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Goodbye Foucault's 'Missing Human Agent'?

Self-formation, capability and the *dispositifs*

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Abstract: A steady stream of commentary criticizes Foucault's 'agentless position' for its inability to observe, much less theorize, the ways in which human actors manoeuvre, negotiate, transform or resist the structures within which they are situated. This article does not so much refute this critical consensus but seeks to reconstruct a framework from Foucault's writings, which allows space for 'human agency', including individuals' pursuit of tactics, attempts at solving problems, reactions to unexpected events and their reflexive work on their own subjectivities. The revised analytical framework, 'dispositional analytics', integrates the study of self-techniques with the analysis of *dispositifs*. Recognizing that Foucault's work eschewed an adequate consideration of individuals' capacity to affect the forces that bear upon them, the article discusses the socio-political conditions for self-formation. Finally, a case study of 'voice-hearers' who use self-techniques to reconstitute themselves in opposition to institutional psychiatry is reinterpreted through the framework of dispositional analysis.

The critique of Michel Foucault's alleged neglect of human agency and freedom has long been repeated in the classroom, at conferences and on the pages of critical commentaries. At least since Jürgen Habermas declared that Foucault's genealogy is '*relativistic, cryptonormative* illusory science' (1987, p. 276, emphasis in original), a continuous stream of critique has targeted Foucault. Central to this critical stream is the claim that Foucault fails to theorize human agency, and that his refusal of any notion of human essence, together with his assertion of power's efficacy, eliminates all foundations for normative critique, leading Foucault to a 'negative paradigm of subjectification' (McNay, 2000). That Foucault's analytical framework leaves little space for human agency is an enduring interpretive tendency across a wide range of disciplines, including sociology, political philosophy, anthropology, ethnography, organization science and gender studies (Caldwell, 2007; Fox, 1998; Fraser, 1995; Habermas, 1987; Honneth, 1991; Jameson, 1991; Kioupkiolis, 2012; McNay, 2000; Wheatley, 2019). Indeed, many commentators have criticized Foucault's 'agentless position' for its inability to observe, much less theorize, the ways in which human agents actively manoeuvre, negotiate, transform or resist the discursive or social structures within which they are situated.

An illustrative proponent of the critical consensus is Raymond Caldwell who declares: 'Foucault's most influential works tend to treat agency as an exogenous effect of discourse and power/knowledge', insofar as 'he does not provide a coherent theory of embodied agency or embodiment' (2007, p. 786). Foucault's theoretical framework, concludes Caldwell, 'closes down ideals of agency founded on intentional action, knowledge, autonomy and reflexivity' (2007, p. 787). Alexandros Kioupkiolis asserts that Foucault failed to give attention to creative agency as vehicle for the transgression of existing limitations, since people's capacity to think differently is limited to a restricted set of preconceived alternatives. This is, argues Kioupkiolis, '(t)he unfortunate after-effect of Foucault's fixation on genealogy to the detriment of creative praxis' (2012, p. 392). And Lance Wheatley finds in Foucault's works 'views that were strongly structuralist',

posing the question whether his writing, in fact, reveals that agents have more influence than his quasi-structuralist approach can account for ([2019](#)). This critique runs through several generations of critical theorists, political philosophers and gender scholars, who have continuously argued that Foucault's rendering of power/knowledge forecloses the possibility of human agency.

Three related critical claims underpin the critical consensus regarding Foucault's missing human agent. The first claim holds that Foucault offers insufficient resources for exploring the complexities and dynamics of human agents in their lived practices. A second claim argues that Foucault's position dissolves any platform for normativity and critique because it renders resistance – and the resisting agent – as entirely reactive to power. Finally, a third critical claim asserts that Foucault's analysis has the unfortunate 'ideological' effect upon the reader of resignation and passivity in the face of power's omnipotent reach.

Readers well versed in Foucault's authorship have been hesitant to accept these critical claims, since they find in his books abundant descriptions of people who act, including hygienists, town planners, psychiatrists, industrialists, prison wards, 'infamous men', ancient truth-tellers and more. One would have to accept that those diverse groups all act in the service of power understood akin to a uniform and constraining force. Theoretically, the critique of Foucault's missing agent rests on two premises that must be accepted too: First, acts of genuine human agency and resistance must be essentially *external* to power structures to count as genuine, which means that 'immanent resistance' does not qualify as agency. Second, the critics' claim that, for Foucault, the subject's actions can only be entirely *reactive* to power rules out power's *productivity*, including the possibility that power can produce something unexpected, liberating or self-undermining, such as resistant human agency.

The intention in this article, however, is not so much to refute the long-standing critical consensus but rather to reconstruct an analytical approach from Foucault's work, which allows space for considering 'human agency', including individuals' pursuit of tactics, attempts at solving problems, reactions to unexpected events and reconstructive work on their own subjectivities. Specifically, I will present an analytical approach by drawing upon Foucault's concept of the *dispositif*, which, at the moment, is receiving growing attention in empirical applications of Foucauldian analysis ([du Plessis, 2020](#); [Fleming et al., 2022](#); [Gøtzsche-Astrup, 2022](#); [Hautz and Thoma, 2021](#); [Wagner et al., 2021](#); [Villadsen, 2021](#)).

The proposed analytical approach, 'dispositional analytics', might not satisfy critics informed by critical theory or humanist ideals or those seeking functional solutions to the problems of modern societies. I do not claim that the approach is without its problems and shortcomings, and, towards the end of the article, I discuss some of these problems in relation to the notion of 'limit-experience' and Foucault's typical silence regarding the socio-political conditions that give individuals the capability of undertaking ethical self-work. I suggest that the problem is not so much that the historical, political and social context receives no attention in Foucault's work on ethical self-formation. Instead, I agree that Foucault's earlier as well as later work did not sufficiently consider the problem of individuals' *capability* to affect the forces that bear upon them.

Another key task this article will pursue is to integrate analytically the self-techniques with the concept of *dispositifs*, hence bridging Foucault's 1970s studies of power with Foucault's work on ethics from the early 1980s. Notably, Foucault did not himself elaborate his concept of the *dispositif* in relation to the theme of self-formation through self-techniques. The commentary literature typically divides Foucault's authorship into three overall phases to identify the main themes of his evolving work ([Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1982](#)). In brief, the early Foucault focused on discourse and knowledge (early 1950s–1970), the midcareer Foucault studied power and institutions (1970–1980) and the late Foucault explored ethics and

self-conduct (1980–1984). In this interpretive model, the last phase is defined by Foucault's departure from subjugation to his recovery of an active human agent who practises self-cultivation. However, this model has generally kept the analytics from Foucault's journey to Greco-Roman antiquity separate from his previous authorship. The specific problem at hand here of analytically integrating the study of self-techniques with the *dispositifs* remains, to the best of my knowledge, largely unexplored (see [Deleuze, 1992](#); [Villadsen, 2021](#)). However, Foucault's later work has several fundamental continuities with his previous research that should allow for an approximation of the two.

