of determining what morality *is*, for *all* humans, nor the practical problem of determining what it *should be*, can be resolved by leaving all this particularised complexity out of account. This is rendered evident in our mode of evaluation of other people, which, she says, is not just based on their actions and pronouncements. Instead "we

consider something more elusive which may be called their total vision of life, as shown in their mode of speech or silence, their choice of words, their assessment of others, their conception of their own lives, what they think attractive or praiseworthy, what they think funny: in short the configurations of their thought which show continually in their reactions and conversation.” (VC, 80-81) All this, she writes, may be summed up using two metaphors, which “making different points in the two metaphors, one may call the *texture* of a man’s being or the nature of his *personal vision*.” (VC, 81, my emphases) The different points indicated here in the two metaphors refer to the *particularity* of the individual synthesis in the “texture” of one’s being, and to the fact that this may be imbued with a broader, more public, and more fully articulated vision (or visions). For Murdoch “these activities are themselves direct expressions of a person’s “moral nature” or “moral being” and demand a type of description which is not limited to the choice and argument model.” (Ibid).

Attempts at definition of the concept of “thought” are also frequent in this latter model; and again, just as learning to think was for Ryle based on concepts taken *from* the public domain, so the validity of the activity of thought, its operation on those concepts, is limited to what is *outwardly directed*, at least in Stuart Hampshire’s version in *Thought and Action* (1970), from which Murdoch quotes the following: “ ‘Thought cannot be thought, as opposed to day-dreaming or musing, unless it is directed towards a conclusion, whether in action or judgement [...] the idea of thought as an interior monologue... will become altogether empty if the thought does not even purport to be directed towards its issue in the external world [...] Under these conditions thought and belief would not differ from the charmed and habitual rehearsal of phrases or the drifting of ideas through the mind.’ ” (cited: IP 314, ellipses Murdoch’s) Among the “configurations of thought” pertaining to our evaluations of other people listed by Murdoch above, it would be hard to establish which of these would here merit classification as “thinking” in Hampshire’s definition, and which would count as “musing” or “the drifting of ideas through the mind”. That Hampshire’s own introspection allows him to make such clear distinctions could be seen as a laudable feat, but on Murdoch’s view, not only are the borderlines between these different types of mental activity not so easy to define, but to incorporate such distinctions into a philosophical theory is to eliminate by fiat a whole area of moral reflection she considers to be of crucial importance. In describing a case¹⁶⁴ of a change of attitude (of a person she calls M), a change in the way another person (D) is *seen*, which depends on the way that person is *viewed*, she describes the considerable moral work upon the self (M’s self) that this change of view entails. She comments: “the idea we are trying to

¹⁶⁴ The famous case of *M* and *D*, discussed in *The Idea of Perfection*.

make sense of is that M has in the interim [between one attitude and another] been *active*, she has been *doing* something, something which we approve of, something which is somehow worth doing in itself. M has been morally active in the interim: this is what we want to say and to be philosophically permitted to say.” (IP 314) On Hampshire’s picture, one is *not* philosophically permitted to say this. Work on one’s own conceptions, especially in relation to others, the awareness that the conceptions themselves may be morally suspect and require investigation, is for Murdoch an important moral *activity*, inner activity. Transforming our conceptions also means transforming ourselves in relation to our world.

When viewed from Murdoch’s perspective, many of the other key terms of analytic epistemology also lose their fixity. She writes “I would argue that we cannot accommodate this aspect of morals without modifying our view of ‘concepts’ and ‘meaning’; and when we do this the idea of choice becomes more problematic.” (VC, 82) This must be the case if, as she says, “We differ not only because we select different objects out of the same world but because we see different worlds.” (Ibid). This experience is tied up for us with our sense of our own truthfulness to ourselves. As she puts it

[t]he concept of ‘fact’ is complex. The moral point is that ‘facts’ are set up as such by human (that is moral) agents. Much of our life is taken up by truth-seeking, imagining, questioning. We relate to facts through truth and truthfulness, and come to recognise and discover that there are different modes and levels of insight and understanding. In many familiar ways various values pervade and *colour* what we take to be the reality of our world; wherein we constantly evaluate our own values and those of others (MGM, 26)

It follows from her general argument that if what gives meaning to my life is a particular vision, outside of which my vision is a mere blur, then I cannot hold myself, as an individual, free to choose what goes against that vision.¹⁶⁵ From the liberal viewpoint however this may seem dangerous: “it may seem that our conception of moral freedom is in danger”; and yet, according to Murdoch, “there is no need to equate the freedom needed to ensure morality with a complete independence of deep conceptual attitudes.” (VC, 84) On the contrary, the idea that such independence is even possible “ignores an obvious and important aspect of human existence, the way in which almost all our concepts and activities involve evaluation” (MGM, 26). Already however, as she points out “the notion that moral differences are conceptual (in the sense of being

¹⁶⁵ One case of conflicting moral visions concerning the same “facts” which evoked moral horror, from both sides of the major moral-conceptual divide in Italy a few years ago, was that of a Catholic mother of three, pregnant with a fourth, who had a cancer that could not be treated unless she aborted. She chose to renounce treatment and have the baby, who lived, and as expected, she died. For many, choosing to leave four children without a mother, instead of aborting the foetus, accepting treatment, and staying alive to look after the three small children she already had was a morally abominable choice. She was immediately put forward for sainthood by the Catholic Church. The “facts” were not seen as the same from the different perspectives.

differences of vision) and must be studied as such is unpopular in so far as it makes impossible the reduction of ethics to logic, since it suggests that morality must, to some extent at any rate, be studied historically.” But, she goes on: “This does not of course imply abandoning the linguistic method, it rather implies taking it seriously.”(VC, 84). If what constitute “facts” for us are already imbued with value this breaks down any notion of facts as constituting a reality that is accessible to all rational human beings in the same way, and of values as private. In a broadside turning the tables on ethical systems based on particular philosophical conceptions of human nature she says that nonetheless, “[a] proper separation of fact and value, as a defence of morality, lies in the contention that moral value cannot be *derived* from fact. That is, our activity of moral discrimination cannot be explained as merely one natural instinct among others, or our ‘good’ identified with pleasure, or a will to live (etc.)”(MGM, 26)

This brings her into the fraught conceptual area of what is “natural”, and of what is “naturalism” as the notion that “naturalism” was based on a logical fallacy had important consequences for analytic moral philosophy. She therefore attempted to unpack its constituent arguments in the following way. She delineated four central tenets of this theory thus: the anti-metaphysical argument, the distinction between descriptive and evaluative meanings, the logical argument (the incomplete syllogism), and the moral argument. The first two and the fourth of these arguments have been discussed above. To summarize them briefly, with regard to the first, the anti-metaphysical argument, she rejects the stronger analytic position: “that all concepts of metaphysical entities are empty”, but supports the weaker form: “that the existence of such entities cannot be philosophically established.” With regard to the second argument distinguishing descriptive from evaluative meanings she argues firstly that meanings are not so easily sorted into these two camps, and secondly, as above, that “moral concepts show moral differences as differences of vision not of choice.” Behind these two arguments, she writes, “lie the assumptions of British empiricism, and behind the fourth [the moral argument] lie the moral attitudes of Protestantism and Liberalism.” The whole package is presented as *logically* cohesive, and yet, she says, only the third of the four arguments “has a strictly logical air.” This, she writes, affirms that “any argument that professes to move from fact to value contains a concealed evaluative major premiss.” (VC, 92-93)

Now, methodologically, the exposure of concealed premises she considers to be an analytical tool that is extremely useful for the purposes of getting a better understanding of a moral view. As an

example of how this method can be applied she takes the not uncommon view that: “ ‘Statistics show that people constantly do this, so it must be all right.’ ” This is of course, in its even more basic form of ‘Well, everybody else does’, a form of moral justification that is frequently heard, usually of something that the person concerned is *not* really convinced is all right. As such it is a classic case of the kind of unreflective and opportunistic adjustment to conformity that is seen from Sartre’s moral position as *mauvaise foi*, or bad faith. The suppressed premise here is clearly that “ ‘What is customary is right’ ”. But from a logical perspective, she argues, the person making this case should realise, or be made to realise, “that ‘What is customary is right’ is a moral judgement freely endorsed by himself and not a definition of ‘right’.” As she says, in many cases, “the exposure of the premises destroys the appeal of the argument [...] and I would certainly want to endorse many arguments of [this] type [...] whose purpose is solely to achieve such an exposure.” (VC, 93-94)

Cora Diamond writes of this argument that here, in Murdoch, we can see:

a particular limited kind of agreement with the analytical philosophers of the 1950s and a more important disagreement. She and they can agree that an important kind of flaw in some arguments that proceed from fact to value is the suppression of premises. But, for the analytical philosophers, the need for a further premise is tied to the supposed existence of a logical gap between fact and value; for Murdoch, the need for the further premise and the point of exposing it are tied to a quite different conception of moral rationality, in which there is no logical gap between fact and value, but there is the possibility of a kind of failure in moral thinking, the criticism of which is not an abstract, logical matter. (WPM, 81)

For Murdoch therefore, the suppressing of premises is important precisely as a shadowy aspect of varying forms of moral reflection and behaviour, and this is something that requires investigation. The analytic philosopher may demonstrate that the argument is *illogical*, but is it not more important to note that it may be, as Diamond put it, “a kind of evasion, a kind of refusal to take responsibility.” Diamond sees a direct connection here between this argument and “Stanley Cavell’s discussions of moral rationality in Part III of *The Claim of Reason* (1979) For Cavell”, she writes “moral rationality centrally includes coming to understand what we are doing (or plan to do, or have done), what we are committing ourselves to, what responsibility we are taking.” (Ibid.) She further notes that these terms - evasion, responsibility - that she has used in describing Murdoch’s views “are terms of evaluation that are as much moral as cognitive”; in accordance, therefore with a central theme of Murdoch’s that “thinking is always an activity of ours as *moral* beings. This is the theme of the cognitive as always moral.” (Ibid, 82)

One consequence of this is that we require a considerable range of concepts, or “ramifications of more specialised concepts” as Murdoch puts it (VC, 92), in order to be able to express our moral views. What Bernard Williams famously calls “thick” moral concepts, like “evasiveness” and

“responsibility”, which tell us so much more in that they are both descriptive *and* evaluative than a simple commendatory “thin” concept such as “good”. If, as Murdoch says, we don’t see moral concepts as favourable (or unfavourable) judgements of neutral “facts”, but rather as expressions of a moral outlook or vision that requires concepts which, in context, are simultaneously descriptive and evaluative, then there can be no “*philosophical* error which consists in merging fact and value.”(VC, 95) The notion that this is a *philosophical* error, Murdoch argues, is tied to a particular *moral* attitude, which holds that “moral terms cannot be *defined* in non-moral terms because the agent *freely* selects the criteria.” (VC, 94). In other words, this notion defends a particular idea of freedom which requires the “facts” to be neutral and the language used to describe them to be publicly shared, whilst the language of moral judgements is a matter of private choice. Whereas, Murdoch writes,

if moral concepts are regarded as deep moral configurations of the world, rather than as lines drawn around separate factual areas, then there will be no facts ‘behind them’ for them to be erroneously defined in terms of. There is nothing sinister about this view; freedom here will consist, not in being able to lift the concept off the otherwise unaltered facts and lay it down elsewhere, but in being able to ‘deepen’ or ‘reorganise’ the concept or change it for another one. On such a view, it may be noted, moral freedom looks more like a mode of reflection which we may have to achieve, and less like a capacity to vary our choices which we have by definition. I hardly think this is a disadvantage. (VC, 95)

In an illuminating footnote to this passage Murdoch writes “In certain cases, whether we speak of deepening or of changing a concept will be a, not necessarily unimportant, question of words. When we deepen our concept of ‘love’ or ‘courage’ we may or may not want to retain the same word.” (VC, 95n). This gives an indication of the kind of exploration of ordinary uses of language, and the perplexity, and the seeking for accuracy that occur in everyday moral reflection, that she believes require detailed philosophical attention. In *The Sovereignty of the Good* she elaborates on this theme, whereby “deepening our notions of the virtues” occurs as a result of real attempts to understand what “the good” may mean in any given situation. In such a context, she writes, “Courage, which seemed at first to be something on its own, a sort of specialised daring of the spirit, is now seen to be a particular operation of wisdom and love. We come to distinguish a self-assertive ferocity from the kind of courage which would enable a man coolly to choose the labour camp rather than the easy compromise with the tyrant.” (SGOC, 378) Here she is employing, she requires, the kind of thick concepts Williams refers to. She also notes that not only do different individuals see fundamentally different moral pictures, but also the same individuals at different times; and that, in this particularly, the relation of words to concepts is complex: “Words may

mislead us [...] since words are often stable while concepts alter; we have a different image of courage at forty from that which we had at twenty.” (IP, 322).

Even from moment to moment however, another factor she saw as shaping “facts” for us is our state of mind. A line from Wittgenstein that she cited frequently was “The world of the happy is unlike the world of the unhappy.” (MGM, 35); and the type of elucidatory work she is suggesting here also recalls *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 174e, where Wittgenstein discusses experiences such as that of hope, or grief, noting that “the phenomena of hope are modes of this complicated [human] form of life”; and that grief “describes a pattern which recurs, with different variations, in the weave of our life.” As do the concepts with which we describe other patterns that are woven (into the texture) of our life. In *Vision and Choice in Morality* she asks “Why should philosophy be less various, where the differences in what it attempts to analyse are so important. Wittgenstein says that ‘What has to be accepted, the given, is – so one could say – forms of life.’ For purposes of analysis moral philosophy should remain at the level of the differences, taking the moral forms of life as given, and not try to get *behind them* to a single form.” (VC, 94).

3. Language and Experience

“Language” as Murdoch says, referring to what is known as the ‘linguistic turn’ in twentieth century philosophy, “is now a prime philosophical concept” (MGM, 153), both in analytic (including ‘ordinary language’) philosophy, predominantly Anglo-American, and differently in the European development of structuralism. Unlike, it would seem, many of her more insular Oxford contemporaries, Murdoch was aware of the importance of this other genealogical line in European thought, and of the need to understand its appeal and its widespread power of influence. Analytic studies made no particular distinction between the spoken and the written word, whereas she felt that contemporary realities required this.¹⁶⁶ Derrida’s “deconstruction”, which does make this distinction, was therefore of interest to her, and she takes it (though generally considered ‘post-structuralist’) as the major contemporary (1980s) representative of a more general structuralist trend which began early in the twentieth century in linguistics, with Saussure, and was then taken

¹⁶⁶ She writes: “Any dictator attempts to degrade the language because this is a way to mystify. And many of the quasi-automatic operations of capitalist industrial society tend also toward mystification and the blunting of verbal precision. [...] we have to realise that, in our world, the quality of words is the quality of printed words. Of course Plato is right that words are best understood, are most precise and profound, when used in particular face to face contexts. The printed word has inevitable ambiguities. [...] But since we do not live in a city-state we have to use print, and though this is a danger it can also be an inspiration and a challenge.” (SW, 241)

up in anthropology by Levi-Strauss and by Lacan in psychology. Lacan too later came to be regarded as a ‘post-structuralist’ (a very loosely knit category), as was Foucault, despite his dislike of any such collocation. The considerable complexity of the arguments within and around structuralism was not Murdoch’s, and is not our, concern here; what is essential to note however is that its multi-disciplinary authority came to constitute an inescapable reference point in the post-war France of Foucault, and though it was largely ignored in philosophy in Britain and America it was influential in other disciplines. The disinterest among philosophers was in general reciprocal, and the two lines therefore developed separately. In fact, Murdoch observes, certain structuralist insights, hailed as original, were already to be found in Wittgenstein. She notes that “Lacan produced as novel, in 1956, ideas (for instance about ‘inner processes’, and words not being names) which were current in Cambridge before the 1939 war.” And comments: “In general, for those trained in the analytical philosophical tradition, structuralist writings seem singularly lacking in detailed philosophical reflection.” (MGM, 49)

Murdoch appreciated the work of Saussure, the linguist, who did not, she says, whilst elaborating a groundbreaking instrument of analysis, create a metaphysic, something she thought that Derrida did set out to do. She writes: “Saussure separated language conceived as a general system from its particular local use by individuals. He retained however the idea (which belongs with ‘presence’¹⁶⁷, consciousness, experience) that speech, not writing, was the basis of language and meaning. [...] Derrida reverses this. What is primary is writing [*archi-écriture*], thought of in a (metaphysical) sense as a vast system or sign structure whereby meaning is determined by a mutual relationship of signs which transcends the localised talk of individual speakers.” (MGM, 188) It can be argued of course that Derrida’s “reversal” of the primacy of speech over writing was more part of a strategy of provocation, designed to unseat old certainties, than an attempt to substitute these with new ones. His concept of *Archi-écriture* contested the deep-rooted idea, first expounded in Plato’s *Phaedrus*, that speech guaranteed an immediacy of communication, direct from the soul, as it were, of which writing was a (poor) copy. Instead, if all language comes from ‘outside’, from the web of signs, then speech and writing are at the same distance from a real or imagined originating consciousness, and speech can equally well be ‘read’ as a form of writing. Hence, he may have agreed with Murdoch that the notion of a sign-structure, though methodologically useful in debunking *other* illusions, constituted a danger in itself of creating a new metaphysic. This being said, it remains true that for Derrida “primal writing”, *archi-écriture*,

¹⁶⁷ ‘Presence’ is in inverted commas here in reference to Derrida’s attack on “what he calls Heidegger’s ‘metaphysics of presence’, the use of concepts of present being, consciousness, experience”. (MGM, 187)

weaves the web of signs – the structure – in that speech, as Murdoch points out, has for him the disorderliness of being “uttered in present moments by individual local historical incarnate speakers.” (MGM, 201)

Derrida’s deconstructive attack on moral concepts that he sees as hopelessly drenched in metaphysics was indeed fierce. Murdoch translates from his *De la Grammatologie* (1967, p.89, cited MGM, 191) a long passage which begins: “As for the concept of experience, it is certainly an embarrassment here. Like all ideas we are dealing with, it belongs to the history of metaphysics and we can only make use of it under erasure [*Sous rature*]. ‘*Experience*’ has always indicated a relationship to something present, whether or not this relation takes the form of consciousness.” Derrida’s *bêtes noires* – experience, presence, consciousness – are precisely those concepts that Murdoch sees as necessary *regulative* ideas of moral reflection, that is to say, concepts of which it makes *no sense* to ask if they are true *or* false. Derrida, on the other hand, says that deconstruction requires “the putting into brackets of regions of experience, or of the totality of natural experience, [and this] must uncover a transcendental field of experience.” (Ibid.) Language, with its vast field of overlapping differentiations and deferrals, speaks us. Murdoch does not dispute that language is “of course a huge transcendent structure, stretching away out of our sight” (MGM, 188), but she is wary of a mode of philosophical expression which “involves a *deconstruction* of experience so radical that the concept can only be used *sous rature*, under erasure. This ‘embarrassing’ device, of using a crossed-out word, is intended to alert us to an unusual, stripped, deconstructed sense of a concept which no better words can at present be found to exhibit. It is a term of art designed to be stronger and more specialised than what is often achieved by putting a word in inverted commas.” (MGM, 192)

She sees this as a clever form of trickery in which the bracketing of actual experience will reveal the ‘transcendental field’ that is “the great sea of language itself”. She writes: “On this view, almost all language-use is an unconscious subjection to system”. (MGM, 193) What she does appreciate in Derrida’s system is the recognition of the vastness and endless possibilities of language, but this seems to her to be accessible only if we can free ourselves of the old constraints on meaning that deconstruction entails. Then we can fully open to contingency, “conceptualising what confronts us, ‘making’ it into meaning.”(Ibid., 196) For Murdoch this potential for creativity in the notion of language as “play” may seem attractive as “a philosophy for our age”, and “may be welcomed by clever people who are, perhaps understandably as they survey the present world, fed up with ‘all the old solutions’” (Ibid., 197) The *moral* problem with this view, as she sees it, is

that it seems that only “in the activity of some minds” (Ibid. 193) can language be seen to emerge as conscious play. The insidiousness of a certain implicit romanticism of the (superior) intellect, sadly common in philosophy, was always something that disturbed Murdoch.

As to Wittgenstein, he suffered no such illusion. Hacking remarks that “he detested philosophers who feel good being quick, clever and flashy”¹⁶⁸. Considered a major catalyst of the *linguistic turn*, “under whose shadow” Murdoch says, she “grew up as a student” (SW, 244), what brought him to the study of language was the conviction that the primary philosophical task – to bring clarity to confused thinking, both ordinary and philosophical – had to do with words. He notes (in 1931) that: “People say again and again that philosophy doesn’t really progress, that we are still occupied with the same philosophical problems as were the Greeks. But the people who say this don’t understand why it has to be so. It is because our language has remained the same and keeps seducing us into asking the same questions.” (CV 15e) His own analyses of the *logic* of language however, which manifests in this structural and lexical “sameness”, also revealed its irrepressible differences. In 1937 he writes: “[T]hat is the difficulty Socrates keeps getting into in trying to give the definition of a concept. Again and again the use of a word emerges that seems not to be compatible with the concepts that other uses have led us to form.” (CV 30e) As we have seen, it was this “slipperiness” of language, as she calls it, that interested Murdoch, and therefore Wittgenstein’s later explorations of concepts in relation to the “forms of life” in which *particular* uses arise. Conversely however, where Wittgenstein was initially concerned to clear up the *logical* problems generated by the “sameness” and “seduction” of language across centuries, she wished to explore the *ethical* aspects of that sameness, of why it is that “We today have no great or essential difficulty in understanding plays written by the Greeks in the fifth century BC.” (E&M, 229)

Crucial in ethical thinking, for both Wittgenstein and Murdoch, is a quest for ‘sense’ or purpose, which makes itself manifest in our language, an attempt to discover in (or impose on) the world a system of meanings, which attributes value to human life. Clearly religion is one form this quest takes, but it has also been the endeavour of science, and lies at the roots (if not along all branches) of philosophy. The linguistic turn in philosophy in itself represents a *new* system of meaning, an epistemic change, and Wittgenstein’s description in *Culture and Value* of the great *difficulty*

¹⁶⁸ Hacking, I., *Historical Ontology*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002, p. 224

experienced in attempting to see something *differently* throws light on the power of a system of thought to hold us in:

Getting hold of the difficulty *deep down* is what is hard.

Because if it is grasped near the surface it simply remains the difficulty it was. It has to be pulled out by the roots: and that involves our beginning to think about these things in a new way. The change is as decisive as, for example, that from the alchemical to the chemical way of thinking. The new way of thinking is what is so hard to establish.

Once the new way of thinking has been established, the old problems vanish; indeed they become hard to recapture. For they go with our way of expressing ourselves and, if we clothe ourselves in a new form of expression, the old problems are discarded along with the old garment. (1946) (CV 48e)

The more discursive mode of expression employed here also sheds light on what Wittgenstein meant, more cryptically, by “the vanishing of the problem” in the famous citation from the *Tractatus* (6.521) cited by Murdoch and reproduced below. In the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein describes this reading the world through a *particular* system of meanings as seeing it *as if* from a point of view that is in fact inaccessible to us – the point of view of eternity: “To view the world *sub specie aeterni* is to view it as a whole – a limited whole” (*Tractatus*, 6.45) This concept, epistemological in its original use here, was important for Murdoch; but she also made use of it with reference to *ethical* systems, in the context of the way of seeing, of the vision, which infuses our world and our words with *value*; and as such it became one of the key operational concepts in her work. For her all metaphysical systems were “limited wholes” whose “unsayable” assertions were indeed neither verifiable or falsifiable. But she believed that in the cases of some of the most interesting metaphysical systems a literal interpretation was never the *intention* of the author; and even if it had been, the ethical implications in the texts would now still need to be read as metaphor. She writes: “The element of metaphor is unavoidable in philosophy, especially in moral philosophy; [...] Some theories of will, for instance, may avoid speaking of leaps, but constantly use metaphors of movement.” (MGM, 177) Wittgenstein himself, in *The Conference on Ethics*, says that the language of ethics and religion is full of similes, allegories etc., and necessarily so, but he did not further explore this. For Murdoch, on the other hand, this whole important area of language was one that was neglected in philosophy generally, and consequently misunderstood; that is, the function of metaphor in our thinking, particularly in moral thinking, has remained largely unexplored, and our thinking about our thinking is therefore skewed. She felt that Plato, for example, had had the misfortune to have been taken too literally, by both supporters and opponents. She writes: “Failure to understand how thought constantly *works* in moral living supports a popular misrepresentation of Plato as an ‘*intellectualist*’ philosopher who (in the

ordinary sense) puts the highest value on intellectual skill, and (in the metaphysical sense) thought that nothing was real except objectified abstract ideas lodged somewhere in heaven.” (MGM, 177) Conversely, she herself believed that “The Platonic myths are an explicit resort to metaphor as a mode of explanation” (Ibid). And this she explored in detail in, especially, *The Sovereignty of Good*. Against Wittgenstein, therefore, she saw the investigation of ethics as still a primarily *philosophical* question. She quotes Wittgenstein’s famous denial of this – a kind of early position statement – from the *Tractatus* (6.522, 6.53), where he says:

“The solution of the problem of life is seen in the vanishing of the problem ... There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They *make themselves manifest*.” [...6.521, 6.522]
 “The correct method in philosophy would really be the following: to say nothing except what can be said i.e. propositions of natural science - i.e. something that has nothing to do with philosophy – and then, whenever someone else wanted to say something metaphysical, to demonstrate to him that he had failed to give a meaning to certain signs in his propositions.” [6.53](cited MGM, p.30)

The *Tractatus* sets out to establish this ‘correct’ method, this way out of philosophical confusion that involves a clear separation of what is logical from what is metaphysical or psychological. Nonetheless, Wittgenstein had a clear understanding of the particular *experience* of that conflicting *philosophical* desire precisely to do the impossible: to reject, to go beyond, the very same sober self-limitation in the use of language he is here proposing; the desire which constantly threatens this rigorous separation. To draw attention to Wittgenstein’s sense of this paradox running through the activity of philosophy Murdoch juxtaposes these didactic statements from the *Tractatus* with the following more reflexive citation from his conversations with Friedrich Weissman, *Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle* (p.68).

Man feels the urge to run up against the limits of language. Think for example of the astonishment that anything at all exists. This astonishment cannot be expressed in the form of a question, and there is also no answer whatsoever. Anything we might say is *a priori* bound to be mere nonsense. Nevertheless we do run up against the limits of language. Kierkegaard too saw that there is this running up against something and he referred to it in a fairly similar way (as running up against paradox). This running up against the limits of language is *ethics*. I think it is definitely important to put an end to all this claptrap about ethics – whether intuitive knowledge exists, whether values exist, whether the good is definable. In ethics we are always making the attempt to say something which cannot be said, something that does not and will not touch the essence of the matter. ... But the inclination, the running up against something, *indicates something*. (MGM 29)

For Wittgenstein the *something* that is indicated – ethics – is what is most important (the unwritten part of the *Tractatus*)¹⁶⁹, and the paradox we live with is that of this we cannot speak. But what he

¹⁶⁹ Murdoch also cites the letter to Ficker of 1919, where he says “The book’s point is an ethical one. ... My work consists of two parts: the one presented here plus all that I have not written. And it is precisely this second part [the ethical] that is the important one.” Quoted in MGM, pp.28-29.

really appears to be demonstrating in the *Tractatus* is that we cannot speak of ethics epistemologically: “whether intuitive knowledge exists”, or ontologically: “whether values exist, whether the good is definable”, or metaphysically: why “anything at all exists”. Nothing in his work suggests, however, that we cannot speak of ethics *ethically* (though for him this means *outside* philosophy), that is to say, within a language-game regarding the concepts by which we live our lives, or regarding the forms of life in which we formulate our concepts. In placing all talk of ethics outside of philosophy (in literature, for example, and elsewhere) Wittgenstein’s own usage of the concept of “philosophy” here is itself in alignment with the current (then and now) view of it as primarily an epistemological discipline, a view to which he contributed with the *Tractatus*, both through what he said there, and through what his silences said. From this it is evident that the disagreement between Wittgenstein and Murdoch is not so much about the contents of their theories as about whether “philosophy” is primarily a logical or an ethical discipline. In his later work however, Wittgenstein too acknowledges, and is more concerned with, the way experiences, thoughts, life can *force* (ethical, nonsensical) concepts on us. (see esp. CV 86e).

Murdoch notes that it has “been properly pointed out by both Saussure and Wittgenstein that language develops and depends upon internally related groups of concepts, wherein sense is *modified* in relation to the group”. Given their disciplinary preoccupations however, Saussure the linguist’s concern was with the former – the internal relations between groups of concepts, whereas Wittgenstein’s primary concern was with the latter – with how *sense* is achieved or fails to be achieved, and with how it is modified. This perspective includes an analysis of the internal relations of *specific* languages, rather than language in general, as inseparable from the production of sense. Conversely, Saussure excluded mental *contents* from his analysis, but this exclusion was a technical one, in order to allow access to those formal structures of language that were universal, thus ahistorical, acultural and impersonal. For Saussure however, as has been said, this entailed no metaphysical conclusions about the primacy of language itself in shaping our thought and being.

Murdoch notes that the “second sentence of the *Tractatus*, ‘The world is the totality of facts, not of things’, resembles a structuralist insight”: what counts as a fact is established by human beings, through meaningful webs of signs, mostly linguistic, things (in themselves, as it were – it also evidently *resembles* a Kantian insight) not being directly inaccessible. The statement is clearly metaphysical, and therefore for Wittgenstein serves to establish or clarify a way of *picturing* reality, and not of determining how reality *is*; but – she goes on – “Structuralism however makes a

further metaphysical move from which Wittgenstein wisely abstained. If we cannot see, or say, how language is able to refer to the world [...] then it seems a simple philosophical feat ... to remove the world.” (MGM, 48). Her greater sympathy with Wittgenstein in this reflects her suspicion of foundational stances disguised as ‘methods’, something she shares with Foucault, who acknowledged having to battle with himself with regard to this temptation. She reads the structuralists (post-structuralists, deconstructionists) as offering “a metaphysic which offers a new model of language as a structure of reality” (MGM, 5), such that “[r]eality, it is argued, lies in the linguistic medium itself, in the various (including scientific) languages of the planet...”(MGM, 6), Foucault, as we have seen, attempted to explore these regions of language, especially disciplinary languages, as *active* structures of reality, whilst wishing to avoid falling into the trap of drawing metaphysical conclusions about them from the results of his analyses.

Murdoch saw this unidirectional perspective – from language to thought – as an unhelpful constriction of the space of thought. In her own work on language she points out that thought is not simply “the uttering of mental words. [...] Words do not occur as the content of thought as if they were cast upon a screen and there read off by the thinker.” (TL 33-34) And just as “uttered speech often demands an awareness of gesture, tone, and so on, as well as of context, for its full understanding”, so too “for inward speech. The thought is not the words (if any) but the words occurring in a certain way with, as it were, a certain force and colour.”(TL, 34) She acknowledges the usefulness of that common picture of the mind which distinguishes “at two extremes the vague floating images which are pliant and indescribable [...] and the fully verbalised thought, ready for exposure to someone else, the formulation of which was perhaps a development of some vaguer reflection”, but she lays emphasis on this important and oft-neglected space of “vaguer reflection” “where words occur but in a more indeterminate imaging manner [...] and not at all like a rehearsed inner speech.” Clearly “the former are the most private, the latter the most public, i.e. readily exposable, parts of any inner monologue” (TL, 34). She agreed with all those she is arguing with here – structuralists, logical behaviourists, verificationists – on the importance of considering the public symbols which constitute our ordinary language, noting in particular “the crystallising role which the occurrence of words, and the determining role which the availability of names, may play in thought.” (Ibid). What she objected to however was the reduction of thinking to language, and of language to “a set of grooves into which we slip”. She annotates this according to analytic method thus:

Language cannot be considered as saying itself; it is not ‘p’ that says p, but I who say ‘p’ meaning p. Language is a set of occurrences. (TL, 35)

She does not see this 'I' as some kind of substantive subject that is separate from language but it does not follow from this that there is any reason to denounce "the *inner*" as illusion, "as *nothing*, or at best shadowy and nameless." At the same time, though language and thought for her are *not* co-extensive, she nonetheless felt it equally important *not* to take this fact to the opposing metaphysical conclusion that " 'consciousness is the gaps in language'." (TL, 35). Instead, she says that what is required and should be attempted is a new description: "Not all our new concepts come to us in the context of language; but the attempt to verbalise them may result not in frustration but in the renewal of language. This is *par excellence* the task of poetry. So there is give and take; words may determine a sense, or a fresh experience may renew words. (I am not distinguishing here between words which I originate, and the words of another which I think through and make my own)". (TL, 36) It is precisely in the context of this dynamic circularity of language and experience that "we need and use the idea that thoughts are particular inner experiences." (TL, 38). And she notes that this idea, and the need of it, are directly "observable", as an idea that is connected to the notion we have of ourselves as unique and private beings, as "personalities".

