Foucault and Lacan: Who is Master?

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Lacan’s desire

“The master breaks the silence with anything—with a sarcastic remark, with a kick-start. That is how a Buddhist master conducts his search for meaning, according to the technique of *zen*. It beseeches students to find out for themselves the answer to their own questions. The master does not teach *ex cathedra* a readymade science; he supplies an answer when the students are on the verge of finding it.”¹

The above quote is taken from Lacan’s introduction to his first seminar on *Freud’s Papers on Technique*. It frames the psychoanalytic question so that it becomes a question of the master, and, moreover, becomes a question of technique. Nonetheless, this framing of the question leaves the reader with her own question: what kind of question is it that the student will ask? The quote above implies that the very technique of psychoanalysis is such that it rests on the subject of psychoanalysis asking the right sort of questions, rather than forwarding the right kind of answers. The question: “who am I?” or “what am I?” will be left unanswered, and replaced by “who is talking?”

To Hannah Arendt, the philosophical question of the Who—“who am I? Who is he”—must be substituted for the metaphysical question of the What, in order to avoid essentialism. There is no human essence in the sense of what we are. We can only think in terms of who we are. If we are to believe it is possible to have full knowledge of what man is, we must imagine a God that sees everything. It is, on the contrary, not possible to turn the question of the Who into a metaphysical question. The question of

the Who points to man as a singular being, leaving metaphysical desire unanswered. This desire, however, is impossible to fully extinguish. The desire to get to know the human essence is part of human life, although such a desire can never be satiated. The Who and the What follow each other, in the condition where “I have become a question to myself.”

Let us pursue an examination of the question of the Who in conjunction with a reading of Foucault’s concept of the technologies of the self. It may appear that Foucault’s project aims towards the realization of a greater measure of freedom for the self; the technologies of the self being a quest for the possibilities that one can have in relation to the norms of society. In other words: what are my limits, what are my possibilities, within the normative framework by which my desire and my knowledge are shaped. Foucault considers the formation of the self as a striving towards knowledge. But the question of the Foucauldian subject—just as in the case of Lacan—is not “who or what am I?” If the subject were a product of technologies that shape his truth, rather than a readymade science, then the Foucauldian question would be, as argued by Judith Butler, “what can I become?”

Although Foucault is a stern critic of psychoanalysis, one must note that the Lacanian focus on questions of technique and method, addressing the formation of the subject—rather than the truth of the subject—is not entirely inconsistent with a Foucauldian notion of the self. In 1988, the journal *Topoi* published an issue on the question: “Who comes after the subject?” In an interview with Jacques Derrida, held by Jean-Luc Nancy, Derrida reverses the question, by asking: who comes before the subject? The question of the subject is always placed in conjunction with the question of the Who, which in turn implies a form of submission under a law. Thus, Lacan has certainly not terminated the subject, he has only displaced it from consciousness to the unconscious. As soon as we ask the question of the Who in conjunction with the subject, we point to a certain stricture that turns the subject into a singularity, responding to a universal constraint. This is certainly the case in both Lacan and Foucault: the only possible freedom is a freedom that always comes at the price of a certain submission. It is, if not an adaptation to a norm, then at least a response to a structure that is always in place. The notion of technique, as used by both Foucault

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2 A quote that Hannah Arendt associates with Augustine as well as with Paul; see *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harvest, 1978), 65, 85.
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and Lacan, implies that the subject can in fact be re-structured, if not modeled according to certain goals. It is part of a terminology that implies a kind of opening, a certain freedom within a given structure.

To Lacan, the self is irrevocably split, and the question of truth is always placed within the framework of the unconscious. Even more importantly, the question posed by the subject is displaced by the question of the Other, as is implied by the quote on the technique of zen. The question of the self is tied to the master. However, the quest for identity can never be the goal for the psychoanalytic project. There can be no master answering the pledge of the patient: instead the enunciations must be brought back to the patient, and play within the relation of transference between analyst and analysand that the psychoanalytic setting gives rise to.