Some scholars suggest that in the 1970s Foucault showed that subjects are historically constituted on the basis of particular *dispositifs*, whereas he shifted his focus to the subject itself in the 1980s. Alan Milchman and Alan Rosenberg thus note that Foucault's late work displays a search for the possibility that the subject could be constituted in autonomous fashion: 'Foucault seemed to be breaking new ground in his last years, inasmuch as the subject, and not the *dispositif* [networks] of knowledge-power, and their attendant social practises, had become the focus of his thinking' ([2007](#), p. 53). Contrary to this temporal division, I suggest that Foucault's late work could still be understood as analyses of *dispositifs* (and subjects' relation to them), just as the analysis of self-formation already begin to surface in the 1970s, especially in Foucault's attention to religious 'counter-conduct' ([2007](#)). In a similar gesture, Jeffrey Nealon forges a link between Foucault's late interest in self-formation and his work, at the end of 1970s, of neoliberalism and biopower, since these forms of power circulate through our very identities. Foucault's notion of self-fashioning, suggests Nealon, should be read in the context of biopower, which targets micro-relations and identities. This feature of biopower commits Foucault to analyse the self's work upon the self, insofar as it is in the self-relation that power operates most intensely.

Other authors have stressed the possibility of human agency in Foucault's work. [Alexander Hooke \(1987\)](#) explains the elusiveness of Foucault's normative position by his refusal of humanism, which interlinks universal norms to quasi-metaphysical truths about man. Instead, Hooke finds in the art of the self a search for possible ways of living that is non-foundational, that is 'lived, contextual and experimental' ([1987](#), p. 55). [Mark Bevir \(1999\)](#) notes that a rejection of autonomy does not necessarily entail a rejection of agency, and he finds in 'the composed Foucault', that is, the later Foucault's work on governmentality, a critique of domination and a preference for forms of power that recognize individuals as agents. [Karsten Schubert \(2021\)](#) argues that a space of freedom can be continually created from the subject's self-relation, because the self-relation can reach a degree of autonomy in relation to the outside that constitutes it: 'Freedom is an emergent level of operation vis-à-vis the subjectifications that constitute the subject' ([2021](#), p. 644). Finally, [Gilles Deleuze \(1988\)](#) explicitly addresses the problematic of this article. Emphasizing the potential for creation in practises of self-formation, Deleuze asserts that *dispositifs* always constitute possibilities for the subject to 'enfold' its relations to the outside world in irreducible ways. When one establishes a self-relation, writes Deleuze in his distinct vocabulary, 'it is as if the relations of the outside folded back to create a doubling, allow a relation to oneself to emerge, and constitute an inside which is hollowed out and develops its own unique dimension' ([1988](#), p. 100). This article pursues the question of agency in Foucault, like the above contributions, but its specific aim is to connect the analysis of self-formation with the notion of the *dispositif*. In particular, it explicates Foucault's analysis of self-formation as a 'technical' achievement, eschewing humanist notions of the subject, as it re-inserts the self-techniques within dispositional analytics.

The article falls into four parts. The first part introduces the *dispositif*, emphasizing that its emergence and subsequent development is often spurred by social groups who respond to pressing problems. Then, the second part discusses Foucault's 'technical' notion of ethics as the self's work upon the self, emphasizing

the question: what price do we pay when taking up a particular self-work? This section also addresses the challenge of integrating dispositional analytics with self-techniques, considering different possible relationships in which subjects can engage with the *dispositifs*. The third part explores Foucault's oft-neglected question of the sociopolitical conditions for self-formation, centring on the notions of 'limit-experience' and human capability. Finally, the last section gives an example of 'voice-hearers' who use self-techniques to transform themselves in opposition to institutional psychiatry. This illustrative case is reinterpreted from the perspective of dispositional analytics.

The *dispositif* and self-techniques

As a first approximation, Foucault's concept of *dispositif* can be conceived as *a set of connected practices and techniques, which are invested with a strategy*. For example, the disciplinary *dispositif* connects a range of practices and techniques for surveying, comparing and correcting human bodies. These practices and techniques are all invested with the strategy of 'normalisation', that is, a strategy aiming to prevent unwanted behaviour and bring human action to comply with certain norms in prisons, schools, factories, military barracks, and hospitals (Foucault, 1977). In an oft-cited interview from 1977, Foucault said that the *dispositif* denotes a network which interconnects diverse elements, including practices, procedures, techniques, scientific concepts, laws, architecture and more (1980, p. 194). Importantly, the *dispositif* is defined in such a way, that is, an unspecified system of relations traversed by a strategy, that it requires careful historical analysis before the concept begins to take shape. When asked to elaborate on the *dispositif*, Foucault (1980) refrained from formal conceptual specification, instead giving a series of historical details that leave the impression that the *dispositif* is inseparable from its socio-historic context. Hence, analytically, the *dispositif* serves as a 'grid of intelligibility' (Dreyfus and Rabinow: 1982, p. 121), a conceptual tool that the genealogist uses in describing evolving historical processes.

An illustrative example of how the *dispositif* interconnects diverse elements surfaces in Foucault's 1973 lecture series, *The Punitive Society* (2015), which describes how, in the eighteenth century, discipline began to connect up 'elements' such as reformist penal law, new correctional techniques, early psychiatric classifications and the architectural design of institutions. The analysis recovers how privileged groups deploy various tactics and invent new techniques in their struggle to protect their wealth and discipline workers during early industrial capitalism. This activity could perhaps be termed 'human agency' à la Foucault. In the aforementioned 1977 interview, Foucault said that the *dispositif* is 'a formation which has as its major function at a given historical moment that of responding to an urgent need' (1980, p. 195). The innovators of micro-disciplinary techniques, such as merchant guilds, philanthropic associations and societies for the correction of manners, could be indeed be said to respond to 'an urgent need'. However, Foucault insists that the responses of these groups, namely the development of a range of punitive and moralizing techniques targeting the workers, were not pervaded by any uniform class ideology. It was rather a matter of ad hoc solutions and groups' shifting tactics, whereby a system of disciplinary practices, techniques and forms of knowledge gradually spread in the social body.

While minor tactics are often initiated by identifiable actors, these actors tend to retreat into the background as tactics solidify into general strategies (Bidet, 2016, p. 156) that, in turn, propel the *dispositifs*. On Foucault's account, then, the 'urgent needs' to which the *dispositif* 'responds' are the needs of certain social groups, although once a *dispositif* is consolidated it is often forgotten who invented its constitutive elements (for a discussion of how social groups are essential in establishing *dispositifs*, see Hardy, 2015). As a tool for writing 'histories of the present', the most important effect of reconstructing a *dispositif* is to display how its particular normativity might still condition our possible experiences. Yet, for the purposes of this article's discussion, the essential point is that the *dispositif* arises from human action,

induce actions, and it is continually transformed through actions. Instead of a fixed and deterministic structure, the *dispositif* appears as a moving 'battlefield' shaped by perpetual struggle, unfolding through the tactics that individuals pursue in their self-constitutive practice. This point brings us to our central task, which is the relationship between the *dispositif* and self-techniques, and, specifically, the question of how to integrate the two in an overall analytical approach.

