

## ARTICLE

### **Time for Foucault? Reflections on the Roman Self from Seneca to Augustine**

James I. Porter, University of California, Berkeley

**ABSTRACT:** The essay approaches the idea of the self as this was most often formulated in antiquity from Heraclitus to Augustine — not as the object of self-fashioning and self-care, but as an irresolvable problem that was a productive if disconcerting source of inquiry. The self is less cultivated than it is “unbounded,” less wedded to regimes of truth and discovery than it is exposed, precariously, to crises of identity and coherence in the face of a constantly changing and unfathomable world. The self on this view of it does not conform to the accounts that are given by Foucault, Hadot, or Gill. Readings of Marcus Aurelius, Seneca, and Augustine are used to support this first attempt at an alternative picture of the self in antiquity.

**Keywords:** Self, Marcus Aurelius, Seneca, Heraclitus, Augustine, cosmos, Stoicism

#### **Introduction**

Heraclitus inaugurates the philosophical search for the self in antiquity in two of his preserved fragments. The first is fr. 101 DK: “I went in search of myself.” Lest we get thrown off by the past tense of the verb (“I *went* seeking”), as if the search ended in success at some point in the past, Heraclitus reminds us in another fragment that the search in fact has no end, because for him the self is unbounded: “You would not find out the boundaries of soul, even by travelling along every path: so deep a measure does it have” (fr. 45 DK; trans. Kirk, Raven and Schofield). Charles Kahn’s comment is apt: “Normally, one goes looking for *someone else*. How can I be the object of my own search? This will make sense only if my self is somehow absent, hidden, or difficult to find... [A subject] presents a problem for himself to resolve.”<sup>1</sup>

The fragments suggest that Heraclitus succeeded in posing the problem of himself—or rather, that he confronted himself in the form of a problem, but not that he ever resolved it, let alone that

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<sup>1</sup> Charles H. Kahn, *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus: An Edition of the Fragments with Translation and Commentary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 116.

he framed the problem in such a way that could in theory admit of solution. On the contrary, the self for Heraclitus is fundamentally opaque. It is, quite simply, *abyssal*.<sup>2</sup> I want to suggest that Heraclitus' radical outlining of the problem of the self should be taken as utterly characteristic of ancient inquiries into the self. Indeed, Heraclitus was a paradigm for later philosophers, above all the Stoics, who will concern us in this essay. What Heraclitus teaches is that the self, instead of being an object that is waiting to be described, is an inescapable *problem*. Better yet, the "self" is whatever answers to, without answering, the kind of problem that searching for one's self poses whenever it arises. The problem can be shown to take the different forms that it does in antiquity not only because the self was differently experienced at different moments in antiquity from Homer to Plato to Augustine, and certainly not because "the self" evolved in any way, but because the self presented itself *as a different kind of problem over time* and often *even within any given historical moment*. Socrates and Gorgias, for example, frame the problem of the self in contrasting ways despite being contemporaries, and parallels could be easily multiplied. It is for this reason, I wish to suggest, that the self, if it exists at all in antiquity, is not a single phenomenon but a multiply variegated one: it is a rich *matrix* of problems and possibilities, one that is, moreover, a virtual genre of inquiry unto itself (each new discourse on the self typically looks back to earlier discussions and takes its cue from these), and a highly contested one at that. The terrain of the ancient self is various and unsettled—and, by dint of these things, it can be unsettling to us. This is, I believe, a far better premise to start out from than assuming that if one wants to locate the self in antiquity one merely needs to go looking for it.