The phenomenon of transference is central to Freud’s papers on technique published together in 1918—six papers that were originally meant to give a systematic account of the psychoanalytic technique. These papers were: “The Handling of Dream-Interpretation in Psychoanalysis”; “The Dynamics of Transference”; “Recommendations to Physicians Practicing Psychoanalysis”; “On Beginning the Treatment”; “Remembering, repeating and working-through,” and “Observations on Transference-Love.” However, as James Strachey points out in his introduction to the Standard Edition, the writings on the technique of psychoanalysis do not form a system, and, indeed, there seems to have been a great deal of reluctance on the part of Freud to complete his work.5 There is, however, a reason for his reluctance, and one integral to the work of psychoanalysis as such. Reading Freud’s papers, one must conclude that technique is a question concerning the clinic, and not theory. Therefore, the question of technique could only be formulated in conjunction with the experience of analysis.

In his own reading of the papers on technique, Lacan quickly leaves the bibliographical details behind. His readings of these papers are soon displaced by observations about the general methodological questions pre-occupying Freud. Lacan observes a specific form of development: Freud becomes increasingly aware of his role as master, an awareness causing a great deal of discomfort. Thus, in Lacan’s view, the papers on technique mirror a certain development of Freud’s thought, based on his experience as an analyst. Famously, Lacan concludes his reading of Freud’s papers on technique by advancing that new theoretical tools are necessary in the

clinic, tools that will for the subject make possible the unraveling of the question of desire, which remains the focus of analysis. In the seminar, Lacan breaks with the analysis of the ego, which had up to that point been dominant in psychoanalytic discourse. Lacan pursues the quest for a form of psychoanalysis that will reformulate its questions. Rather than being: “who am I?”—the question raised by the ego—the focus of psychoanalysis will be to target the desire of the subject. To the early Lacan—or the Lacan that held the seminar on the technique of Freud—the question of the subject must begin with the recognition that psychoanalysis is not a system, but a technique. Freud began the history of psychoanalysis with an analysis of himself. The psychoanalytic situation entails a split of the subject. Through the process of the cure, the question of the subject appears not to concern the self, but the other: You are this. The answer to this question, however, can only be placed as an ideal, and never fully appears.⁶ The most important questions of psychoanalysis are those that concern transference and countertransference. In his seminar on technique, Lacan rephrases the question of the self so that it becomes a question of the Who: “who, then, is it who, beyond the ego, seeks recognition?”⁷

Lacanian analysis always places desire at the center. In one of Lacan’s later seminars, the famous formula of desire becomes “Che vuoi?”⁸ Entailed here is a distinct displacement of the subject; the subject is repositioned in relation to a Master who underpins its fantasies. “What do you want?” is the question that forms the focus of fantasy towards which psychoanalysis is directed. This is also why transference and countertransference are the most important aspects of the technique of psychoanalysis: in discovering these phenomena, Freud implies that the subject is a function of desire, rather than a function of knowledge.

Foucault’s technologies

Is there, then, any relation at all between the question of technique such as it was formulated by Freud and Lacan’s seminar on the one hand, and Foucault’s technologies of the self on the other? Lacan’s seminar on Freud’s technique was offered at a time when Foucault was interested in psycho-

⁷ Ibid, 51.
analysis. He visited the seminar of Lacan at Sainte Anne, and must have come in contact with the Freudian notion of technique in this way. Lacan, in his seminar, equates the question of psychoanalysis with the question of technique. In his famous essay on “Nietzsche, Freud, Marx,” published a decade later, Foucault suggests that psychoanalysis is a technique of interpretation. As such, it is a kind of hermeneutics of suspicion, displacing the question of truth as being directed towards that which is manifest to that which is not seen, the invisible, that which lies below the surface. In his famous article “The Technologies of the Self,” his use of the term technology refers to the ways in which a conception of the self has arisen through distinct corporeal and discursive practices. In another text, “Self writing,” Foucault introduces his project as part of a series on “the arts of oneself” or on “the aesthetics of existence” or, even, on “the government of oneself and of others.” The aim was to shift focus onto the first two centuries of the Roman Empire. This enquiry was then developed into the volumes comprising The History of Sexuality. Here, Foucault claims that the ancient “care of the self”—in which philosophy, and the truth-claims that belong to it—could be described as an ethos rather than a science, a way of life in which body and soul participate as equal terms. The ethos of the care of the self aims towards certain achievements; through these achievements one becomes true to oneself. Modern scientistic ideals, however, have replaced the notion that truth is something one achieves with the notion that truth is something one discovers. This, in turn, has contributed to the creation of forms of confessional practices of subjectivation. Psychoanalysis, according to Foucault, is one form of such subjectivation. In this sense, psychoanalysis is a form of interpretation that will also shape a certain relation of the self to itself, a relation based on confession. If we were to believe such a notion of psychoanalysis then, indeed, the question “who am I?” would have made perfect sense to psychoanalysis. As we have seen, however, this is not the case.