To begin, Foucault's late emphasis on the subject as both *constituted and self-constituting* complicates the dualism of power and the subject which many critics of Foucault's 'lack of human agency' rely upon. In his studies of Greek antiquity and early Christianity, [Foucault \(1984\)](#) used the term 'self-techniques' to describe the practical and reflexive tools by which subjects act to cultivate themselves. Importantly, this move did not entail any recovery of the constitutive human subject that opposes power from a violated or estranged human 'essence'. By analysing self-formation as 'technical,' analogous to the work of craftsmen, Foucault eschewed assuming a subject both in modern scientific and humanist terms. Late in his career, Foucault viewed the subject as an on-going project, or process, which is never totally determined by power or external conditions. To be clear, this is not because there is an 'essence' or a kernel of absolute freedom hidden deep within the subject that escapes complete subjugation. Rather, the fundamental point introduced by the concept of self-techniques is that the self, while being shaped by external forces, also shapes itself. Foucault can advance a notion of freedom that the subject may forge *in relation* to the *dispositifs*, because his understanding of freedom does not rely upon any human essence or sphere that exist 'outside' of the *dispositifs*.

Notably, Deleuze wrote: 'We belong to social apparatuses [*dispositifs*, AUTHOR] and act within them' ([1992](#), p. 164), but he also stressed that a *dispositif* is not a structure of absolute determination, since subjects 'enfold' external forces in variable ways, creating 'variation of the fold or of subjectivation' ([1988](#), p. 95). I take Deleuze's comments to mean that the later Foucault saw subjects as historically constituted on the basis of specific *dispositifs*, which emerged from contingent and transient practises, but he also insisted on the irreducibility of the subject's reflexive self-constitution. In an interview from 1982, Foucault declared that his role was

to show people that they are much freer than they feel, that people accept as truth, as evidence, some themes which have been built up at a certain moment during history, and that this so-called evidence can be criticised and destroyed. ([1988a](#), p. 10).

Hence, there is no vacuous space or pure origin from which self-formation begins. Colin Koopman succinctly defines the context in which the subject undertakes historically conditioned self-work:

We all begin exactly where we find ourselves and with the weight of an enormous history bearing down upon us. The very space of possibilities in which we begin to imagine better forms of selfhood is already conditioned by the past that constitutes us. ([2013](#), p. 539).

For subjects to begin reconstituting themselves, and hence redefine the freedom they can enjoy, they must undertake a reflexive work on themselves in the face of what constitutes them. Self-techniques are the medium through which subjects are able to produce, as well as transform, a conception of themselves and what they hold as truth in relation to the *dispositifs*.

Even if Foucault displayed some fascination with Greek ethics, Foucault does not assign a superior moral value to it ([Davidson, 1991](#)). Nevertheless, the experimental and transgressive potential that commentators often connect to Foucault's notion of ethics begs the question of the general value of self-techniques: Is it possible to assign different values to distinct kinds of self-techniques? And is the use of self-techniques that

create a form of subjectivation a prior necessity for the subject's capacity to actively engage with the *dispositifs*? Foucault's work, from the 1970s and early 1980s, reveals many ways in which the subject can relate to the *dispositifs* and their power/knowledge arrangements. Very schematically, a key contrast in Foucault's late work (1984, [1989a](#)) runs between ancient Greco-Roman self-cultivation and self-mastery premised on principles of 'self-care' and early Christian self-scrutiny and self-renunciation under a corpus of binding moral codes. Or, put in terms of dispositional analytics: the ancients used a set of self-techniques governed by a strategy of moderation—cultivation of the self, while the Christians invented self-techniques, and developed existing ones, around a strategy of elucidation—renunciation of the self. Bluntly stated, the ancient Greek man surfaces as the historical example of a subject that freely and reflexively subjects himself to 'the *dispositif* of aphrodisia' (my term), its moral codes and its techniques.

Here, we must recall our definition of the *dispositif* introduced above: it is not a solid and unified structure; instead, the *dispositif* constitutes a propensity for organizing practises and generating knowledge that is observable transversally in the social body ([Raffnsøe et al., 2016](#)). Although Foucault had reached such a flexible notion of the *dispositif* in the late 1970s, he made self-critical statements in the 1980s on having insisted too much on domination in his earlier work. In the lecture *Subjectivity and Truth*, delivered in 1980, Foucault announced that his emphasis would now shift from 'techniques of domination' to 'techniques of the self', but, also, that government connects the two. If one wants to write the genealogy of the subject, says Foucault,

He has to take into account the points where the technologies of domination of individuals over one another have recourse to processes by which the individual acts upon himself. And conversely, he has to take into account the points where the techniques of the self are integrated into structures of coercion and domination. (1993, pp. 203–204).

If we extend the analysis of *dispositifs* with the concept of self-techniques, we can consider how subjects, in working on themselves, expand and intensify the *dispositif*, but, also, how they twist, reverse and resist it. Hence, David Owen explains that self-techniques 'offer possibilities for both the elaboration of power networks and the generating of modes of resisting the process of subjectification' ([1989](#), p. 116). Directing analytical focus to this ambiguity of techniques of the self, Owen specifies, 'we can examine both the unwitting complicity of these techniques with the elaboration of techniques of subjectification but, also, the ways in which our modes of self-constitution resist subjectification' (1989, p. 116).

Commentators like [Richard Wolin \(2006\)](#) have argued that Foucault's late work represents a turn away from politics and towards individual self-cultivation as an aesthetic practice. Conversely, Thomas Dumm asserts that Foucault did not abandon politics in his work on ethics but redefined it as being centred on the activity of self-constitution ([1996](#), p. 3). Proponents of Foucault emphasize that the notion of 'the care of the self' entails an understanding of self-cultivation whereby the subject is always in a relation to others and the community towards which he holds certain responsibilities. However, it must be admitted that Foucault's ethical subject stands, above all, in a relation to itself. This reflexive self-relation is essentially what constitutes the subject, which Foucault makes clear in the dossier 'Culture of the Self': '[T]he self with which one has the relationship is nothing other than the relationship itself' (Foucault cited in [Gros, 2005](#), p. 533). Foucault's 'modest' conception of ethics is refreshing in terms of its analytical versatility and its escape from moral and legal models, and yet, it has left some readers with the view that it turns away from politics as such. Deleuze emphasizes that Foucault's subject is but a set of processual relations, since the subject exists in a field of interacting forces, and yet, 'what comes about as a result is a relation which force has with itself, a power to affect itself, an affect of the self on the self' ([1988](#), p. 101). Hence, ethics, in Deleuze's interpretation, is the reflexive process by which the self 'folds back' on itself external forces that

constitute the individual as a subject, effectively reshaping and inflecting the forces of subjectivation in one's cultural environment. Ethics, in brief, is nothing else than the reflexive work of the self upon self. This conception of ethics is strikingly simple or, as Smith observes, 'surprisingly modest' (2015, p. 144), but it should be understood in the light of Foucault's search for an ethics beyond the content derived from legalistic frameworks and universal imperatives.