Ch.2 Moral Being

1. Philosophical pictures of the self

In her essay “Consciousness and Thought”, Murdoch asks:

How do the concepts ‘self’, ‘experience’, ‘consciousness’ relate? [...] Philosophically, should ‘self’ be taken as an initial problem, or simply assumed or postulated as a carrier of experience or consciousness, or should we take something else, society or language or genes, as fundamental? Is the self part of the world, or should it be seen as constructing the world. (MGM, 147-48)

The concept of “self” which was of primary interest to her was that of “moral being”, referring to the moral individual engaged in an inner dialogue which both starts from experience and shapes experience, through consciousness. In her work, these concepts, construed empirically, can always be taken to be evocative of each other and they will here be treated as such. As we will see, on her view, “consciousness or self-being” (MGM, 147) refers to our everyday awareness of our experience as well as to the metaphorical locus of our reflections. As such, and though indefinable (but variously describable), it is the filter through which we experience and act in the world; there is no ‘pure’ perception, uncoloured by our consciousness. For her, the ‘self’, indefinable, is part of the world *and* constructs its world, (and *the* world). There is therefore no clear foundation – as sought for in the questions posed above – that could be established in this circularity of what is. Her own use of the term ‘self’ (which is relatively rare, to avoid misinterpretation) never signifies a substantive “self”, except where she is using it to refer to someone else’s concept. These, what she describes as philosophical pictures of the self, she was very interested in; a category which included for her what contemporary philosophy made of the moral individual in the *absence* of a concept of a substantive self.

She frequently uses the metaphors of “picture” and “picturing”, originally taken from the *Tractatus* (2.1 and following) where they refer to the logical correspondences between words and the ‘facts’ they “picture”, and the way these are woven together into bigger logical pictures. Murdoch uses the metaphors to refer mostly to these bigger logical pictures and their various imaginative accoutrements (she tends to use ‘picture’ and ‘vision’ interchangeably, according to the aspect under consideration). With regard to explicitly metaphysical pictures of the self she did not see the fact that a philosophical argument presented such a picture as an obstacle to exploring what that argument had to say about ethics, about how we live our lives; and she certainly felt that

philosophers who rejected whole bodies of philosophy *in toto*, as “metaphysical”, therefore nonsense, because they held such conceptions, were wasting important opportunities for expanding and enriching their own thinking.

Each of the questions she raises in the citation above were the focus of differing foundational positions adopted by one or another strand of modern philosophy, from which, in her reconstruction of the uses of these concepts, she draws out sometimes surprisingly interlocking themes, starting, inevitably, with Descartes. Of Descartes she writes that he “pictures a solitary mind having certain knowledge only of its immediate apprehensions, from which (helped by a belief in God) it is able to find itself in a world grasped as ‘external’ and real” (MGM, 148). With regard to this picture she says she welcomes modern philosophy’s response to the old question facing this solitary mind, this “self”, (or “soul”), the question: “How do I reach the world?”; and she caricatures the various answers as coming together in the idea: “You are in the world, it is your world”, commenting: “For this relief much thanks.”! (MGM, 147). Despite this relief, she was also concerned that “in removing old Cartesian errors, [... these philosophical arguments] may indeed seem to render problematic the common-sense conception of the individual self as a moral centre or substance.” (MGM, 153). She observes that Hume – the first to seriously challenge Descartes’ notion of the interaction of “mind” and material world (and its conception of the human body responding in some unknown way to the commands of the spirit) – in putting forward his own ontological picture of a non-substantive (and biological) self as a sensory (and motor) apparatus giving rise to a bundle of perceptions, nonetheless retained this sense of the individual as “a moral centre or substance”. Murdoch points out that, however discontinuous, this “bundle” was for Hume “endowed with innate awareness of association and order”. In *this* way at least, and in despite of his radical rejection of the notion of the self as “soul”, Hume’s “self”, she writes, was actually rather “like that of Descartes”. (Ibid.) What she is doing here is challenging the stereotyped assumptions about those matters which constitute the important philosophical differences between the founding fathers of modern philosophy, in order to get at the ways the conceptual lines of descent from them have crossed and recrossed. Similarly therefore, in commenting on the heritage Descartes may well *not* have wanted to leave behind, she notes that “Cartesians seem on the whole to have taken the attractive clarity of the certain starting point as founding an empiricism more friendly to science than to ethics or religion.” (MGM, 149)

Continuing to dig beneath the surface of these established notions of the mind – roughly sketched as either the Cartesian reason-producing-experience or as the Humean experience-producing-reason – she cites Hume’s famous broadside against Descartes’ rational soul, to the effect that reason “ ‘is and ought to be the slave of the passions’ [...] (*Treatise of Human Nature* II iii 5 and III i I)”. But she does so in order to point out that “[t]his ‘slave’ is nonetheless to be seen more as a friendly adviser, an old family solicitor as someone has suggested” (Ibid.); in other words as an eminently *reasonable*, however passionate, man. Ironically therefore, the philosopher renowned for his scepticism about the very existence of a “self” paints a picture, in opposition to Descartes’ substantive but *divided* self, of an *integrated* individual for whom “similar habits and movements of imagination set in order both the factual and the moral.” (Ibid). As ever, she picks up on the way in which the philosophers’ *aesthetic* use of language colours (and therefore modifies) the starker declared picture, as of course does historical reconstruction.

Though Murdoch reads Hume viably in this way, in the interceding centuries it is Hume’s sceptical negation of the substantive self, rather than his regard for the reality of the moral self, that has dominated Humean studies, and much of empiricist philosophy. In other words, Hume’s epistemological picture dominates and conditions subsequent reconstructions of his ethical picture, and that of his philosophical descent line. Murdoch writes: “It is from him more than anyone else that we have derived a philosophical tendency, which is still with us, to see the world in terms of contingently conjoined simples, to see it as a totality of ultimately simple facts which have no necessary connection with each other. In so far as we imagine that the world does contain necessities, and that real connections exist between these simple elements, this is merely the result of habit and custom, which are themselves the work of Nature. [...] It is habit which gives us, according to Hume, both our objective material world, and our moral world.” (ME, 68-69).

Murdoch cites the key passage in Hume’s *A Treatise of Human Nature* in which he paints one of philosophy’s most extraordinary and compelling pictures of the self, construed as the bodily situated mind:

For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call *myself*, I always stumble upon some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never catch myself at any time without a perception, and can never observe anything but the perception ... [Someone else] may perceive something simple and continued which he calls *himself*; though I am certain there is no such principle in me. But setting aside some metaphysician of this kind, I may venture to affirm of the rest of mankind that they are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual state of flux and movement. (Book I, Part IV, section 6, quoted MGM, 287)

Hume's description is empirical, but his own speculation thereon does not contain a reflection on whatever it is that is doing the perceiving, this witness with whose voice he speaks, and which he accuses the "metaphysician" of claiming to *perceive*; whereas for Descartes, whose view he is addressing, it is the fact that something which is precisely *not* perceivable, but nonetheless in some sense present in his cogitating, that allowed him to conclude *ergo sum*. Descartes' empirical observations thus led to the metaphysical conclusion that there is this conscious subject, and Hume's empirical observations led to the opposite, but for Murdoch equally metaphysical, conclusion that there is no such thing. What Murdoch found particularly useful in Hume's picture, shared, she says, by some contemporary empiricists and existentialists, was its attempt, while demystifying consciousness, to capture certain of its qualities: "the elusive, fragmentary or messy nature of the so-called stream." (MGM, 251) Though when he moved from informative description to ontological conclusion she refers to this unflatteringly as "Hume's ramshackle and unsatisfactory idea of consciousness as a continuum of units, fused by association and habit and containing certain morally tinged items such as feelings of approval". (MGM, 221)

The third of the great founding fathers of modern philosophy she discusses in this regard, and the one whose portrait of "rational man" she found to be the backbone of most subsequent pictures of the self in modern philosophy (in guises he could not have imagined), was Kant. She writes:

Kant's conclusive exposure of the so-called proofs of the existence of God, his analysis of the limitations of speculative reason, together with his eloquent portrayal of the dignity of rational man, has had results which might possibly dismay him. How recognisable, how familiar to us, is the man so beautifully portrayed in the *Grundelgung*, who confronted even with Christ turns away to consider the judgement of his own conscience and to hear the voice of his own reason. Stripped of the exiguous metaphysical background which Kant was prepared to allow him, this man is with us still, free, independent, lonely, powerful, responsible, brave, the hero of so many novels and books of moral philosophy. (SGOC, 365)

Among the results which may have dismayed him Murdoch is thinking of Anglo-American moral philosophies and of continental existentialism. Despite great differences in the ways in which the individual freedom described here is thought to be experienced in these traditions, and is therefore normatively articulated (as, for example, responsible common sense, or as an anguished commitment to authenticity), she maintains that these different forms of post-Kantian philosophy both have at their core "the notion of the will as the creator of value. Values which were previously in some sense inscribed in the heavens and guaranteed by God collapse into the human will" (Ibid., 366). For Kant of course, listening to the voice of one's *own* reason was not in itself morally problematic in that in his conceptual system this was necessarily guided by "Reason"

(what Murdoch calls one of the “metaphysical substitutes for God” (Ibid., 365); but this is a saving grace which is no longer available to modern moral philosophy and its loss has occasioned very different forms of problematisation of freedom, though for Murdoch, the grounding of all these developments remains this Kantian conception of “rational man”. Thus, in the wake of Kant, the heroes of post-Kantian literature have qualities, and anguishes, which are characterised by *this* autonomy.¹⁷⁰

Conversely however, what remained as morally problematic for Kant was, shall we say, the older voice of unreason, of the sensual, empirical “lower” part of a self that was for him, as Foucault too points out, radically divided. Not only does Kant posit a radical and antagonistic separation of the material being from the super-sensible ‘self’ of reason (what Foucault calls Kant’s empirico-transcendental doublet) (OT, 329), but also a further separation that is *internal* to reason itself: “Kant’s man as knower of the phenomenal world (exercising theoretical reason) is to be distinguished from his man as moral agent (exercising practical reason).” Again the intentions of the founding father – for Kant, she says, this separation served to “elevate and purify moral philosophising” and therefore ultimately to *re-forg*e the links between theoretical and practical reason – were not always reflected in the historical development from his philosophy. And once again as Foucault has pointed out, this separation of the spheres of reason further fuelled the trend towards the predominance of epistemology in philosophy, and to some extent to the requalification of moral philosophy, eventually to the point where, Murdoch writes, ethics could “be considered as a ‘special subject’ wherein the philosopher worked as a neutral technician”. (MGM, 150)

Converging in this direction, Murdoch notes that, once the Cartesian picture of the solitary knower in the “private theatre” of the mind, had been generally abandoned in philosophy, there was a further tendency to assume “that all private, inner reflection was in some sense incoherent, inaccessible and vague. [And that with this ...] ‘self’ theories, whether psychological or metaphysical, were to be ‘eliminated’.” (MGM, 150)¹⁷¹ As noted, in distancing herself from this attitude however, Murdoch did not wish to defend any metaphysical conception of either self or non-self. On the contrary, she writes: “the choice must be rejected between logical behaviourism and the private theatre. An ontological approach, which seeks for an identifiable inner stuff *and*

¹⁷⁰ By contrast, Hamlet’s moral dilemma, for example, had to do with a “free will” conceived in relation to “God’s will”. Steiner wonders if it may be Shakespeare’s playing with theological evil which so disturbs Murdoch “in Hamlet’s decision not to dispatch Claudius when at prayer”. (E&M xvi).

¹⁷¹ MGM, p. 150. She notes that more recently (in the latter half of the twentieth century) some forms of Aristotelian moral philosophy “have given much needed attention to the inner life”. Among these she mentions Philippa Foot *Virtues and Vices*, and Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*.

either asserts or denies its existence must be avoided.” (TL, 38, my emphasis) Here she is contesting the illusion (which she attributes to logical behaviourists) that to categorically deny the existence of such “inner stuff” is somehow a less metaphysical stance (whatever its ‘anti-metaphysical’ atmosphere) than that of philosophers who uphold the notion of a metaphysical subject. For her the *idea* of the self, as the (metaphorical) locus of our thinking and feeling and hence of our moral being, was not one that could be dismissed as philosophically irrelevant simply on grounds of its non-verifiable status. “What is observable” she writes, “is that we need and use the idea that thoughts are particular inner experiences. This is an idea which connects up with our notion of the privacy and unity of our ‘selves’ or ‘personalities’.” Murdoch suggests that a possible description of an idea having these apparently contradictory characteristics – as both “needed” and non-verifiable – might be as “an important and necessary ‘illusion of immanence’; only” she says “to call it an ‘illusion’ risks giving the description an ontological flavour.” In view of this risk, she clarifies further in this way:

It is rather a necessary regulative idea, about which it makes no sense to ask, is it true or is it false that it is so? It is *as if* for us our thoughts were inner events, and it is *as if* these events were describable either as verbal units or in metaphorical, analogical terms. We constantly recover and fix our mental past by means of a descriptive technique, a sort of story-telling, whose justification is its success. We know too of ways in which to adjust and check, in ourselves and others, the accuracy of this technique. And if a philosophical precedent be needed for this important *as if*, we have only to look to Kant’s use of the regulative idea of freedom, which seems to me essentially similar and equally empirical. (TL, 39, emphasis in original).

In this important passage Murdoch does many things. She introduces the important concept of inner narrative and its *active* relation to public use of language. She elaborates theoretical criteria which allow the metaphysical debate about the *existence* of ‘inner events’ and of a self to be put aside, so that discussion of the relation of thought and experience may proceed without being deviated along ontological paths. And in order to do this she takes up (from another context) Kant’s notion of the regulative idea – an idea that is necessary to our lives as human beings even though it cannot be proved true or false – and applies it to the present discussion. This is important methodologically, but also substantially in that for Kant it is the regulative idea of *freedom* that allows (obliges) us to assume moral responsibility, and for Murdoch the regulative idea of the *self* (as locus of inner events) grounds our intuitive sense of ourselves as moral beings. She is also keen to note that there are good empirical grounds for this supposition, and – perhaps as an aside addressed to those suspicious of any notion originating in Kant – that he too had his empirical reasons. On her view however, something like the *regulative* idea of the self had already been provided by none other than Hume. She notes that “Hume (as philosopher) held that the self was a

sort of ‘illusion’, just as the material object was an ‘illusion’; that is, it was, both as empirical knower and as moral agent, a lot of fragmentary experiences held together by strong habits of imagination.” (MGM, 164) Nonetheless, Hume distinguished among the illusions we live by those that were in some way necessary to our capacity to live in the world, and among others, she writes: “Hume’s ‘self’ and ‘object’ illusions may be thought of as natural necessities, necessary though perhaps scarcely justifiable ideas.” In support of this view she quotes the following section from Hume’s *Treatise*:

‘I must distinguish in the imagination betwixt the principles which are permanent, irresistible and universal, such as the customary transition from cause to effect and from effects to causes; and the principles which are changeable weak and irregular. The former are the foundation of all our thoughts and actions, so that upon their removal human nature must immediately perish and go to ruin.’ (*Treatise of Human Nature* I iv 4.)

Along with causality, Hume included the existence of persons and objects among “the foundations of our thoughts and actions”, and Murdoch comments on this, “We *must* believe in causality, in persons and objects and in the substantial continuity of our own being. What would it be not to?” (MGM, 164) This question (rhetorical or not) poses both epistemological and ethical problems. Her answer to the former is given above, in her evident agreement here with Hume’s conclusions on the matter. With particular regard to our belief in persons, she takes this notion of our necessary belief in their existence to *include* their having an inner life: “We constantly reflect upon the inner life of others, we are *driven* to do this. The concept is forced upon us.” (Ibid., 294) The latter idea expresses – as do Kant’s regulative idea and Hume’s “permanent, irresistible and universal principles of the imagination” – the way in which certain concepts appear to be an essential part of what it is to live as human beings. This notion she took from Wittgenstein [“A *concept* forces itself on one. (This is what you must not forget.) *Investigations*, 204e], who uses it here in a different context in his discussion of how our concepts are wrought into our visual experience. (And, she points out, in *Culture and Value*, in connection with the idea of God.) She was particularly struck by this discussion: “Does perception include interpretation? (Pure perception, pure cognition?) ‘Was it seeing or was it a thought? [again citing *Investigations* 204e]’ ” (MGM, 277). What and how we see, the quality of our attention, our looking, the metaphors of moral seeing, were central to Murdoch’s own moral *vision*, and Wittgenstein’s reflections here had for her immediate ethical significance: “our perceptions, which so largely constitute our experienced-being, are intensely individual and polymorphous. Seeing, thinking and interpreting are mixed. And, for instance, instinctive value judgements and intuitions are involved.” (MGM, 278)

Conversely however, whilst reworking this notion for her own purposes, she felt that in his case, “Wittgenstein’s urgency, his anxiety as he poses these questions is related to his wish to keep the ‘individual’ and ‘value’ out of the picture. (This would continue the metaphysic of the *Tractatus*)”. Though he himself explicitly recognised the presence of this metaphysic in the *Tractatus* and rejected it, therein and later in the *Investigations*, she felt that it tended to resurface even in his later work. Murdoch repeatedly remarks on the debt philosophy owes to Wittgenstein for his attack on the notion of private language and “on the otiose dualism, for instance, the ‘inner process’ which is supposed to articulate and present the *finished outer speech*”, but she felt that this clear and useful argument opened up philosophical space (exploited by others) for a more general and blurred dismissal of everything that has to do with the “idea of ‘processes’ as stream of consciousness, inner reflection, imagery, in fact our *experience* as inner (unspoken, undemonstrated) being. It is this huge confused area which is being threatened, even removed.” (MGM, 273)

This is not a view that is shared by all scholars of Wittgenstein (though it was held by the logical positivists she claims misunderstood him). She herself also said that Wittgenstein’s intention was to protect this vital, ethical area of life, through his silence, his refusal to paint a philosophical picture of the self. However, such a picture of what she calls our “experience as inner being” at least as the locus of learning, using, misusing and recreating language, and of learning and re-elaborating a human form of life, is something which can be said to emerge through certain other readings of Wittgenstein, particularly that of Cavell (see below). The ‘outer’ has for Wittgenstein to do with language, with language-games and with *Lebensformen* (forms of life), concepts Murdoch feels are “rather rigid, and indeed not clearly explained” (Ibid.); and yet, she says, the forms of life “are finally referred to as to be accepted as the given [*Investigations*, II, p. 226]” (MGM, 276) She questioned what Wittgenstein meant at *Investigations* 241: “It is what human beings say that is true and false; and they agree in the language they use. That is not agreement in opinions but in forms of life.”; caricaturing this as the setting up of an essentially rule-bound and constraining “machinery” of language, for which “the imagined ‘assent’ of postulated ‘groups’” establishes “correctness and intelligibility” (MGM 281). She argued that this picture doesn’t sufficiently take into account that “Truth and falsehood are in perpetual engagement with meaning. Meaning is slippery and free, language is a huge place” (Ibid., 281)

Murdoch does not seem to have been aware of Cavell's early work on Wittgenstein¹⁷², in which he points out that the "language game", with its discernable rules, was not at all the "rigid" structure she complains of here, but rather a carefully fashioned metaphorical device. Cavell writes: "Wittgenstein invokes and invents games not as contexts in which it is just clear what 'observing rules' amounts to, but contexts in which the phenomenon can be *investigated*." (MMWS 49) For Cavell the "game" is an analogy which throws light precisely on the fact that no game could ever be "everywhere circumscribed by rules" (PI, 68), and this fact in itself "tells us something about 'what being governed by rules' is like" (MMWS, 49). And what it is like turns out to be a lot less rigid, and more variable, than is suggested by the rules, which nonetheless give the game its form. Cavell is here elucidating Wittgenstein's (more cryptic) method of elucidating. He goes on:

'Following a rule' is an activity we learn against the background of, and in the course of, learning innumerable other activities – for example obeying orders, taking and giving directions, repeating what is done or said, and so forth. The concept of a rule does not exhaust the concepts of correctness or justification ('right' and 'wrong') and indeed the former concept would have no meaning unless these latter concepts already had. Like any of the activities to which it is related, a rule can always be misinterpreted in the course of 'following' it. [...] There is no one set of characteristics – and this is the most obvious comparison – which everything we call 'games' shares, hence no characteristic called 'being determined by rules.' Language has no essence." (MMWS, 49-50).

As a description of our experience, of the human form of life, this is certainly not "power generates resistance", but it is at least "rules generate insidious variation", which begins to put the kind of flesh Murdoch would prefer to see on the more skeletal picture Wittgenstein's paints. There are language games, and indeed other human practices, with rules, and there is learning, misinterpreting, breaking, bending and extending the rules. Many of these activities of the human form of life are *not* necessarily culturally specific, not tied to (governed by) specific human groups as Murdoch feared (though others clearly are). These activities involve both introjecting and projecting language, receptivity and creativity; dimensions which Cavell explored further, through his reading of Wittgenstein, in *The Claims of Reason* (cf. esp. Ch. VII). Cavell's interpretation here is remarkably similar to Murdoch's own account, in *The Idea of Perfection*, of the play of words in our *moral* understanding; of what Cavell calls "the extent to which my relation to myself [Murdoch would add: and others] is figured in my relation to words" (MMWS xxiv). Illustrating this, Murdoch here sets up an imaginary case of a mother-in-law 'M', "who feels hostility to her daughter-in-law" 'D' (IP, 312), this hostility finds (mental only) expression in words like "vulgar", "noisy" etc. Murdoch comments: "By means of these words there takes place what we might call 'the siege of the individual by concepts'. Uses of such words are both instruments and symptoms

¹⁷² Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say*, Cambridge University Press, 1976 (1969).

of learning.” (Ibid., 324). She is keen to point out that it is through the fixing of such words “either aloud or privately, in the context of particular acts of attention” that learning takes place. But the individual can and does resist the siege, and in so doing will find other words. M, through a more open attention to D, achieved through self-reflection, comes to see D as not “vulgar” but “spontaneous”, as not “noisy” but “gay”. Similarly, with regard to the development of vocabulary in *public* space, Murdoch writes: “Uses of words by persons grouped around a common object is a central and vital human activity.” (Ibid., 325) (A form of life, Wittgenstein might say.) What Murdoch wished *philosophy* to encourage however (and what Wittgenstein left to itself), was the enrichment of moral vocabulary, of moral discourse, as “relevant to our ability to move towards ‘seeing more’, towards ‘seeing what he [the other] sees’.” (Ibid.)

2. Will, imagination and freedom

We have seen that early noncognitivist arguments largely confined the expression of value to the realm of the emotions, and consequently, for Murdoch, were faced with the problem of giving some account both of the cognitive dimension of moral judgement and of freedom. In a later and more complex development from this theme, under the auspices of “philosophy of mind”, Stuart Hampshire (in *Freedom of the Individual*, 1966, reviewed by Murdoch in *Encounter*, July 1966) challenges earlier philosophical separations of fact from value for which value is seen as a product – not of the *emotions* – but of some form of *transcendent will*. For Hampshire, she writes, such a notion “presents freedom as an ‘ideal’ movement of thought which does not ‘factually’ occasion conduct, since the domain of value is entirely separate from the domain of empirical fact.” Against this, Hampshire maintains that the “will is a function of desire” (DPR, 193). This would seem to deny to “Reason” any transcendent authority over the will; however, his binary concept of “desire” appears to let reason in – by the back door, as it were – through the distinction he draws between *active* “thought-dependent” desires, on which reasoned argument may and does operate, and those *passive* biologically driven desires which manifest directly in behaviour and are thus revealed by observation. In Murdoch’s account of his views, the former desires are based on belief, which can be altered, they are normatively regulated, and generally result in intention. The rational beliefs one holds enable one to “step back” from the forces rendering one the “passive” instrument of desires; scientific knowledge (particularly from experimental psychology, but also from Freud)

may therefore contribute to this capacity. In this way, our freedom as moral *agents* consists in “being realistic enough (holding enough rational beliefs) to be able to achieve what we intend. It is the normative (objective, impersonal, unwilled) nature of the formulation of belief which rescues the active (uncaused) side of the mind from its passive (caused) side.” (Ibid., 196).

Not surprisingly, Murdoch writes of this theoretical construct that “it is not easy to see why Hampshire rejects *in toto*” any notion of the transcendent will “since he himself holds, as I shall argue, a version of this same doctrine.” (DPR, 195) On Hampshire’s view, she says “What I am ‘objectively’ is not under my control ... What I am ‘subjectively’ is a footloose, solitary, substanceless will. Personality dwindles to a point of pure will.” (IP, 311) For her, the active-passive mind dualism Hampshire operates is “as strict as Kant’s (and its close relation)” (DPR, 195). What she sees as the important *difference* here however is that where, in the Kantian system for example, freedom has to do with the *whole field* of moral activity, of value in relation to fact; the fact-value dualism that Hampshire adopts serves instead, she maintains, “to isolate, not value as such, but simply the value of freedom.” (Ibid., 197) Freedom is seen as the primary value, and “what freedom chooses – the secondary values –” do not figure in the mechanism he sets up. This freedom is not construed as given, it is achieved in the world, but it is seen as “a fairly simple and intelligible achievement, since the drama of attempt and motivation is something ‘recorded in our ordinary language’.” (Ibid.) On this view, failure to be free has to do with inadequacies in the formulation of rational belief (pivotal to the whole mechanism of, shall we say, “rationalised” will as a function of desire), and not with any more complicated kind of moral failing. Though what this results in, Murdoch writes, is “doing what you intend, not doing what is right” (Ibid.). Of course, once *this* freedom is established, and she sees it as indeed a vital *political* freedom, other criteria will be taken into account to establish what is right. Murdoch, however, holds that “a moral (*as opposed to a purely political*) definition of freedom” cannot separate out freedom from other values in this way. (DPR, 198) Why this is so is what she had set out to address a few years earlier in the essay *The Idea of Perfection*, discussed below.

Another key feature of Hampshire’s work however, one which for him serves to further differentiate his system from any purported echoes of Kantianism, is his insistence on the role of “ordinary language”. He maintains that this enables us “to see transparently the mechanism which connects reason (the formulation of sensible beliefs) with will and allows of the ‘stepping back’ movement.” (DPR, 195) This injunction on ordinary language however apparently only applies *within* the system, in that viewed from outside the system as a whole seems to depend on a

somewhat contorted *philosophical*, and not ‘ordinary’, use of the word “desire”. The grounding function of ordinary language had been elaborated further by Hampshire in *Thought and Action* (1959); and Murdoch quotes from this thus: “ ‘it is the constructive task of a philosophy of mind to provide a set of terms in which ultimate judgements of value can be very clearly stated’.”¹⁷³ (IP, 300). She notes that philosophy of mind is here put forward as the *background* to moral philosophy; and she comments on this rather caustically that “in so far as modern ethics tends to constitute a sort of Newspeak which makes certain values non-expressible, the reasons for this are to be sought in current philosophy of mind and in the fascinating power of a certain picture of the soul.”¹⁷⁴ (Ibid.) This “picture of the soul” is essentially that of the reasonable “moral agent”; who, liberated from the power of any pre-constituted notion of what is “good” – since value is now seen to be not a feature of the world but a (personal) evaluation of it – enjoys a true freedom of the will, the only constraint on which is to express one’s choices in ordinary, intelligible language. On this view therefore, Murdoch says, “Goodness is not an object of insight or knowledge, it is a function of the will.” (Ibid., 301). In *The Sovereignty of the Good* of which this essay forms part, she sets out to establish that although the good indeed *cannot* be defined, the *idea* of goodness (which may be variously formulated), and the related *cognitive* practice of continually seeking to understand what is good and what is right, in each of the circumstances of our lives, is fundamental to moral growth, and it is essential to this that the good is precisely *not* seen as a function of the will. ‘Moral growth’ is of course itself another concept that sits uneasily with this conception of the freedom of the will; and we saw earlier how she considers the values attached to *working on the self*, to *transforming* one’s attitudes,¹⁷⁵ to be among those that what she calls this philosophical “Newspeak” renders “non-expressible”.

The two main features of Hampshire’s¹⁷⁶ picture of the self that Murdoch focuses on are the *public* nature of introjected concepts (therefore the moral, as well as epistemological, need for clarity and

¹⁷³ Carla Bagnoli writes that Murdoch seems “strikingly unfair” to Hampshire, in that, in relating moral philosophy to philosophy of mind he was “attempting to restore the mind and its workings to their legitimate place in philosophical debate, and recognise dignity to ethics. Like Murdoch, he is sensitive to the inexhaustible descriptions of realities, and holds that the world is open to conceptual rearrangements.” (EML 205n) Nonetheless, she may have chosen to target Hampshire precisely because, though *modifying* the model of linguistic empiricism, at its core she saw Hampshire’s version as essentially the same.

¹⁷⁴ Moran notes that here and in the other essays which make up *The Sovereignty of the Good*, “the Prescriptivism of Richard Hare and the Emotivism of A. J. Ayer and others are the central objects of her attack, which she assimilates to the common element of non-naturalism in Kant and existentialism.” (IM&E 186) Here however, she refers more narrowly to the British tradition.

¹⁷⁵ As in the case of M and D, cited earlier and taken from this essay, *The Idea of Perfection*.

¹⁷⁶ Broackes points out that though this essay centres on Hampshire’s work, Hare’s *Language and Morals* (1952) was also her target here. (IMP 38, n79)

agreement in the use of *ordinary* language), and the identification of the (private) individual with the will. Murdoch observes that

Immense care is taken to picture the will as isolated. It is isolated from belief, from reason, from feeling, and is yet the essential centre of the self. 'I identify myself with my will.' [citing Hampshire] It is separated from belief so that the authority of reason, which manufactures belief, may be entire and so that responsibility for action may be entire as well. My responsibility is a function of my knowledge (which tries to be wholly impersonal) and my will (which is wholly personal). (IP, 305).

The will is of course also here separated from reason, because it is a function of desire, though of a desire which has the noteworthy capacity to “stand back” from itself. This metaphor of the will as “stepping back” in order to then step forward in intention, is an interesting, but apparently not fully clarified one. (What occurs during the stepping back? How does this requalify “desire”?) What it clearly does not refer to, however, is any process of self-transformation, as, for example, in the Stoic “discipline of desire”, where cultivating attention to one’s desires allows one to understand more clearly their morally errant nature, if that is what they are seen to be, and gradually weaken them, becoming wiser in the process, and therefore having “wiser” desires. (“Wisdom” may however be another concept that is seen as “not expressible” on this view). In fact, according to Murdoch, “Hampshire permits no machinery in between the passive states, which he surrenders to empirical psychology, and the active disengaged states which manufacture the free will as he sees it”; the latter seeming, she remarks, “(surely transcendental enough)” (DPR, 196)

As Murdoch sees it therefore, the freedom of the will for Hampshire has to do with the two features of his system she describes above: the public nature of our concepts and, crucially, the identification of the self with the will. These are necessarily interrelated: the inner, or mental world, is seen as shadowy and “inevitably parasitic on the outer world” (IP, 302); therefore it is only in intention and action, in the freedom of the will, that the individual self finds expression. On this she cites Hampshire thus: “ ‘The play of the mind, free of any expression in audible speech or visible action is a reality, as the play of shadows is a reality. But any description of it is derived from the description of its natural expression in speech and action.’ ” (Ibid.) Murdoch recognises that examples, and they are plentiful, of the public origin of our “thinking” can be persuasive. She illustrates the relevant argument in this way: “How do I learn the concept of decision? By watching someone else who says ‘I have decided’ and then who acts. [...] How do I distinguish anger from jealousy? Certainly not by distinguishing between two types of mental data. Consider

how I learned 'anger' and 'jealousy.' What identifies the emotion is the presence not of a particular private object, but of some typical outward behaviour pattern." (IP, 309) Murdoch sees much truth in this type of observation (despite the behaviouristic over-simplification of what learning actually involves). She agrees that "Inner words 'mean' in the same way as outer words; and I can only 'know' my imagery because I know the public things which it is 'of.'" (Ibid. 310) She also holds that, in their favour, these arguments "really do clearly and definitely solve certain problems which have beset British empiricism. By destroying the misleading image of the infallible inner eye they make possible a much improved solution of, for instance, problems about perception and about universals." (Ibid. 311) The problem she sees with this argument is that it is not only the *infallibility* of the inner eye that they found to be cumbersome, but *any* concept of "inner eye". Since this rejection of the old metaphor leaves the new picture of the self without an image, Murdoch says, "Hampshire suggests that we should abandon the image (dear to the British empiricists) of man as a detached observer, and should rather picture him as an object moving among other objects in a continual flow of intention into action. Touch and movement, not vision, should supply our metaphors ... Actions are, roughly, instances of moving things about in the public world. Nothing counts as an act unless it is 'a bringing about of a recognizable change in a public world.'" (Ibid).