### Flat Selves and Objective Selves

In the present essay, I will be testing this hypothesis by turning to two exemplary case studies, Seneca the Younger and Marcus Aurelius, with a brief excursus on Augustine. But before doing so, I want to take up two of the prevailing views of the self in antiquity and indicate why they are ill-equipped to seize on the kinds of complexity that I outlined just above. Both are part of a reaction to an earlier, progressivist model of the self, according to which subjectivity as we know it, in our post-Cartesian and post-Kantian era (that of the autonomous, self-conscious, and self-authorizing agent), developed out of an originally Greek, chaotic, unformed, and immature (proto-)self that had no conception of its own nature or identity and that in no way merited the name

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<sup>2</sup> This is not the accepted view, though see Edward Hussey, "Heraclitus," in *The Cambridge Companion to Early Greek Philosophy*, edited by A. A. Long (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 88-112; here, 104-5 (<https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521441226.005>). Differently, Kahn, *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus* 226; G. S. Kirk, J. E. Raven, and M. Schofield, *The Presocratic Philosophers: A Critical History with a Selection of Texts*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Christopher Gill, *The Structured Self in Hellenistic and Roman Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) 204; A. A. Long, "Finding Oneself in Greek Philosophy," *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie* 54, no. 2 (1992): 255-79; here, 271 n1.

of individual, let alone subject.<sup>3</sup> The first and most prominent, or at least the most influential, of these critiques is found in Foucault's proposition that the self in any age, but most visibly in antiquity, is an elaborately fashioned object.<sup>4</sup> On this view, subjects cultivate themselves in an ongoing labor of production and reproduction of their modes of existence. Rome in the first two centuries CE represents "a kind of golden age in the cultivation of the self,"<sup>5</sup> an apogee that can be measured by the number and quality of the manuals in the art of living that have survived from the time of Seneca the Younger and Epictetus to the time of Plutarch and Marcus Aurelius, in addition to a host of minor writings in medicine, dream analysis, and literary fiction.

It's hard to pinpoint just what the attraction is that this historical explosion exercises on Foucault. Part of the answer lies in the very loquacity ("verbosity") of these discourses of the self, in the mere fact that the self is so manifestly and obsessively an object of intensive concern, virtually a function, if not a product, of "talk" about the self ("we have thousands of pages").<sup>6</sup> Another reason why Foucault is so drawn to the ancient discourses of sexuality and their congeners lies in the mechanics of desire, pleasure, and bodily regulation that appear to be so immediately available in this literature: the soul can be shaped because it is virtually another substance parallel to the body. Affections within can be read off from behaviors and practices, which in turn act on the inner life of the individual, to the extent that one can even speak of an inner life.

On this view, ethical behavior is naturalized. It is made into a "physical process" that is viewed in terms of "relations of force" that act upon subjects.<sup>7</sup> The soul is simply one more substance among others—an "ethical substance" that is susceptible to physical mechanisms. Self-inquiry, when it is posed as a matter of putting social algorithms into practice, be these rules of housekeeping, accounting, classification, governance, or medical examination, reflects mainly on its own applicability. Ethical or moral dilemmas are reduced to this order of behaviors, while nature is their sanction—strictly, their "physiologization."<sup>8</sup> In a word, Foucault's ethical reality, at least in the *History of Sexuality* (published between 1976 and 1984), is organized by a *flat social on-*

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<sup>3</sup> On the Greek side, see Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) and A. A. Long, *Greek Models of Mind and Self* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015). On the Roman side, see Michel Foucault, *The Care of the Self: Volume 3 of The History of Sexuality*, translated by Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), e.g. 41. Gill, *The Structured Self* covers both Greek and Roman developments.

<sup>4</sup> "In all societies, whatever they are" (Michel Foucault, "About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self: Two Lectures at Dartmouth," *Political Theory* 21, no. 2 (1993): 198-227; here, 203).

<sup>5</sup> Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, 45.