Central to Foucault from the early 1970s onwards was the interlinkage of knowledge and the *dispositif*, or, more precisely, the *dispositif's* integration into knowledge production. Already in 1973, Foucault stressed the intricate connection between 'the subject of knowledge' and the political conditions for the production of knowledge:

There cannot be particular types of subjects of knowledge, orders of truth, or domains of knowledge except on the basis of political conditions that are the very ground on which the subject, the domains of knowledge, and the relations with truth are formed. (2000a, p. 15).

For example, the disciplinary *dispositif* intersected with new knowledge of deviance, producing individuals as 'cases' and 'types' through the normalizing categories of the rising psy-disciplines. The *dispositif* of sexuality also interlinked with normalizing knowledge produced by medicine, psychiatry and psychology, but most significantly, it re-appropriated the confessional technique, which turned the speaker into the object of his own true discourse.

In the early 1980s, Foucault shifted explicitly towards the subject's own production of truth and, in particular, the historical conditions in which the subject can make true statements, including the self-techniques required to act as such a subject of knowledge. In this period, Foucault explored the position of the subject in different discursive domains, or 'truth orders', and their related techniques, including pastoral care with its confessional technique (2005), judicial process with its technique of the inquiry (2000a) and politics with the ancient technique of *parrêsia* (2001).

The socio-political conditions for self-elaboration?

We can define 'care of the self' and 'self-techniques' as modes of self-formation whereby subjects, in working on themselves, relate actively to the forces of their social and political worlds. They do so not by simply denying or resisting the dominant moralities, truth orders and hierarchies of power, but by reflecting upon them, rearticulating them, and, perhaps, exposing the hypocrisy of political rulers. The subjects in Foucault's genealogies are not 'inherently autonomous' or 'resistant', but they can cultivate an awareness of the limits imposed on them and, on this basis, undertake a patient self-work by means of historically received techniques that permit the subject a degree of freedom. We here recapitulate Foucault's distinctive definition of ethics which he explicated in one of his last interviews: 'what is ethics, if not the practice of freedom, the conscious [*réfléchie*] practice of freedom?'. Foucault then declared that 'ethics is the considered form that freedom takes when it is informed by reflection' (2000c, p. 281). Foucault's emphasis on reflection must be distinguished from Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophy, insofar as Sartre typically worked from abstract ontological assumptions in explaining how meaning is produced, whereas Foucault situated reflexive practices in relation to *dispositifs* of power/knowledge within a specific social and historical milieu. Comparing Foucault and Sartre, Nik Farrell Fox notes that 'meaning is produced by the Sartrean subject in ontological-individual rather than in socio-linguistic terms'; a conclusion that Fox subsequently moderates and complicates (2003, p. 36). For Foucault, the ethical self-relation arises, then, from the subject's own reflexive practice of freedom, which, in the Greco-Roman world, required attending to one's own thoughts and attitudes by techniques of self-domination, self-testing and meditation.

The circular, self-referential relation whereby the self-works upon the self, along with the privilege that Foucault gives to practises of *reflection*, has spurred critiques that he neglects the material and sociopolitical conditions of self-formation ([Callinicos, 1989](#); [Eagleton, 1990](#); [Fox, 1998](#)). Nick Fox argues that while Foucault's work before 1980 implied determinism of the subject, his late 'notion of the "self" moves to the other extreme, inadequately addressing the constraints which affect the fabrication of subjectivity' ([1998](#), p. 415). Hence, one might ask: Was the freedom that Foucault describes as the 'condition of ethics' merely a privilege of an elite of 'free men'? And, perhaps more importantly, do we risk inheriting this (restricted) view of freedom, if we transpose Foucault's ethics into contemporary analysis without due attention to the conditions that underpin or constrain the subject's self-formation? For example, [Nikolas Rose's \(1999\)](#) recent attempt to conceptualize a new ethics, an 'ethico-politics', in times of expanding potential for bio-genetic self-modification has been criticized for its inattention to the sociopolitical conditions of such self-care ([Dean and Villadsen, 2016](#), pp. 39–40). Hence, the inescapable question is whether Foucault's merging of ethics and politics in self-formation can escape 'tired' political issues like universal rights, struggles around distribution, and access to the innovations of biomedicine, surgery and healthcare.

A case in point is [Foucault's \(2001\)](#) late analysis of ancient *parrêsia* ('truth-telling'), where the production of a discourse of truth occurs principally in the relationship of the speaker and listeners. But for Foucault, this relationship, that is, 'the occasion' of truth-telling, does not depend on a juridical framework or the social position of the interlocutors, insofar as *parrêsia* is essentially achieved through the interlocutors' ethical work on themselves. Judith Butler makes this point when she highlights how Foucault's analysis of truth-telling ignores the speakers' habitus, their social context and the sensorial dimension:

Our narratives come up against an impasse when the conditions of possibility for speaking the truth cannot fully be thematized, where what we speak relies upon a formative history, a sociality, and a corporeality that cannot easily, if at all be reconstructed in narrative. ([Butler, 2003](#), p. 132).

Of course, in Foucault's defence, one should recall that he never aimed to establish a *universal theory* of subjectivation or ethics, and, therefore, his journey back to the Greco-Roman world can hardly be evaluated from such premises.

If one wishes to synthesise a general formula of Foucault's ethics, it could perhaps be defined as the self's capacity to command the forces that target the self. Or, as Nealon states: 'Foucaultian ethics concerns governing the forces that come to bear on the self' ([2008](#), p. 91). In Nealon's interpretation, the subject's relationship to power is certainly not reducible to mere refusal or resistance to power. Instead, 'we must always work *with* or *alongside*' the productivity of power, and, since Foucault's primary register for understanding power is 'intensification', argues Nealon, 'critique becomes a matter of attempting to extend, broaden, or saturate certain effects within a given field, while trying to constrict, limit, or downplay other effects' ([2008](#), p. 95). This is a helpful interpretation, which, in terms of dispositional analytics, emphasizes how the subject's self-formative techniques will intensify, deflect or constrict the effects of the *dispositif*, insofar as these effects must 'pass through' the subject, or, more specifically, the subject's evolving self-relation and relations to others.