One further consequence of this is that as "the 'inner life' is hazy, largely absent, and anyway 'not part of the mechanism' it turns out to be *logically* impossible to take up an idle contemplative attitude to the good. Morality must be action since mental concepts can only be analysed genetically." (Ibid.) That is to say, as shadowy, and parasitic upon the 'outer'. In the case of concepts of emotion too, anger and jealousy as mentioned here for example, it is clear that I learn the *names* for these emotions from outside myself, but one wonders how many experiences of private struggle with these emotions it takes before I can confidently distinguish anger from jealousy; before I can see how these emotions run into each other, feed each other; before I can see these emotions as what Wittgenstein describes as patterns recurring "with different variations, in the weave of our life" (PI, 174e); or what Murdoch describes, with the same metaphor, as "inner acts ... forming part of a continuous fabric of being." (IP, 316). Murdoch gives the further example of a man "trying privately to determine whether something which he feels is repentance or not." She says that his investigation is of course "subject to some public rules", but that it remains a highly personal activity. She writes: "Here an individual is making a specialised *use* of a concept. Of course he derives the concept initially from his surroundings; but he takes it away into his privacy." (Ibid., 319) The use that he makes of this concept will depend in part on his personal

history, and, she says “once the historical individual is ‘let in’ a number of things have to be said with a difference. The idea of ‘objective reality’, for instance, undergoes important modifications when it is to be understood, not in relation to ‘the world described by science’, but in relation to the progressing life of a person.” (Ibid., 319-20).

It may be useful to recall at this point, that for Foucault ‘subjectivation’, the ethical process by which one becomes the subject of one’s own life, is a process which is *individualised* when some contingency opens a breach in one’s ‘objectification’, that is to say, when the form of public discourse which has shaped one’s sense of one’s own identity has weakened its hold on one for some reason, opening up other possibilities. Murdoch describes what “objective reality” means in “the progressing life of a person” as inevitably historical, Foucault goes further, treating “the world described by science” as also inevitably historical. This idea does not contradict, but reinforces Murdoch’s argument. The process itself may involve setting one public discourse against another, one set of concepts against another, in any case it involves what Murdoch here describes as deriving a concept from one’s surroundings, and taking it away into one’s privacy.¹⁷⁷ She writes “we have private insights and cognitions which go beyond what could be described as a private saying of public sentences; and even when we speak aloud may we not to some extent ‘make the language our own’? Men dream when they are awake too. The outer and the inner are in a continual volatile dynamic relationship. Such is the creation and growth of the individual, the person who is in innumerable ways special, unique, different from his neighbour.” That this person lives a reality that is historical is important to her, but perhaps even more so she says: “belief in this person is an assertion of contingency, of the irreducible existence and importance of the contingent. (MGM, 349) for her it is to the contingent, even more than to the historical, that we owe our individuality and our individual subjectivity.

With regard to the aforementioned case study of M at the heart of *The Idea of Perfection*, Murdoch notes that M’s activity, her internal struggle to overcome her negative attitude to D, “is peculiarly *her own*. Its details are the details of *this* personality; and partly for this reason it may well be an activity which can only be performed privately. M could not do *this* thing in conversation with another person.” (Ibid. 317) With regard to what this activity is, for Murdoch the metaphor of *vision*, disliked by Hampshire, is necessary here: “M looks at D, she attends to D, she focuses her attention. ... She may for instance be tempted to enjoy caricatures of D in her imagination.” (Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Clearly Foucault’s ‘subjectivation’ and Murdoch’s “moral being” differ greatly in other ways.

317) These two mental concepts, of attention and imagination, and of attention to one's own imagination, to what it is *doing*, are essential to the development of Murdoch's picture of moral being. She explains:

What M is *ex hypothesi* attempting to do is not just to see D accurately but to see her justly or lovingly. Notice the rather different image of freedom which this at once suggests. Freedom is not the sudden jumping of the isolated will in and out of an impersonal logical complex, it is a function of the progressive attempt to see a particular object clearly. (Ibid.)

According to Richard Moran, the notion of attention Murdoch is employing serves also to counter the atomistic picture of moral change "as if it were something made possible by isolated acts of instantaneous conscious choice." He goes on, "For attention, by contrast, is in its very nature answerable to something outside oneself, and the action of attention does not produce its results instantly or by fiat, but is rather part of the arduous, progressive, piecemeal business of moral growth." (IM&E, 186) For Murdoch, there is no neutral stance from which to see "accurately" (The world of the happy is not the world of the unhappy), and bad moods poison our vision¹⁷⁸. Therefore our attention must focus on what Moran calls "the Real outside oneself" (Ibid., 181), but also on our own state of mind, on what our imagination is doing. If this is indeed the case, then to give the object of our moral judgement a fair chance of being seen accurately, we must attempt to see them benevolently, so that for M to see D "justly or lovingly" is not intended as an either/or here. This may not always be the case – much moral philosophy denies that it is *ever* the case, contrasting (impartial) justice and (partial) love – and the point is a complex one (see below); but for the moment let us say that on Murdoch's view, there *are* cases, indeed many cases, where this must be true. To take as given ones' own "rational" impartiality in judging others is an illusion; impartiality is in reality extremely hard to achieve (people can "hate" others because of the clothes they wear, their accent, or other remarkably trivial things). And since our imagination is constantly at work, impartiality is not to be achieved by either ignoring or denying it. A different strategy is required.

Referring to an analysis of the imagination she found useful in her own reflections (without sharing the theoretical foundations) Murdoch writes that "Kant [in the *Critique of Judgement*] tells us that 'the imagination (as a productive faculty of cognition) is a powerful agent for creating, as it were, a *second nature* out of the material supplied to it by actual nature ... By this means we get a

¹⁷⁸ Another example of this she draws attention to is that "in *Anna Karenina*, we learn not only the intensity but the quality of Levin's joy from his finding a tiresome meeting delightful, of Anna's misery from her seeing inoffensive people as beastly." (SRR, 84)

sense of our freedom from the law of association (which attaches to the empirical employment of the imagination).’ [her italics ...] This idea can go very far, farther perhaps than its author intended. [...Though Kant here refers to art,] we may want to maintain that the world around us is constantly being modified or ‘presented’ (made or made up) by a spontaneous creative *free* faculty which is not that of ‘reason’ thought of as ‘beaming in’ upon purely empirical situations not otherwise evaluated.” (MGM, 314) (Kant’s notion of ‘reason’ conjured up for her the image of it as light ‘beaming in’ to empirical darkness.) This is not of course how Hampshire sees it. On the contrary, she writes, he “regards imagination as a side issue”; relegating it “to the passive side of the mind, regarding it as an isolated non-responsible faculty which makes potentially valuable discoveries which reason may inspect and adopt.” (DPR, 198) He implies, she says, that “imaginings” are just drifting ideas which he has chosen to leave out of his main argument, and out of his operative vocabulary. He sees the imagination as a “passive condition which may impede freedom by making thinking unrealistic” (Ibid.). Murdoch sees it instead as “something which we all *do* a great deal of the time”, which is not so easily separated out from “thinking”. She regards any attempt at definition of the imagination as unhelpful, but she does suggest a possible description, seeing it as: “a type of reflection on people, events, etc., which builds detail, adds colour, conjures up possibilities in ways which go beyond what could be said to be strictly factual.” (DPR, 198) She also notes that the “bad” activity of the imagination is often called ‘fantasy’ or ‘wishful thinking’, and for her it is evidently true that the imagination can cloud judgement. The case of M’s original attitude to D illustrates a more subtle instance of this, and murderous revenge fantasies, to take just one example of *bad* imaginings (not rare among human beings) represent a worst case scenario. Between these, the “normal” fantasy life of human minds is not generally marked by nobility of spirit. Murdoch remarks that Plato for one was “well aware of the lying fantasising tendency of the human mind and that it would be hard to exaggerate our capacity for egoistic fabrication.” (MGM, 317)

Despite all this, she questions whether or not the imagination, which remains nonetheless a “great human activity”, should be thought of *only* in these terms. She asks: “Is there not also a good constructive imagination which plays a part in our life?” (Ibid. 198-199) She says that Hampshire would not wish to accept this for one important reason; that is: “He can readily admit imaginings which are unwilling, isolated, passive. But if we admit active imagination as an important faculty it is difficult not to see this as an exercise of the will.” (Ibid 199). His theory requires thought to be untainted, to be able to see the world of facts “objectively”. For Murdoch on the other hand, “The world which we confront is not just a world of ‘facts’ but a world on which our imagination has, at

any given moment, already worked; and although such working may often be ‘fantasy’ and may constitute a barrier to our seeing ‘what is really there’, this is not necessarily so.” (Ibid.) The point in question though, and a very old one in philosophy, is how does one rid oneself of “egoistic fabrication” in order to genuinely achieve rational judgement? Even the most unimaginative people have an active imagination, so ignoring its function, as opposed to exploring it, hardly seems “wise”. Murdoch’s answer to this question is unorthodox however. She writes:

Each of us lives and chooses within a partly private, partly fabricated world, and although any particular belief might be shown to be ‘merely fantastic’ it is false to suggest that we could, even in principle, ‘purge’ the world we confront of these personal elements. Nor is there any reason why we should. To be a human being is to know more than one can prove, to conceive of a reality which goes ‘beyond the facts’ in these familiar and natural ways.

This activity is moreover, usually and often inevitably, an activity of evaluation. We evaluate not only by intentions, decisions, choices (the events Hampshire describes), but also, and largely, by the constant quiet work of attention and imagination. (Ibid., 199-200)

She is saying that there is no point in developing a philosophical fantasy of morality which pretends to be able to resolve the “problem” of the imagination by putting it aside, or by repressing it. But though we cannot, and *therefore* should not, purge the world of our imaginings, she is not saying that we should accept them the way they are. Far from it, she holds that the imagination is active, and develops according to what it is confronted with, both habitually and in the present moment. This is why it is so important on the one hand to confront it, and regularly, with the idea of the good, or the beautiful, or truth, or the perfect, with exemplars; and on the other to turn the attention to the imagination itself, to look very carefully and honestly at one’s bad objects, one’s egoistic dreams, prejudices, etc.; to look at what goes into one’s ways of classifying what (and who) is bad and good. Attention is a *cognitive* instrument which requires much honing if it is to cut through the continual egoistic fabrication to get to the reality. The practice of attention she is suggesting here is of course a distant cousin of certain similar practices of the Greeks; practices that, as Hadot has shown, were unfortunately (for secular philosophy) transformed through centuries of Christianity to become expiation for one’s sins. Since these were construed as infractions of Christian moral codes, the techniques themselves have thus become unusable in other ethical contexts. Nonetheless, for Murdoch we must find new ways of looking, and of looking deep, into the cognitive (not merely “psychological”) exercise of the imagination. She writes: “We are obscure to ourselves because the world we see already contains our values and we may not be aware of the slow delicate processes of imagination and will which have put those values there. This implies of course that at moments of choice we are less free than Hampshire pictures us as (potentially) being”. (Ibid 200)

On Murdoch's view therefore, choice (choosing), deciding, intending, are in themselves *experiences* requiring investigation. Of course the experience of choice is something much explored by the existentialists¹⁷⁹, who do, she says, "account for a peculiar feature of moral choice, which is the strange emptiness which occurs at the moment of choosing." (IP, 328) Though she acknowledges that there may be simple decisions to be made in which only logic and preference come into play, more difficult and painful choices, she says "often present this experience of void [...] : this sense of not being determined by the reasons." (Ibid.) She quotes Sartre as saying: " 'Quand je délibère les jeux sont faits' " (Ibid.). This notion, that the die is cast, that the deliberation is governed by "[f]orces within me which are dark to me" (Ibid.), can result in a kind of fatalism, a feeling that everything is determined, and that freedom is mere illusion. Murdoch finds this view "if anything less attractive and realistic" than the viewpoint of the rational will, and asks, rhetorically: "Do we really have to choose between an image of total freedom and an image of total determinism?" (Ibid.) Her answer to this is that it is the idea of attention that can provide a way out of this impasse. How we make our choices has to do with how we see, so the question then is how do we see? Can we trust in the serene impartiality of our perception, or is serene impartiality something to achieve, through moral effort and moral imagination? Murdoch holds that this is precisely what is required in order to see (another person, for example) clearly, and this – the moral effort of trying to see clearly – is what she means by "attention". It is true of course that where any present deliberation comes from is largely from everything that has previously taken place in the mind (which is why moral activity must also create good mental habits), but that still leaves space for the *activity* of the present moment. She writes:

If we ignore the prior work of attention and notice only the emptiness of the moment of choice we are likely to identify freedom with the outward movement since there is nothing else to identify it with. But if we consider what the work of attention is like, and how continuously it goes on, how imperceptibly it builds up structures of value round about us, we shall not be surprised that at crucial moments of choice most of the business of choosing is already over. This does not imply that we are not free, certainly not. But it implies that the exercise of our freedom is a small piecemeal business which goes on all the time and not a grandiose leaping about unimpeded at important moments. The moral life, on this view, is something that goes on continually, not something that is switched off in between the occurrence of specific moral choices. What happens in between such choices is indeed what is crucial. (Ibid., 329)

¹⁷⁹ Murdoch in fact classifies "together as existentialist both philosophers such as Sartre who claim the title, and philosophers such as Hampshire, Hare, Ayer, who do not. Characteristic of both is the identification of the true person with the empty choosing will, and the corresponding emphasis upon the idea of movement rather than vision." (IP, 327)

To return to her example of the moral work that M is doing in *looking* at D and at herself, in focusing her attention, Murdoch says that this is “something progressive, something infinitely perfectible. So far from claiming for it a sort of infallibility, this new picture has built in the notion of a necessary fallibility. M is engaged in an endless task. As soon as we begin to use words such as ‘love’ and ‘justice’ in characterising M, we introduce into our whole conceptual picture of her situation the idea of progress, that is the idea of perfection”. (IP, 317-18) This *idea of perfection*, the idea of a progression in our mode of conceptualising, undermines the confident notion of what Taylor calls “disengaged reason” employed by analytic moral philosophy. By “disengaged reasoning” he means “reasoning which can turn on its own proceedings and examine them for accuracy and reliability.” (IMMP, 6) It takes away the ‘outer’ standard of reference, in that, Murdoch writes, “Moral tasks are characteristically endless not only because ‘within’, as it were, a given concept our efforts are imperfect, but also because as we move and as we look our concepts themselves are changing.” (IP, 321)

Murdoch does not elucidate further on the connection she establishes here between “love and justice” and “perfection”, which leaves her reader with a problem, as these concepts figure prominently in other moral theories with which, as they are crucial to modern democracies, we are generally more familiar. With regard to these concepts, Taylor notes that Anglo-Saxon moral philosophy has mostly focused on what things we *ought* to do. “One theory says that they [the things we ought to do] all involve maximising human happiness; another says that they all involve our not acting on maxims which are not univertalisable.” (IMMP, 10). These theories he calls “single-term moralities”, the former focusing on “benevolence” (a synonym of “kindness”, which may be taken as one of the – more public – faces of “love”), the latter on “justice”. In practice, both these theories, the utilitarian and the deontological, form the ethical underpinning of modern democracies, together creating what he calls the domain of “justice-benevolence”. Nonetheless, Taylor continues, “There is an internal tension that can arise here between the two terms. The issue can arise: When should we override justice in the name of benevolence? Should we ever override it at all? Traditionally put this is the issue of justice versus mercy.” He comments on this type of dilemma that the idea that it can be resolved internally, with some kind of “calculus of obligated action” is an illusion, and one that “only makes sense on condition that their homogenous domain exhausts the moral.” Clearly for Taylor, as for Murdoch, this is not the case. On the contrary, he says, “Ethical thinking, to use this term for the broader domain, sometimes also requires deliberation about what it is good to be in order to determine what to do in certain circumstances.” (IMMP, 11-12). As pointed out, Murdoch affirms but does not thematise the

connection between justice and perfection; but the following passage from one of her novels, *The Nice and the Good*, is an illuminating illustration of an imperfect “perfectionist” reflection on justice, on the part of one of its institutional protagonists, the barrister Ducane:

It is impossible to be a barrister without imagining oneself a judge, and Ducane’s imagination had often taken this flight. However, and this was another reason for Ducane’s ultimate disgust with life in the courts, the whole situation of ‘judging’ was abhorrent to him. He had watched his judges closely, and had come to the conclusion that no human being is worthy to be a judge.... Ducane’s rational mind knew that there had to be law courts and that English law was on the whole good law and English judges good judges. But he detested that confrontation between the prisoner in the dock and the judge, dressed so like a king or a pope, seated up above him. His irrational heart, perceptive of the pride of judges, sickened and said it should not be thus; and said it more passionately because there was that in Ducane which wanted to be a judge.

Ducane knew ... that there were moments when he had said to himself, “I alone of all these people am good enough, am humble enough, to be a judge.” ... He did not rightly know what to do with these visions. Sometimes he took them ... for a sort of harmless idealism. Sometimes they seemed to him the most corrupting influences in his life.

What Ducane was experiencing, in this form peculiar to him of imagining himself as a judge, was, though this was not entirely clear in his mind, one of the great paradoxes of morality, namely that in order to become good it may be necessary to imagine oneself good, and yet such imagining may also be the very thing which renders improvement impossible ... To become good it may be necessary to think about virtue; although unreflective people might achieve a thoughtless excellence. Ducane was in any case highly reflective and had from childhood quite explicitly set before himself the aim of becoming a good man; and although he had little of the demoniac in his nature there was a devil of pride, a stiff Calvinistic Scottish devil, who was quite capable of bringing Ducane to utter damnation, and Ducane knew this perfectly well. (pp. 74-75)

If Foucault has brilliantly analysed the symbolic trappings of power (and its counterpart in humiliation) of the judicial systems of earlier centuries, this fine literary passage could stand as an illustration of the power-game in its most discreet, most English (in the self-representation of English), twentieth century form. Murdoch explores many things here. In the first place it is a description of the mental proliferation in which we all live, with its muddy moral contours. Whatever our present experience, interlaced in it there is usually future projection, with ourselves as hero or victim of the developing story, depending on the way in which our present mental state colours that projection. In Ducane’s case, this particular fantasy veers between pride and shame, equally incapacitating, as a genuine desire for the good gets lost in the middle. The narrative of the self, as she presents it here, also runs backwards from the present, as we insert an edited version of each experience into the belief we have about who we are: a would-be good man with a devilish Scottish pride, or whatever. But the point she is most concerned to express is that of the difficulty of working out how to be good – one of the great paradoxes of morality. It requires reflection (its occurrence as mere chance is to be welcomed, but cannot be counted on), and yet reflection does not occur in an imaginative vacuum, and the imagination has a problem with the ego. For this reason the moral progression she envisages is both “endlessly perfectible” and endlessly fallible.

Murdoch complains that “it is a shortcoming of much contemporary moral philosophy that it eschews discussion of the separate virtues, preferring to proceed directly to some sovereign concept such as sincerity, or authenticity, or freedom, thereby imposing, it seems to me, an unexamined and empty idea of unity, and impoverishing our moral language in an important area.”(OGG, 347) Nonetheless, when she asks: “What is it like to be just?”, she immediately replies that “We come to understand this as we come to understand the relationship between justice and the other virtues.” (Ibid.) Despite appearances, there is no contradiction here. What she means is that any unity that is theoretically derived and imposed on reality will be false. That it is necessary to look at the virtues separately, in a whole range of circumstances, but that in the process of doing this the way each virtue involves others, the fact that there are no clear borderlines between them, becomes apparent empirically.

To return to the will, now from this Murdochian perspective, as with other moral concepts, she sees its hypostatisation (or false unity) in various philosophical formulations as problematic and confusing. “Will” she writes “can be a term which, seeming to deal with or explain a large matter, halts reflection at a crucial point. It may be better ... to restrict the term will, as ‘willing’ or ‘exercise of will’, to cases where there is an immediate straining, for instance occasioned by a perceived duty or principle, against a large part of preformed consciousness.” (MGM, 300) From this position, one crucial point at which Hampshire’s reflection would seem to have halted here is precisely in relation to those moments of internal conflict in which we experience “willing”, when we feel our “will” to be engaged in such “straining”; those moments in which some interaction must (presumably) occur between active, thought-dependent desires, and passive desires. Murdoch pursues this line of thought thus:

What moves us – our motives, our desires, our reasoning – emerges from a constantly changing complex; moral change is the change of that complex, for better or worse. Herein intellectual experiences, states of reflective viewing of the world, are continually moving in relation to more affective or instinctive levels of thought and feeling. Experience, awareness, consciousness, these words emphasise the existence of the thinking, planning, remembering, acting moral being as a mobile creature living in the present. ... The problem of freedom of the will must be thought of as lying inside such a picture. Freedom (in this sense) is freedom from bad habit and bad desire, and is brought about in all sorts of ways by impulses of love, rational reflection, new scenery, conscious and deliberate formation of new attachments and so on. (MGM, 300)

It appears here, as in the discourse of “virtue ethics”, that Murdoch holds that the only thing which will guarantee that the “freedom of the will” does not lead to the bad is freedom from – or at least striving to be free from – bad habit and bad desire; and that to achieve *this* freedom it is necessary

to cultivate the virtues. This is indeed part of, but not the whole of, her own picture of what moral being requires.

3. Existentialism.

Existentialism and [linguistic] empiricism ... share a number of motives and doctrines. Both philosophies are against traditional metaphysics, attack substantial theories of the mind, have a touch of Puritanism, construe virtue in terms of will rather than in terms of knowledge, emphasise choice, are markedly Liberal in their political bias, are neo-Kantian. But in other ways they are very different. (S&BR 267)

[Existentialism] is also a natural mode of being of the capitalist era. It is attractive, and indeed to most of us still natural, because it suggests individualism, self-reliance, private conscience, and what we ordinarily think of as political freedom, in that important sense where freedom means not doing what is right but doing what is desired." (E&M, 223-24)

Murdoch over-generalises in these compressed sketches partly in order to draw attention to the Kantian concept of the autonomy of the individual, shared by these two philosophies, and the ensuing political freedom this concept guarantees. It is a concept that is structural to the Western democracies (less so to capitalism, though historically they have so far more or less coincided), and *as such* is to us "a natural mode of being". She insists on this Kantian core of both contemporary philosophies, though in expanding the argument she is equally concerned to map the different genealogies which have helped to produce the very different images of who we are that they present. Murdoch's classification of linguistic empiricism as "existentialist" on grounds that the two separate lines of philosophical development both paint a neo-Kantian picture – with these important variations – of the self as an isolated choosing will, may however seem strange in one who is generally so keen to mark differences. Among these differences she notes that whereas for Kant, "We respect others, not as particular eccentric phenomenal individuals, but as *co-equal bearers of universal reason*" (Ibid., 262, my emphasis); in the British empiricist tradition, in "the world as envisaged by Hobbes, Locke, and Hume there is a plurality of persons, who are quite separate and different individuals and who have to get along together. Moreover, implicitly for Hobbes, and explicitly for Locke, that which has a right to exist, that which is deserving of tolerance and respect, is not the rational or good person, but the actual empirically existing person whatever he happens to be like." (Ibid., 265) This tolerant, commonsensical attitude, even love of eccentricity and human variation, has also allowed a tolerant attitude to oneself and one's moral failings to arise, favoured, as Murdoch notes, by the "phenomenal *luck* of our English-speaking

societies.”¹⁸⁰ (Ibid., 266) Murdoch labels the person viewed from this perspective as “Ordinary Language Man”, one “who is not overwhelmed by any structure larger than himself, such as might be represented by a metaphysical belief or an institution. ... it has been a major preoccupation of empiricist moral philosophy to depict the agent as totally free and self-sufficient. Even the presence of others is felt, if at all, simply as the presence of rational critics.” (Ibid., 268).

The (pre and post-Kantian) historical and philosophical development of continental Europe was very different, and at its heart, for Murdoch, was Hegel¹⁸¹. Whereas Kantian subjects were endowed with the same, atemporal, acultural faculty of reason, “in the Hegelian world reason has a history, that is the subject has a history” (NM, 103). There is no sustained Murdochian study of Hegel, but his presence is felt in her writings, though not in the pervasive way that it was felt, in her view, in the work of his Hegelian – and anti-Hegelian – successors.¹⁸² Noting this, Denham says that Murdoch’s writings “venture into the territory of traditional a priori metaphysics and epistemology, but their beating heart is her exercise in descriptive, experiential phenomenology, where she explores the details of what it is like to engage seriously with ethical problems from a first-person, experiential point of view.” (PEMM, 328). Murdoch saw a constant tension in Hegel’s work between detailed attention to contingent reality, to phenomena, and at the same time the relentless absorption of all contingency into the totality of the *Absolute* (“In Hegel contingency progresses into the ideal totality” (MGM, 370)). She saw this tension continually reappearing in many guises, idealist, romantic and existentialist, as well as in Marxism, whether as concept or as counter-concept. On the one hand, she says, “[w]hat Hegel teaches us is that we should attempt to describe phenomena... What we are all working upon, it might be said, is *le monde vécu*, the lived world, what is actually experienced, thought of as itself being the real, and carrying its own truth criteria with it – and not as being the reflection or mental shadow of some other separate mode of being which lies behind it in static parallel.” (EPM, 131) On the other hand, and despite this anti-

¹⁸⁰ Revolutionary, and more importantly, totalitarian, fervour having been relatively short-lived in England, since cutting off the head of one king, a return to more gradual methods of change, and of *accommodation of difference*, has generally been favoured.

¹⁸¹ She writes: “It is almost mysterious how little Hegel is esteemed in this country. This philosopher, who, while not the greatest, contains possibly more truth than any other, is unread and unstudied here.” (HMD, 146)

¹⁸² For Murdoch Sartre, like all metaphysicians, was obsessed with the need to elaborate a conceptual system that would provide the key to everything, tempered by the painful knowledge that this is illusion. However “The model which seems to prove that such a total philosophical synthesis can be, very nearly, achieved is Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Mind*, and it has been the dream of more than one metaphysically minded thinker, after and including Marx, to rewrite this book and get it right. Sartre attempted it twice. *l’Être et le Néant* was a huge non-historical revision of the subject-object dialectic, in which the prime value, and motive force, replacing Hegel’s *Geist*, was freedom (individual project) ... Sartre here portrayed the dialectic psychologically as the human soul; later he portrayed it socio-politically as human history.” (SRR, 11)

Kantian stance, his concept of “consciousness ... (as belonging to a supra-personal whole) has the same effect of displacing the vitality and significance of the individual”. (MGM, 153) “Hegel’s *Geist*” she writes, “is the energy which perpetually urges the ever-unsatisfied intellect (and so the whole of being) onward toward Absolute reality. Everything is relative, incomplete, not yet fully real, not yet fully true, dialectic is a continual reformulation. Such is the history of thought, of civilisation, or of the ‘person’ who, immersed in this process, is carried on towards some postulated self-consistent totality.” (MGM, 488) Murdoch labels the picture of the self which emerges from this vision as “Totalitarian Man” (S&BR, 268). She means this in a more generally ethical, rather than a political sense; the one may, though not necessarily, lend itself to the other. One aspect of this vastly influential picture was the requirement of continual work on this self, the requirement of self-knowledge. She says of Kierkegaard, for example, that though he hated Hegel, he “is profoundly Hegelian. He retained and used with wonderful versatility the clear, dramatic, solipsistic picture of the self at war with itself and passing in this way through phases in the direction of self-knowledge.”¹⁸³ (Ibid., 265). This task is his life’s work, which is to say that his life is his life’s work.

As Moran remarks, there are many references, but not many actual citations from texts generally recognised as existentialist in much of her work (outside of her early monograph, *Sartre Romantic Rationalist*). He surmises that “our philosophical interest may be in something ‘existentialist-sounding’ rather than actually defended by Sartre, Kierkegaard, or others” and also that “there are obvious dangers in this ‘assimilating’ approach.” (IM&E, 184) The main danger being, he says, not so much that anyone would be led into confusion regarding the views of these authors, “but rather that we fail to see that in criticizing this or that element of this combined image, Murdoch is resourcefully deploying several of the defining insights of certain Existentialists themselves.” (Ibid.) He points out that “Existentialism arises as a reactive movement of thought (a stance embodied in the familiar existentialist figure of rebellion)” (Ibid., 187); and that what these philosophers have in common has more to do with what they are opposed to than what they defend. In particular, like Murdoch, they put forward “various rejections of any positivist idea of ‘fact’ which defines it in opposition to the ‘evaluative’. [... Moreover] no one could reasonably accuse *these* writers [he refers to Nietzsche, Kierkegaard and Heidegger], of all people, of restricting moral attention to single, overt, and public actions, and leaving out of account the moral

¹⁸³ Though, she writes: “Sartre praises Kierkegaard for maintaining against Hegel that what I crave from the world is the recognition of my being as an individual, and not as an abstract truth.” (SRR, 127)

importance of the ‘inner life’, including emotional life and habits of attention.” (Ibid.) Moran goes further, making the interesting point that it is from “within a broadly Existentialist framework that we can break the hold of another opposition which Murdoch seeks to overcome: seeing any ‘serious’ or ‘cognitive’ moral change in the person as grounded exclusively in a change of *belief*, with the rest of the mental life confined to mere sensations, and thus lacking any understanding of the moral difference made by such things as changes in attitude, feeling, attention, or habits of thought.” (Ibid.) Therefore, he argues, the form of freedom presented in existentialist literature is never that of the isolated will, but is always of the situated individual: “we are told that the person is always engaged in some *situation* or other (or rather in an interlocking set of situations); that the person does not exist and then come to *acquire* a situation, but is always ready to be found within one. [...] The fate of situatedness as such is not escapable, but at the same time the situation does not itself dictate one’s orientation to it.” (Ibid., 190). In other words, our freedom has to do with the different possibilities of response within any situation.

What Moran calls the “Sartrean” conception of freedom that emerges here he describes as “both finite and unbounded.” Finite in as far as the circumstances we find ourselves in are what they are, they cannot be bent to our will; unbounded in as far as there are always all sorts of ways in which we can and do choose to respond to the situation: “The ‘facticities’ which make up my situation may be said to be ‘given’, but there is always the question of what the person makes of them”. (Ibid.) *This* freedom cannot therefore be construed as that of the isolated will, or ‘empty self’; it is only through the kind of close attention to what is given in the situation, the ‘facticities’, that it comes into play, and importantly, through “refusing to reify or take for granted the given attitudes with which it [the situated self] approaches the situation.” He goes on,

We could call this self ‘empty’ only in the following sense: when it confronts such a situation calling for thought, the ideal it holds itself to is that any core belief or other attitude is sustained in the self only by the continued endorsement of the self. (This is the sense of Sartre’s slogan ‘There is no inertia in consciousness’ (BN 61/104) (Ibid., 194)

From such a perspective, “empty” is not then a passive condition, but a result of the activity of the wakeful consciousness of emptying the self of habitual views. Moran is drawing on Sartre here, but this image also recalls Heidegger’s image of consciousness as a clearing (as in a forest), as Murdoch presents it (see below). As Moran points out, Murdoch’s metaphor of “vision” could also stand for “the very dimension of action that Existentialists like Kierkegaard and Sartre are fairly obsessive in insisting on.” (Ibid.) In fact, he explains, when we look closer at this metaphor of vision, and the practice of attention, which Murdoch puts forward as “a correction to the exclusive

concentration in moral thought on action and agency” (Ibid., 186), we see that the metaphor “is not in any simple *opposition* to the idea of action, but in fact contains it. Indeed it is the morally difficult *activity* of imagination that Murdoch uses the metaphor of vision to draw our attention to, not a matter of passive receptivity, but rather the endless effort to see clearly. [...] So, contrary to the impression we might have received before, the metaphor of vision is not intended as competitor to the self as agent, but is rather in the service of rejecting a particular impoverished picture of agency.” (IM&E, 189). She herself says that “It seemed from *L’Être et le néant* that what Sartre meant by ‘freedom’ was the reflective, imaginative power of the mind, its mobility, its negating of the ‘given’, its capacity to rise out of muddy unreflective states, its tendency to return to an awareness of itself.” (SRR, 96).

All this being said, why then does Murdoch persist in targeting existentialism? In *Sartre, Romantic Rationalist*, she characterises Sartre’s most clarified picture of the self thus:

The metaphysical imagery of *L’Être et le Néant*, Being and Nothingness, was, for popular purposes, easily grasped. The *pour-soi*, for-itself, a spontaneous free consciousness, was contrasted with the *en-soi*, in-itself, inert, fixed, unfree. The *en-soi* was the world experienced as alien, senselessly contingent or unreflectively deformed. The heroic consciousness, the individual self, inalienably and ineluctably free, challenging and confronting the ‘given’ in the form of existing society, history, tradition, other people. (SRR, 9)

Here she is drawing attention to the fact that, as with Kant’s pure practical reason, in Sartre’s view consciousness is active and free but, in contrast to the imposition of constraints on the self produced by Kant’s free-to-be-dutiful Reason, for which conformity was generally valued, Sartre’s freedom echoes rather the rejection of constraints and the anti-conformism of Nietzsche; it is romantically free to create itself. The dark side of this consciousness however is the passive in-itself of the unfree, unreflective life. This *en-soi* is what is “given”, and it appears “as inert, conventional opinions, dead traditions, illusions.” (SRR, 11). Murdoch speaks often of Sartre’s *en-soi* as the “horror of the contingent”, as “contingent matter, our surroundings, things, experienced as senseless and awful” (SRR, 12,10); the metaphors he uses for it are of a gluey, opaque viscous mess. The portrait of this self emerges most clearly in what Murdoch considers one of Sartre’s finest works (though at the same time she sees it as “a hate-poem”), the novel *La Nausée*. Here Roquentin, the hero, “yearns for logical necessity in the order of the world [...] but] feels the vanity of these wishes.” She goes on:

What Roquentin has in common with Hume and with present-day empiricists is that he broods descriptively upon the doubt situation, instead of moving rapidly on to the task of providing a metaphysical solution.