<sup>6</sup> Michel Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth. The Essential Works of Michel Foucault, 1954-1984. Volume I*, edited by Paul Rabinow (New York: New Press, 1997), 259.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, 107: "Desire and pleasure are direct effects of anatomical dispositions and physical processes"; *ibid.*, 67: "sexual pleasure as an ethical substance continues to be governed by relations of force." Cf. *ibid.*, 55, 134-5, etc.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 107 on the "'physiologization' of desire and pleasure."

tology, while Foucauldian subjects live out phenomenologies that are as “flat” as the ontologies that he uses to locate their existence.<sup>9</sup>

Consequently, subjects for Foucault do not form themselves by means of “a withdrawal within the self,”<sup>10</sup> nor are they formed by a compulsion “to try and decipher a meaning hidden beneath the visible representation”<sup>11</sup> of themselves: they are not vigilant with regard to any “deep origin” within. For the same reason, there are no deep “problems” that subjects confront and around which they frame their identities—problems with a spiritual or metaphysical cast like “Who am I?,” “What am I essentially?,” “What do I mean to myself?”—but only new “problem-izations” of one’s “relation to one’s self,”<sup>12</sup> problems that are less spiritual than they are intelligible within a set of practices, typically made legible by reference to “exercises, practical tasks, various activities,” centered around “the care of the body,... health regimens, physical exercises without overexertion, the carefully measured satisfaction of needs,”<sup>13</sup> and so on.<sup>14</sup>

Self-inquiry on this view is closer to dieting than to self-examination, while the self is not a problem but is simply a given waiting to be shaped and elaborated. The self for Foucault is essentially an engineer who applies techniques to herself, not someone who makes probing speculations about her own nature. Subjects who pursue these technologies of the self enjoy considerable freedoms that we can only dream of today: they occupy the enviable position of having to “accept in the relation to the self *only* that which can depend on the subject’s *free and rational choice*” (emphasis added).<sup>15</sup> Modern subjects can of course do more than dream of such freedoms. They can aspire to reintroduce them into a reconceived way of life, free of the tyranny of the interiorized, rule-bound, and spiritualized self that in the Christian era took the place of the self-mastering classical self and to which the modern self remains tributary. The hermeneutical approach to the self as the bearer of an inner secret or truth within can be banished simply by exposing its historical contingency, and indeed by reminding ourselves of the contingency and constructed form of all notions of subjectivity.

There is something undeniably attractive and compelling about this model of human behavior. Nevertheless, the question that needs to be asked is whether Foucault’s view adequately

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 117-118: “The organs, the humors, and sexual acts constitute both a surface... and a very active focus” — and supply *The Care of the Self* with its chief preoccupation.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 56: “a particular and intense form of attention to the body.” Cf. Foucault, *Ethics*, 234: “Theoretically, the cultivation of the self is soul-orientated, but all the concerns of the body take on a considerable importance.”

<sup>15</sup> Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, 64. Cf. e.g. Michel Foucault, *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977-1984*, edited by Lawrence D. Kritzman (New York and London: Routledge, 1988), 50 and Michel Foucault, *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling: The Function of Avowal in Justice*, edited by Fabienne Brion and Bernard E. Harcourt (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press; Presses Universitaires de Louvain, 2014), 102-3 for the same position.

captures the experiences and the accounts of the self that we find in the surviving evidence from antiquity. And here I believe that the answer is negative. Foucault's behavioral model ultimately gives us an inadequate measure of the actual depth, range, and complexity of ancient subjectivities, as I hope will emerge below.

One might object, perhaps rightly, that Foucault later makes amends in his Collège de France lectures from 1982, entitled *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, where he allows for a larger view of nature, physics, and metaphysics in his picture of the ancient self under the rubric of "spiritual exercises." In these lectures Foucault claims that the turn to spirituality gained ground during the Roman period, which paved the way for Christian spirituality and its eventual repudiation by a Cartesian, rationalizing modernity.<sup>16</sup> By spiritual exercises Foucault understands a set of practices that involve "the subject's ability to see himself and grasp himself in his reality" through "a kind of self-viewing (*'héauto-scopie'*)" and mental focus on the "spontaneous and involuntary flux of representation[s]" that pass through the mind, so as to determine the "objective content" of this flux as it might appear from a third-person point of view.<sup>17</sup> But as promising as this last turn towards larger and grander things may be, it remains heavily underdetermined and strikingly, indeed often frustratingly, vague.<sup>18</sup> And so, I think it is fair to say, as Hadot was the first to complain, that this wider perspective is underrepresented in Foucault's writings on antiquity and that he failed to integrate it within the overall framework of his analysis.<sup>19</sup>