[Karsten Schubert \(2021\)](#) moves a step further in theorizing the conditions necessary for the subject's self-work in relation to power. Developing Foucault's late notion of freedom, the freedom to act differently, Schubert defines freedom as 'the capability to criticize one's own subjectification' ([2021](#), p. 635), emphasizing that this capability is dependent on institutions of which the rule of law is essential. Foucault's concept of power asserts the possibility of agential freedom and his notion of resistance implies that

subjects reflect critically on their mode of subjectification, but Foucauldians have largely neglected to specify the conditions that enable such ‘freedom as critique’. From this assessment, Schubert argues that ‘resistance is a demanding capability that cannot be generalized, but is only contingent, which is why a modally robust account of freedom as critique is necessary to explain how its general possibility can be transformed into probability and actuality’ (2021, pp. 647–648). Considering how to ensure not only the *possibility* but the *probability* of freedom as critique, Schubert turns to the neo-republican tradition. For neo-republicans, the rule of law is essential for guaranteeing ‘robust non-interference, that is, the institutional stabilization of freedom as non-interference’ (2021, p. 647). By the term ‘robust non-interference’, Schubert implies that only the law can ensure the absence of domination, or arbitrary interference, in a variety of possible socio-political contexts.

Schubert’s persuasive argument is relevant for this article’s concern with the subjects’ capabilities for practising transformative self-work in contestation of the *dispositifs*. However, the neo-republican emphasis on law resists any easy integration with Foucault’s search for non-judicial models of ethics and selfhood. While the rule of law arguably constitutes the most effective mediator of conflicts yet known to humankind, Foucault expressed scepticism against the law as a bulwark against power, sometimes portraying juridical institutions as deeply invested with strategies of domination (2003). As a set of ‘blood dried’ codes, the law’s promise of a reconciliatory universality dissolves into struggles between particular social forces (Dean and Villadsen, 2016, pp. 67–71). Furthermore, in his work on governmentality, Foucault distinguished his ethico-political subject from the juridical conception of the subject of right in institutional political theory.

Instead of the neo-republican concern with how to protect the subject from interference, the ‘freedom-from-problematic’, I wish to turn to the subject’s capabilities to exercise freedom as critique, a variant of the ‘freedom-to-problematic’. From this latter perspective, what is missing in Foucault’s work on ethical self-formation, or insufficiently considered, is the problem of subjects’ actual *capability* to affect the forces that bear upon them. The question of capabilities can hardly be settled by means of an abstract, universal codex, since what constitutes necessary capabilities depend on the *dispositifs* that, in specific sociopolitical contexts, both constrain and enable the subject’s actions. What is relevant to consider, then, is what basic conditions of human well-being must (always) exist for it to be ‘probable’, to use Schubert’s (2021) term, that subjects undertake self-work, while negotiating the *dispositifs*.

In a rare contribution to the discussion regarding such conditions for self-formation, Saul Tobias (2005) brings Foucault’s thinking into a dialogue with the ‘capability approach’ of Martha Nussbaum. The central question for Tobias is whether the Foucauldian notion of self-fashioning and self-transformation can stand alone, without a concern for the minimum conditions necessary to enable the subject to pursue such a project. It is hardly fully meaningful to talk about creating yourself ‘as a work of art’ in regard to severely deprived humans, namely those who are economically and politically deprived like the millions of slum dwellers and refugees, who sustain life at its bare minimum and have no ability to bring about real changes in their lives. Foucault did occasionally mention his own felt need to confront ‘the intolerable’ referring to prisoners and other disempowered groups, but he never theorized why these conditions should be resisted by ‘political militancy’ (Veyne, 2010). Tobias argues, however, that Foucault’s oeuvre ‘evinces a recognition of the basic conditions of human flourishing, which are themselves unavoidable and arguably primary objects of political activity’ (2005, p. 69). This is where Nussbaum’s (1993) theory of ‘capability’ and ‘well-being freedom’ provides a supplement by considering what could be termed the basic ‘material’ conditions of agential self-determination. She argues that psychological and physical incapacity, as well as economic and political deprivation, must be included in any analysis of human’s capacity to pursue autonomy.

Foucault's thinking on the liberating potentials of 'limit-experience', whereby 'the subject escapes from itself' (2000b, p. 248), must also be reconsidered in the light of the theory of capability. Reading avant-garde writers, especially George Bataille in the 1950s, Foucault had come to appreciate the idea of limit-experience as an experience that brings the subject to the limits of its own subjectivity and thus, momentarily, frees one from oneself. Limit-experiences can be reached through intoxication, ecstasy, eroticism, illness, the exploration of sadomasochistic practices, the encounter with art and near-death experience. James Miller describes them as 'mysteriously revealing states of intense dissociation' (1993, p. 30), explaining that although limit-experiences begin with a personally transformative experience, Foucault strived to make these experiences accessible to others and hence render them of collective value (1993, p. 32). In limit-experiences, one does not simply lose one's self but, rather, is returned to the problem of subjectivity, as one experiences that one can never completely get rid of – or ultimately arrive at – oneself. Such limit-experiences can be induced by the above-mentioned transgressive practices, but it could also occur through the process of writing. At his inaugural lecture at *Collège de France* in 1970, Foucault mentions that the author can begin to lose himself by delving into the dispersion of language. Foucault would prefer, he says, to disappear in the discourse,

to enmesh myself in it, taking up its cadence, and to lodge myself, when no one was looking, in its interstices...All I want is to allow myself to be borne along, within it, and by it, a happy wreck. (1972, pp. 215–216).

Through the experience of reading and writing, one could reach the border of rational language, hereby exposing the fragility of our knowledge and, at the same time, encountering the very limits of one's own subjectivity. In limit-experience, then, losing one's way in knowledge is the price of self-transformation.

Limit-experience is not, however, a secure route to liberating self-transformation, since it carries an inherent ambivalence, which Tobias identifies in Nussbaum's (1993) concern with both capability *and* fragility. The experience of self-loss, brought about by limit-experiences, can entail a destructive, crippling process whereby the human subject's capacity to merely function, let alone create change, effectively erodes: 'Pain, illness and extreme economic and social deprivation can all erode the capacity of the subject to function as an active agent within the networks of power' (Tobias, 2005, p. 79). A subject undergoing such 'de-subjectivation' can hardly participate in the struggles around power/knowledge qua Foucault's ethical formula; reflexively affecting the forces brought to bear on oneself. Simply put, the *dispositifs* of power/knowledge in contemporary key subjectifying institutions, such as medicine, psychology, economics and HRM, demand a lot of capability on the part of the subjects to exercise self-determination and change. Tobias concludes that, insofar as Foucault's ethics is 'parasitic on the existing arrangements of knowledge and power' (2005, p. 77), critical, analytical and political attention must be given to the basic conditions of human well-being and capacity for practising such ethics. Articulated in this article's terminology, subjects are in need of not only self-techniques that help them 'lose themselves' but also of those that enable them discursively and materially to engage with the *dispositifs* of power/knowledge, which condition how subjects may transform themselves and work for social change.