Roquentin does not feel so sure that rational knowledge and moral certainty *are* possible; he examines piecemeal the process of thinking, the commonplaces of morality, and accepts the nihilistic conclusions of his study. A further result of his brooding over the doubt is the neurotic distress about language which then assails him; in this respect too Roquentin is of his age. But what marks him out as an existentialist doubter is the fact that he himself is in the picture: what most distresses him is that his own individual being is invaded by the senseless flux; what most interests him is his aspiration to be in a different way. (SRR, 43)

This is a description of the *pour-soi* in conflict with the *en-soi* construed as inside the self but shaped by outside, by language and therefore by others. But the awful paradox, isolating this individual even further, is that the same struggle experienced by ‘the other’ stands, not in solidarity with, but against oneself. The other may thus be seen as an alien being “whose freedom contradicts one’s own, and whose unassimilable Medusa gaze turns one’s *pour-soi* into an *en-soi*.”(SRR, 11) Clearly, if this is our image of “the other”, then indeed *l’enfer c’est les autres*. As she points out, the lovers in Sartre’s novels “are engaged in perpetual speculation about the attitude of the other” (SRR, 130), where they are not in much more destructive interaction; but even friendship is doomed. Murdoch writes that in his trilogy, *Les Chemins de la liberté*, “There is only one hint of deep commitment, of real emotion, in the personal sphere, and that is in the relationship of Brunet and Schneider”. Schneider dies however, and Sartre, commenting on this friendship, says that it was, after all “*un drôle d’amitié*.” (SRR, 60-61). Despite this bleak view of human relationships, Murdoch says that love as a value does emerge from the death of Schneider, of which Sartre writes that “ ‘No human victory can efface this absolute of suffering.’ ” Murdoch says this loss of love, in death, is presented as a “ ‘paradise lost’ – a paradise of human companionship – and of a final isolation.” She notes that “here something more is affirmed, namely that the moment of human love had its absolute value, and that its loss is absolute loss.” (Ibid., 62). The existential situatedness of which Moran speaks appears in this picture as a very lonely situatedness (like Hegel’s ‘unhappy consciousness’ to which she frequently refers). Accordingly the virtues here are lonely virtues: “sincerity, courage, will: the unillusioned exercise of complete freedom”, Murdoch says, while “the ordinary bourgeois social virtues, which take society for granted, are cases of bad faith.” (S&BR, 269) The labelling of many of these “ordinary” virtues as “bourgeois” (and the celebration of anti-conformism *as such*) was something Murdoch saw as rather slack historicity, and morally problematic.

Murdoch distances her own picture of moral being, in which attention to others, and love, figure so largely, from both this picture and from that of linguistic empiricism thus: “whereas Ordinary Language Man represents the surrender to convention, the Totalitarian Man represents the surrender to neurosis: convention and neurosis, the two enemies of understanding, one might say

the enemies of love; and how difficult it is in the modern world to escape from one without invoking the other. Sartre's man is like a neurotic who seeks to cure himself by unfolding a myth around himself. Ordinary Language Man is at least surrounded by something which is not of his own creation, viz. ordinary language." (S&BR, 268)

This is an advantage, but not a game-changing one, because, she continues: "Neither pictures virtue as concerned with anything real outside ourselves. Neither provides us with a standpoint for considering real human beings in their variety, and neither presents us with any technique for exploring and controlling our own spiritual energy." (Ibid., 269) and finally: "The philosopher often clarifies and crystallises something which exists in a less coherent form in the general consciousness: that is, I take the general consciousness today to be ridden either by convention or by neurosis; and there are many features in both these current philosophies in which we can recognise ourselves." (S&BR, 270) Anxiety regarding self-image abounds in the West today, which is something very different from an ethical self-questioning. The particular existentialist form of this anxiety, this *Angst*, may occur, Murdoch says "when there is any felt discrepancy between personality and ideals. Perhaps very simple people escape it and some civilisations have not experienced it at all." (IP, 330) (In fact, the present Dalai Lama, and other Eastern spiritual guides to Western souls, have frequently commented on the ubiquity of self-obsessed anxiety and of guilt in the West, both syndromes almost unknown in traditional Eastern societies.) "Extreme *Angst*, in the popular modern form, is a disease or addiction of those who are passionately convinced that the personality resides solely in the conscious omnipotent will: and in so far as this conviction is wrong the condition partakes of illusion." (Ibid., 330-31)

According to Murdoch, Sartre (and Derrida) "were of course influenced by Heidegger, adopting from him his 'heroic' distinction between the authentic and the inauthentic life" (MGM, 158), the latter category all too often accommodating the lives of ordinary individuals. Despite this, and the reason for her interest in his early work, she says of Heidegger, that he "(in *Sein und Zeit*) takes his stand 'in the middle of experience', a place avoided by other philosophers. Existentialists professed to do something of the sort, but without much success. Perhaps in his attempt to explain what it is to be a here and now experiencing person, (early) Heidegger is the only true existentialist. His *Dasein*, being-there, self-being, makes its first appearance as an individual. The views of later Heidegger are another matter." (MGM, 160)

She often said that the two philosophers who had "most deeply disturbed philosophical thinking" in the twentieth century were Wittgenstein and Heidegger, and, also that "[i]t is a sad, interesting comment on the general state of philosophy that there are so few thinkers who are equally

interested in both.” (SZ, 94) The book she herself wrote on Heidegger, late in life, she felt was unsatisfactory, and she was not able to complete its correction. For this reason it has never been published; except, very recently, for the first chapter (of five drafted) cited below¹⁸⁴. His work was important to her, however, in relation to the question of selfhood construed as moral being. She says that a fundamental move for both him and Wittgenstein was “the retirement of the old metaphysical subject. [...] Heidegger” she writes “uses the term *Dasein*, ‘being there’, to indicate, in the most general and initially vague sense, human awareness, consciousness, something there; *Dasein* is also primordially Being-in-the-World. It is its world. [...] *Dasein*] is not a subject, or an ‘individual’ or an entity, but rather a sort of relation, or world-awareness, or being-there of a world. (Wittgenstein, [...] without fuss, and in terms of the nature of language, makes the same move, *Tractatus* 5.62 and following and *Investigations* passim.)” (95-96). Heidegger thus distinguishes *Daseins* from: “Being, which is that from which, or by which, they are given, and (roughly) what surrounds *Dasein* on every side.” (SZ, 97) She describes the way that this “awareness” finds itself in a world which is “essentially contingent, its Being-in-the-World (*In-der-Welt-Sein*) is accidental [...] and so, limited, temporal, historical”.

For Murdoch, *Dasein*, though not an entity, nonetheless required an image, one for which Heidegger was inspired, she believes, by “clearings” in his beloved Black Forest: “*Dasein* is not a thing, but more like an open space, or absence, which permits or encourages manifestations of Being. Only in human existence, consciousness, is Being disclosed” (97); and then only fleetingly, moments of “presence” appearing, as in a clearing, and slipping back into absence. What she appreciated in Heidegger’s picture is evident from the following brief account she gives of it:

Heidegger holds no theory of a transcendent systematised order of spiritual reality, or true knowledge, which it is man’s proper destiny to realise. The word ‘Being’, in Heidegger’s parlance, indicates the infinite availability of beings to each *Dasein*, ‘thrown’ as it is into contingent surroundings, where it always confronts ‘more’ and ‘other’. ‘*Being is the transcendens pure and simple*’ (62:68). *This* is what must be taken as absolutely primary; and not the old metaphysical subject who was always busy constructing, or argumentatively seeking, or dialectically pouncing upon, the objects of which its ‘external world’ was to consist.(97)

Here as elsewhere her appreciation of philosophical arguments which shift attention from the self construed as some kind of entity to a self construed as a centre of experience is evident, as is her capacity to see through the thickets of what she considered unhelpful philosophical terminology to “the clearing”. She saw Heidegger’s coming at the problem from a different angle as opening up

¹⁸⁴ Cf. *Iris Murdoch, Philosopher*, ed. Justin Broackes, OUP, Oxford, 2011, “*Sein und Zeit: Pursuit of Being*”, pp.93-109. Broackes notes: “It is a work caught literally in progress, half-corrected. It occupies sheets 1-26 of the full 224-sheet typescript on Heidegger”.

the possibility of a greater exploration of experience, with its inevitable affective qualities, and she sympathises with his claim “(178:139) that ‘the basic ontological Interpretation of the affective life in general has been able to make scarcely one forward step worthy of mention since Aristotle. On the contrary, affects and feelings come under the theme of psychological phenomena, functioning as a third class of these, usually along with ideation and volition. They sink to the level of accompanying phenomena.’” (SZ, 96) Murdoch shared this objection to the sidelining of affect as “psychological”; she did not see the emotions as something separate from cognition (or ideation), nor from volition (including the moral will). But for her, Heidegger’s work did not fulfil the promise hinted at here, moving off in a different direction. In a footnote to the passage cited above, Heidegger (quoting Pascal on the relation of love and knowledge) “here notices” she writes, “and at once abandons, an idea of immense importance, that of the moral content of cognition and the ubiquity of evaluation. [...] The implication of his lack of interest is that at an ‘everyday’ level, proximally and for the most part [in Heideggerian terminology], human life has no in-built moral aspect. In his system, moral insight or inspiration is a later, or farther, or special, or specialised, narrowly defined, achievement.” (SZ, 97)

This introduces a qualitative distinction between Daseins, and between, on the one hand Dasein’s; “everyday (*alltäglich*), provisional, incomplete, not yet authentic, ordinary state” (SZ, 97), which she says Heidegger portrays as “curiously bereft of values”; and on the other, the more fully-fledged “authentic” being, “which consists of higher and enlightened forms of what are already represented as fundamental structures.” (Ibid., 98). “Everyday Dasein” Murdoch writes, “the fuzzy and confused state of our ordinary awareness, is analysed by Heidegger in terms of various structural levels. Heidegger repeatedly insists that there is no correspondence between the level to which a Dasein attains – along the path from inauthentic to authentic – and individual human beings and their cultural levels (the ‘honest peasant’ being a lauded figure in his human panorama), but the coincidence of the higher qualities of Dasein and various high cultural attributes make this insistence slightly suspect for Murdoch.

She was particularly interested in the way that Heidegger speaks of the “understanding (*Verständnis*) and state of mind (*Befindlichkeit*, how we find ourselves)” as those primary structures that are constitutive of Dasein; with the further qualification that “Mood (*Stimmung*) characterises both states of mind and understanding as primary cognition. Fear, for instance, is a mode of state of mind.” (Ibid.). If states of mind have emotional qualities, or “modes”, such as that of fear, she suggests that an analysis of such fundamental structures would seem necessary to the further development of the theory; and yet she quotes Heidegger admitting that “ ‘the different

modes of state-of-mind and the ways in which they are interconnected in their foundations cannot be interpreted within the problematic of the present investigation' ” (Ibid.). Nor, she thought, were they thoroughly investigated elsewhere in his work. Despite this, Murdoch says, he uses these relatively unexplored concepts as the basis of his analysis of our “awareness” or “consciousness”. “Such an analysis” Murdoch writes, “cannot but be arbitrary, and in this case is designed by Heidegger to offer a primary support, in ‘inauthentic’ being, for his later theory of ‘authentic’ being. In fact, each Dasein in creating its own world as it responds to Being, is subject to multifold illusions and, she says, temptations to error: “ ‘Being-in-the-world is in itself *tempting* [*versucherish*]’ (221: 177). A prime temptation is represented by *They*: public opinion, conformity, society. ‘Idle talk [*Gerede*] and the way things have been publicly interpreted.’ (221: 177).” (Ibid.). It is not that “everyday chatter” is necessarily bad for Heidegger. Though “inauthentic”, he says repeatedly that “ ‘the inauthenticity of Dasein does not signify any “less” Being or any “lower” degree of Being. Rather it is the case that even in its fullest concretion Dasein can be characterised by inauthenticity – when busy, when excited, when interested, when ready for enjoyment.’ (68: 43).” It is at this point, Murdoch says, that we may wish to question Heidegger’s account, “which often in fact seems realistic and capable of being explained equally well without philosophical jargon” (SZ, 99). In this regard, she acknowledges that everyday chatter is clearly not “a manifestation of human greatness or virtue”, and also that, though possibly trivial, it is not seen by Heidegger as necessarily bad. What she objects to is that his distinction of authentic and inauthentic “in effect leaves the ordinary world of human activity, when we are busy, interested, enjoying something, without any signs of moral activity or moral orientation. [...] There is a kind of contempt for human existence if not in some way ‘exalted’ implied in Heidegger’s condescension towards *Gerede* and similar ‘inauthentic’ activities.” (Ibid.).¹⁸⁵

Cavell, who like Murdoch took Heidegger very seriously, also felt this. He cites, as an example, Heidegger, from *What Is Called Thinking?*, talking about the “abbreviation of words, or combination of their initials”, such as “Uni” for “University” and “Kino” (movies) for the cinema, as “[a] symptom, at first sight quite superficial, of the growing power of one-track thinking ... (p.34).” (QO, 159) Reading this, Cavell asks himself: “When I use the word ‘movies’ (instead of ‘motion pictures?’ ‘cinema’) am I really exemplifying, even helping along, the annihilation of human speech, hence of the human? [Heidegger’s point]. And then I think: Heidegger cannot hear

¹⁸⁵ For Sartre too ‘talk’ is suspect. Murdoch writes. “The notion that talk is false and only action is true ... can also be deduced from the psychology of *L’Être et le Néant*. Talk is *mauvaise foi*, choice reveals the man, and is the truth. (SRR 34)

the difference between the useful non-speak or moon-talk of acronyms (UNESCO, NATO, MIRV, AIDS) and the intimacy (call it nearness) of passing colloquialisms and cult abbreviations (Kino, flick, shrink, Poli Sci). [...] as to his evoking of popular language and culture, Heidegger hasn't the touch for it, the ear for it." (Ibid., 159-60).

Murdoch sees the notion that "Daseins inhabit (experience, make-to-be) a precognitive, and prelinguistic world, which demands or prompts interpretation" (SZ, 100), as a useful starting point for examining levels of consciousness, but for her his system-building gets in the way of the promise it contains of a deeper understanding of the passage from inauthentic to authentic being, of what it means for this to be mediated by truth. She writes: "in order to glorify the contrast, Heidegger unobtrusively downgrades *Alltäglichkeit*, everydayness, by treating its various manifestations as quasi-factual and unworthy of being paid the compliment of discriminating moral criticism." (Ibid., 101). (Interestingly, as Conradi notes, one of the questions Murdoch had hoped to address in her work on Heidegger was why it was that he "and Plato alike were attracted to tyrants." (IML, 111)

But to return to the discussion that most interested her, the question of state-of-mind as constitutive of primary cognition, she notes that "Dasein's fundamental and ubiquitous form of apprehension is described as care (*Sorge*) or concern (*Besorgen*), our restless practical state of being concerned with our world, which is also a sense of contingency and mortality." (SZ, 98). This is also, and primordially, a concern for truth. There is an affinity here with what Crisp calls Murdoch's belief "that attending to detail, and bringing out the nuances of what was observed, was the way to truth" (IMN, 276); and of course, attention to any object of our world for Murdoch always implied an awareness of its temporary and accidental nature, its "contingency and mortality". She notes that consciousness for Heidegger, as for Husserl, is always consciousness of something, "any perception makes something be", but this is not "an introduction to a phenomenalist sense datum theory of knowledge. Perception as something which may be distinguished from cognition, is not to be taken as providing original elements out of which cognition is to be constructed. A more general primary concept here is Mood (*Stimmung*), Dasein is always attuned to something." (SZ, 102). Here too, as we have seen, there is a certain affinity; perception at least, for Murdoch, could be described as always "attuned to something", but she found that little was made by Heidegger of the potential implicit in these concepts for exploring our relationships with our worlds. He does, however, make a distinction she finds useful between good and bad moods. (175: 136) In bad moods, "'Dasein becomes blind to itself, the environment with which it is concerned veils itself, the circumspection of concern goes astray.'" Of this she

writes that it “sounds like a promising description of ordinary selfish untruthful behaviour, but is not explored as such by Heidegger, who treats these distinctions as if they concerned ‘low-level’ psychological conditions, unconnected with the really important moral orientations.” (SZ, 101). (And this despite his protestation, cited earlier, that philosophy had for centuries relegated ‘affect’ to such psychological conditions.) She cites Heidegger as saying: “ ‘The possibilities of disclosure which belong to cognition reach far too short a way compared with the primordial disclosure belonging to moods.’ (210: 168)”

The case envisioned by Murdoch (and referred to above), of the mother-in-law ‘M’, “who feels hostility to her daughter-in-law” ‘D’, could easily be redescribed in the Heideggerian terms cited here: M’s Dasein, in her hostility (bad mood), “becomes blind to itself”, and so “the environment [or object, in this case D] with which it is concerned veils itself, the circumspection of concern goes away”.¹⁸⁶ But M is also described as intelligent, capable of self-criticism and of concern (in the ordinary sense) for others, and she therefore “observes D, or at least reflects deliberately about D, until gradually her vision of D alters”. (IP, 312-13) The “ordinary selfish *untruthful*” original view held by M manifests, as we have seen, in the use of adjectives which in effect convey the moral judgements of bad moods: vulgar, undignified, noisy; and these are eventually replaced by adjectives which convey those of good moods: straightforward, spontaneous, vivacious. What is “truthful” here is therefore not something which can be established objectively; but a *subjective* attempt to get to a clearer, more truthful vision *is* important, and it is not one that can be undertaken in a bad mood. This is not something which is morally insignificant in Murdoch’s view; but nor is it to suggest that a facile optimism takes one closer to truth. On the contrary, she felt that “evil” too was a concept that had been lost, leaving us unable to fully conceptualise the manifest evil of recent history :”Our inability to imagine evil is a consequence of the facile, dramatic, and, in spite of Hitler, optimistic picture of ourselves with which we work. We need to turn our attention [...] towards the real impenetrable human person. That this person is substantial, impenetrable, individual, indefinable, and valuable is after all the fundamental tenet of Liberalism.” (AD, 294)

There is no coincidence of philosophical vision between Heidegger and Murdoch, though there are certain affinities. With regard to the theory of ‘moods’, which she describes as “another philosophical way of characterising consciousness”, she asks: “Heidegger suggests that we are always in a mood. Is a mood then any state of mind?” She describes as somewhat dubious and

¹⁸⁶ “the world, and moment-to-moment experience, of the kindly, loving person is unlike that of the malicious, vengeful person. (Of course we may all of us be such persons at different times.)” (MGM 261)

arbitrary his selection of moods to include (care, angst, guilt, fear), and to exclude – those associated with love, for example (Heidegger’s ‘care’ does not seem to have any quality of love) – from his system. And furthermore, she doubted it was possible, or wise, to attempt “to create, for philosophical purposes, any systematic structure out of the innumerable concepts which may be used to characterise states of mind”; affirming rather that “it is important, I think essential, in philosophy, to handle these great ambiguous ideas, doing the best one can with them in particular contexts. Philosophy should be able to do this.” (SZ,101).

4. Wording the world.

Words constitute the ultimate texture and stuff of our moral being, since they are the most refined and delicate and detailed, as well as the most universally used and understood, of the symbolisms whereby we express ourselves into existence. We become spiritual animals when we become verbal animals. (SW ,241)

It is clear from this that “moral being” here refers to our being human, as verbal animals, in a much broader sense than that of animals with *logos*, if this is construed as the *rational* capacity to produce an intelligible, worded, ordering of the world from the mass of sensory data perceived. Unless, that is, *logos* itself is conceived as including the imagination as an active faculty, something which many philosophers have feared, not least Plato, who both loved and feared the imagination, for reasons Murdoch would explore¹⁸⁷. Nonetheless, she writes that “[a] deeper realisation of the role of symbols in morality need not involve (as certain critics seem to fear) any overthrow of reason. Reason must, however, especially in this region, appear in her other *persona* as imagination.” (VC, 92n) Murdoch contested dualist pictures of the mind, like that of Kant, which allowed for a subordinate role for the imagination in the formation of concepts¹⁸⁸, but specifically excluded it from *moral* reasoning. For her the symbolisms whereby we express ourselves into existence were drenched in metaphor, the principle instrument which *verbalises* images, and the imagination is involved at all levels of concept formation and concept change. More than this, she says, “The development of consciousness in human beings is inseparably connected with the use of metaphor. Metaphors are not merely peripheral decorations or even

¹⁸⁷ With regard to his dismissal of art Murdoch comments: “Artists are famous for not knowing how it is done, or for perhaps rightly feeling that at their best they do not know what they are up to. (This darkness of aesthetic inspiration worried Plato.) (MGM, 169)

¹⁸⁸ She writes: “Kant (in the *Critique of Pure Reason*) establishes imagination as a mediator between sense perception and concepts, something between sense and thought. Knowledge of the phenomenal world, empirical knowledge, is made possible by the imagination as a power of spontaneous synthesis operating at the transcendental barrier of consciousness.” (MGM, 308)

useful models, they are fundamental forms of awareness of our condition: metaphors of space, metaphors of movement, metaphors of vision.” (SGOC, 363) As *moral* beings therefore, our narrower, normative conceptions form part of, and derive from, the interweaving of symbolisms – those in word-form and those in other forms – in the texture of our being.

Murdoch’s investigations of how we word the world took two main directions: that of ordinary language, and that of philosophical language in as far as this contributes so greatly to creating the pictures of ourselves (and of our institutions) by which we live, returning in this way to ordinary life. Few citizens of Western democracies are aware of the immense debt they owe to Kant and Locke¹⁸⁹ (and others) for the formulation of concepts – such as that of the moral obligation to treat every other human being as an end, and not as a means – on which the human rights that we enjoy, and that we consider “natural” are based (“natural” in the sense of “self-evident”, a very recently acquired concept in history, and a remarkable one to have gained a degree of familiarity, at least as rhetoric, in the public domain). Philosophical terms often require translation before they can be assimilated (often through metaphor, as in the case of ‘means and ends’); but, as Murdoch says: “Great philosophers coin new moral concepts and communicate new moral visions and modes of understanding” (VC, 82-83); and for her this implies a *further* rich conceptual proliferation, both at the level of philosophical theory and beyond. More than this, these concepts have allowed modes of being to come into existence which previously, as *inconceivable*, were a fortiori *unliveable*. The obverse of this however is that powerful new concepts can mesmerise the world for generations, creating what Foucault calls new objectifications through which we read ourselves, and live our lives. Philosophy suffers from the temptation, valiantly fought by linguistic empiricism – to its great credit for Murdoch – “to take over all new knowledge and organise it into a pattern of what is deepest. The metaphysic of Freud, for instance, now so familiar, might be put forward (by some), refined and altered perhaps, as a structure fundamental to the mind, beyond and beneath which one cannot go.” (MGM, 159) A temptation she says which was not “resisted by philosophers in the past, and [was] deified by Hegel” (Ibid.) And of course Marx set out unashamedly to create *the* definitive system, adapting and displacing Hegel’s words into a brilliant and spellbinding new language for the purpose (The metaphor of “structures”, so solid, and yet in dialectical relation, was particularly compelling, especially to the modern science-infatuated

¹⁸⁹ “We are still using the language of Locke and Tom Paine, concerning ‘natural rights’, ‘toleration’, the ‘rights of man’. Politicians assert ‘human rights’, law courts listen to pleas for ‘natural justice’. The Nuremburg courts (after Hitler’s war) used the authority of ‘natural law’.” (MGM, 360)

mind). Where Foucault studied primarily the intellectual construction of discourse, Murdoch tended to focus more on its powerful appeal to the imagination.

Again, in Murdoch's youth, Paris was still the centre of the western world, and Sartre its *lumière*, for whom, as we have seen, the "dull gluey jumbled unfree ... nature of the inner life ... is taken as an image of, and then as a case of, *mauvaise foi*, bad faith, failure to reflect, spiritless acceptance of habits, conventions and bourgeois values"; and contrasted with "the clean clear light agile movement" of free authentic thought and action. The reliance on metaphor in this account (in *L'Être et le néant*) struck her forcibly: "Our mind is required to run with instant unnoticed speed along this persuasive line of juxtaposed ideas. Deep instinctive metaphors are at work [here]". (MGM, 155-56) What Murdoch is drawing attention to is the way in which the *picture* of the *en-soi* (and contrastingly free *pour-soi*), put together with metaphors, may hold us captive here. (The mind, despite the evident difficulty with the grey areas, seems so often captivated by binary pairs). It is not a description of any *realities* bearing these names, but we may (and many did) try to model ourselves accordingly, with a certain disdain for those who did not.

As to ordinary language, though Murdoch learned much from Wittgenstein in this regard, she notes that "Wittgenstein's examples and reflections include, but he does not discuss as such, our everyday, every moment use of metaphors which carry so many shades and evidences." (MGM, 281). Wittgenstein does in fact discuss metaphor *logically*, in terms, for example, of primary and secondary instances of meaning; the logician's (or anatomist's) eye taking the meat off the bones, as it were. But Murdoch felt that, in paying too little attention to the image-making *and* concept-forming function of metaphor in language, what tended to get lost was the fact that *all* language is "full of art forms, full of *values*" (Ibid.); and therefore an important aspect of our moral being was being ignored.

What she constantly comes back to is that our 'experience', our thoughts, are "riddled with the sensible." She writes, "Language itself, if we think of it as it occurs 'in' our thoughts, is hardly to be distinguished from imagery of a variety of kinds – hardly distinguished at times, one might add, from sensations, in the sense of obscure bodily feelings." (TL, 39). One of the important functions of *new* metaphor, as it expresses the spontaneous, or studied, creativity of language (incisive, lyrical, comic and so forth), is that of translating feeling into language. One simple, ordinary language example she gives of thinking instead with *old* (no doubt sometimes paleolithic) metaphors is that of the word 'bond', when used to describe a form of human relationship (or the less ancient relationship with money, which she doesn't mention). This she says is "typical of our use of language to fix in a semi-sensible picture some aspect of our activities – and such fixing is

using, or creating, concepts.” What she is pointing to here is that how a word is *used* does not and cannot exhaust the philosophical interest of words. Metaphor is, she says, “not a peripheral excrescence upon the linguistic structure, it is its living centre.” (TL, 40). (Note here that all the seven meaning-carrying words in this one sentence, whether abstract or concrete: peripheral, excrescence, upon, linguistic, structure, living, centre, are either directly metaphors, or, in the case of ‘linguistic’, a ‘buried’ (sic) metaphor, that is, it stands at one remove from the bodily instrument of language: *lingua* = tongue). She goes on to say that if we think of conceptualising as “grasping, or reducing to order, our situations with the help of a language which is fundamentally metaphorical ...[it] will operate against the world-language dualism which haunts us”. (Ibid.) It would also operate against the time-hallowed mind-body dualism – in philosophy and in ordinary conceptions of mind – at the point where the problem presents itself most forcefully, at the conjunction of bodily sensation, image and thought. Murdoch touched upon this, but never fully developed it: “Seen from this point of view, thinking is not the using of *symbols* which designate absent *objects*, symbolising and sensing being strictly divided from each other. Thinking is not designating at all, but rather understanding, grasping, ‘possessing’.” (TL, 40-41)

This “grasping” (an ordinary language metaphor describing the moment when one gains access to an idea one has been striving for), is crucial, for Murdoch, to the development of consciousness; to the fixing of “semi-sensible” pictures that ground (sic) these *mental* concepts. The word refers to a bodily-situated image of thought which, when set against voluntarist conceptions of human agency as located in an autonomous “will”, suggests a different picture of mind, and therefore of morality. (Other everyday metaphors of the understanding for example, include that of making clear what is opaque, or that of confused things “falling into place”.) She spoke of Kant’s “Reason” as shedding a beam of light from elsewhere (“from a distant, thereby invisible, God, or spiritual principle better called Freedom and Reason”, MGM ,34) into the dark matter of being. Another metaphor “voluntarist” philosophies suggest to her is that of “The moral agent [...] pictured as an isolated principle of will, or burrowing pinpoint of consciousness, inside, or beside, a lump of being which has been handed [on the behaviourist picture] over to other disciplines, such as psychology or sociology.” (OGG, 338). The latter portrait also provides the unflattering metaphor of “lump of being” for the “other half” of the human: the matter, the body, with its biological and psychological urges and its entrapment in social forms that certain views of *homo sapiens* imply.

In his foreword to *Existentialists and Mystics*,(p. xi), Steiner says of Murdoch that she “possesses, in the rarest measure, a gift ... that of dramatising, of making figurative, the act of thought.” One

other novelist Murdoch acclaimed for precisely this capacity was Henry James. We have seen her objection to the common philosophical practice of regarding introspection as a *merely* psychological practice, therefore fraught with the risk of inaccuracy and self-deception (which of course she knows it is); and her insistence that there are nonetheless forms of introspection – that are morally significant – which are able to focus on thought-processes truthfully (and which, as such, resemble what Foucault describes as the meditative form of reflexivity). In her essay *Consciousness and Thought*, she quotes this lengthy passage from James' *The Golden Bowl*, in which he describes the heroine's inability to think what is for her the unthinkable, the world-devastating – her husband's secret affair with her best friend. James records the tiny, almost imperceptible movements in her consciousness, as it moved from the unthinkable to the (almost) thought:

It was not till many days had passed that the Princess began to accept the idea of ... having listened to any inward voice that spoke in a new tone. Yet these instinctive postponements of reflection were the fruit, positively, of recognitions and perceptions already active; of the sense, above all, that she had made, at a particular hour, ... a difference in the situation so long present to her as practically unattackable. The situation had been present to her for months and months, the very centre of the garden of her life, but it had reared itself there like some strange tall tower of ivory, or perhaps rather some wonderful, beautiful, but outlandish pagoda... She had walked round and round it – that was what she felt; she had carried on her existence in the space left her for circulation, a space that sometimes seemed ample and sometimes narrow; looking up, all the while, at the fair structure that spread itself so amply and rose so high, but never quite making out, as yet, where she might have entered if she wished. She had not wished till now – such was the odd case ... At present, however, to her considering mind, it was as if she had ceased merely to circle and to scan the elevation, ceased so vaguely, so quite helplessly to stare and wonder: she had caught herself distinctly in the act of pausing, then in that of lingering, and finally in that of stepping unprecedentedly near... (quoted from James' *The Golden Bowl*, MGM, 170-71)

Murdoch cites this as a description of a state of consciousness that we can recognise: “We are able to think of the imagery both as something which the character is continually, like the author, coining as she goes along, and as something ‘deeper’ or ‘beyond’, which the imagery evokes or points to. This may be seen as two levels of a region where we can discern many levels. Figurative language is everywhere in our thinking, apprehended by the thinker as ultimate or as pointing beyond.” It may be impossible for us, reading this passage in an era where the influence of Freud is ubiquitous,¹⁹⁰ not to read it in the first instance as a description of Freudian negation, but be that as it may, for Murdoch the description in psychological terms does not exhaust, or displace, the philosophical interest in such empirical descriptions of occurrences in consciousness, of the relation of concept to image and of the creating of a narrative of our lives. As she says, this is a region where we can discern many levels (and the metaphors of “levels”, “depth and surface”, “beyond”, etc. are clearly indispensable to our thinking about thinking.)

¹⁹⁰ Murdoch quotes Auden's remark that Freud was not a position, but a whole climate of opinion.