Foucault separates the technologies of the self, including what he calls the care of the self, from a hermeneutics of the self, which has served as a guide for philosophy in the West. The care of the self has, however, been forgotten and obscured. In his text on “The Hermeneutic of the Subject,”

12 In Foucault, Essential Works Vol. 1.
Foucault recognizes a form of existential impulse or conversion through which the gaze of the self is developed towards a new aim, that of shaping the self through a set of social practices. These were called *askesis*. From the moment that these practices were put in place, the quest for rational discourse or theoretical forms of truth had started. The aim in late antiquity—the period in which these discourses begun to develop—is not, however, to discover the truth (as in the case with the hermeneutics of the self), but rather to link the subject to a truth, one that is learned, memorized and progressively put into practice. To progressively apprehend a relation to truth is to establish a relation to the external world through “a quasi subject that reigns supreme in us.”

Perhaps such a “quasi subject” could be likened to a Freudian superego, or a Lacanian Other, to which the desire of the subject is directed.

In “The technologies of the self” Foucault names four kinds of technologies serving as the means by which man has come to understand himself: (1) the technologies of production, through which man produces or changes artifacts; (2) the technologies of sign systems, making it possible for us to create meanings through the use of signs and symbols; (3) the technologies of power, shaping and dominating the individual towards certain goals and (4) technologies of the self, through which the individual elaborates his intellect, body and feeling in order to achieve wisdom, happiness and other moral values. All these technologies were regarded by Foucault as interwoven. The technologies of power, through moral and social taboos, for instance, have come to influence the conception of the self. This in itself is a concept that is very much possible to look at in conjunction with the Lacanian notion of the subject as a product of the law. While investigating the tradition of the care of the self, Foucault became increasingly uninterested in the idea of discourse as regulative for the individual but was instead engaged in the individual’s relation to himself. The technologies of the self have a particular place in the system of technologies, representing a position through which the individual is able to formulate a productive conception of the self:

Perhaps I’ve insisted too much on the technology of domination and power. I am more and more interested in the interaction between oneself and others, and in the technologies of individual domination, in the

mode of action that an individual exercises upon himself by means of the technologies of the self.\textsuperscript{14}

Foucault defines the self as a striving towards knowledge. But such striving has not always looked the same. To Aristotle, there is a natural link between sensation, pleasure, knowing and truth. The self, in Aristotle, is a unity in which the discovery of truth becomes enjoyable; knowledge becomes something you should strive for since it enriches the self. The ethical injunction to care for the self—and for how the self is constituted—leads a development of the care of the self during a long time. The practices that are developed in late antiquity are specific in that they are aiming towards a freedom of the flesh: ascetic techniques are developed in order to win a freedom from bodily needs. The care of the self has, however, been overshadowed by the injunction of “knowing” oneself. In this way, an important insight is lost; there are different ways of creating knowledge, and there are different forms of self.\textsuperscript{15} To a certain extent, however, this insight was rediscovered by Nietzsche. In Nietzsche, the self is something set in motion on a field where the will to power determines everything: here, the self is an aid to a deceitful will striving for advantage and survival. The question of knowledge is redefined as a question of technologies—technologies that are created to define truth, to hide truth and to create truth. These technologies are submitted to the will to power.

Foucault’s point is that the notion of the self has, historically, developed through experiences allowing thereby the self to change. It is this insight that must be rediscovered. When new technologies have developed, the “care of the self” has also developed. For instance, the art of writing has been tied to introspection, through the writings of Marcus Aurelius. He shows how a new freedom of the self may develop through the nuances of introspection: in this, the very experience of the self is developed. Writing allows for a whole new field of experiences and possibilities to emerge. The care of the self does not just apply to the soul, but also to the body. A tradition has developed from Marcus Aurelius to Nietzsche: detailed descriptions of food and the body’s reaction to the intake of food have become an important part of the male, philosophical tradition of diary writing. In this tradition, the technique of diary writing is described as making congruent the “gaze of the other and the gaze which one aims at oneself.”\textsuperscript{16} In the text,

\textsuperscript{14} Foucault, \textit{Essential Works}, Vol. 1, 225.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid, 228
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid, 221.
the technology of the self is thus described as a form of aisthesis through which the pleasure of the body is made a tool for self-enquiry. Moreover, it is a process of exteriorization, through which the written sign makes one appear to the gaze of the other as well as the gaze of the self.17