The capability approach highlights a very fundamental problem, namely the subject's actual capacity for reflexive self-formation, which is often neglected in studies of Foucault's ethics. I now proceed by examining this problem from within Foucault's own work, focussing on the relationship between self-techniques and *dispositifs*. At the outset, let us note that the problem of self-formation and capability can be situated within Foucault's understanding of power as immanent to social relations, as reversible, and as

passing through the subject. In *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, Foucault recapitulates this view of power as immanent that he had earlier named governmentality:

if we understand by governmentality a strategic field of power relations in their mobility, transformability, and reversibility, then I do not think that reflection on this notion of governmentality can avoid passing through, theoretically and practically, the element of a subject defined by the relationship of self to self. (2005, p. 252).

Governmentality, explains Foucault, eschews the subject of right, since the analysis of power as a set of reversible relationships 'must refer to an ethics of the subject defined by the relationship of self to self' (2005, p. 252). At other places, Foucault tells us that the subject, understood as the point through which government must pass, is characterized by both techniques of subjugation and techniques through which the subject constructs or modifies himself (1993, pp. 203–204). This conception of government also entails that modern governmental practice both assumes and requires reflexivity of the governed. Or, as Magnus Hansen, points out, 'the modes of governing that Foucault examines, from discipline and Christian confessional practices to psychiatry and neo-liberalism, are exactly about tying together forms of truth with forms of subjectivity' (2016, p. 131). This analytical interlinking of ethics and politics, in ethico-politics, and the Foucauldian injunction to govern the forces that bear upon the self returns us to the conditions for such self-work.

Self-formation along four dimensions

Let us briefly examine Foucault's four-dimensional framework of self-formation, which he schematically outlines in the late interview, 'On the Genealogy of Ethics' (2000d), and which appears more elaborated in *History of Sexuality Volume Two: The Use of Pleasures*. In the interview, Foucault says that the subject 'is constituted in real practices – historically analyzable practices'. As if wanting to expand his earlier analysis of the subject constituted in discourse, Foucault continues: 'There is a technology of the constitution of the self which cuts across symbolic systems while using them' (2000d, p. 277). To pursue this genealogical analysis, Foucault introduces a four-dimensional framework for analysing the subject's self-constitution. Whereas historians have largely studied the codes of moral behaviour, Foucault instead undertakes a history of *the forms of moral subjectivation*. By moral codes, explains Arnold Davidson, 'Foucault understood, for example, the rules that determine which actions are forbidden, permitted, or required, as well as that aspect of the code that assigns different positive and negative values to different possible behaviours' (1991, p. 228). While the sociology of morals studies people's actual moral behaviour, and moral philosophy seeks to elaborate defensible moral codes, Foucault explores *how the subject can relate to the moral codes*, that is, how one reflexively constitutes oneself as a moral subject of one's own actions. Foucault breaks down this reflexive and processual self-formation into four dimensions:

1. The ethical substance: the *part* of oneself or one's behaviour that one submits to ethical reflection and judgement. Foucault notes: 'It's not always the same part of ourselves, or of our behavior, which is relevant for ethical judgement' (2000d, p. 263). Such relevant ethical substances could be actions, 'the desiring flesh', or suppressed sexuality.
2. The mode of subjection: the way in which one establishes one's *relation* to the moral codes of society. Subjection, says Foucault, 'is the way, in which people are invited or incited to recognize their moral obligations' (2000d, p. 264). For example, one is required to rigidly follow universally binding rules rooted in divine law, or one is induced to actively take up an individual relationship to inspirational ideals regarding how to live.

3. The mode of elaboration: the self-forming *activity* that one performs on oneself to become an ethical subject. Here, the question is: 'what are the means by which we can change ourselves in order to become ethical subjects?' (2000d, p. 265). This self-forming activity includes, for example, memorizing sacred texts, imitation of a mentor, confessional practices, diary-keeping and scrutiny of desires.
4. The telos: the ultimate *mode of being* which one aims at when acting ethically. Foucault says: 'Which is the kind of being to which we aspire when we behave in a moral way? For instance, shall we become pure, or immortal, or free, or masters of ourselves, and so on?' (2000d, p. 265). Such ultimate goals could be to live a beautiful life (Greek antiquity), salvation through self-renunciation (Christian morality) or self-realization in this life (contemporary culture of self-fulfilment).

Foucault introduces this framework in a specific analysis of the shifting moral attitudes and techniques related to self-formation in the Greco-Roman world, that is, the interlocking civilizations of ancient Greece (from the fourth century BC) and the Roman Empire (the first and second centuries AD) with frequent comparisons of this Greco-Roman period with early Christianity (fourth and fifth centuries AD). Hence, the analysis covers three periods: First, Greek antiquity, where Foucault foregrounds the Socratic care for the self; second, the Hellenistic and Roman period, 'a kind of golden age in the cultivation of the self' (1988b, p. 45), and, third, early Christianity, where sceptical self-scrutiny emerges, a 'hermeneutics of the self'.

The above framework displays a series of contrasts that Foucault draws mainly between ancient Greece and early Christianity in regard to the dominant ethical obligations in the two periods. Foucault's analyses foreground the obligations in regard to sexual conduct, but the theme of sex is interlinked with a series of other themes, including diet, sports, rhetoric and politics. In ancient Greek philosophy, the moral value of one's actions was neither dependent upon conformity to an external code originating in divine authority nor was it structured as a persecutory 'hermeneutics of desire', which Foucault identified in Christianity. For the ancients, moral valorisation of conduct was primarily appraised according to the satisfaction of one's obligations to oneself, but such caring for oneself was, at the same time, a prerequisite for the government of others in the city state. However, according to Foucault, the Greek and Roman care for the self transforms into Christian self-scrutiny and self-renunciation.

This schematic counter-positioning is too simplistic, however, which Foucault recognizes by highlighting some important continuities in 'sexual ethics' between the ancient Greek and the early Christian period. Foucault argues that the moral themes – the attention to certain desires and acts – did not actually change very much between the two periods that he compares, although prohibitions tended to be stricter and more rigorous under Christianity. What *did* change, however, was the *mode of subjection*, which we defined as the way in which one establishes one's relation to the moral codes of society. Foucault explains:

So I think that the great changes that occurred between Greek society, Greek ethics, Greek morality, and how the Christians viewed themselves are not in the code but in what I call the 'ethics', which is the relation to oneself. (2000d, pp. 265–266).

For the Greeks, a rigorous elaboration or 'styling' one's daily life in consistency with self-imposed principles of conduct served as the basis of moral approval, which meant that such approval was not limited to conformity to a moral code. This means that the *telos*, the kind of being toward which one aspires, also changed. With Christianity, valorisation of conduct becomes primarily concerned with whether the single individual fulfilled those moral obligations that constitute the Divine law. However, it is analytically

important that Foucault does not postulate a complete break in all four dimensions of his framework between Greek ethics and Christian morality but instead emphasizes that there can be discontinuity in one dimension and continuity in another, and hence it is only a matter of 'partial' transformation.