Her interest in phenomenological and existential philosophy, as we have seen, had much to do with the exploration of consciousness, a concept that had been more or less killed off in Anglo-American philosophy.¹⁹¹ She says “I want there to be a discussable problem of consciousness because I want to talk about consciousness or self-being as the fundamental form of moral being.” She repeatedly contrasts this with notions such as that of Kant “for whom phenomenal awareness (the mess of actual consciousness) is without value”; but also, she adds, with “theories in the style of Husserl or of Freud which depend upon technical terminology.” (MGM, 171-72) Though phenomenology¹⁹² was concerned with consciousness and experience, with the inner life, she felt that its reliance on philosophical jargon masked a pressure to *structure* it in some way (or identify its presumed patterns or structures), to universalise it. The question of the language used in philosophical discourse was not only (though it was also) an aesthetic problem for her. Though some use of vocabulary that is internal to a certain discourse is inevitable in philosophy she believed that it was necessary to keep it to a minimum, given the paradox that the search for truth produces systematic set of concepts that must to some extent falsify. In this she agreed with Wittgenstein that philosophy may augment the spell-binding tendency already present in our “one-making” and its expression in words. She writes:

“The idea of a self-contained unity or limited whole is a fundamental instinctive concept. We see parts of things, we intuit whole things. [...] The urge to prove that where we intuit unity there really is unity is a deep emotional motive to philosophy, to art, to thinking itself. Intellect is naturally one-making.” (MGM, 1)

And one of the great culprits, the great worders of our world, the great unifiers, not mentioned here but always part of her awareness of the problem, is of course science. Unlike Foucault, she did not explore scientific discourse in either detail or depth, though its power, on a par with that of metaphysics, to shape our understanding, to create an enormously convincing “limited whole” through which we read the world and ourselves, was for her a constant preoccupation. Though she saw Wittgenstein’s exposure of the unifying tendency of thought as necessary, the resulting “loss of conceptual tissue” brings up other problems. She writes, “The contemporary challenge to unity

¹⁹¹ “Being and Nothingness is a very long and almost totally Hegelian work concerning the nature of human consciousness – a subject which no longer exists in British philosophy.” (HMD, 146)

¹⁹² She refers in particular to Husserl’s use of the concept of consciousness, and his belief that “it was possible by a special kind of introspection to isolate contents of consciousness and to study their transcendental (logical, category-bearing) structure.” *MGM*, p.158. This aspect of phenomenology, as an epistemological study of consciousness, already seeking (universal) structures, Murdoch saw as one of the genealogical antecedents of structuralism.

affects [...] ideas as diverse as God, the self, virtue, the material object, the story. The conceptual loss involved poses moral and theoretical problems [...] Can and should what is lost be recovered in some other way? In such contexts we see how deep metaphysical imagery goes down into the human soul” (MGM, 85) In a striking and much-quoted image of the way in which words entrap us, applied to any system of thought, to science as much as to philosophy, Wittgenstein wrote: “A picture held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it inexorably.” (PI, 115) The notion of the limited whole and the metaphor of picturing taken from Wittgenstein were central to Murdoch’s conception of consciousness (a word he was suspicious of, and she valued), as was another metaphor of his, that of the net. Wittgenstein had set up a thought experiment in the *Tractatus* (6.341- 6.342), using the example of Newtonian mechanics, to show that while scientific pictures, constructed using theoretical grids through which to read reality, were indeed useful instruments of knowledge, often capable of extraordinarily detailed and accurate description of their objects, they were nonetheless *pictures*.¹⁹³

Murdoch took the title of her first novel *Under the Net*, from this passage. In this book her hero, Hugo Belfounder an unworldly, unpretentious thinker who uttered Wittgensteinian insights with no apparent sense of their profundity, says¹⁹⁴: “All theorizing is flight. We must be ruled by the situation itself and this is unutterably particular. Indeed it is something to which we can never get close enough, however hard we may try as it were to creep under the net.” (UTN, 92). Against him, the other main character argues: “What you say goes against our very nature. We are rational animals in the sense of theory-making animals” (Ibid.) A.S. Byatt, who draws attention to this passage¹⁹⁵, also notes the view of reality Murdoch shares to some extent with Sartre. Murdoch

¹⁹³ 6.341. Newtonian mechanics, for example, imposes a unified form on the description of the world. Let us imagine a white surface with irregular black spots on it. We then say that whatever kind of picture these make, I can always approximate as closely as I wish to the description of it by covering the surface with a sufficiently fine square mesh, and then saying of every square whether it is black or white. In this way I shall have imposed a unified form on the description of the surface. The form is optional, since I could have achieved the same result by using a net with a triangular or hexagonal mesh[...] The different nets correspond to different systems for describing the world. Mechanics determines one form of description of the world by saying that all propositions used in the description of the world must be obtained in a given way from a given set of propositions – the axioms of mechanics. [...]

6.342. [...] The possibility of describing a picture like the one mentioned above with a net of a given form tells us nothing about the picture. (For that is true of all such pictures.) But what *does* characterise the picture is that it can be described *completely* by a particular net with a *particular* size of mesh.

Similarly the possibility of describing the world by means of Newtonian mechanics tells us nothing about the world: but what does tell us something about it is the precise *way* in which it is possible to describe it by these means. We are also told something about the world by the fact that it can be described more simply with one system of mechanics than with another.

¹⁹⁴ In the persona of Annandine, in the novel within the novel written by the other protagonist Jake, who personifies himself as Tamarus, setting up a fictional framework for their conversations.

¹⁹⁵ Byatt, A.S., *Degrees of Freedom: The Early novels of Iris Murdoch*, London: Vintage, 1994

writes of Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* that in it: "What does exist is brute and nameless, it escapes from the scheme of relations in which we imagine it to be rigidly enclosed, it escapes from language and science, it is more and other than our descriptions of it." (SRR, 39) But Byatt points out that one of her disagreements with Sartre is over his own fascination with building "pleasing intellectual schemes and patterns"; such that, despite his interest in the details of contemporary life, what he lacks is "an apprehension of the absurd irreducible uniqueness of people and of their relations with each other." (SRR, 75)

These passages, as with many others throughout Murdoch's work, stand as testimony to her concern for the particular, that theory ignores at its peril. Her work was taken as seminal in the development of particularism, but Bagnoli argues that she was not a "particularist" herself, if that is taken to imply "claims that universal moral principles are dispensable in accounting both for moral knowledge and moral reasons: such principles are epistemologically inert or simply unavailable. These claims do not follow from Murdoch's conception of concrete universals, and are not the core of her view." (EML, 222-23) (Just as Newtonian mechanics is not epistemologically inert because of its limitations.) Bagnoli argues that in this Murdoch follows Hegel, for whom, as she says, concepts have a history. Bagnoli writes: "According to Hegel we do not merely select and apply fully formed, static and fixed concepts. Concepts alter and develop as we use them. [...] Their content derives from the role they play in articulating experience and this is progressively determined over time." (EML, 221). Murdoch gave as one example of the way a concept's meaning changes and deepens that of "courage", mentioned earlier, Bagnoli uses the same framework for "love":

At twenty we have (not just a different) but a more abstract and empty concept of love than we have at forty. Life teaches us what love is, in concrete. This is not because at forty one has loved more, so to speak. The change in concepts does not occur merely because an abstract concept has been instantiated so many times. Rather, change occurs in virtue of the intimate relation that the abstract concept stands to its embodiments. Abstract and empty universals are enriched, and therefore changed, by their embodiments, that is, by the ways in which they are expressed and manifested. On this picture, moral concepts are concrete universals. (EML, 221-22)

Murdoch herself had written: "My view might be put by saying: moral terms must be treated as concrete universals" (IP, 322). Bagnoli points out that this means that such concepts exhibit both authority *and* history, a notion which marks the divergence of opinion on moral concepts between Murdoch and her colleague and friend, Elizabeth Anscombe (to whom *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* is dedicated). Both philosophers insisted on the *historicity* of moral concepts, but Anscombe (in *Modern Moral Philosophy* in *Philosophy* 33, No. 124, January 1958) claimed that

the transposition of such concepts from one historical context to another deprived them of authority, a conclusion Murdoch did not share. In this ground-breaking essay, Anscombe claims that Aristotle did not fully clarify the differences between non-moral and moral uses of certain concepts, particularly those having to do with obligation. She gives, as an example of non-moral use of the modal verbs of obligation, the case of a machine which “needs oil” or “should be oiled”. Instead, she writes, with regard to the moral connotations of these same words: “The ordinary (and quite indispensable) terms “should,” “needs,” “ought,” “must”- acquired this special sense by being equated in the relevant contexts with “is obliged,” or “is bound,” or “is required to,” in the sense in which one can be obliged or bound by law, or something can be required by law.” Therefore, Anscombe asks:

“How did this come about? The answer is in history: between Aristotle and us came Christianity, with its law conception of ethics. For Christianity derived its ethical notions from the Torah. [...] To have a *law* conception of ethics is to hold that what is needed for conformity with the virtues failure in which is the mark of being bad *qua* man (and not merely, say, *qua* craftsman or logician) - that what is needed for *this*, is required by divine law. Naturally it is not possible to have such a conception unless you believe in God as a law-giver; like Jews, Stoics, and Christians. But if such a conception is dominant for many centuries, and then is given up, it is a natural result that the concepts of “obligation,” of being bound or required as by a law, should remain though they had lost their root; and if the word “ought” has become invested in certain contexts with the sense of “obligation,” it too will remain to be spoken with a special emphasis and special feeling in these contexts. (Ibid.)

Anscombe describes this situation as “the interesting one of the survival of a concept outside the framework of thought that made it a really intelligible one.” (Ibid.) Her conclusion is that, deprived of *this* sense, these concepts have become meaningless, and the use of them in modern philosophy (her target is “every single English academic moral philosopher since Sidgwick”) is conceptually distorted and therefore illegitimate. She is here defending a deontological against a consequentialist view of ethics. Consequentialism is clearly “quite incompatible with the Hebrew-Christian (preceptive) ethic. For it has been characteristic of that ethic to teach that there are certain things forbidden whatever *consequences* threaten, such as choosing to kill the innocent for any purpose, however good.” (Ibid.) As a Catholic, what she is thinking of here is abortion, not war (and the concept of ‘innocence’ already excludes the death penalty from this precept).

Murdoch’s historicity goes much deeper however, as she never sees moral concepts as either fixed or fixable. Their changeable nature requires rather constant attention to the way in which each concept is being used, and this will always have to do with the vision by which the user lives. She saw concepts as so unfixed that their perpetual modification was itself part of our form of life, and whereas Anscombe was expressing her fear of the moral degeneration implied in concept loss, Murdoch saw both degeneration *and* moral progress as involving conceptual shifts. Another anti-

Liberal thinker Murdoch took to task was T.S. Eliot, who, like many conservatives, believes that humans are fundamentally bad, or sinful, discipline must be strict, and the world of liberalism is chaos. She writes, paraphrasing Eliot: “Liberalism [...] destroys tradition through challenging authority. In a society where every man’s opinion is equally valuable there is no unity of outlook.” (TSEM, 164). As with Anscombe, perhaps even more so with Eliot, she shares a profound concern for the power of words. Of his poetry she writes that one of its deep characteristics “is a continual concern, in the midst of difficulties, for the referential character of words. (This one most movingly feels in the *Four Quartets*.) [...] He is aware, and shares this concern with certain contemporary moral philosophers [e.g. Hare], that a deterioration in morals is a destruction of concepts. If our convictions part company with our vocabulary of justification, our controversies become empty. ‘We are living at present in a kind of doldrums between opposing winds of doctrine, in a period in which one political philosophy has lost its cogency, though it is still the only one in which public speech can be framed.’ ” (Ibid., 165) Or, as he superbly expresses this disconnectedness in an image she quotes from his poetry, we have become “ ‘Men and bits of paper, whirled by the cold wind.’ ” (Ibid., 166). Again however, her rejection of his conclusions is a defence of what was for her the enormous *good* on which liberalism is based: “Mr. Eliot plays dangerously when he rejects *in toto* the moral content of liberalism and appeals over its head to a conception of dogma and authority [tradition, the Anglican Church] which can itself play an ambivalent role. In 1933 Mr. Eliot remarked that ‘it was better to worship a Golden Calf than to worship nothing.’¹⁹⁶ And in 1939 he said that we should object to fascism because it is pagan. [...] To argue in this way is to belittle that naked respect for the human person as such which one may connect with Locke and with Kant, and which one hopes has become part of the English political tradition.” (Ibid.) Interestingly Murdoch, like Eliot, bemoaned the loss of concepts from political discourse, but from the other end of the political spectrum. Noting that the Welfare State was “a result, largely of socialist thinking and socialist endeavour”, the achievement of which has given rise to a certain “lassitude about fundamentals”, she notes the shift from serious theoretical endeavour to short-term pragmatic ends in the Labour Party (and long before Blair): “we see an impoverishment of thinking and language which is typical. [...] We have suffered a general loss of concepts, the loss of a moral and political vocabulary. We no longer use a spread-out substantial picture of the manifold virtues of man and society.” (AD, 289-90)

¹⁹⁶ In *Criterion* (April 1933).

With regard to the concept of “duty” Anscombe in effect argues that it was now epistemologically inert and could be reactivated, as it were, only by the reinstatement of its connection with an external moral authority. Anscombe therefore saw Kant’s internalisation of moral authority, though principled, as leading to the hollowing out of the concept of duty. Murdoch on the other hand saw the internalisation of duty as a regeneration¹⁹⁷, not a degeneration of the concept, which now (and probably forever) would require further regeneration. Bagnoli writes, “[to] say that the deployment of universals is concrete is to say that we express and manifest something particular with them.” (Ibid. 223) And with regard to “duty”, Murdoch writes, as if to illustrate the point:

There are what we call ‘public duties’ and there are ordinary duties, related to personal conduct, such as truth-telling and benevolence; and there are very difficult duties where what is public or taken for granted is scrutinised in an unusual personal situation. The idea of duty extends into a personal sphere of potentially minute and not publicly explicable detail. Here where it loses its automatic or semi-public character, it becomes a part of what seems more like personal moral desire or aspiration, of experience and consciousness and the continuous work of Eros. (MGM, 356)

Plato meets Kant in Murdoch, shall we say, and from the encounter something new emerges. Here, for Murdoch, the abstract universal is rendered concrete in a number of different, situated ways. This process is one of the ways in which we word our world, and here duty is required to respond to love.

¹⁹⁷ “A main tenet of the Kantian metaphysic has merged into popular, or semi-popular, moral argument. We must internalise the demand of duty, understand it, judge it, make it our own, be autonomous, not heteronomous.” (MGM ,137).

Ch.3. The Good

1. Life goods and constitutive goods.

“Good represents the reality of which God is the dream.” (MGM, 496)

Murdoch treats the concept of good in two ways which are essentially interconnected; firstly as a regulative idea, an idea that is, in her usage, operational in (and therefore constitutive of) our understanding of the world; and secondly as a means of access to the real. The notion of the regulative idea she took, as we have seen, from Kant, using it explicitly in relation to the concept of the self, and implicitly in her treatment of the concept of the good; while the notion that the idea of the good can provide us with access to what is real she took from Plato. With regard to the relevance of the regulative idea, just as we need the idea of “consciousness or self-being” as the metaphorical locus of our moral being, so – in this world in which we have the bad¹⁹⁸ constantly before our eyes – we need to believe in the existence of the good. A world without good is clearly unthinkable, and for Murdoch, a world without a significant *idea* of the good, would be drifting and impoverished. What is in question here philosophically is whether or not this idea is subsumed under another, such as that of God, or of freedom, or of maximising happiness; these conceptions all narrowing the range of application of the *fundamental* idea of the good, to which they are all connected, in different ways, each presenting their own problems. For this reason she saw the Platonic idea of the *moral* good (freed of the metaphysical *Form*) as such a promising starting point in moral philosophy. Murdoch insists on the relevance of the simple fact that we all do believe that some actions and attitudes are better than others, and recognise that some of our actions and attitudes are not good; and further that “we recognise the real existence of evil: cynicism, cruelty, indifference to suffering”. Nonetheless, she says, “the concept of Good still remains obscure and mysterious.” (SGOC, 380)

¹⁹⁸ “Marx said prophetically (...), that now for the first time in history the human race had the technical means to cure many of its age-old ills such as hunger and homelessness and poverty. We today are in an even more remarkable situation. We are not only coming into possession of the means to cure the ills, we are in the position of not being able to avoid quite literally seeing them. On television we see the sufferings of the world, we see how other lives go to waste. As our latter day prophets keep telling us, technology is making the world into a village, (...) while at the same time, we see that we are still even now patently unable to set things to rights, unable to stop famine in India or war in Africa. I think this is fundamentally the situation which drives young people into a kind of frenzy.” (E&M, 230)

This is in part because of its level of generality: “Asking what Good is is not like asking what Truth is or what Courage is, since, in explaining the latter, the idea of Good must enter in, it is that in the light of which the explanation must proceed. ... And if we try to define Good as X we have to add that we mean of course a good X” (SGOC, 380) So, for example, if we say that Reason, or Love, or Pleasure are good, we must acknowledge that there is also bad reason, or love, or pleasure. In the same way, the idea of *perfection* is always linked to some particular thing: “all things which are capable of showing degrees of excellence show it in their own way” (Ibid., 381); but the concept of “perfect” is also dependent on that of “good”. The non-cognitivist solution to this problem was, Murdoch says, to “support a view of Good as empty and almost trivial, a mere word, ‘the most general adjective of commendation’, a flag used by the questing will, a term which could with greater clarity be replaced with ‘I’m for this.’” (Ibid., 381) We have seen some of her objections to this line of argument. Crucial among these, as Moran puts it, is that “Against the notion of ‘good’ reduced to evaluative choice in logical empiricism Murdoch pictured it as ‘the object of genuine apprehension of something real outside oneself’.” (IM&E, 186)

This, clearly Platonic, view was one developed by Murdoch alone in those years and will be discussed later. In her time at Oxford however, another line of development was emerging in opposition to the mainstream picture, that of “virtue ethics”, which was generally associated with an Aristotelian focus on human flourishing as the ground of orientation to what is good.¹⁹⁹ Writing in recognition of his debt to Murdoch, Charles Taylor recalls that, in his book *Sources of the Self*,²⁰⁰ he had described the virtues as “life goods”, meaning things it is good to *be*, which he distinguishes from what he calls “constitutive goods”. By the latter, he means “features of the world, or God, such that their being what they are is essential to the life goods being good.” (IMMP, 12) He draws particular attention to those discussed explicitly and extensively by Murdoch, that is, of Plato (The Idea of the Good), and of monotheistic religion (God), and also to that of Aristotle, which she treated less, but with which she shares a lot of ground. These will be discussed here in reverse order. “For Aristotle”, he writes, “our being animals having logos” is a *constitutive* good, therefore “we come to see better how to order the goods in our lives when we understand that we are animals possessing logos.” (Ibid., 12-13). This naturalistic stance was, he

¹⁹⁹ “recently forms of Aristotelian moral philosophy, both Thomist and phenomenological, have given much-needed attention to the concept of the inner life (Philippa Foot, *Virtues and Vices*, Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*.)” (MGM 151)

²⁰⁰ *Sources of the Self*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989, chap.4. Murdoch refers to this as a “wise and learned work” (MGM, 166)

says, congenial to Murdoch (without the metaphysic) as far as it went; and many of the ways of bringing about freedom from the bad, which she always identifies with the selfishness, the self-centredness, of the ego, do in fact have to do with human flourishing – “impulses of love, rational reflection, new scenery”, etc. But for her there was something lacking from this worthy, worldly perspective; something that has to do with the need for a deeper understanding of life, and therefore to do with a coming to terms with death; with a more profound sense of value; something she recognised in Wittgenstein’s urge to run up against the limits of language, or in running up against paradox. Taylor describes this as, for Murdoch, “the consideration of a good which would be beyond life, in the sense that its goodness cannot be entirely or exhaustively explained in terms of its contributing to a fuller, better, richer, more satisfying human life. It is a good that we might sometimes more appropriately respond to in suffering and death, rather than in fullness and life – the domain, as usually understood, of religion.” (IMMP, 5) That is to say, it is the *ethical* domain of religion, of all and any religion (therefore with no necessary connection to dogma), as it is the domain of much metaphysics.

The spectrum of connotations of “good” is of course a very large one. At its “upper” end there is the notion of a “higher” good requiring a deep personal commitment, whereas material “goods” are usually collocated at the “lower” end. To say this is already to use the metaphor connecting human “mind/spirit” and “matter” with what is “higher” and “lower”. That this metaphor appears to be universally understood, in the most diverse of cultures, is in itself not insignificant; a fact we are told something about the world by, as Wittgenstein has it. By the same token, the metaphor “deep”, also employed here – deep commitment, deep thought – signifies that the whole of a person, heights and depths, as it were, is involved in such commitment, such thought. In many traditions of human thought, the notion of a higher good refers to some ideal, something which inspires individual humans to go beyond self-interest, to orient themselves to “higher” goals, whether these be this-worldly, such as human liberation or some form of perfectionism, or other-worldly, such as love of God. This is true even in a philosophical tradition such as utilitarianism, which looks more kindly than others on material goods. If the greatest good (note the utilitarian change of superlative adjective) is held to be the good of the greatest number then, here too, many lesser individual goods must be sacrificed to that end²⁰¹.

²⁰¹ Though, as a philosophical tradition that set out to define the good, the conundrum represented by quantitative and qualitative goods, and “spiritual” and material goods, provided many an opportunity for philosophical headaches.

Taylor describes the empiricist and utilitarian visions as belonging to “the cultural revolution which I have called the affirmation of ordinary life, which dethroned the supposedly higher activities of contemplation and the civic life and put the center of gravity of goodness in ordinary living, production, and the family. It belongs to this spiritual outlook that our first concern ought to be to increase life, relieve suffering, foster prosperity. Concern for the fullness of life smacked of pride, of self-absorption. And beyond that, it was inherently not egalitarian, since the alleged “higher” activities could only be carried out by an elite minority, whereas leading one’s ordinary life rightly was open to everyone.” (IMMP, 6) Murdoch expressed considerable sympathy with this “revolution”, the concern that value be attached also to ordinariness, and that moral philosophy should be addressed to everyone, not merely an elite, can be seen throughout her work. But whereas for many advocates of these traditions a concern for the inner life was at best a private right, at worst morally reprehensible in as far as it did not contribute to the happiness of others, for Murdoch the reverse of this was true. For her, as for the virtue ethicists, an ethical concern for oneself and one’s own life was central to the way one would operate in the world, among others²⁰². Murdoch held that a morality which lacked either a public or a private dimension was incomplete. Of empiricism, she writes that, in general, it “is one essential aspect of good philosophy, just as utilitarianism is one aspect of good moral philosophy. It represents what must not be ignored. It remembers the contingent.” (MGM, 236). And in an essay from 1970 she writes : “When I was young I thought, as all young people do, that freedom was the thing. Later on I felt that virtue was the thing. Now I begin to suspect that freedom and virtue are concepts which ought to be pinned into place by some more fundamental thinking about a proper quality of human life, which *begins* at the food and shelter level.”²⁰³ As is evident from this, her focus shifted over the years, but never to the extent that any of these dimensions could for her be neglected.

With regard to these “life goods” there is then a certain confluence of opinion, between Murdoch’s own ideas and those of virtue ethicists, a certain Aristotelian streak in Murdoch. A reading of McDowell’s account of the neo-Aristotelian position he defends can serve to illustrate this confluence. He points out that for those ethical positions for which the primary question is “right conduct, and the nature and justification of behaviour”, the concept of virtue is only of secondary

²⁰² As noted in Pt.I, Foucault expresses this same point in saying that the care of the self is ethically prior in that it is ontologically prior.

²⁰³ She goes on “This philosophical viewpoint is, of course, not new. It is a form of utilitarianism: less optimistic, more desperate, but still recognisable as a relation of the great doctrine of Bentham and John Stuart Mill.” (E&M, 231)

interest. On such views, virtue is seen as “a disposition (perhaps of a specially rational and self-conscious kind) to behave rightly; the nature of virtue is explained, as it were, from the outside in.” (V&R, 121) Against this, he puts forward a different view, in the Aristotelian tradition, for which the question of what one should *do* is approached “via the notion of a virtuous person. A conception of right conduct is grasped, as it were, from the inside out.”(Ibid.) From this position, he takes up the question of the relation of virtue to the knowledge that is required to make morally correct decisions, illustrating this with the case of the virtue of kindness thus:

A kind person has a reliable sensitivity to a certain sort of requirement which situations impose on behaviour. The deliverances of a reliable sensitivity are cases of knowledge; ... a kind person knows what it is like to be confronted with a requirement of kindness. The sensitivity is, we might say, a sort of perceptual capacity.” (Ibid., 122)

This is clearly reminiscent of Murdoch’s insistence that perception is never uncoloured by states of mind and mental habits that will be more, or less, virtuous. The *attention* that she sees as a moral requirement is dependent on the type of *sensitivity* here described, thus she shares this “inside out” view of achieving right conduct. McDowell adds, for the sake of pursuing the argument, the hypothesis that “the concept of the virtue is the concept of a state whose possession accounts for the actions which manifest it. Since that explanatory role is filled by the sensitivity, the sensitivity turns out to be what the virtue is.” (Ibid., 123) He later overturns this by pointing out that if the holder of the appropriate sensitivity perceives the requirement, but fails to act on it, then it must be said that the sensitivity is only one component of, not the whole of, the virtue. Murdoch would agree with this; what she would stress however is just how important a component it is, and how acting upon the deliverances of that sensitivity will depend on how it is woven into the texture of one’s being. McDowell too points out that the argument in any case only holds if the “sensitivity” so described indicates something more and something other than a simple predisposition. A propensity to kindness, for example, unaccompanied by a practice of moral reflection, may not necessarily result in right conduct. There may be some truth in the popular saying that sometimes it is necessary to be cruel to be kind; but more importantly, certain deontological moralities have objected to treating kindness, or “compassion”, as a *principle* for precisely the reason that it may obstruct “justice”. An alternative reading of this conundrum however, may see it as indicative of the relevance of another Aristotelian argument, that regarding the unity of virtue. On this reading, kindness as a *virtue* must be distinguished from a mere

propensity to be gentle by the fact that it must *include* a sense of justice. McDowell explains further:

So we cannot disentangle genuine possession of the virtue of kindness from the sensitivity which constitutes fairness. And since there are obviously no limits on the possibilities for compresence, in the same situation, of circumstances of the sorts proper sensitivities to which constitute all the virtues, the argument can be generalized: no one virtue can be fully possessed except by a possessor of all of them, that is, a possessor of virtue in general. Thus the particular virtues are not a batch of independent sensitivities. Rather, we use the concepts of the particular virtues to mark similarities and dissimilarities among the manifestations of a single sensitivity which is what virtue, in general, is: an ability to recognise requirements which situations impose on one's behaviour. It is a single complex sensitivity of this sort which we are aiming to instil when we aim to inculcate a moral outlook." (Ibid., 123-24)

Now, Murdoch never took up the Aristotelian argument of the unity of virtue as such, and Aristotelians generally recognise that some individuals clearly do in fact possess some virtues and not others, and that some, like prudence and courage, for example, may result in conflicting deliverances. Nonetheless, this argument may throw some light on Murdoch's insistence on moral attention being both "just and loving" in that, if it is clear that the virtue of kindness must contain, in some sense, that of fairness, an argument may also be constructed which will show that the reverse of this is true. They are both significant threads in the texture of one's being, and the absence of one quality will compromise the other. This is also true of the "vices". What convention labels as separate vices are also to be seen, especially in Murdoch's novels, as interconnected. Nussbaum cites a passage from *The Black Prince*²⁰⁴ in which the main character, Bradley bemoans egoistic anxiety as the root of all the vices: " 'Anxiety most of all characterizes the human animal. This is perhaps the most general name for all the vices at a certain mean level of their operation. It is a kind of cupidity, a kind of fear, a kind of envy, a kind of hate. Now, a favoured recluse, I can, as anxiety diminishes, measure both my freedom and my previous servitude. Fortunate are they who are even sufficiently aware of this problem to make the smallest efforts to check this dimming preoccupation ... The natural tendency of the human soul is towards the protection of the ego.' p.183)." (Cited FSK, 146) Here anxiety is *equated* with the protection of the ego (from fear), with feeding the ego (cupidity), and with resentment of whoever offends the ego (hate), or has what it doesn't have (envy). What they all have in common is the tension in the body and the tightness in the mind we describe as anxiety. Virtue therefore, on Murdoch's view, always tends to the overcoming of the anxious ego.

Although she holds that it would be difficult to establish an *order* of virtues in any systematic form, she also says that if, for example, "we reflect upon courage and ask why we think it to be a

²⁰⁴ Murdoch, *The Black Prince*, (New York, Viking, 1973)

virtue, what kind of courage is the highest, what distinguishes courage from rashness, ferocity, self-assertion, and so on, we are bound, in our explanation, to use the names of other virtues. The best kind of courage (that which would make a man act unselfishly in a concentration camp) is steadfast, calm, temperate, intelligent, loving ... This may not in fact be exactly the right description, but it is the right sort of description.” (OGG, 346). Murdoch believes that possessing virtue (being good), derives from a desire for the good, and hence, from her viewpoint, from the inclination, and intention, to pay great attention to each and every situation of one’s life, and to one’s own operations within it, with the good in mind. This however, was an intention that could be misdirected by adherence to conventional moral codes, and the language in which they are expressed. As she says, with particular reference to moral words: “There are two senses of ‘knowing what a word means’, one connected with ordinary language and one very much less so. Knowledge of a value concept is something to be understood, as it were, in depth, and not in terms of switching on to some given impersonal [public] network.” (IP, 322) The reductive, narrow views which ordinary language can enshrine may offer us a substitute for reflection on whatever matter is at hand. If instead we ask ourselves, for example, what it really means to be just then, Murdoch writes, “[w]e come to understand this as we come to understand the relationship between justice and the other virtues. Such a reflection requires and generates a rich vocabulary for naming aspects of goodness.” (OGG, 347).

All this, however, refers particularly to “private” morality, for which the ordinary language meaning of a word counts as an element in one’s moral reflection; but she believed there were good reasons for distinguishing this from, let us say, public morality. “Thinking about politics is in certain respects different from thinking about private morals”, she writes. If for no other reason, because “One may be ruthless with oneself but not with others.” (MGM, 368). Maintaining such a distinction may seem “over-simple”, she says, “as great philosophers have usually collected morals and (sometimes by implication) politics, together with epistemology and ‘logical foundations’, into one metaphysical internally related package. Yet the distinction deserves to be kept in mind.” (MGM, 351) Murdoch held that we require “axiomatic notions which distinguish political machinery from moral ideas (e.g. crime from sin), and also allow some ideas a special (universal) status (e.g. the idea of human rights).” (Ibid., 358) Though she held that conscientious law-breaking should be kept to a minimum in a democracy, where mechanisms exist for change within the law, she believed that in democratic states, the law could sometimes rightly be broken in the name of axiomatic rights.

So – on this picture, if not unity there is at least a necessary interpenetration of the virtues in private moral reflection; and at the same time the need for a careful separation and distinction in the public sphere, where: “Axioms must be mutually independent (externally not internally related) in order to be able to intelligibly fight each other and go on existing in defeat.” (MGM, 367) In this sense, with regard to the public good, Murdoch stood with Kant, and not with Plato. She says that “Plato temperamentally resembles Kant in combining a great sense of human possibility with a great sense of human worthlessness. [...] Though he knows how passionate and bad we are, Kant is a moral democrat expecting every rational being to be able to do his duty. Plato, on the other hand, is a moral aristocrat, and in this respect a puritan of a different type, who regards most of us as pretty irrevocably plunged in illusion” (F&S, 403) Worse still of course, on her view, where the aristocratic Plato thought only the few would use freedom wisely, totalitarian thinking denies this possibility to everyone. In totalitarian societies, an order of *internally related* virtues and vices is established, making these coincide with crimes, or simply dematerialising “anomalies”. At one time, in China, Murdoch asked a question about homosexuality, and her otherwise excellent interpreter did not know what she meant. After giving an explanation, she was told there was no such thing in China. This she says, is an example of “conceptual impoverishment or concept-starvation”, which “makes it easier for a few leaders to turn their citizens into a centrally directed herd.” (MGM, 364)

According to Taylor the constitutive good of “Judeo-Christian-Islamic theism” is “God having created us and calling us”, in the light of which “the most important life goods are the love and worship of God” (IMMP, 12-13), all other virtues taking their specific form in accordance with these central values. Though such goods are clearly unavailable to and unwanted by a non-believer such as Murdoch, she was interested in what they implied as practices, as forms of the relation of the self to itself, as it were. Just as she had explored the changing nature of moral concepts like “duty” and “courage”, which were subject both to historical variation and to personal variation in the progressing life of a person, so she was interested in the *loss* (to many), so recent in the history of Western society, of the concept of God; of God as exclusive author of constitutive and life goods. Murdoch did not hold, like T. S. Eliot, or Dostoevsky, another of Murdoch’s points of reference, that if God is dead all is chaos. What she did fear however was the loss of the *function* of God, so to speak, as a fixed point of exemplary goodness *outside* of the self, and its leaving behind the power (through the will) of the over-confident intellect, a problem she felt Kant, and certain descent lines from him, had underestimated or confounded. Kant himself, however, “could

still put science ‘in its place’. In our post-Kantian world, where religious faith wanes and truth gains so much of its prestige from scientific method, this is harder to do.” (MGM, 50). Kant was also of course, like Plato, a religious philosopher, in the sense that mattered to her, that is, in that they were both “imbued with a characteristically religious certainty about the fundamental and ubiquitous reality of goodness: their real world is the moral world.” (Ibid.)

She read pre-Kantian Christian philosophers with scepticism about their “proofs”, but great interest in how these connected with their ethics. Anselm’s ontological proof, though no proof at all and “often treated as an absurdity”²⁰⁵, interested her in that his arguments were more ethical than epistemological. The *concept* of truth was seen to emerge from the *experience* of truthfulness and truth-seeking (attention to reality); in this bearing some resemblance to Foucault’s definition of the “meditative” form of pre-Cartesian reflexivity, which Foucault attributes particularly to the Stoics, whereas Murdoch attributes it particularly to Plato. For her, Anselm’s arguments recall “Plato’s philosophy [which] expounds a fundamental connection between epistemology and ethics; truthful knowledge and virtue are bound together.” (MGM, 398) Unlike the Aristotelian Aquinas (who rejected the Proof), Anselm was of a Platonic disposition “through Plotinus and Augustine, and the neoplatonic transformations of Plato’s Form of the Good into a personified one.” (Ibid.) He believed that “we ‘see’ God through the morally good things of the world, through our (moral) perception of what is beautiful and holy, [...] So we find God both, and inextricably both, in the world and in our own soul.” (MGM, 396) Beyond this however, if ‘belief’ is construed as of the intellect, ‘faith’ implies a belief experienced as *conviction*, that is, as a form of certainty rendered unshakable by a *feeling* of its rightness. The feeling that “it must be like this” has its dangers in philosophy, and in ethics, where, dangerous as it is, it is of crucial importance in our relation to the world. Without such conviction the constitutive goods would be disempowered. In this territory where philosophy crosses paths with religion, Murdoch quotes Wittgenstein’s remarks from *Culture and Value* (p.85) on the fact that “proofs” of God rarely seem to be convincing (or even intended to be) to the non-believer. This leads him to think “that what believers who have furnished such proofs have wanted to do is to give their ‘belief’ an intellectual analysis and foundation, although they themselves would never have come to believe as a result of such proofs.” (cited MGM, 415) In other words the conviction, which is unshakable, precedes the “proof”. As Murdoch shows in her discussion of Anselm’s ontological proof, the conviction has to do with the way “The idea of Good (goodness, virtue) crystallises out of our moral activity” Ibid.