Most significant for what will concern us below, however, is another consideration. On Foucault's view of ancient subjectivity, even in its spiritual dimension, risks that endanger the subject and its coherence are reduced to a minimum. Indeed, they barely enter into his picture of what defines a subject at all. This is true even if one takes into account the final twist in Foucault's theory of ancient selfhood in his last lectures on *parrhesia* or frankness of speech (*franc-parler*) at the Collège de France from 1983 to 1984 during the last year of his life. There he appears for the first time to trade in codes for risks: in putting oneself on display, one is putting at risk "the very

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<sup>16</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981-82*, edited by Frédéric Gros (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 178, 281-85, and 290-308.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 308, 293.

<sup>18</sup> Compare *ibid.*, 15-16, where "spirituality" merely redescribes the processes of self-transformation that Foucault has been pursuing all along, and *ibid.*, 19, where spirituality is defined as "the form of practices which postulate that, such as he is, the subject is not capable of the truth, but that, such as it is, the truth can transfigure and save the subject," a mystifying formulation. One momentary exception is found in Foucault's discussion of Marcus Aurelius (*ibid.*, 289-92 and 307), where Foucault's analysis suddenly resembles Hadot's (see below).

<sup>19</sup> Pierre Hadot, "Reflections on the Idea of the 'Cultivation of the Self,'" in Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, edited by Arnold I. Davidson (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1995), pp. 207-13.

way in which one lives,"<sup>20</sup> thereby rupturing all codes of conduct and intelligibility.<sup>21</sup> But the change is less transformative than it might appear.

For starters, Foucault's conception is modeled after the Cynics, whom he considers to be an exceptional strand of thought in pagan antiquity. He expressly contrasts the attitudes of the Cynics and their modeling of philosophical heroism with those of Heraclitus, Socrates, the Epicureans, and the Stoics. *Parrhēsia*, after all, is a peculiarly Cynic trait, and it is only natural that by focusing on this trait Foucault would be led down a different path from his prior work. One surprising twist in Foucault's picture, however, is the way he locates a close affinity, and even a legacy, between Cynicism and Christian asceticism, self-destitution, and martyrdom. What surprises is not the tie between pagan and Christian ideas of selfhood—that is standard practice in Foucault—but the nomination of the Cynics in this genealogical role.<sup>22</sup> Secondly, while Foucault is perhaps right to emphasize that Cynicism uniquely foregrounds the "theme of life as scandal of the truth" ("*bios* as alethurgy"), Cynic risk-taking is less existentially threatening than it is a demonstrative, exhortative, and unsettling practice-by-display that is tailored to the consumption of others. It has a specifically social and theatrical mission.<sup>23</sup>

As a counter to Foucault, I want to suggest that risk-taking is not unique to these rarer kinds of display. It is an essential ingredient of self-formative practices in antiquity outside of Cynicism and especially in Roman philosophy. Only, here the risks involved are not existential but are rather ontological, just as the destitutions one undergoes are not external but radically internal: the threat one experiences is to the core of one's identity, and it is posed by the very nature of the universe, which affects subjects both from without and from within.<sup>24</sup> Self-formation is

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<sup>20</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Courage of the Truth (The Government of Self and Others II): Lectures at the Collège de France, 1983-1984*, edited by François Ewald, et al. (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 234; cf. *ibid.*, 11-14; 161.

<sup>21</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1982-1983*, edited by François Ewald, et al. (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 63 (<https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230274730>).

<sup>22</sup> Foucault, *The Courage of the Truth*, 181-82; 209-210. See James I. Porter, "Foucault's Ascetic Ancients," *Phoenix* 59, no. 2 (Special issue: "Interrogating Theory—Critiquing Practice: The Subject of Interpretation," edited by W. Batstone) (2005): 121-32.