Self-transformation as resistant agency

It can be challenging to transfer the framework of ancient self-formation to the contemporary context, and it particularly lacks of attention to the socio-political conditions for such self-cultivation. Despite these issues, it can be fruitful to utilize the concept of self-techniques for analysing present-day struggles around subjectivity that contest the modern *dispositifs* of power/knowledge.

A highly illuminating example of such deployment of Foucault's notion of self-techniques is [Lisa Blackman's \(1998, 2000\)](#) work on the 'Hearing Voices Network' (HVN), which explores experimental self-formation by means of self-techniques. Blackman's study is selected as illustrative case, since it displays both key potentials and limitations in the Foucauldian approach. The case is exemplary in showing that ethico-political work cannot be presupposed in subjects, insofar as self-transformative techniques have to be learned and trained. It also displays that self-work is necessarily immanent to the *dispositifs*, insofar as struggles over subjectivity must target the power/knowledge involved in categorizing and governing individuals. At the other side of the coin, the study displays typical limitations in the Foucauldian approach, including the privileging of self-transgression over social inequality, self-description over scientific knowledge and the celebration of extra-state movements over formal political organization. However, for the purposes of this article, Blackman's study of voice-hearers' self-techniques is very useful, because it is relatively easy to re-articulate on the basis of dispositional analytics, just as it can be extended by including attention to human capability.

The HVN is a self-help group which supports 'voice-hearers', that is, subjects who experience auditory hallucinations, in Britain, across Europe, and in Australia. In the Western world, the disciplines of psychiatry and psychology, the 'psy'-discourses, have played a key role in establishing notions of health and abnormality, which continue to inform the way that individuals are brought to constitute their subjectivities. Within modern psychiatry, voice-hearing has been viewed as a pathological condition which inhibits the patient from having 'normal experience'. The phenomenon of hearing voices is used as one of the principal indicators of the presence of a specific psychiatric disease, named schizophrenia, and the progressive deterioration of cerebral functions. This framework, notes Blackman, is rooted in Enlightenment notions of rationality and control, which help explain why the 'psy'-disciplines have constructed voice-hearing as lack, deficit and loss of normal rationality: 'The hearing of voices is a signifier of deficit, disease, pathology, and lack, indicating that a person has lost certain psychological propensities and is unable to function as a responsible citizen' ([2000](#), p. 57). On this basis, psychiatry has generally sought to eliminate the voices to allow patients to be reinserted into society.

The HVN counsels and supports voice-hearers who re-conceptualize voice-hearing in ways that diverge from and challenge the psychiatric system and its normalizing discourse. A key objective of the group is to loosen the grip of institutional psychiatric expertise on voice-hearers to open up for new ways of relating to the voices. A self-help manual produced by members of the network says: 'It is important to see yourself as an individual rooted in society and not as a patient rooted in psychiatry' (Coleman and Smith, cited in [Blackman, 1998](#)). Exploring a set of alternative self-techniques, [Blackman \(2000](#), pp. 63–69) describes how individuals constitute themselves in opposition to the psychiatric system, thus striving to become different subjects. This self-work requires that a different relation to the voices is established, one that reassigns a positive meaning to them:

Within the modern 'psy' ethical system a particular relation is engendered towards the voices or visions, where the voice-hearer is required to deny their existence and view them as meaningless epi-phenomena, having no other function than as signifiers of disease and illness. (2000, p. 59).

Overall, the voice-hearers construct themselves in almost diametrical opposition to the pathological framework of the modern 'psy'-disciplines. First, the HVN re-articulates voice-hearing as a 'gift' which equips the hearer with a special sensitivity, instead of conceiving it as a mere lack and symptom of disease. In Foucault's terms, one might say that hereby the 'ethical substance' of the voice-hearer's self-formative work is transformed into 'positive voices' (Blackman, 2000, p. 70). Second, while modern psychiatry views the voices as an imminent threat to rational self-control, a threat, which the one diagnosed must recognize, the HVN promotes a form of subjectivation, which integrates the voices into the hearer's life. With Foucault, we say that 'the mode of subjection', the way in which one establishes one's relation to the moral codes, shifts from one of fear and denial to one of acceptance of the voices' presence in one's life. Third, whereas the psychiatric expertise conceives of voices as random, uninvited assaults that must be suppressed by medical and custodial supervision, the HVN reconstructs voices as a capacity that, if handled carefully, can facilitate spiritual development. Again, in Foucault's (1984) words, 'the mode of elaboration' changes from medical normalization and suppression to individualized management of voices in terms of time, situation and the hearer's mood. Finally, whereas the psychiatric discourse turns the voice-hearer into a passive object, a victim of the disease, the telepathic discourse of the HVN constructs the hearer as an active person who carries a special potential for self-mastery and self-growth. In Foucault's (1984) framework, this difference is one of 'telos', that is, the subject that one ultimately strives towards becoming. In sum, the self-help group supports a work of the self upon the self in which voice-hearers transform their relation to their voices, which resonates well with Deleuze's (1988, p. 101) rendering of ethics as the reflexive process by which the self 'folds back' on itself the forces that constitute it.

Blackman's study shows that there exist very different ways of shaping subjectivity in opposition to the psychiatric regime, with its custodial power of diagnosis, supervision and internment. She describes her research as 'a strategic attempt to de-naturalise and de-stabilise "psy" understandings and show that they are historically contingent and not natural' (Blackman, 1998, p. 40). Her analysis of the voice-hearers' alternative self-techniques demonstrates that the 'psy'-disciplines and their institutionalized truths can be contested by novel ways of categorizing and giving meaning to 'pathological symptoms'. However, Blackman suggests that the implications of her study reach further. It points to the possibility of contesting the subjectivation and their demands for 'self-mastery', which modern welfare institutions impose on citizens. Hence, institutions such as medicine, schooling and social work all normalize according to 'desired images of selfhood' (Blackman, 2000, p. 70). If we read Blackman's study through the lenses of dispositional analytics, as developed in this article, her discoveries attest to the evolving struggles around subjectivity and the entrenched knowledge of the 'psy'-expertise. Given that institutional psychiatry and its disciplinary practises have been persistently criticized since the 1960s, and, in response, has undergone a series of reforms, the case also points to the historical transformability of the disciplinary *dispositif*. More broadly, we can locate in the 'Voice-Hearing Experience' a profound concern with the problem of subjectivity in the modern welfare state and its institutions of 'psy'-expertise. One might wonder, however, if the relationship between the 'psy'-sciences and those individuals who straddle the institutionalized boundaries of 'normality' is more ambiguous than the discipline/resistance model suggests.