²⁰⁵ The Proof itself in its different formulations will not be discussed here. It is the Platonic form of the argument that interests Murdoch.

426), regardless of the flawed logic of the argument and its failure to prove the existence of God. Murdoch, following Weil, associates this finding words for something one already seems to know with Plato's concept of *anamnesis*, the sense of knowing more than one has words for, of recognition, when one finds the words, of a truth one already knew. For Murdoch, there is a "religious outlook, religious preoccupations, a religious psychology which is detachable from dogma. Religion is a mode of belief in the unique sovereign place of goodness in human life. ... It adheres essentially to the conception of being human, and cannot be detached; and we may express this by saying that it is not accidental, does not exist contingently". (Ibid.)

One version of this conviction she mentions, still in Anselm, is his "*Credo ut intelligam* (I believe in order to understand)"; and she says, interestingly, that this is "an idea with which we are familiar in personal relationships, in art, in theoretical studies. I have faith (important place for this concept) in a person or idea in order to understand him or it." (MGM, 393). She describes this faith as "loving belief". Anselm love's God's truth and so he can understand it. Referring to a similar perception in another context, she cites Henry James "well-known remark concerning Balzac and his characters; that Balzac did not love these people because he knew them, he knew them because he loved them." (AD, 285) *This* concept of faith is one which has to do with intuition, not with the unreflective acceptance of dogma, though it is vulnerable to dogma. It has to do with the experience – known to everyone in some form or degree – of conviction that something is right, whether or not there are arguments available to express it: "I intuitively know and grasp more than I can yet explain" (MGM, 393), or ever explain. Murdoch would agree with Wittgenstein that this type of knowledge is in the territory of the unsayable: "It may be seen too", she notes, as a proof which a man can only give to himself, herein resembling *cogito ergo sum*, to which it is indeed related by Descartes." (Ibid., 392)

For her this *experience* of conviction, which is the *sine qua non* of constitutive goods, was a territory that philosophy needed to explore. Cavell has pointed out that the desire for certainty that marks the Cartesian tradition, with which Wittgenstein was trying to come to grips, had its darker side in the inevitable persistence of uncertainty; or rather of a vast realm of doubt, lived in the absence of metaphysical consolation, that is, of both religious and philosophical consolation. He describes this as "our human subjection to doubt" (MMWS, 61), and for Cavell it was Wittgenstein who, perhaps more than any other philosopher, exposed the way in which "our desire for certainty is written into every word we use, and believe we believe in." (Ibid.) Plato too of course feared the "magical" power of words. He certainly had a thorough knowledge of the myths and theologies of his own time, and may well, Murdoch says, have taken part in the Eleusian

mysteries, but as she also says that, “he cannot be said to have taken any form of myth literally, and constantly draws attention to its status of an edifying or hermeneutic ‘as if’ [including those of his own invention].” (MGM, 402). He also “positively excludes theistic magic and belief in gods. The form of the Good is never identified with God.” (Ibid. 403)

For Anselm, the necessary, non-contingent existence of God is established through experience, through our capacity to recognise good and evil, and “degrees of good, and [we] are thus able to have the idea of the greatest conceivable good.” (MGM, 395) For Murdoch the Proof is interesting therefore not as “proof”, but as a particular type of metaphysical argument which is also an appeal to experience. And she notes that of course “good metaphysical arguments are successful appeals to experience.” (MGM, 395). She points out that this “is essentially an argument from morality not from design. It appeals to our moral understanding, and not to any of the more strictly rational considerations relied upon by Aquinas” (Ibid., 396) Murdoch suggests that if the Proof proves anything it is not the existence of any God, but rather how deep-seated moral value is in human life. She quotes Simone Weil’s (Platonic) comment on this in *Pensées sans ordre concernant l’Amour de Dieu* (p.136) : “ ‘For everything which concerns absolute good and our contact with it, the proof by perfection (wrongly called ontological), is not only valid, but is the only proof which is valid. It is instantly implied by the notion of good.’ ” (Quoted MGM, 401)

Taylor says of Plato that his constitutive good was the Idea of the Good itself, for which “a deeper understanding of the life dominated by reason has to pass through attaining a vision of the Idea of the Good. The truly good person is inspired to model himself or herself on the order shaped by the Good.” (Ibid. 13) Murdoch’s own objective however was clearly not a deeper understanding of the life dominated by reason, but rather a deeper understanding of ourselves as moral beings, dominated instead by false images and conceptions of ourselves and others, from which we need to free ourselves. This was much more a problematic of the Stoics than of Plato’s, who Murdoch never explored thoroughly. The Idea of the Good as a model, as exemplar, that Taylor points to here was indeed important for her as a moral instrument; but she saw this as perhaps its *secondary*, and not its primary function. Much more importantly, she saw it as a tool for cutting through fantasy to get to reality; and for this reason she saw Plato’s work as vitally relevant today, in a philosophical context in which the good can no longer be considered as definable. For Plato, she writes, “The idea of Good cannot be compromised or tainted by its inclusion in actual human proceedings, where its magnetism is nevertheless, and even at the lowest levels, omnipresent. Good is unique, it is ‘above being’, it fosters our sense of reality as the sun fosters life on earth.

The virtues, the other moral Forms, are aspects of this central idea, increasingly understood as interconnected parts of it.” (MGM, 399) Plato assumed however, that only more refined souls would feel this magnetism of the good, the rest were to be kept in line by coercion. Murdoch, who spurns elitism, seems to believe that the magnetism of good is felt by everyone, though its evident corruptibility presents a major problem. Despite these difficulties, the idea of the good remained Murdoch’s constitutive good. As Maria Antonaccio writes, what Murdoch means by the “sovereignty of good” is that it “supercedes all concepts that might rival it as the norm of morality.” (PH, 142).

2. Good: Real: Love (IP, 333)

Wittgenstein has nothing to say in the *Tractatus* about a transcendent reality. Ethics cannot be expressed in words. ‘Ethics is transcendental.’ (6.421) (cited MGM, 30)
(What is transcendent is beyond human experience, what is transcendental is not derived from human experience, but is a condition of it.) (MGM, 28)

Murdoch, like Wittgenstein, holds that nothing *definitive* can be said about transcendent realities and that the *foundations* of ethics cannot be expressed in words, but she rejected the idea that all talk of such realities was therefore meaningless. She says that “philosophy has a negative technical task of removing (philosophical) errors, which must be combined with a positive task of finding a simple open mode of discourse concerning ordinary evident (for instance moral) aspects of human life.” (MGM, 212) In effect, on her view, there is nothing that humans do that is not in some way connected to morality which, she says, “is not one empirical phenomenon among others [... it is] concerned with [...] what cannot be ‘thought away’ out of human life, what Plato expressed in the concept of the Form of the Good and Kant in the Categorical Imperative.” (Ibid., 412) Philosophy has shown the errors inherent in these “transcendent realities”, but what they are pointing to, what they are unverifiable descriptions of, is an underlying reality of human life that cannot be denied, cannot be “thought away”. This she calls “the omnipresence of value (an opposition between good and bad) in human activity.” (Ibid., 259)

Like Wittgenstein, she holds that ethics is transcendental, that it is, in her terms, a condition of human experience. But for her the transcendental character of ethics translates into this idea of the omnipresence of value, this sense human beings have of an opposition between bad and good in human affairs; and a wanting to do what is good, to be what is good, that is made manifest in the ubiquity of moral systems and religions. (That the desire for the good is easily corrupted,

becoming a desire for the bad, is integral to this hypothesis, and requires much attention. She sees no grounds for hypothesising any autonomous “desire for evil”²⁰⁶.) She notes also that “the traditional idea of God was an image or metaphor” (Ibid., 412) of this orientation to the good, construed as an absolute of human experience; despite, or maybe even because of, the myriad forms in which it is expressed. So for Murdoch, it is precisely because ethics is *transcendental*, that it is a condition of existence, that the “transcendent realities” invented to describe it are all in one sense wrong, conflicting with each other and unverifiable; and in one sense right, in that taken as *metaphor*, they point to morality as an essential form of life, though one that manifests in many different historical and cultural guises. The guises themselves are of great interest both in what they hold in common – for Murdoch, an idea of the good, an image which inspires, an ideal to aspire to – and in their differences. With regard to the latter, some of the images of transcendent realities created by human beings, and the memorable stories that enshrine them, have been the inspiration of much that is good (and bad) in human life, precisely because, Murdoch says, they have to do with the *incomprehensibility* of the world, not its comprehensibility, around which Wittgenstein wished to clarify the limits. She writes: “How ambiguous a parable [for example, or myth] appears to be will depend on the coherence of the moral world in which it is being used. Certain parables or stories undoubtedly owe their power to the fact that they incarnate a moral truth which is paradoxical, infinitely suggestive and open to continual reinterpretation.” (VCM, 90-91) (She mentions here the Prodigal Son, many others from various traditions come to mind). A salient fact for her was that we mostly do believe, in ordinary life if not in the philosopher’s chair, and regardless of whether or not we think it can be “proved”, that *objectively*, Ghandi was “good” and Hitler was “bad”. For this reason, some philosophies have tried to say the unsayable, to determine ultimate criteria of goodness and badness that will help us judge morally more ambiguous figures, and ourselves, accurately; conversely, others have left unattended the misfit between what we may hold philosophically and what we believe in ordinary life. For Murdoch such approaches, today, misconceive the task of moral philosophy. What is now needed is recognition of the inevitable disjunction between the empirically evident fact that we do think some things are objectively better than others, and the theoretical impossibility of establishing

²⁰⁶ The desire for moral good is empirically evident and justifiable on various types of grounds. The desire for evil is equally evident, but there is no verifiable means of knowing whether it appears as a corruption of the desire for good, or as due to some hypothetical, autonomous, deterministic force (Freud’s position on this varied, for example.) Murdoch is not interested in theorising about this. Her own conclusion is that this is impossible to establish either way, and in any case it makes no difference to morality how evil is categorised. Its manifestations are what they are, and seem to be largely attributable to egoism of one kind or another; and the remedies (if, and as far as they can be found) must respond to the presenting case.

definitive criteria of good and bad; so that we can move on to the more pressing problem of how we can develop our moral reflection in the context of *this* reality. In as far as we still do believe that there is good and bad in this world however, our moral task is to ground ourselves in the good, and Murdoch believes modern moral philosophy, like ancient philosophy, should occupy itself with how we can achieve this extremely difficult task.

Her own analysis begins with the fact that we are incessantly evaluating; in the first instance aesthetically: in all of our looking at the world and at others there is a felt response, a trace of: “I like this, I don’t like this, I am indifferent to this”, most of which is *not* consciously articulated. In our moral evaluation this aesthetic evaluation is always, consciously or not, in some way present.²⁰⁷ Given that this continuative evaluation is largely inarticulate, some philosophies, as we have seen, have regarded it as a messy territory that is best ignored, in that, whatever its effect on the moral agent, its deliverances will be seen in behaviour, or will in some way be amalgamated into thought and thereby expressed with greater clarity in words or actions. This is a modern view which Murdoch challenges.²⁰⁸ To take an example of a dissimilar view from the ancients, Epictetus held that one ignored this murkiness at one’s peril. What was ethically necessary was to render articulate such desire and aversion (and the resulting judgements), through a close examination of which “representations” we give our assent to, and which we reject²⁰⁹. In some respects, Murdoch’s account of M reflecting on her own “representations” of D comes close to this view of ethical practice²¹⁰; with the important difference that, on this Stoic view, although aesthetic sensibility is held, as it is for her, to be imbued with intellect, the ethical reflection which operates on it was not similarly held to be imbued with passion, it could rise above passion (hence its appeal to Kant). For Murdoch, on the other hand, there are no clear borderlines between aesthetic sensibility and ethical reflection, and the theories that interested her most were those where consciousness (or self-being) is seen in some way as a variable continuum of intellect and passion, a continuum that may be introspectable and transformable.

²⁰⁷ In Eastern moral philosophy everyday “mind” (as opposed to more awakened mental states) always has some affective character, therefore terms for such “mind” usually translate as “heart-mind”. Some forms of meditative practice begin with an attempt to determine accurately one’s present state of mind. “Indifference” is here considered a negative, not a neutral state, having its own (variable) affective character.

²⁰⁸ She says of Kant, for example, that “Kant’s aesthetic tastes mirror his moral preferences. He would like, as it were, by morality to crystallise out of the historical process a simple society living strictly by extremely general rules (‘Always tell the truth,’ etc.), with no place for the morally complicated or eccentric.” (S&G, 215)

²⁰⁹ See on this especially Hadot, P., *The Inner Citadel*, 1998, Harvard University Press.

²¹⁰ Though Murdoch herself had no sense of affinity with the Stoics.

In this regard, she writes that one difference between Kant and Plato is that “Plato insists that approach to the central Idea (pure goodness, the Form of the Good) comes through a difficult disciplined purification of intellect and passion, wherein passion (Eros) becomes a spiritual force. Whereas Kant regards ‘feelings’ as dangerous to morality, sharply divides (noumenal) reason from (phenomenal) emotion, and stresses that dutiful action is something of which every man is capable.” (MGM, 11). This last point, that morality must be able to elaborate a path that everyone can follow, Murdoch too held dear; and she appreciates Kant for democratising spirituality (and not just society) in this way. But, though Plato, in his time, did not share these concerns,²¹¹ she values his capacity to envisage different paths (for different people, or different phases in one life) to the Good, rather than imposing a single model; and his awareness that no path was without its risks. His most celebrated model is that described magnificently in the *Phaedrus*, where it is beauty, the spiritual thing to which we are most immediately and instinctively attracted, that is our first awakening to the Good, understood as difficult to accede to directly. But this is not put forward as the only path. “The way of beauty which passes through human love has a more obvious, evident and immediate starting point, but also involves great psychological dangers and temptations. The way of intellectual activity in the broad sense of Plato’s word *techné*, which would include craft but not fine art, lacks the initial charm of the beautiful, but is on the whole less perilous, although knowledge is power, and power poses moral problems. Power as magic, pride, secret superior knowledge infects science and technology, as it has always infected religion.” (MGM, 17) The last of these statements is clearly a Murdochian extension of Plato’s thought to a question that mattered to her in contemporary reality, which she leaves here as an aside.

Murdoch believed, as we have seen, that to *assume* a separation between ideas and feelings, between aesthetic evaluation and moral evaluation, was more a result of hypostatisation of concepts than of attention to reality; typical of attempts to fit the unruly world into an orderly philosophical system. Wittgenstein saw the fallacy of any such endeavour and avoided it; *Tractatus* 6.421, cited above, continues: “(Ethics and aesthetics are one and the same [i.e. transcendental])”. For Murdoch, ethics and aesthetics, if not always the same, were internally connected, even inseparable, as two forms of manifestation of the same Eros, in our experience of, and operation on, the world. (Her argument rests on a conception of Eros as symbol of

²¹¹ Murdoch notes that Plato envisages a “‘way of justice’ which, without necessarily leading to true enlightenment, is open to anyone who is able to harmonise the different levels of his soul moderately well under the general guidance of reason” (F&S 414); his dim view of the moral standing and capacities of most people notwithstanding.

ethics/aesthetics as transcendental, allowing her to draw on “naturalistic” arguments without committing to them metaphysically.) Murdoch refers to Eros as the life-energy in human beings, our desires, our creativity, our capacity for empathy and for love. The great paradox of Eros is that, in its self-centred desires, in order to get from “the other” what it wants, it has to recognise the other, relate to the other. “Love” as she says, “is the extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real.” And it is precisely as such that “Love ... is the discovery of reality.” (S&G, 215)

The great theoretician of Eros was of course Plato, for whom, she writes:

Eros is the desire for good and joy which is active at all levels in the soul and through which we are able to turn toward reality. This is the fundamental force which can release the prisoners [from the darkness of the cave] and draw them toward the higher satisfactions of light and freedom. It is also the force which finds expression in the unbridled appetites of the tyrant (who is described in books VIII-IX of the *Republic*). There is a limited amount of soul-energy (*Republic*, 458D), so, for better or worse, one desire will weaken another. (F&S, 415)

Reading today of this mutability of psychic energy, through forms of good and bad, immediately calls to mind Freud, the great modern theoretician of Eros; and Murdoch notes that Freud readily acknowledged his debt to Plato. She quotes, from the preface to Freud’s *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, his remark that “ ‘The enlarged sexuality of psychoanalysis coincides with the Eros of the divine Plato.’ ”(Quoted F&S, 418) Eros was the central concept, both in terms of our ethical relation to the world as described above, *and* in our understanding of reality, for both Plato and Freud; one from a materialist, the other from an ideal perspective (with material and ideal sex as the great symbols). Murdoch was neither an idealist nor a materialist, but she believed that Freud’s work was too important to be ignored by moral philosophy²¹². From Freud’s vast opus, the part most relevant to Murdoch, and to this argument, is his discussion of the relation of the “pleasure principle” to the “reality principle”²¹³. To give a very rough sketch of this, Freud holds that our original, infantile form of relation to the world can be expressed as: “I like it, therefore I want it”, and “I don’t like, I’m getting rid of it (Freud says ‘spitting it out’)”. The resulting mechanism of “take or reject, but don’t give” is what he calls the “pleasure principle”; and it is entirely selfish. As we grow, we come to understand that the other exists, and has desires and aversions that are equally self-centred, therefore in conflict with our own, to which necessity

²¹² She agreed with Wittgenstein that Freud had, around some ground-breaking and important insights, invented a new and enormously persuasive mythology that has suffered the fate of becoming part of our collective western vision, without necessarily being properly understood. She writes: “Freud takes the idea of the sexual drive as a unitary principle of explanation; and, with simplifications, the ‘modern consciousness’ has followed him. At any rate ‘explanations by sex’ tend to have for us a kind of intuitive obviousness, as if we perfectly knew what sex was.” (MGM, 21)

²¹³ First elaborated in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, and re-elaborated variously throughout his work.

requires we adjust. The resulting need to come to terms with the world outside ourselves he calls the “reality principle”. Our narcissistic preoccupation with self is paradoxically self-defeating however: if we do not learn to recognise the other, to give as well as take, we will be trapped in this conflict. Freud also hypothesises that the birth of *thought* itself occurs here, in the need to activate this dormant capacity, so as to work out a strategy (in effect, a communication strategy) for managing this first and most basic of all contradictions in one’s relationship to the other. The strategy that works turns out to involve acceptance of limitations on the space and power of the self. And from recognition of the other – from putting energy into the effort of *seeing* the other – in sufficiently favourable conditions a warm sentiment of affection arises, and the beginnings of love. Thus in Freud, *thought* and *love* and recognition of *reality* arise in relation to each other.

On this picture, aesthetics appears clearly as the ground of ethics, of the capacity both for love *and* for self-control. Our immediate, necessarily aesthetic, apprehension of the world produces a non-mediated response, but increasingly, in what Murdoch calls the progressing life of a person, a response mediated by reflection. “Virtue” she writes, “is concerned with really apprehending that other people exist”, and it starts here. Virtue was not Freud’s primary concern of course. Murdoch notes that he makes these observations “in the context of a scientific therapy which aims not at making people good but making them workable” (OGG, 341); though in his more discursive, less clinical works, he upheld this idea.²¹⁴ Freudian clinical practice centres on words, on an interpretation of their uses as driven by forces within oneself linked to the pleasure principle (whose domain is the unconscious), in its lifelong struggle with reality. Bringing to consciousness these deep-seated motivations should allow us to overcome fantasy and face reality. It is evident from this account that M’s response to D could also be described in these terms. She undertakes an examination of the reality of the other, thus disempowering her fantasy construction of who D is. What is important to note here however is that the intellect which is thus engaged in the adjustment of itself (from a mental health perspective, or, from a moral perspective, is engaged in purification, or clarification, or seeing justly) is *not* disengaged, not dispassionate. What is dispassionate is unsympathetic in its mode of looking; “judgemental” is not “judicious”. The *engaged* intellect is striving for a calm passion (and this is only an oxymoron if the two concepts are hypostatized as contradictory). Murdoch writes: “we need the concept of consciousness to understand how morality is cognitive [...] Reflection on this concept enables us to display how deeply, subtly and in detail, values, the various qualities and grades between good and bad, ‘seep’ through our moment-to-moment experiences. This activity concerns our ability to see that value,

²¹⁴ See particularly Freud, *Civilisation and its Discontents*.

valuing, is ... an apprehension of the world, an aspect of cognition, which is everywhere.” (MGM, 265)

Apprehension of the world occurs automatically, but it changes according to the degree of attention that is brought both to *what* we are looking at and to the *way* we are looking, in other words, to the state of mind through which we evaluate. On Plato’s picture, Murdoch says, “you can only *see* at your own level and a little above. Perception here is, and properly, the *image* of thought and spiritual insight.” (MGM 400) And the biggest obstacle to clear vision Murdoch sees as ego-centred, rather than other-centred vision. As Conradi puts it: “Iris believed ... that what is self-enclosed is disturbed, and what is good self-transcending. Attention – what she was to call a ‘passionate, stilled attention’ – was the bridge.” (IML, 545) This sentence of Conradi’s is indicative of three of Murdoch’s main sources of reference (though not in equal measure) in constructing her own moral philosophy: Freud, for his profound analysis of what is self-enclosed and disturbed; Plato for his account of what is good and self-transcending; and Simone Weil, for developing a practice of “passionate, stilled attention”. Between them they show that ego traps us in fantasy, that attention to the other allows us a way out of the egoic trap, and that orientation to the good allows us to grasp reality. For all of them love is the key; the good quality of Eros that leads us out of the self to the other and to reality. (“The activity of Eros is orientation of desire.” MGM, 497).

Of Freud’s insights she writes:

Freud takes a thoroughly pessimistic view of human nature. He sees the psyche as an egocentric system of quasi-mechanical energy, largely determined by its own individual history, whose natural attachments are sexual, ambiguous, and hard for the subject to understand or motive, and fantasy is a stronger force than reason. Objectivity and unselfishness are not natural to human beings. (OGG, 341)

She notes that as a theory this is a form of determinism, but it served her purposes in its other guise of insightful (and metaphorical) empirical description. As determinism it was rejected by Sartre, and others. For her too “Determinism as a philosophical theory is quite unproven”. Nonetheless, she writes, “[t]he problem is to accommodate inside moral philosophy, and to suggest methods of dealing with the fact that so much of human conduct is moved by mechanical energy of an egocentric kind. In the moral life the enemy is the fat relentless ego. Moral philosophy is properly, and in the past has sometimes been, the discussion of this ego and of the techniques (if any) for its defeat.” (Ibid., 342) The techniques of psychoanalysis were developed for the clinical setting of analyst and analysand, and were not easily to be transferred to a form of

individual practice, so psychoanalysis ceased to be useful to her in moving from description of the problem of ego-centrism to devising personal techniques for working with the self. As previously noted, between determinism, like that of Freud, and the existentialist image of total freedom, Murdoch proposed, following Weil, the idea of *attention*, or looking. Sufficient attention (according to the possibilities of the specific individual in the specific moment) to a whole situation, with all the characters in it, including the self, may lead to an understanding of what is the right thing to do, that conventional norms cannot provide. Should the artist sacrifice her family to her work or her work to her family? Should one leave a failed marriage or stay for the sake of the children? Should one afflict another person with a painful “truth”, or stay silent? There are no formulaic answers to these questions. If there is a conflict between what one wants and what one considers one’s duty does the “will” enter in conflict with itself? Murdoch notes that “What I have called fantasy, the proliferation of blinding self-centred aims and images, is itself a powerful system of energy, and most of what is often called ‘will’ or ‘willing’ belongs to this system. What counteracts the system is attention to reality inspired by, consisting of, love.” (OGG, 354) Rather like Kant’s freedom to obey the deliverances of one’s own reason, on this view one exercises one’s freedom, one’s courage, one’s will, in choosing to try and get to the truth of the matter under observation, choosing not to avoid difficult truths. And though she does not spell this out here, the implication is that only love can provide an energy of sufficient strength to counter egoism. “Will and reason then”, Murdoch writes, “are not entirely separate faculties in the moral agent. Will continually influences belief, for better or worse, and is ideally able to influence it through a sustained attention to reality. This is what Simone Weil means when she says that ‘will is obedience not resolution. As moral agents we have to try to see justly, to overcome prejudice, to avoid temptation, to control and curb imagination, to direct reflection.” (Ibid., 331-32).

This does not imply that for her “insight or pureness of heart are more important than action... Overt actions are perfectly obviously important [...] I have suggested that we have to accept a darker, less fully conscious, less steadily rational image of the dynamics of the human personality.” (IP, 335) Given the difficulties however, clarity may not come easily, and she believes, against existentialism, that we cannot always achieve clear insight, and we do also need moral codes to fall back on, however personalised. She goes on “With this dark entity behind us we may sometimes decide to act abstractly by rule, to ignore vision and the compulsive energy derived from it; and we may find that as a result both energy and vision are unexpectedly given. To decide when to attempt such leaps is one of the most difficult of moral problems. But if we do leap ahead of what we know, we still have to try to catch up. Will cannot run very far ahead of

knowledge, and attention is our daily bread.” (Ibid.) On this picture, she recuperates the concept of the moral “will” as in the first place supplying the moral effort that is needed to deepening our understanding of where the path of good lies in any one situation, and secondly – in those situations which may occur when clear vision has not been attained – she uses “will” in the more orthodox sense of holding us to observation of a moral duty. Importantly however, in such cases, our moral obligation does not stop there. She suggests here that we must continue to pay *retrospective* attention to whatever it is we had not fully understood, and learn from this.

For the religious believer on the other hand the focus outside of the self that will help one orient to the good (and away from the bad), is God. “Prayer” she says, “is properly not petition, but simply an attention to God which is a form of love.”²¹⁵ Murdoch says of this believer that, “especially if his God is conceived as a person, [he is] in the fortunate position of being able to focus his thought upon something which is a source of energy.” But, she says, this reorientation of one’s energies to the good (as to the bad) is something we all have : “Such focusing, with such results, is natural to human beings. Consider being in love. Consider too the attempt to check being in love, and the need in such a case of another object to attend to. Where strong emotions of sexual love, or of hatred, or of jealousy are concerned, ‘pure will’ can usually achieve little. It is small use telling oneself ‘Stop being in love, stop feeling resentment, be just.’ What is needed is a reorientation which will provide an energy of a different kind.” (OGG, 345)

The good then, in nature, in art, in beauty, in God, serves as a focus for reorienting psychic energy; but Murdoch sees it as a model which inspires rather than as a model to emulate. In discussing the ethical significance of Plato’s Forms she says that for him “our relation to the divine pattern thus discerned [the Forms, especially the Form of the Good seen in the good man, in the starry heavens, in nature, etc.] must not be ambitiously mimetic (mimesis apes appearance), but rather participatory and continuous.... To put it (as Plato does not) in terms with a Kantian ring: a good man does not copy another good man, playing him as an actor plays a role, but attempts to become himself a part or function of the divine intelligence. We were never told to ‘copy’ the Forms by producing something else, but only to become able to see them and thus in a sense to become like them.” (F&S, 436) This being said however, what is most important in focusing on the good remains for her its capacity to clear our vision (to which the good as good *energy* tends). To clear it from that self-enclosed fantasy which constitutes so much more of our mental life than we

²¹⁵ In Christian theology, this is “perfect prayer”, the prayer of saints, mystics and the good of heart; prayer as petition is recognised as better than nothing, as capable of keeping the believers on the right path.

would like to admit, and blocks our perception of reality; or colours it with negative states of mind. She believed that:

The chief enemy of excellence [and even decency] in morality (and also in art) is personal fantasy: the tissue of self-aggrandising and consoling wishes and dreams which prevents one from seeing what is there outside one. Rilke said of Cézanne that he did not paint 'I like it', he painted 'There it is.' This is not easy, and requires, in art or morals, a discipline. One might say here that art is an excellent analogy of morals, or indeed that it is a case of morals. We cease to be in order to attend to the existence of something else, a natural object, a person in need. We can see in mediocre art, where perhaps it is even more clearly seen than in mediocre conduct, the intrusion of fantasy, the assertion of self, the dimming of any reflection of the real world. (Ibid., 347-48).