Moral paideia was part of the askesis of the free man. In classical Greek thought, “the ascetics that enabled one to make oneself into an ethical subject was an integral part—down to its very form—of the practice of a virtuous life, which was also the life of a free man in the full, positive and political sense of the word.”18 Freedom, to the Greeks, entailed a certain form of relation of the individual to himself. Freedom, here, is the same as mastery of the self. To Socrates, the ontological recognition of the self to the self emerges through desire: through the need to know oneself in relation to desire and the need to subdue these desires. The relation of the self to truth is described not as a discovery but as a form of strife. The concept of truth was used as a moral measure of moderation and was not a question of the decipherment of one’s inner being. This question is then displaced through the ontological writings of Plato. With Diotima, Foucault argues, we move from the question of what kind of object one is supposed to love, into the question of the true nature of love. “For Plato, it is not exclusion of the body that characterizes true love in a fundamental way; it is rather that, beyond appearances of the object, love is a relation to truth.”19 Socrates does feel erotic love, but the aim of his desire lies elsewhere than in the fulfillment of bodily needs. The real virility of Socrates lies in the fact that he knows the true object of that desire. Socrates is thus a double master: not only does he have dominion over his own body, he is also a master of truth.20

In his notion of the technologies of the self, Foucault argues that truth is something you may learn to achieve rather than something you may discover. This offers a shift in perspective in relation to the hermeneutics of the self. The subject is a product formatted outside of the norms of society, but it can take shape in relation to these norms in forms that also define its freedom. To Foucault, the question of technology is therefore closely linked to governmentality. In his text “On the Government of the Living” Foucault asks: “How is it that in Western Christian Culture the government of men demands, on the part of those who are led, not only acts of obedience and

17 Ibid, 216.
19 Foucault, The Care of the Self, 239.
20 Ibid, 243
submission but also acts of truth, which have the peculiar requirement not just that the subject tell the truth but that he tell the truth about himself, his faults, his desires, the state of the soul, and so on?"\(^21\) In the text, Foucault analyzes the practice of confession integral to the Christian heritage—the very practice of confession that, in *The History of Sexuality*, is considered to be developed in psychoanalysis. As we have shown, however, the question of the subject in psychoanalysis has less to do with confession than with transference: the analyst will not listen so much to what is being said, or being confessed, but rather will ask: “who is talking?” It is a question that traces out a structure in which the subject is the product of a law. If we implicate the Who as a particular instance of a discourse—in which the subject is split, dislocated, and displaced—it will always be submitted to such a law, a law that in turn is productive of the desire that manifests itself in the phenomenon of transference. It must be the case, then, that if Foucault is talking about the subject as a product of governmentality, it is a product of submission, of the laws and the norms that produce the splits and displacements that follow every attempt to reformulate the conditions of the self. However, in Foucault, the historical evidence that speaks in favor of the self is overwhelming: the split of the self is a question of technology and of development, not of structural necessity.

As we have shown, both Lacan and Foucault work with the assumption that there is a limited amount of freedom to be had for the split subject, but there is at least some. Moreover, both Lacan and Foucault work with the assumption that the concept of technology can be used in understanding how the self can be restructured in relation to the laws and the norms that will help produce it. The question that remains to be answered is: is there a concept of transference present in Foucault?

In her book, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Judith Butler argues that the presentation of the self is always engaged in transference. It is not just an aspect of analysis, but of human interaction. The I addresses a you, and both are affected in the process. Transference alters the question “who are you?” because the You can never be known. It is both the you of the analyst and something beyond, and so the question is returned to the self; there is no Other that can answer the question. The question of the Other is not intertwined with the formation of the self. It is impinged from the outside before any self can appear. The first problem of psychoanalysis, then, is not the opening towards alterity. It is, rather, building an I from too much other-

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ness.\textsuperscript{22} It is from this perspective that we must consider Foucault’s critique against psychoanalysis. The problem of psychoanalysis is not the unconscious or the unknown. It is, rather, that the talking cure dissolves any possibility of forming a self. To Foucault the question is not that of the desire of the Other, but: “what can I become?” It is in formulating a self, in recapturing the possibility of a subject that is not split, that freedom can be recuperated.

\textsuperscript{22} Butler, \textit{Giving an Account of Oneself}, 72.