In analysing the voice hearers, Blackman showcases not only the evident analytical strengths of the Foucauldian framework, but also, I would contend, some important limitations. Consider our previous discussion of whether active choices of self-creation can be pursued without considering the role of public

policy in giving access to a healthcare system that ensures individuals' well-being and capability. This includes the right to treatment, diagnosis, counselling and medicalization, which probably condition voice-hearers' capacity to experiment with alternative self-techniques for mastering their voices in the first place. One must recognize, then, that even those who are disciplined will be equipped with a register of reactions, tactics or enhanced capacities, by which they can induce reverberations in disciplinary institutions and their modalities of knowledge. Or, put differently, researchers must not forget to explore what the premise that the *dispositif* operates both through subjugation and subjectivation means in each context. And they must ask how our institutions, in submitting those considered 'abnormal' to discipline, both constrain *and* enable them – perhaps spurring demands not to be normalized like that, not qua this knowledge and not 'at that price'.

Conclusions

This article began with charting a long-standing critical consensus around human agency and freedom in Foucault's work. As a broad outline, Foucault is paradoxically criticized for portraying freedom and resistance as impossible in his 1970s work on discipline, sexuality and biopower, whereas, conversely, he allegedly viewed the subject's freedom as too unconstrained in his late work on ancient self-care. I have shown that the later Foucault's approach escapes these critiques, insofar as his self-techniques – and his notions of power, knowledge and subjectivity – transcend the critics' fundamental divisions of agential freedom/power's determinism, and human essence/external constraint. Centring on the *dispositif* and its relations to self-techniques, the article has shown that the subject's relationship to power is irreducible to the dualities of acceptance versus refusal, submission versus resistance and 'internal versus external' resistances to power. Analytically, the article seeks to bridge Foucault's 'power-phase' of the 1970s with his 'ethical phase' of the 1980s. The resulting integration of self-techniques and the *dispositif* into a single analytical approach provides an effective remedy against Foucault's alleged elimination of human agency. To use the terms of the critical consensus, our reconstruction gives emphasis to the mutual interplay and intertwining of 'agency' and 'structure', and it provides space for the relative freedom that subjects exert in the face of seemingly coherent and deterministic structures. This analytical approach does not assign to Foucault a notion of freedom as autonomous self-determination, just as it does not resurrect the self-identical, constitutive subject. Indeed, the subject is just as ambiguous and pervaded by contradictory forces, as are the *dispositifs* and their attendant human and social sciences.

Dispositional analytics also escapes the position of a foundational normative critique. Instead, it asks what 'price' we pay when we submit to a particular subjectivity, which opens up a way of inquiring into the consequences of pursuing values without the normative foundations derived from humanism and modern science. [Friedrich Nietzsche \(1994\)](#) already expressed an acute suspicion of the worth of values, what they cost humans and how values are operative in social struggles for domination, and he fiercely set out to re-evaluate all existing values. [Foucault \(1989b\)](#) rearticulates the question of what price subjects pay when they submit to particular orders of truth, but he was cautious to avoid overarching critiques of our culture. In Foucault's genealogies, the question of 'the worth of values' becomes a matter of careful inquiry into the specific effects of values, that is, how values actually operate in historical contexts and in multifarious practises. Yet, introducing the notions of the *dispositif* and self-techniques, Foucault frees this inquiry from Nietzsche's psycho-physiological theme and gives it a more open-ended, empirically sensitive formulation.

Foucault's analyses of Greco-Roman self-techniques as well as his reflections on governmentality show numerous ways in which subjects can relate to the *dispositifs* in their social worlds. Essential to these ways of relating is the reflexivity of the self upon the self, which grants the subject a degree of freedom in relation to the *dispositif*. Foucault finds in Greco-Roman antiquity a model of reflexive self-formation, which

is 'very interesting', and which becomes paradigmatic for subsequent Foucauldian notions of ethico-politics: the subject's reflection on the way one ought to conduct oneself in relation to the prescriptions of the *dispositif*. The relatively neglected issue of the subject's capacity for undertaking such work of the self upon the self can be reconsidered by giving attention to human capability and fragility. Although much Foucault-inspired tends to take over Foucault's suspicion of the welfare state's insidious 'pastoral power' as well as his general silence concerning welfare provision and legislation, it is timely to shift the balance and, in the light of growing inequality and political unrest, consider the socio-political conditions for subjects' self-formation as unavoidable issues for contemporary analysis.

Other recent developments might call for readjusting Foucault's framework for analysing self-techniques and their interrelation with our contemporary *dispositifs*. For starters, Foucault's emphasis in the 1970s on discipline as normalizing and pleasure-denying must be supplemented by a consideration of our contemporary pleasure-permissive culture ([Žižek, 1999](#)). Recall that Foucault described how, during early capitalism, people's time and life needed to be forged into continuous labour by moral coercion, petty sanctions and sequestration. In *The Punitive Society*, Foucault said:

The time of life, which could be broken up by leisure, pleasure, chance, revelry had to be homogenized so as to be integrated into a time that is no longer the time of individuals, of their pleasures, desires, and bodies, but the time of the continuity of production, of profit. (2015, p. 211).

It would seem that today, this 'explosive energy', which is integral to life, namely 'pleasure, discontinuity, festivity, rest, need, moments, chance, violence' (2015, p. 213), has itself been enrolled into the productive circuits of contemporary capitalism. This is an expansive capitalism works not simply by excluding or correcting abnormal individuals and their behaviours, but it operates by accommodating plural identities, life-styles and subcultures. Contemporary globalized capitalism, observe [Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri \(2000\)](#), embraces difference and diversity, having fully adopted the postmodern vocabulary that criticizes rigid binaries and hierarchies.

One consequence of the transformations in liberal-capitalist citizenship described above is that our ethics, understood as the reflexive work of the self upon the self, is ceaselessly enrolled in consumerist production. The recent explosion in social media technologies that facilitate and thrive on incorporeal, self-identificatory work through virtual profiles bears out this tendency. A parallel development is noticeable across institutions like health service, HRM and social work. There, experts do not so much determine and instruct subjects but instead increasingly seek to initiate and supervise the self's work on the self towards objectives of improved health, professional development or personal growth ([Karlsen and Villadsen, 2008](#)). This development interlinks commercial standardization and 'psy'-normalization around calls for pursuing self-improvement through consumers' and citizens' ethics, understood indeed as their reflexive self-formation. Acute analytical attention needs to be assigned to the novel techniques that emerge from the operation of contemporary *dispositifs* that increasingly incite individuals to carry out the autonomous work of self-improvement. Equally important, however, is to further explore subjects' 'ethico-political' work, that is, how subjects intensify, 'bend' or resist external forces in their deployment of self-techniques. This inherently political work of freedom must proceed not only in confrontation with others' moral judgements, but, most importantly, in confrontation with oneself, that is, the subject one takes oneself to be. In Foucault, one finds no final redemption or acquisition of subjectivity but instead the indefinite unfolding of the history of the subject.

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