The question of the usefulness of “transcendent objects”, such as God, or the Idea of the Good, or the Idea of Perfection, appears in this context of striving for excellence. She asks if, instead of the injunction “ ‘Be ye therefore perfect’ ”, whether it would not be more sensible to say: “ ‘Be ye therefore slightly improved?’”, given that, as some psychologists say, too high a standard can make us neurotic. And she replies that “One cannot feel unmixed love for a mediocre moral standard any more than one can for the work of a mediocre artist. The idea of perfection is also a natural producer of order. In its light we come to see that A, which superficially resembles B, is really better than B.” (Ibid. 350) Yet again, love is seen as the motivating force of morality. As Charles Taylor puts it: “If we give the full range of ethical feelings their due, we can see that the fullness of ethical life involves not just doing, but also being; and not just these two but also loving (which is shorthand here for being moved by, being inspired by, what is constitutively good.” (IMMP, 15)

Murdoch writes: “It is in the capacity to love, that is to *see*, that the liberation of the soul from fantasy consists.” (OGG, 354). If then the ability to see another person clearly is dependent on love, then seeing falsely must be blighted by lack of love, by looking through a fog of vice. Nussbaum, in discussing Murdoch’s relation to both Plato’s and Dante’s conceptions of the relation of love to clear seeing, notes that for Dante, in the *Purgatorio*, the world is blind “ (*lo mondo è cieco*’. *Purg.* XVI. 66, cited L&V, 34). She goes on:

[For Dante] The manifold lures of the world – including fame, honour, money, and sexual gratification – create a ‘fog’ around the sight of the individual, blocking him from truly perceiving other individuals [...] The sins that are purged in purgatory are all different forms of false love [...] In pride, for example, one attends only to one’s own standing; this leads to a failure to notice the needs of those one loves. In envy, one fixes on the possessions or standing of others, again failing to notice who they are and what they need. In anger one is filled with resentment at slights to oneself and so cannot fully attend to the particular history and needs of another. In sloth and gluttony, one’s absorption in one’s own comfort and gratification makes one slow to go to another’s need. Lust finally, is also seen as a deformation of individual love. [...] A person who is seen as a vessel of pleasure is not seen truly for what he or she *is*. (L&V, 34)

It is the last of these in particular that Nussbaum contrasts with Plato's vision in the *Phaedrus*. Plato, she says, does describe cases of sexual love having this same characteristic of falsity, determined by lust, this failure to recognise the soul's beauty within the beautiful body; but the *Phaedrus* is a hymn to the opposite case, where it is erotic love itself which induces clear vision. Among the claims Plato makes in the *Phaedrus* for erotic love, Nussbaum notes that

First, love of this sort is a crucial, apparently even a necessary, source of *motivation* for the soul in its search for the vision of the Good ["and a lifelong accompaniment to that search"]. And "Second, love of this sort is a crucial source of *vision*, vision both of the beloved person and of the external impersonal Good, the two being closely linked. The passage makes it clear that the discovery of the inner divinity and the nature of the beloved person and the generous loving actions inspired by this discovery (see 253B, 255B) would not have taken place without the violent erotic reaction of the whole soul, therefore not without its sexuality [...] The passage also argues that although direct unmediated arousal by the Good is conceivable, it is not empirically possible; as we are we need the body's response to beauty to stimulate our vision and send it searching for goodness. (L&V, 31)

Clearly, this sexual love is largely sublimated in Plato, its physical expression mostly restricted to the limited form of caresses; but the sexual desire remains, whereas in Dante it is radically purified, so that *no* physical desire remains. The question Nussbaum poses is whether Murdoch's vision, as expressed in her philosophy and her novels, is closer to that of Plato, her inspiration, or of Dante. In this essay (*Love and Vision*), Nussbaum notes that at no point in her philosophical work does Murdoch contrast these two visions directly, and she turns to the novels to examine the question. Here she cites different passages which could support either argument, but, whilst acknowledging that it is impossible to determine the matter, she says finally that "Murdoch's *eros* is ... more Platonic than Dantean, though it complicates Platonism with a complex diagnosis." (Ibid., 46) Nussbaum makes the suggestion that, in the case of M and D, "it is envy and perhaps sexual jealousy that causes the mother-in-law to focus on the superficial and unattractive traits of her daughter-in-law." (Ibid., 36-37) This is a somewhat gratuitous and irrelevant comment as, *whatever* the sources of M's dislike, and Murdoch lists many of these (but *not* sexual jealousy, and *not* by "Freudian" omission), *why* this dislike occurs is *not* what this case study is about. What it is about is self-transformation as a practice of reflection on the way in which one formulates one's moral judgements, and this practice does not change if the obstacle to "the good" (Buddhists would say "to right seeing") changes (from snobbishness to sexual envy, for example). Nussbaum seems to be looking for some kind of "natural" explanation of malice, whereas Murdoch is looking at the cognitive imagination (in which sexuality figures as one manifestation, not necessarily predominant, of a much broader "Eros"). Nussbaum herself notes that "Murdoch, more than any other contemporary ethical thinker, has made us vividly aware of the many stratagems by which

the ego wraps itself in a cozy self-serving fog that prevents egress to the reality of the other.” (Ibid. 36). In fact, it is always egoism that is Murdoch’s cardinal sin; and this may, and often is, expressed through sexuality, just as genuine other-centred love may be. Sexuality is therefore explored in her work *both* in its undoubted (for Plato and everyone else) capacity to blind and, as with other forms of love, in its capacity to open the eyes to reality. Nussbaum’s target here is not so much Murdoch’s Danteism, as her Platonism (as far as that goes), which she contrasts with an Aristotelian (and Nussbaum’s own) love of “the flawed, idiosyncratic, lumpy, surprising human individual.” She sees in the connection – made by Plato and endorsed by Murdoch – between love of an individual person and of the impersonal good, that both “in their accounts of erotic achievement, somewhat impatiently bypass this individuality in search of the good.” (Ibid., 38) Having said this she then admits that “Murdoch seems more charitable to the sexual than Plato himself, since she allows that sexual intercourse itself, not merely the bodily response to the sight of beauty, can intimate and express spiritual values” (Ibid., 41). Murdoch’s Plato however is not so exclusively concerned with the spiritual. She writes: “In spite of Plato’s repeated declaration that philosophers should stay chaste and his requirement that the soul should try to escape from the body, it is the whole Eros that concerns him, and not just some passionless distillation.” (F&S, 415) Nussbaum also accepts that (of all people), Murdoch cannot be criticised for undervaluing the contingent, “lumpy” individuality of persons. She writes that “for Murdoch art can present the whole human being, the absurd and idiosyncratic alongside the splendid. On the other hand, her severe allegiance to the Good colours the way in which these features of daily life are seen.” (Ibid. 48). It is not so much that Nussbaum sees Plato’s, and Murdoch’s, allegiance to the Good as an *obstacle*, not as an aid, to clear vision however, as that she sees her as moralistic. For Nussbaum it as if “Murdoch’s commitment to the idea that ‘What is needed ... is a new orientation of our desires, a re-education of our instinctive feelings’ (*Metaphysics*, 503) ... leads often, in the fiction, to a slight disdainfulness towards characters who do not re-educate their instincts.” (Ibid., 49). This would be easy to challenge²¹⁶, but Nussbaum asserts this here to draw a distinction between Murdoch and that self-confessed Aristotelian genius, James Joyce. She says “Joyce is the great anti-Platonist of art. ... Joyce is anti-Platonist in the ... fundamental sense that he simply does not see the reason for the Platonic ascent. It is too much fun down here below, with the body and its

²¹⁶ Illustration through passages from the novels would be too lengthy, but regarding literature Murdoch writes: “I would like to say that all great artists are tolerant in their art, but perhaps this can be argued. Was Dante tolerant? I think most great writers have a sort of calm merciful vision because they see how different people are and why they are different. Tolerance is connected with being able to imagine centres of reality which are remote from oneself.” (L&P 29)

smells and its odd deflections from rationality, the outhouse and the joys of Plumtree's Potted Meat and the joy of being and making a mess. Joyce, I think, really loves sexuality in a way in which neither Plato or Murdoch actually does, much though they give it high praise. For they praise it as a route to something else, whereas Joyce made a big point of inverting the direction of signification." (Ibid., 49-50)

It could be argued of course that it is not that Murdoch sees sexuality as on route to something else, but as containing something else, that makes it more exciting, not less, than the more earth-bound sexuality described in Joyce's novels, but that, surely, is a matter of taste? Murdoch would also argue no doubt that nothing in life is contained within itself, including the sexual act; that absolutely everything must be valued in itself, but is *also* on route to something else. The question is to what; but where each moment is leading can be to the good, or to the bad, in myriad ways. Murdoch gives no formula for the good, other than the need to pay attention to reality, and to the significations of one's acts (and thoughts). Nussbaum goes on: "Joyce's holy sacrament is the Aristotelian purgation of all Platonic forms. Murdoch's 'holy office' is the sacrament of purifying one's attention so that the good becomes evident. And this means that my original question, Is Murdoch Plato or Dante, now has a certain sort of answer: for she is both, insofar as both are united in their departure from Joyce's Aristotle, with his indifference to purifications, his calm delight in the body." (Ibid., 51-52) We each have our own Joyce of course, and our own Murdoch, and Aristotle, but Joyce surely expressed hostility rather than *indifference* to purifications, drenched as the concept was for him in the guilt-ridden Catholicism that he had experienced as a prison from which it was his life's work to escape (he wrote often of the three nets that entrapped him: Ireland, the Church and the family, and his very troubled relationship with all of them). Nussbaum concedes however that "in Murdoch there seems to be a residual Aristotelianism – a sense at times, that the real physical being of the object is out there somewhere and the better for not being seen with the purifying scrutiny of art. Such moments of sympathy and yielding are especially powerful sources of generosity and vision in her work, at odds though they may be with the spirit of Platonism that on the whole animates it." (Ibid., 52)

In this regard, there is a crucial difference between Murdoch and Plato however. She notes that for Plato, "The proper apprehension of beauty is joy in reality through the transfiguration of desire. Thus as we respond we experience the transcendence of the real and the personal ego fades as, in the words of the *Symposium* (210 D), we 'escape from the mean petty slavery of the particular case and turn toward the open sea of beauty'" (Ibid. 425) In other words, Plato sees the overcoming of the personal ego by the "real" as a *case* of the overcoming of the particular by the universal

(open sea of beauty). In Murdoch there is no such metaphysical order, and she never draws this parallel. On the contrary, overcoming personal ego in order to see what is real is for her *precisely* to do with each particular case, for all that seeing our common humanity incurs in the particular person who is the object of our attention. Where Plato is aiming at the *transcendent* reality of the Forms, Murdoch is aiming at seeing the *moral* reality of the *particular* other. Art, for Plato, renders the particular too fascinating. Murdoch notes that he attempts to explain the reality “to which Eros moves us and from which art allegedly diverts us” (Ibid., 426) through the Theory of the Forms; but she points out that this theory went through many stages, and that Plato himself was never fully satisfied with it. “The relation of Forms to particulars remains persistently problematic as Plato moves uncertainly from a metaphor of participation [in the earlier dialogues] to one of imitation, and increasingly emphasises that the forms are separate. The Forms are more like ‘imminent universals’ at the start, and ‘transcendent models’ later on.” (Ibid.) In neither case did Murdoch feel he achieved his metaphysical aims, which she certainly did not share.

Murdoch evidently agreed with Plato that the contemplation of beauty opens the mind to the possibility of the good, and yet not with the fact that “he practically defines it [beauty] so as to exclude art, and constantly accuses artists of moral weakness or even baseness.” (F&S, 387) And yet she writes that almost all art “is a form of fantasy-consolation and few artists attain the vision of the real.” (Ibid., 352) She hated manipulative or mind-numbing “art” (television, propaganda, etc.). Even so, the free practice of both good and bad art was something she defended: “a free art is an essential aspect of a free society, as a degraded lying art is a function of a tyrannical one. Art as the great general universal informant is an obvious rival, not necessarily a hostile one, to philosophy and indeed to science, and Plato never did justice to the unique truth-conveying capacities of art.... Art, especially literature, is a great hall of reflection where we can all meet and where everything under the sun can be examined and considered. For this reason it is feared and attacked by dictators, and by authoritarian moralists such as the one under discussion [Plato]. The artist is a great informant, at least a gossip, at best a sage, and much loved in both roles.” (Ibid., 461) As was the artist Murdoch herself. Her cryptic statement: “Good: Real: Love.” (IP, 333) seems at first sight hard to justify. But the first effective step she takes is to show that the great obstacle to morality is clothing reality in veils of “selfing”, veils of Bad: Self (false): Hate, as it were. She then puts forward various ways to overcome this (to be further examined). Ways of moving away from the narcissistic bad, and moving simultaneously towards the good, and to the reality of the other.

3. Unselfing

Falling in love is for many people their most intense experience, bringing with it a quasi-religious certainty, and most disturbing because it shifts the centre of the world from outside ourselves to another place. A love relationship can occasion extreme selfishness and possessive violence, the attempt to dominate that other place so that it be no longer separate; or it can prompt a process of unselfing wherein the lover learns to see, and cherish and respect, what is not himself. (MGM, 16-17)

Caught in the Self-Centred Dream – Only Suffering
Holding to Self-Centred Thoughts – Exactly the Dream
Each Moment, Life as It is – The Only Teacher
Being Just This Moment – Compassion’s Way (Zen “Prayer”)

“Unselfing” is a neologism in Western philosophy that Murdoch uses to describe one of the two ways in which she saw the possibility of self-transformation. The other, as said, was that of orienting our energies to the good, but the two paths lead to each other. Both involve the moral practice of cultivating attention, both involve love. In the first quote above, Murdoch sets out the limit case of the Platonic argument, wherein awakening to the reality of the other, therefore to reality, can occur suddenly, violently, through falling in love. This however, is not an opportunity that chance often renders available to human beings, but it provides us with an image of the experience of awakening, and of the qualities of a good life – awareness, unselfishness, other-centredness, love – and these qualities may be cultivated more slowly through a patient sustained attention to others, and also to beauty in nature and (for her and not for Plato) in art. The concept of unselfing on the other hand, not formally thematised in Plato’s writings, is present there, on Murdoch’s reading, as a case of awareness of the insignificance of individual particularity in the face of the universal, especially of the Form of the Good. As to the concept of unselfing, its natural home is of course Buddhism. Murdoch took the concept of unselfing in part directly from Buddhist sources, and in part from the use Simone Weil made of it in her writings.

In Buddhism, unselfing refers on the one hand to the capacity to see one’s own finitude as an instance of the impermanent reality of all existing things; and on the other to learning to see one’s interconnection with everyone, and everything else. Impermanence and inter-being constitute the Buddhist conception of reality. The Pali root term, *Anatta*²¹⁷ – non-self, means not nothingness, but openness (a vital, not a dead void), non-separateness, and above all non-identification with a “self” imagined as a fixed being; (though the temporary aggregate which is *atta* (self) is known to put up considerable resistance to developing consciousness of the truth of *anatta*, hence the need

²¹⁷ A concept used by the Buddha to counter both the Indian concept of *purusa*, construed as a personal soul, and the religious practices associated with this concept.

for reminders, like the Zen verse cited above, and for meditation and reflective practices in daily life, the primary Oriental techniques of the self).

The importance of finitude, of suffering and death in our lives was a central concern for Murdoch, but one which occupies more space in her novels than in the philosophical texts. In *Nuns and Soldiers*, for example, there is a long conversation between a man dying of cancer and an ex-nun, which includes this exchange:

“Guy said, ‘You don’t, I imagine, believe in the anti-religious idea of life after death?’

‘No. I agree it’s anti-religious. I mean – whatever it is – it’s happening now and here.’ That’s what I couldn’t tell them in the convent, she thought.” (N&S, 68)

It is anti-religious for these two (Guy and Anne, the ex-nun), both here speaking with Murdoch’s voice, in the one sense of “religious” which Murdoch valued in that it is concerned with truth and with how to live (including how to die); and not with a fantasy of escape from the reality of death, or from the realities of the present. All else in religion was for her myth, though myths with potentially valuable uses if their consolatory function of masking the harshest truths could be held at bay. The falsifying nature of consolation enjoined for her “the traditional problem of preventing the idea of God [as Good] degenerating in the believer’s mind.” (OGG, 346) In the same novel Anne muses on the Christian story of purgatory thus: “Purgatorial suffering is a magical story, the transformation of death into pain, happy pain whose guaranteed value will buy us in return some everlasting consolation. But there are eternal partings, all things end and end forever and nothing could be more important than that. We live with death. With pain, yes. But really ... with death.” (N&S 510, ellipsis in original.) Murdoch cites from Simone Weil’s *Notebooks* these words:

‘To lose somebody: we suffer at the thought that the dead one, the absent one, should have become something imaginary, something false. But the longing we have for him is not imaginary. We must go down into ourselves where the desire which is not imaginary resides ... The remedy is to use the loss itself as an intermediary for attaining reality. The presence of the dead one is imaginary, but his absence is real, it is henceforth his manner of appearing.’ (p.28)

Murdoch comments on this that instead of surrendering to the need for consolation, “with fantasies of ‘bouncing back’”, “we must hold on to what has really happened and not cover it with imagining how we are to unhappen it.... What is needed here, and is so difficult to achieve, is a new orientation of our desires, a re-education of our instinctive feelings.” (MGM, 502-03) She also says, of our “natural impulse to derealise our world and surround ourselves with fantasy”; that “Simply stopping this, refraining from filling voids with lies and falsity, is already progress.” (Ibid., 503)

In Buddhism, direct contemplation of the forms of finitude – chance, incompleteness, change, loss, death etc. is practised in similar ways, as it was also by the Stoics. In today's world, Murdoch thought art could play the role of *memento mori*. Despite its closeness to fantasy, it can appeal to the moral imagination. She admits that the great deaths of literature are few (and the “fake, prettified death”s are many), but says of the few, for example, Patroclus, Cordelia, Petya Rostov, that they show us that “All is vanity. The only thing which is of real importance is the ability to see it all clearly and respond to it justly which is inseparable from virtue.” (SOGC, 372). She writes:

Any story which we tell about ourselves consoles us since it imposes pattern upon something which might otherwise seem intolerably chancy and incomplete. However, human life is chancy and incomplete. It is the role of tragedy, and also of comedy, and of painting to show us suffering without a thrill and death without a consolation.

[...] Good art, unlike bad art, unlike ‘happenings’, is something pre-eminently outside us and resistant to our consciousness. We surrender ourselves to its *authority* with a love which is unpossessive and selfish. Art shows us the only sense in which the permanent and incorruptible is compatible with the transient; and whether representational or not it reveals to us aspects of our world which ordinary dull dream-consciousness is unable to see. Art pierces the veil and gives sense to the notion of a reality which lies beyond appearance; it exhibits virtue in its true guise in the context of death and chance. (SOGC, 371-72)

Here Murdoch describes the experience of something of extreme beauty that takes one completely out of one's ordinary dull dream-consciousness, into a state of mind that is more spacious, open and awake. It is a state of mind that seems impregnated with ‘good’, with what is highest in human experience; a transient state in itself, but one that leaves its mark. For many today the contemplation of the art object (painting, music etc.) is the only form of contemplation, perhaps not even recognised as such, that they know. What is more generally recognised is how much love is felt for the artist who evokes such intense feelings of what is good, beautiful, of the highest value, and no less love is felt for what is most tragic in art. This emotion, this sense of being in the presence of something of great value, is something that is still often described as “sacred”. As such the concept, used by non-believers, lends itself to Murdoch's interpretation of this experience as affirming a sense of the good. But this is perhaps a first, and not fully conscious awakening to the good. There is a *sense* of the good which does not necessarily crystallise into an *idea* of the good. The idea of a sacrament, in moving from receptivity to action, takes that next step, and this is clearly a move made by many artists, if not by their public. Murdoch says that a sacrament “provides an external visible place for an internal invisible act of the spirit” (OGG, 356); but notes also that even the “idea of contemplation is hard to understand and maintain in a world increasingly without sacraments and ritual and in which philosophy has (in many respects rightly) destroyed the old substantial conception of the self.” (Ibid.)

Nonetheless, clearly this experience of a sense of good, of extreme value, can form part of a moral education; the problem is that it can also be reduced to an object of self-interested consumption, and Murdoch does not take on the problem of how the latter path can be avoided. Plato of course resolved it by not taking the risk of sorting out the good art from the bad, and simply banishing art from the ideal city; though as Murdoch notes, as a great artist himself, and as one of the greatest myth-makers of all time, “we can see played out in that great spirit the peculiarly distressing struggle between the artist and the saint.”(SGOC, 372) That art is another form of magic Murdoch of course recognises. It releases and stimulates great energies, therefore its psychic power is great. In this it has a kind of affinity with religion, and in collaboration with it becomes extremely powerful. This is true, she says, nowhere more than in Christianity, “which has been served by so many geniuses. The familiar figures of the Trinity have been so celebrated and beautified in great pictures that it almost seems as if the painters were the final authority on the matter, as Plato said that the poets seemed to be about the Greek Gods.” (F&S, 447). (The Islamic and Hebrew traditions were perhaps more astute in restricting artistic references to the deity to the geometrical.) Because of this magical nature of art for Plato, (as with Kant’s ‘sublime’), it is nature, not art, that can provoke this experience of “piercing the veil” of the dull mind. But (ever wary of shifting concepts), Murdoch points out that for him, nature, not art “means: not statues but boys”(F&S, 423). She also remarks that Kant’s choice of examples of experiences of the sublime “suggests an eighteenth-century cult of the more Gothic aspects of nature which it does not now occur to us to think of as particularly edifying” (S&G, 212-13). Here too however, even though “Plato allowed to the beauty of the lovely boy an awakening power which he denied to the beauty of nature or art” (SGOC, 372), Murdoch notes that he “does not analyse in detail how selfish love changes into unselfish love.” (F&S, 437). And this seems to be the major difficulty with finding a contemporary application of Platonic, and Murdochian, moral reasoning; the problem of how the step from the selfish to the unselfish is achieved.

Buddhism takes a different stance on these intense experiences which pierce the veil, (among which it includes certain deep meditative states). It sees them as indeed able to provoke the *beginnings* of awakening, and as glories to be celebrated; but also as potentially addictive, as bearing the risk of bringing about a romantic division of life into “higher” (valuable) and “lower” (valueless, ordinary) experiences (à la Nietzsche). Therefore great attention to one’s states of mind as one “comes down” from the high is needed. A good life is thought to have instead more to do with seeing everyday reality (which may or may not include Beethoven sonatas, or other peak experiences) as the fullness of life, the place where contingency can be lived as suffering or as joy,

as vitality or as dullness. It is knowledge of this contingent reality that is the epistemological foundation in Buddhism of an ethic of unselfishness : I know you to be a temporary and constantly changing aggregate like myself, one who like me will love and lose, suffer and die; in you I see myself; in wishing your happiness I wish my own. And, be it noted that as for all other living beings, my own happiness is also to be cared for.²¹⁸ Here care of the self and unselfing coincide. Although both the Platonic and the Buddhist spiritual paths involve intellect and passion, or mind and heart, it would not be an unreasonable oversimplification to say that – in terms of the way they are *presented* in the texts – the Platonic path starts from love and arrives at knowledge of reality (the Good), and the Buddhist path starts from knowledge of reality (finitude) and arrives at love (the Good).²¹⁹ In terms of *following* either path however, in both the growth of knowledge of reality and the capacity to love are interwoven. The Pali term *karuna*, usually translated as “compassion”, is considered in the West to be the rather sad supreme value in Buddhism, as a response to human suffering (and that of other beings); but in fact it belongs to a group of virtues, including *metta*, loving kindness, and *mudhita*, joy in the happiness of others. Among the common techniques of the self there are practices designed to increase awareness of the different *experiential* qualities of these different manifestations of *love* (including generosity), and to increase the space for these qualities within the “self”.²²⁰ “Falling in love” however is not separately thematised. (The combination of great joy, wonder, and great risk in falling in love is a major theme in the broader Indian tradition, as is the symbolism of union of earth and cosmos, gods and humans, under the auspices of that other Eros of myriad amorous adventures, Lord Krishna). Murdoch received some instruction in meditation practice in Japan, makes frequent reference to Buddhism, and read certain texts with great interest, but not in such a way as to bring a more detailed insight from them into her philosophy. She believed that throughout the twentieth century a process of demythologisation was underway within Christianity (reminiscent of the demythologisation the Buddha had carried out over two millennia ago in India), whereby the biblical narratives were increasingly recognised as myths, rather than treated as literal truths. She wondered, though pessimistically, whether, in the West, the figure of Christ could “become like

²¹⁸ The Buddha rejected the extreme ascetic traditions of India that he had practiced before his enlightenment. Simone Weil’s extreme asceticism had its origins more in Christian traditions.

²¹⁹ Bliss for the Boddhisattvas (the enlightened symbols of perfect love and knowledge, who renounce liberation to help all living beings become free), is when the tiniest living being passing by fills them with happiness.

²²⁰ The absence of an adequate vocabulary of love causes problems both in philosophy and in ordinary life in the West, and Murdoch complained often of the paucity of moral concepts in use. Oriental languages have as many words (and concepts) for the emotions and states of mind as Alaskans have for snow. Each virtue has its opposite vice (meanness, indifference, envy, etc.), though conceived always as error, not as “sin”, and always as relative (on a sliding scale). Ethical practice tends to involve learning to identify one’s errors, in all their nuances, not in order to castigate oneself (unskilful), but in order to develop skills of self-transformation.

Buddha, both real and mystical, but no longer the divine all-in-one man of traditional Christianity?” (MGM, 136).²²¹

What Murdoch meant by unselfing corresponds to the Buddhist concept specifically in relation to the not unimportant fact that both hold self-centredness, identification with the self, to be the primary cause of all that is morally bad in this world. (And both also hold that chance, contingency, have a hand in everything, and that this must always be recognised as the given, with which one interacts). Murdoch speaks of the human need to have an idea of who one is as a necessary regulative idea of consciousness or self-being. She is concerned to individuate practices that render this self-being less self-enclosed, more open to reality, to the good. The Buddha speaks of the way self-obsessive fantasy clothes the idea of self with many fixed attributes, which constitute obstacles to “right seeing”, of self and others. On this view, identification with an image of self may extend from “me” to “mine”, to false ideas about the characteristics of “us” (variously defined), and of “them” (correspondingly defined), even to the point of making a *morality* out of such a divisory practice (e.g. religious bigotry, patriotism). Since false notions of “self” and “other” are the root of so much that is bad, this must be countered by a slow process of taking these false images apart, piece by piece; this is the central technique of the self, of unselfing, in Buddhism. (Noting how often one reruns the same films of past and future in one’s head, enriching the villainy of whoever has offended us with extra details; running films about how clever or stupid we are, or how much better life is going to be as soon as the next corner is turned. One gets tired of one’s fantasies when too long in their company.) Freedom in Buddhism means freeing oneself of all this fantasy, to be able to live in the present, with eyes open to what one is living and with whom; removing the impediments to right seeing.²²² For Murdoch too of course,

²²¹ Murdoch’s reflections on this had more to do with the general problem of where moral guidance is to be had in the modern world than with exploring techniques of the self used in the East. She notes that “simpler” believers in the East took the various religious mythologies literally, whereas “reflective” believers had a long tradition of using the myths as non-theistic spiritual guidance, so that an atmosphere of spirituality, and a sense of human life as anchored in morality, continues to prevail. In the West on the other hand simpler believers were becoming unbelievers and drifting away from religion, and among reflective Christians, for whom the whole point of the myth is spiritual guidance and the question of its veracity best left to individual interpretation, crisis reigns. She observed, with regret at the loss of some form of moral guidance from *outside* the self, the process whereby the greater the freedom of interpretation, the greater the disarray and division that characterises modern Protestantism. (See MGM, 135-38) “T.S.Eliot said that Christianity has always been changing itself into something which can be generally believed. There may be a limit to this process, where a demythologised religion becomes intolerable. ...A denuded ‘existentialist’ faith may lose its identity in the mind of the believer and become more like and unadorned high moral asceticism. (MGM 126-27)

²²² Like his (roughly) contemporary, Socrates, the Buddha believed that only through moral (intellectual) effort will one truly understand what is before one (right comprehension). If one overcomes one’s ignorance, it becomes clear which course of action has the best chance of leading to the good, and one will not choose the path that is bad (of course there is failure and error, but this is the moral path).

egoistic fantasising clouds the vision and must be overcome by clear-sighted knowledge of the reality of both self and other, and knowledge and love arise together as responses to reality. More specifically, she writes of the psyche that :

One of its main pastimes is dreaming. It is reluctant to face unpleasant realities. Its consciousness is not normally a transparent glass through which it views the world, but a cloud of more or less fantastic reverie designed to protect the psyche from pain. It constantly seeks consolation, either through imagined inflation of self or through fictions of a theological nature. Even its loving is more often than not an assertion of self. I think we can probably recognise ourselves in this rather depressing description.” (MGM, 364)

This passage recalls and puts together insights of Freud, the Buddha, Plato, and Simone Weil, all of whom were concerned in one way or another with the moral-psychological problem of false images of the self. For Murdoch, moral philosophy is empty in the absence of an appropriate moral psychology. She spends some time discussing critically Plato’s metaphysics, but what she took from him and reworked was not so much this but rather his moral psychology: “a psychology which implicitly provides a better explanation of evil (how good degenerates into egoism) than Plato’s more strictly philosophical arguments ... for instance in the *Philebus*. Eros is the desire for good which is somehow the same even when a degenerate ‘good’ is sought.” (Ibid.) In *this* sense, she says, “morality, goodness is a form of realism” (Ibid.), in which the idea of reality is taken, not as given, but as normative. She was clearly not a “realist” in the traditional sense of believing value to be inherent in the world. She clarifies by suggesting that “the authority of the good seems to us something necessary because the realism (ability to perceive reality) required for goodness is a kind of intellectual ability to perceive what is true, which is automatically at the same time a suppression of the self.” (OGG, 353) If for Plato “reality” refers to what is eternal, unchanging, to “being” and not “becoming”, for Murdoch it refers precisely to the particular individual before one, in her becoming, and to oneself in one’s becoming; more like the Buddha in this. Like him also in his consistent refusal to answer any questions about the universe or the unknowable, struggling (as did Plato) against belief in gods and magic, Murdoch worried about the pictures that hold us captive – of God, and as she says, equally “the various metaphysical substitutes for God – Reason, Science, History – are all false deities. Our destiny can be examined but it cannot be justified or totally explained. We are simply here. And if there is any kind of sense or unity in human life, and the dream of this does not cease to haunt us, it is of some other kind, and must be sought within a human experience which has nothing outside it.” (SGOC, 365)

In her considerations of the way in which philosophies have either helped or hindered this quest for freedom from illusion and self-obsession she felt that Kant came close to a solution, which

ultimately eluded him. She writes, “When Kant wanted to find something clean and pure outside the mess of selfish empirical psyche he followed a sound instinct but, in my view, looked in the wrong place. His enquiry led him back again into the self, now pictured as angelic, and inside this angel-self his followers have tended to remain.” (SGOC, 368) This is clearly provocation, a Murdochian shock tactic used occasionally in her philosophy and her novels; nonetheless it pinpoints a problem in modern moral philosophy that she discussed extensively. Kant had rejected the medieval practice of aligning one’s life (*entia creatum*) to an idea of the Good incarnated in God (*ens perfectissimum*), or rather he had rejected the version of this given by an *authority* outside the self, but the result for philosophy was the same. For Kant himself, the Moral Law to which Reason acceded could be construed as constituting a vital point of reference *outside* the individual self, though only accessible from *inside*, and Murdoch says, “indeed his term ‘Idea of Reason’ expresses precisely that endless aspiration to perfection which is characteristic of moral activity.” (IP, 324) But as we have seen, Murdoch believed that this notion was taken up and transformed by existentialism into a moral vision whose paramount value was sincerity, or one’s personal truth, not obedience to the moral law. In this tradition, she says, an “authentic mode of existence is presented as attainable by intelligence and force of will. The atmosphere is invigorating and tends to produce self-satisfaction in the reader, who feels himself to be a member of the elite, addressed by another one.” (OGG, 340). The tradition of analytic philosophy, also focusing on freedom of choice, she felt simply put the problem of egoism aside. In analysing moral concepts on the basis of ordinary (thereby conventional) language, it presents, she says, “a relaxed picture of a mediocre achievement” (OGG, 340). What instead of these views was needed, she said, was:

to return from the self-centred concept of sincerity to the other-centred concept of truth. We are not isolated free choosers ..., but benighted creatures sunk in a reality whose nature we are constantly and overwhelmingly tempted to deform by fantasy. Our current picture of freedom encourages a dream-like facility; whereas what we require is a renewed sense of the difficulty and complexity of the moral life and the opacity of persons. (AD, 293)

That philosophy *itself*, especially in the complex forms that writing allows, can create fantasies to live by is of course a problem that is not new. As Murdoch points out, Plato had already insisted that in philosophy, “(*Seventh Letter* 341C-D) it is only after a persistent study of the matter in hand – *the thing itself* – and an abiding with it, that understanding comes ‘like a light that is kindled by a leaping spark, and thereafter nourishes itself.’” Plato complained that a written statement “is ambiguous, and defenceless in the hands of knaves or fools. So it may become a

vehicle of falsehood even though it was set down as a memorandum of truth.” (MGM, 19). She says that Wittgenstein too chose to write little in case his writing fell into the hands of fools. For Murdoch, the concept of sincerity can be warped in various “self-centred” ways in the absence of an “other-centred” concept of truth. The force of ego is such that, she writes, “psychic energy flows, and more readily flows, into building up convincingly coherent but false pictures of the world, complete with systematic vocabulary ... Attention is the effort to counteract such states of illusion.” (IP, 329)

Philosophy, however, and intellectual study in general, can also be a valuable technique of the self. She says that Plato thought of it as a spiritual activity (especially mathematics, but Murdoch says learning languages works better for her), “the love of learning spoken of in the *Symposium* and the *Philebus*.” (F&S, 437) The practice of attention is close to that of concentration, and all forms of concentrated work are known to increase the capacity for attention, both where it is learned and elsewhere. For this reason also access to the good may occur “not only in intellectual studies but also through personal love and through the various *technai*, all kinds of crafts and skill (excluding mimetic art) to which Plato at different times attaches importance. Love of beauty and desire to create inspire us to activities which increase our grasp of the real, and because they diminish our fantasy-ridden egoism are self-evidently good.” (Ibid.)

It was Simone Weil, above all, who thematised the related practices of attention and of unselfing. Murdoch writes of her that she presents us “with a psychology whose sources are in Plato, in Eastern philosophy and in the disciplines of Christian mysticism.” (KV, 158). We have seen how attention serves to achieving clear vision of the besetting moral problem, but for Murdoch “attention” is also a technique of the self in other ways, focusing on other types of objects, for other moral purposes. When, for example, one’s vision is darkened and one’s energy is low, focusing on what is light may help to change one’s viewpoint and restore energy. There is nothing at all banal for her in practices such as taking a walk in nature, looking at something beautiful, listening to music, reading something uplifting (the metaphor in this adjective is explicit, as are all the metaphors of mood: of depression and uplift, tension and release, lightening and darkening, etc.). These things can help to heal an anguished soul, and importantly, clear the vision. She gives the example of being in an offended, self-obsessed bad mood, and then looking out of the window and seeing by chance “a hovering kestrel. Then in a moment everything is altered. The brooding self with its hurt vanity has disappeared. There is nothing now but kestrel. And when I return to thinking of the other matter it is less important.” (SGOC, 369) (In the absence of the kestrel

however – for a Bodhisattva a fly would do just as well – Buddhism, again like Stoicism in this, offers various mental techniques, including that of phrases to be learned and used as reminders of reality. Reminding oneself gently but with conviction that “Caught in the self-centred dream brings only suffering” might, if practised seriously, achieve the effect of a passing kestrel.) In these cases, a technique is used to redirect one’s energies. Sometimes it is necessary to move away from the besetting problem, and when the negative state of mind is quieted move back. Other times it is necessary to keep the focus on reality.

For Murdoch, the first thing it was necessary to recognise in moral philosophy, the first principle, is that the moral life “is not intermittent or specialised, it is not a peculiar separate area of existence.” (MGM, 495). She says that it is in looking into ourselves, an outmoded practice in and out of philosophy, that we discover that “every little thing matters. Life is made up of details.” We are in a hurry. We compartmentalise our busy lives, and yet, she says, “we are always deploying and directing our energy, refining it or blunting it, purifying it or corrupting it, and it is always easier to do a thing a second time.” (Ibid.) And this is true of *all* practical skills, including those of paying attention to the details of life, to what kind of difference one’s presence makes in any situation. That is what techniques of the self are all about, they involve *practice*, they take commitment and work. She goes on: “All sorts of momentary sensibilities to other people, too shadowy to come under the heading of manners of communication, are still parts of moral activity. (‘But are you saying that every single second has a moral tag?’ Yes, roughly.) [...But this] is not to advocate constant self-observation or some mad return to solipsism. We instinctively watch and check ourselves to some extent, but much of our self-awareness is other-awareness, and in this area we exercise ourselves as moral beings in our use of many various skills as we direct our modes of attention.” (Ibid.) As to how to get the balance between diligent attention and spontaneity, this is not made clear.

In discussing Kant’s “sublime” she says that as he gazes on sea or mountains, “he feels defiant pride in the free power of his reason.” Even though his Reason is frustrated by its inability to achieve complete understanding it is not humbled, rather it “experiences a larger consciousness of the dignity of rationality.” (S&BR, 283). Against this picture, with its obvious moral risks, Murdoch puts forward one of a person who, “faced by the manifold of humanity, may feel, as well as terror, delight, but not, if he really sees what is before him, superiority. He will suffer that undramatic, because un-self centred, agnosticism which goes with tolerance. To understand other people is a task which does not come to an end. This man will possess ‘spirit’ in the sense

intended by Pascal when he said: 'The more spirit one has the more original men one discovers. Ordinary people do not notice differences between men.' And a better name for spirit here is not reason, not tolerance even, but love." (Ibid.). All this amounts to a normative thesis whereby the practice of attention, having as its object a vision of reality cleared of the obfuscating veils of the self-centred view, is able to attain to valid moral knowledge. "The self, the place where we live, is a place of illusion. Goodness is connected with the attempt to see the unself, to see and to respond to the real world in the light of a virtuous consciousness. This is the non-metaphysical meaning of the idea of transcendence to which philosophers have so constantly resorted in their explanations of goodness." (SOGC, 376).

It is undoubtedly true that these practices – what is being referred to here, following Foucault, as techniques of the self – that Murdoch describes are all efficacious means of redirecting our energies, and also of improving our general state of well-being. It is also undoubtedly true that the more at peace we are with ourselves the more at peace we will be with others, and the more we truly try to focus on others the more (however little more) we will see them, and recognise our common humanity in them. Nonetheless it has to be said that, despite the beauty of the morality Murdoch puts forward, she does not really set out a path that can be easily followed by someone lacking her own sensibility to the good, to beauty. At one point she says, according to Conradi, that her philosophy "was essentially religious", and qualifies this by saying that "[t]o be religious is to differ from oneself, to notice that everyone is (at least) two people, one worse or darker than the other, then to seek a means to privilege the better." (IM, 543) In other words, her philosophy served her and also of course, though she does not say this, her readers, as a conducting thread guiding firstly moral introspection, and secondly self-work, just as ancient philosophy served its practitioners. It is ignorance, particularly ignorance of the self, a habit which may be shared by the greatest genius and the uneducated, that favours the darker self. But just as she feared that without a framework of belief religions as moral practice would founder, so too the path she lays out is a meandering one, with beautiful descriptions of forms of attention, but little indication of how to practice without guidance, or how to find guidance in developing that attention. The biographical information regarding Murdoch all confirms how good and kind she was, though Conradi notes that "[i]n her 1970s journals Iris notes objectively in herself envy, jealousy, losses of nerve, depression, masochism, anger, anxiety, silliness, 'asininity', artistic vulgarity, surreptitious optimism. [...] She enquires how low, resentful states of being are to be expelled, transcended, 'seen through'. Such a movement from a closed-off obsessional enclave towards wonder at the

more ‘open scene’ – what Zen calls little mind to big mind – marks her fictions, philosophy, and her private journey too.” (IM, 544)

But it must be Plato, Murdoch’s Plato, who has the last word. She describes “the cosy dreaming ego, the dweller in the vaults of *eikasia*” (F&S, 455), in Plato’s cave, as a form of unconscious mind, whereas those who have moved out of this shadowy region to the fire, which they take as their sun, have acquired some knowledge, and with it some pride. (*Republic*, 517 B) But philosophy (intellectual study) may also function as and feed illusion, like the semi-enlightening fire, not the sun it replicates. “Here” by the fire, she writes, “[they] can recognise for what they are the objects which cast the shadows. The bright flickering light of the fire suggests the disturbed and semi-enlightened ego which is pleased and consoled by its discoveries, but still essentially self-absorbed, not realising that the real world is still somewhere else. [...] The Delphic precept does not enjoin that kind of self-knowledge. The true self-knower knows reality and sees, in the light of the sun, himself as part of the whole world.” (F&S, 423).

Conclusion

1

As we have seen, much of the work of Michel Foucault and Iris Murdoch had to do with the recuperation of a notion of philosophy as a way of life and as a form of self-work. Despite the fact that neither supported any metaphysical idea of a *substantive* self, much of the work of these two philosophers was concerned; in Murdoch's terms, with the "progressing life of a person"; and in Foucault's terms with "the self's relation to itself". Whereas both Foucault and Murdoch began their philosophical work from the central preoccupations – especially with regard to the relation of language to thought – of their respective colleagues in Paris and Oxford (and in the same middle years of the twentieth century); when the question of moral subjectivity came more clearly into focus for each of them they turned their attention to Antiquity, Foucault mostly to the Stoics and Cynics, Murdoch to Plato. Not of course in order to re-propose ancient ethical models as such, but to gain a better understanding of them; and in both cases, to understand them as philosophical *practices* that were not necessarily linked to the specific metaphysical systems that had most clearly articulated them. Such an approach would allow these ancient practices, in Paul Veyne's fine metaphor, to reacquire "a contemporary meaning, in the manner of one of those pagan temple columns that one occasionally sees reutilized in more recent structures." (FFE, 231) In fact, as Hadot (a pioneer of this type of reading) has pointed out, the ancients themselves, though ardent defenders of their metaphysical positions, were generally eclectic and non-denominational, as it were, in the range of "techniques of the self" they employed. Foucault quotes Seneca, for example, saying: "The thought for today is one which I discovered in Epicurus; for I am wont to cross over even to the enemy's camp, – not as a deserter, but as a scout [*tanquam explorator* M.F.]"²²³ Like Hadot, Foucault and Murdoch found contemporary conceptions of "philosophy" as a *merely* intellectual activity regrettable; for both of them – in theory and in practice – the philosophical intellect was, and must be, essentially ethical.

This very important motivation to their work they held in common; another was the intensely erotic dimension of their personal lives, in all senses; which meant for them – as philosophers concerned with moral subjectivity in general and their own in particular – an equally intense, but enormously different reflection on *eros*. What separated them was their very different intellectual and existential biographies, one important feature of which was the divide in contemporary philosophy between the "continental" and the Anglo-American traditions in which they were

²²³ Seneca, *Lettres*, Vol.I. let. 2. Quoted in Foucault "Self Writing", (EWF1, 221)

respectively trained. What became known as “the linguistic turn” in philosophy played itself out in the two traditions in different ways in the course of the twentieth century, through structuralism in mainland Europe and in linguistic empiricism in Britain and America. Foucault’s early writings are heavily influenced by structuralism, though this was for him something of a straitjacket that he worked his way out of; and Murdoch placed herself in the tradition of analytic philosophy, though always in a critical relationship with linguistic empiricism.

2

Foucault’s dedication to “thinking differently” was of course a constant of his work, but in the early years this was not an ascesis. The intellectual work involved did not require any particular focus on what he would later call, from the Greek *epimeleia heautou*, the “care of the self”. Foucault always said that his work focused on the three axes “that constitute any matrix of experience” (PHS, 200): *knowledge*, *power*, and the *subject*, and insisted that from the beginning all three, in their interaction, were the objects of this work. Clearly the focus changed however, from the early phase which he himself characterised as an “archaeology of knowledge”, to the complex interrelation of knowledge and power in his middle “genealogical” phase, and in the last phase of his work to which he never gave a similar methodological denomination, to the subject, to the self’s relation to itself (in varying contexts of knowledge/power). He reformulated these three axes many times. In the Preface to the *History of Sexuality* they appear as “links to truth, to rules and to the self” (Ibid.); in *The Governmentality of Self and Others* as: “the forms of a possible knowledge; [...], the normative matrices of behaviour for individuals, and finally the modes of virtual existence for possible subjects.” (GSA, 4-5) And in his last course he writes that: “the modes of veridiction, the techniques of governmentality, and the practices of the self, is basically what I have always tried to elaborate. (CV, 9-10) It is clear from these rewrites of the three axes that they do indeed constitute a strong thread through all his work. What changes is the gradual process from the early focus on the forms of knowledge/power that shape the subject from outside, to how the (always historically situated) subject may constitute itself from within; through modes of veridiction, the governmentality of self and others, and practices of the self. Throughout his work however, Foucault’s absolute moral priority did not change, it was always freedom: “for what is ethics, if not the practice of freedom, the conscious [*réfléchie*] practice of freedom?” (ECS, 284). For him this meant, above all, freedom from the way the games of truth (*les jeux de vérité*)

prevailing during one's lifetime were played out in one's own mind²²⁴. Therefore gaining insight into the historically relevant truth games and their epistemic underpinnings was for him an ethical, as well as an epistemological, priority; and these games were played out in human institutions, through their *specific* discourses and practices. More than in philosophy, Foucault's work in these areas has radically and definitively changed the human sciences, yet his work was philosophical, and his life was his own form of philosophical practice.

The "history of thought" – which was how Foucault always described his work – was initially elaborated in response to what he saw as the shortcomings of contemporary (1950s and 60s) philosophy in its preoccupation with consciousness and the meaning-giving subject (under the influence of Hegel and phenomenology).²²⁵ He complained that this

philosophy of *consciousness* had paradoxically failed to found a philosophy of *knowledge*, and especially of scientific knowledge. Also, this philosophy of meaning had failed to take into account the formative mechanisms of signification and the structure of systems of meaning. (S&S, 176)

On occasion, he expressed a certain admiration for analytic philosophy, as an outsider, precisely for its meticulous (though insufficiently far-reaching) concern for analysing systems of meaning as they present in language. Paradoxically, Murdoch, who was trained in analytic philosophy and also appreciated its precision and its exposure of the ungrounded nature of metaphysical suppositions, reversed this complaint thus:

terms such as 'being' and 'consciousness' have been dropped from Anglo-Saxon philosophy. Here the philosopher largely confines his activity to removing problems attaching to particular concepts by an examination of the functioning of language in the affected area. [...] It seems to me that in this country our exposure of certain types of metaphysical argument has led us too readily to reject the grandiose picture-making aspects of metaphysics. Such pictures can be illuminating, in a psychological and moral sense, even if their status is dubious, and even if they are established more by a general appeal to our knowledge of human nature than by a rigorous argument. (HMD 148)

What she is saying is not that such concepts are unproblematic, on the contrary, that they are highly problematic, but precisely because they refer to highly problematic areas of our life as human beings; therefore the fact that their "meaning" cannot be pinned down is not resolved by simply declaring them as meaningless or confusing. She herself found such terms useful as descriptions of common human *experience*, as terms which therefore lent themselves to careful,

²²⁴ "What truth game is the person playing, for example, who regards himself as insane or sick?" Flynn (FMH, 38) asks this question in illustration of the way the objects of particular discourses (the "truth games", for example, of "justice", in the seventeenth century, or of "criminal psychiatry" in the nineteenth), "objectify" the individual subject.

²²⁵ For Foucault it was his reading of Nietzsche who liberated his mind from what he experienced as philosophical constraints in epistemology and in ethics. Sluga writes that it was Nietzsche "who helped him to describe the history of knowledge and reason freed from the phenomenological assumption of a founding, transhistorical subject. [...] And subsequently led him to] the realization that there is a history of the subject as well as of reason." (FEHN, 224)".

non-metaphysical redescription. The “exposure to certain types of metaphysical arguments” she refers to here has to do with the fact that where, “Hume and Locke thought that there must be some constant and rigid connection between language and experience”, such ideas had now been decisively overturned within the empiricist tradition, but in the process she says that “[in] ceasing to believe this we have, perhaps too readily, let the notion of ‘experience’ drop out of sight altogether.” (NP, 43) This “ceasing to believe” in a *rigid* connection between language and experience, a perspective which Murdoch shares, had, she felt, been replaced in the early 20th Century by an equally rigid *disconnection*, for which language was seen as a system having its own internal and formal logic, regardless of its empirical content, or its relation to experience. She writes of this disconnection that it occasions “a sense [...] of an unbridgeable gulf between the ‘meaning’ which is investigated by linguistic analysis, and the ‘meaning’ involved in poetry, or investigated by psychoanalysis, which seems inextricably linked with experience.” (Ibid.)

3

Something Murdoch particularly appreciated in analytic practice, however, was “the elimination of hypostatised and non-observable ‘qualities’, ‘sentiments’ or ‘acts of will’” (Ibid.). She refers to these three concepts in particular because of their association with, respectively, Locke, Hume, and Kant. Though this is not spelt out here, as her target when writing this was a different one, this comment is indicative of her (quasi-Foucauldian) concern with the way in which these concepts function as part of philosophical discourses which present some kind of deep structure of mind or world, each in their own way. She writes: “It is certainly a great merit of this [recent Oxbridge] tradition [...] that it attacks every form of spurious unity. It is the traditional inspiration of the philosopher, but also his traditional vice, to believe that all is one. Wittgenstein says, ‘Let’s see.’ (OGG, 340) The term Murdoch generally used to express the type of unified vision around key concepts expressed by philosophical discourse was that of “limited whole”, which she took from Wittgenstein; noting that the “lesson of Wittgenstein”, is that there “may be *no* deep structure” (ME 74, my emphasis); a view she shared. That is to say, whether or not there is any deep structure could only be observed from the point of view of eternity, a viewpoint which is not available to us.

In this connection, Murdoch saw structuralism too as offering “a metaphysic which offers a new model of language as a structure of reality” (MGM, 5)²²⁶; one that Foucault was initially attracted to, though he “never posited a universal theory of discourse, but rather sought to describe the historical forms taken by discursive practices.” (BSH, vii-viii). As the influence of structuralism waned, what he calls his “nominalism” comes to the fore. Already in *L’archéologie du savoir* (1969) he was adopting a nominalist method for which the key concepts of scientific discourse were not to be read as pre-constituted, but as demarcating objects in historically specific domains of knowledge; concepts (or their connotations) which, as Rouse notes, “came into existence only contemporaneous with the discursive foundations that made it possible to talk about them.” (PM, 96) Flynn says of this nominalism that it “treats such abstractions as ‘man’ and ‘power’ as reducible for purposes of explanation to the individuals that comprise them. This is the context of his claim, for example, that ‘power does not exist’, that there are only individual instances of domination, manipulation, edification, control, and the like.” (FMH, 40) It may be interesting to compare here Murdoch’s comments on what she calls the hypostatized (i.e. dehistoricised, or deparicularised) concept of “the will”. “Will can be a term which, seeming to deal with or explain a large matter, halts reflection at a crucial point. It may be better [...] to restrict the term will, as ‘willing’ or ‘exercise of will’, to cases where there is an immediate straining, for instance occasioned by a perceived duty or principle, against a large part of preformed consciousness.” (MGM, 300)

Foucault was of course inspired by Nietzsche’s historicism in the construction of his own genealogies, but, as Sluga points out, with this important difference: “Where Nietzsche had sought to understand human relations in terms of the global concept of the will to power, Foucault sees power relations as exclusively social, multiple, and variable in character. Adopting what he calls a strictly nominalist point of view, he denies altogether that there is a single phenomenon to be called power or will to power.” (FEHN, 231) In this he shares, with Wittgenstein and Murdoch, the same twentieth century aversion to what Murdoch calls the hypostatized, unifying concepts of the great philosophers of previous centuries, Nietzsche included. Though Murdoch saw the key concepts and contents of philosophical systems as *always* historically collocated and subject to change that could be entirely contingent in origin, she saw this fact itself as a *constant* of human life, that is to say, that the individual derives a concept from a culture, but then “takes it away into

²²⁶ See §. Ch.X, Language and Experience. She says that for structuralists (post-structuralists, deconstructionists), “[r]eality, it is argued, lies in the linguistic medium itself, in the various (including scientific) languages of the planet”(MGM 6)

his privacy". (IP 319) She says people make their own specialised uses of concepts, and that "[c]ontingency must be defended for it is the essence of personality" (S&BR 285). How a concept is used will therefore depend both on where its user stands in History, and on the personal history of the individual. And, she says "once the historical individual is 'let in' a number of things have to be said with a difference. The idea of 'objective reality', for instance, undergoes important modifications when it is to be understood, not in relation to 'the world described by science', but in relation to the progressing life of a person." (Ibid., 319-20). Bagnoli comments on what she sees as a profoundly Hegelian streak in Murdoch's thinking with regard to individual consciousness, but she also notes that "this historical dimension is, for Murdoch, confined within the bounds of individuals; it concerns exclusively the mind of the person. To this extent, she does not fully exploit Hegel's main insight, which is that of relating the progressive life of a person to the communal life within the slow development of institutions, through mechanisms of mutual recognition. Murdoch does not care much for investigating the institutional landscape in which the moral life takes place." (EML, 225) And this of course, was Foucault territory. However, Foucault too disliked any hypostatised view of "History"; he was preoccupied instead with giving adequate space to contingency in human affairs. Already in his Inaugural Lecture at the Collège de France in 1970, for example, he expressed his intent to restore "chance as a category in the production of events" (AK, 231)

4

Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals, Murdoch's last work,²²⁷ begins with the statement that: "The idea of a self-contained unity or limited whole is a fundamental instinctive concept. We see parts of things, we intuit whole things." (MGM, 1) This is of course also verifiable in one sense on a literal, empirical level, in laboratory experiments where the mind "believes" it sees whole things of which it has only seen a part; but what Murdoch found interesting was the way the phenomenon appears to occur all the way up from (literal) vision of a single object to (metaphorical) vision of the universe, so to speak. She remarks that Hume's rightful scepticism about the unities we hold most dear – the self, the material object, etc. – led him to contend that they were, "illusions fostered by imagination, by association of ideas, by 'habit and custom'." (Ibid.) But once *this* contention becomes the basis of a philosophy, of a new conceptual system, then a new unity, a new metaphysic, a new limited whole, a new picture, is born. Wittgenstein's more profound scepticism about what it is possible to know *systematically* served to free Murdoch to be able to

²²⁷ Apart from an uncompleted and unpublished monograph on Heidegger.

see philosophical systems in relation to each other, and this was crucial to the development of her own thought. The methodology she developed in this inquiry involved as much attention to the language, especially the metaphor, in which the ideas were expressed as to the abstractions themselves. She believed, as one also in the *literary* trade of creating plausible worlds, that the aesthetics of philosophies, the image-making and atmosphere-creating power of the language in which they are expressed, has a lot more to do with their appeal than is generally recognised. For Murdoch, this was also true of science, at least at the level of the popularisation of science which now has such a forceful (and therefore ethically crucial) hold on the popular imagination. “Historical change” she writes, “is (in part and fundamentally) change of imagery. This is often prompted by scientific discovery.” (MGM, 47)

The scientific domination of what he calls the modern episteme was of course a central preoccupation of Foucault’s. (Even such distinguished thinkers as Marx²²⁸ and Freud both claimed their work was essentially “scientific”, as if this was by then the only acceptable claim to “truth”, despite the constant historical changes in scientific paradigms). Foucault looked at science’s claim to “objectivity” primarily from the point of view of discursive practices (institutional and academic) in society at large, and crucially in the way this affects one’s reading of oneself, that is to say: where one finds oneself situated between specific determinisms and freedom. Murdoch, herself situated in a philosophical tradition that she saw as increasingly and dangerously infatuated with science – therefore one posing for itself the same problem of where freedom lies – was concerned to unpick the epistemological knots of this tradition, in the first instance because of their strong ethical implications. Against this tendency she writes: “Moral concepts do not move about *within* a hard world set up by science and logic. They set up, for different purposes, a different world.” (IP, 321) Both she and Foucault maintained, against this scientific and often scientistic trend, that our *aesthetic* relation to the world is of enormous ethical (and epistemological) importance and a lot of their work thematised this.

5

With regard to moral philosophy there is a large area of agreement between Foucault and Murdoch on the parameters of what *can* be said, and a large area of disagreement on what it is they personally want to say. Both (with Nietzsche on this) opposed all forms of moral absolutism,

²²⁸ Given the political climate of the mid-century, both Foucault and Murdoch were briefly members of their respective Communist parties, but both were too anti-essentialist to ever be convinced Marxists.

maintaining a rigorously historicist position. As Sluga puts it, Foucault argues that “the genealogist [of morals] must seek to find behind things ‘not a timeless and essential secret, but the secret that they have no essence or that their essence was fabricated in a piecemeal fashion from alien forms.’ (NGH, 142)” (FEHN, 228) And Murdoch, arguing against attempts to fix what morality *should* be, writes: “Why should philosophy be less various, where the differences in what it attempts to analyse are so important. Wittgenstein says that ‘What has to be accepted, the given, is – so one could say – forms of life.’ For purposes of analysis moral philosophy should remain at the level of the differences, taking the moral forms of life as given, and not try to get *behind them* to a single form.” (VC 94). Both were anti-essentialist; but when Murdoch says: “At a superficial level history fashions morals, at a deep level morals resist history” (MGM 223); she is referring to Wittgenstein’s statement in the *Tractatus*, that “ethics is transcendental”, in the sense – for her – that it is a condition of human existence. That is to say that to discriminate between what is good and what is bad, both aesthetically and morally, is a continuative part of what it is to be a human being – regardless of what different ideas people might have about value, or “human nature” or transcendent entities. On this picture, the transcendent entities themselves, such as God, Reason, the Idea of the Good, History, etc., whilst all unprovable and, today, no longer philosophically defensible, constitute images that say a lot about morality in general, as well as about moralities in particular. The ubiquity of ethical systems, in all their myriad historical and cultural forms stood witness, for Murdoch, to a human interest in the moral good, *whichever* way this is interpreted. For her therefore “the good” was the sovereign moral concept, all other moral concepts, including freedom, describing different qualities of what is good. For this reason, because he put the Idea of the Good at the centre of his philosophy, as well as for her love of the beauty and insightfulness of his writings, Plato was a key figure for Murdoch, though “Platonist” metaphysically, she definitely was not. Foucault on the other hand generally followed Nietzsche in his dislike of all things “Platonic”, and the idea of the good does not figure in his philosophical vocabulary. Ironically perhaps, though in his personal ethics Foucault was much closer to Nietzsche than was Murdoch, in their thinking this was not always the case. Sluga writes:

That Nietzsche’s genealogy intends no legitimation of moral values is made perfectly clear in his rude persiflage of the Platonic allegory of the cave. Where Plato had insisted that the philosopher must escape from the human cave in order to discover the origin of value, Nietzsche asserts that ‘ideals are made on earth’, in the dark, smelly cave of human life and are manufactured from falseness and self-deception (*GM*, 1.14).²²⁹ Against all forms of moral absolutism, the genealogist maintains thus a resolutely historical and critical stance, and

²²⁹ Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*.

Foucault entirely agrees with that judgement. He insists for this reason that ‘the work of the intellect is to show that what is, does not have to be, what it is’ (*FL*, 252)²³⁰ (FEHN, 227)

This last statement, displaced to another context, could stand as a *precise* description of the type of exercise of oneself in thought that Murdoch advocates as ethical practice, as, for example, in the hypothetical case of M’s reflections on D²³¹; but where Murdoch agreed so thoroughly with Nietzsche is in his description of the human tendency to produce moral views from “falseness and self-deception”, this is in fact an area of ethics which Foucault steered well clear of. His brilliant exposures of the objectification of persons through practices of external surveillance, as in prisons and psychiatric institutions²³², and of forms of internal self-surveillance such as confession and psychoanalysis, augmented his wariness of such forms of introspection. When Foucault says that it is the work of the intellect to show that what is doesn’t have to be, he is talking not only about aspects of external reality, but also about ideas, and about the ideas one has about oneself, often acquired through “subjection” (*assujettissement*) more than “subjectivation” (*subjectivation*). Self-transformation therefore was for him the work of the intellect in that by exposing the contingent nature of any such idea, the idea would be disempowered, freeing one to recreate oneself. Murdoch on the other hand believed that much of our mental life consists of self-centred narratives, of fantasy, that prevent us from seeing the truth. In this her guide was Simone Weil, for whom, she says, “Moral change comes from an attention to the world whose natural result is a decrease in egoism through an increased sense of the reality of, primarily of course other people, but also other things.” (MGM 52).

6

Foucault says of the subject:

[The subject] is not a substance. It is a form, and this form is not primarily or always identical to itself. You do not have the same type of relationship to yourself when you constitute yourself as a political subject who goes to vote or speaks at a meeting and when you are seeking to fulfil your desires in a sexual relationship. Undoubtedly there are relationships and interferences between these different forms of the subject, but we are not dealing with the same type of subject. In each case one plays, one establishes a different type of relationship to oneself. And it is precisely the historical constitution of these various forms of subject in relation to the games of truth which interests me. (ECS, 290. From a 1984 interview.)

²³⁰ Lotringer, Sylvère, ed. *Foucault Live: Interviews 1966-1984*. New York: Semiotext(e), 1989

²³¹ Discussed in *The Idea of Perfection*.

²³² In which he had worked and suffered.

Murdoch, while sharing the view that the subject is not a substance, instead believed that these *internal* “relationships and interferences[?] between these different forms of the subject” were of crucial importance. She writes:

where the central problem of human consciousness is concerned the alleged ‘disappearance’ of the old substantial self has not led to any new philosophical enlightenment, or clear indication concerning how we are to discuss in a more realistic way a demythologised and (apparently) disunited self [; though metaphysical ideas persist of more deprived but still unitary selflets, leading a minimal yet dignified sort of existence as principles of will or sincerity or non-universal rationality. (MGM, 162. From a 1982 Gifford lecture, published 1992)

The curious term “interferences” Foucault uses above might suggest some kind of function resembling that of Freud’s “superego” as an operator in the process of “objectification” by which we internalise and then identify with images of the self (I am mad, bad, etc.). However, the term “objectification” was in any case the fruit of his earlier, more structuralising phase; and true to his nominalist methods, he chose not to hypothesise any explanation of this mechanism. Flynn writes that “Foucault’s method is radically anti-Platonic and individualistic. His sympathy with the Sophists, Cynics, and other philosophical ‘outsiders’ is based on a profound distrust of essences, natures, and other kinds of unifying, totalizing, and exclusionary thought that threaten individual freedom and creativity. That is to say his misgivings are moral (in the broad sense) as well as epistemological, as becomes clear from his numerous remarks about ‘an aesthetics of existence’ toward the end of his life.”²³³ Foucault was clearly not attracted to Plato, who is treated rather schematically in his work, and he tended to take him literally, treating *anamnesis*, for example, as literally referring to an unconscious memory of the Forms. His classification of the ancient (Platonic) form of reflexivity as based on “memory” refers specifically to this.

Given Murdoch’s own “distrust of essences, natures, and other kinds of unifying, totalising” thought, her love of Plato may seem surprising. However, her own reading of Plato was never literalist, and she was in fact rather scathing of such readings, believing that Plato’s use of abstract concepts, just as much as his creation of myths like that of the cave, was often a metaphorical means of picturing an important aspect of our mental experience. She writes, for example: “Failure to understand how thought constantly *works* in moral living supports a popular misrepresentation of Plato as an ‘*intellectualist*’ philosopher who (in the ordinary sense) put the highest value on intellectual skill, and (in the metaphysical sense) thought that nothing was real except objectified abstract ideas lodged somewhere in heaven.” (MGM, 177) Following Simone Weil, who wrote of

²³³ Flynn, Thomas, “Foucault’s Mapping of History.”, in CCF, pp.39-40.

anamnesis that it is “ ‘an orientation of the soul towards something which one does not know, but whose reality one does know’ ” (cited in MGM 505); she held that this type of experience has to do with attempts at understanding what is difficult; one that is familiar to the thinker waiting for the idea to crystallise, and to the artist waiting for the idea to materialise in form. Many artists, like Michelangelo who famously said his task was to release from the rock the form that was already there, see themselves as simply the instrument of some kind of truth waiting to be expressed. Murdoch believed that the energy involved in intellectual activity and in art had to do with the contemplative experience of stilling the mind from its usual whirling, and quieting its self-preoccupied fantasies; and that this was also an important requisite of *moral* reflection. Like every experience, it has a particular form of energetic marker; that “the world of the happy is not the world of the unhappy”, one of her favourite quotes from Wittgenstein, is something that can also be characterised by lighter, more vibrant, or darker and duller energies. In the sense in which the whole of ancient philosophy was “spiritual”, Murdoch maintained that “The energy of the attentive scholar or artist is spiritual energy. [...] One uses this word with a certain purpose, to set up certain pictures, to draw attention to similarities and to explain and clarify the obscure by the familiar. Plato called such energy Eros, love.” (Ibid.) Love and hate in our mind-body experience are forms of energy, and they correspond to the good and to the bad; therefore, for Murdoch, any morality which leaves out of account the question of how to diminish the self-centred energy of egoism and hate, and how to augment the other-centred energy of love, how to orient oneself to the good, will have failed to address the problem at its core.

7

The great artist expresses for her something we all know in our lives to some degree; but philosophy has been afraid of the indefinability of such experiences, that often can only be expressed in metaphor. It has therefore often preferred to dismiss them as philosophically irrelevant (except where it has attempted to fix them metaphysically). Murdoch was anti-metaphysical in the sense that she believed, following Wittgenstein, that the point of view of eternity taken by metaphysics was not available to human beings, but at the same time she believed that metaphysics, like art, and also certain kinds of religiosity, expresses much that is at the heart of our human experience, and constitutes a vast phenomenological reserve of material on which to draw in order to gain a better understanding of our human form of life. Such experiences provide a model of spiritual exercises, or techniques of the self. She writes:

the appreciation of beauty in art or nature is not only (for all its difficulties) the easiest available spiritual exercise; it is also a completely adequate entry into (and not just analogy of) the good life, since it *is* the checking of selfishness in the interest of seeing the real.

[...] It is important too that art teaches us how real things can be looked at and loved without being seized and used, without being appropriated into the greedy organism of the self. This exercise of detachment is difficult and valuable whether the thing contemplated is a human being or the root of a tree or the vibration of a colour or a sound. Unsentimental contemplation of nature exhibits the same quality of detachment: selfish concerns vanish, nothing exists except the things which are seen. [...] I would suggest that the authority of the Good seems to us something necessary because the realism (ability to perceive reality) required for goodness is a kind of intellectual ability to perceive what is true, which is automatically at the same time a suppression of self. (OGG, 352-53)

This long quotation provides us with examples of the spiritual exercises, the techniques of the self, that the Murdochian seeker after truth is advised to engage in; and these are techniques of unselfing (a word Murdoch introduced to Western moral philosophy). Attention to reality as what exists outside the self, inspired by an aspiration to the Good, constitutes the necessary *cognitive* basis of moral judgement and moral conduct. Foucault too uses art as a model for life, though differently, thus:

why couldn't everyone's life become a work of art? Why should the lamp or the house be an art object but not our life?

[...] From the idea that the self is not given to us [as in Sartre], I think there is only one practical consequence: we have to create ourselves as a work of art. (OGE, 261-62)

Foucault here objects to Sartre's "moral notion of authenticity [in that through it], he turns back to the idea that we have to be ourselves – to be truly our true self. I think the only acceptable practical consequence of what Sartre has said is to link his theoretical insight to the practice of creativity – and not to that of activity." (Ibid. 262) For Foucault the problem with this is it allows some sense of a pre-constituted self to interfere with one's ethical self-creation. Murdoch on the other hand, as we have seen, read Sartre's *pour-soi* as conceived precisely as the kind of free spirit, of intellect and will, that would create its own life as a work of art, as Foucault envisaged. Her own objection to Sartre's picture was that she saw this capacity of the *pour-soi* to leave the gluey, earthbound *en-soi* behind, as a pretty picture, a philosophical illusion. The source of artistic creativity is famously not the intellect, except in conjunction with the imagination, which Foucault does not thematise. When he speaks of creating the self, it is always as an act of freedom, it is willed, even in his ethical choice of focusing on "pleasures" one "chooses", rather than "desires". Murdoch reminds us, however, that

artists are human individuals, no work is perfect, though our hearts may claim perfection for some. The material of art is contingent limited historically stained stuff. Nevertheless art is a great source of revelation. Bad art displays the base aspects of human nature more clearly than anything else, though of course not so harmfully. One might even say that the exemplification of human frailty in bad art is a clearer warning to us than its representation in good art. (MGM, 85-86)

Just as for Foucault the self was to be created; for Murdoch the self-centred self, or rather our fantasy of who we are, and of how we operate in and on the world, is the obstacle to clear vision, and must be “suppressed”. *Not*, however, as Foucault feared of ethical theories having this component, in order that some pre-existing “true” self will then rise from the ashes; but simply that, freed of the unhelpful baggage of self-centredness one will live more freely, more able to see and connect with reality. One will live a better life, without the identity-obsession of defining who one is, or deliberately creating a life-style. For Murdoch, the “aesthetics of existence” means being able to truly *see* reality, in order to be able to live in it, in all our activities, and with others. She writes: “[the] same virtues, in the end the same virtue (love), are required throughout, and fantasy (self) can prevent us from seeing a blade of grass just as it can prevent us from seeing another person.” (OGG, 357)

For Foucault, the defining aesthetic of the philosophical life was that it would be an *other* life, radically different from conventional lives, under the sign of a courageous *truth* that would challenge the illusions built into social convention, and he lived that life. For Murdoch, the choice of a life-style was not what was important – contingency can play one any type of hand; what was important was rather to live consciously, cultivating attention to the reality around one in all its contingent dynamics, and to oneself within it, under the sign of the *good* and of *love*, and she lived that life.

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