<sup>23</sup> Foucault, *The Courage of the Truth*, 180. Cf. *ibid.*, 234: "one risks one's life, not just by telling the truth, ... but by the very way in which one lives.... One risks it by displaying it."

<sup>24</sup> For this reason alone, the affinities between Cynicism and Christian asceticism are probably more superficial than Foucault is prepared to admit. "Destitution" (poverty, deprivations, and so on) for the Christians is a statement about earthly existence in its utter contrast with the Beyond, a concept that has no existence for the Cynics, who, moreover, are allergic to metaphysical claims generally (witness their hostility to Plato). Thus, Augustine's tolerance of Cynic behavior in *The City of God* 19.1 is not proof of any deeper affinities (*pace* Foucault, *The Courage of the Truth*, 182). Quite the contrary, it illustrates Augustine's complete indifference to outward manifestations of one's way of life ("dress and manners"), provided these serve the highest good, which in the case of the Cynics they do not. Cf. ch. 14.20 of *City of God* 14.20, entitled "De vanissima turpitudine Cynicorum"

bound up with learning to confront these risks by exposing oneself to them, accepting them, and then moving on from there. Nor is such gambling with the self restricted to the Roman era in antiquity (Heraclitus is a case in point), even if the Roman philosophers are a good place to study it in depth. Or at least so I will be arguing below.

The second prevailing view of the ancient self is in some ways no different in its goals from the first, although it does operate with different criteria. This strand is perhaps best represented by Christopher Gill's *The Structured Self*, which also maneuvers away from the tendency of an older progressivist story about the rise of the individual—the historical shift “towards a more subjective and individualistic approach to self”—that is sometimes dated to the Hellenistic and Roman periods.<sup>25</sup> In the place of the individualized self, Gill posits a “structured self,” by which he means a fully integrated whole (or “unit”) that derives its structure from the structure of the universe (as shaped by Epicurean and Stoic philosophies) and that stands opposed to the Platonic-Aristotelian “core-” or “essence-centered” approach to the person.<sup>26</sup> Gill further describes this approach as an “objective-participant” conception of personality in order to bring out two features that are absent from the modern subjective-individualist approach and that are differently accented in the core-centered approach.

The two parts of Gill's nomenclature bring out different facets of his idea. *Participant*-based personality refers to the interpersonal and social dimension of self-formation fashioned through dialogue, dialectic, debate, and community.<sup>27</sup> In this respect Gill's conception is comparable to Foucault's, despite his protestations to the contrary<sup>28</sup>—and, we might add, it is comparable to a great many other contemporary theories of the ancient and modern self.<sup>29</sup> Participant stances on the self for Gill are *objective* insofar as they are grounded in a reference to what is objectively true and about which there can be objective wisdom and truth. So conceived, truth exists independently of and prior to the subject, and it is in relation to this exterior perspective that the subject derives its validity and its identity, whether this takes the form of an insight into ultimate facts about nature and the cosmos (physics), or whether the holism that configures the subject's identity derives from an impersonal, third-personal and objective totality of things: the two

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(“Of the Foolish Beastliness of the Cynics”), where Augustine vilifies the Cynics for being too cowardly to carry out in public the shameful things they boast of. So much for Cynic “heroism”!

<sup>25</sup> Christopher Gill, *The Structured Self*, xxi.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, xv; 4.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 340-342.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 335.

<sup>29</sup> See Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004) xiv, casting intersubjectivity “a primary vulnerability to others” and to the world generally, a theme that will become prominent below; Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015); Hannah Arendt, *Responsibility and Judgment*, edited by Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2003), 96, 99, 101; Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, New ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973), 441, 476. Arendt cites as examples Democritus, Socrates, Cato, and Epictetus.

methods are mutually informative and coherent.<sup>30</sup> The rationality of both the self and nature is the premise in either case,<sup>31</sup> a desideratum that is likewise premised by Foucault, no doubt owing to the Stoic bias of his sources.<sup>32</sup>

The one area in which Foucault and Gill diverge is in the power that Gill accords to objectivism and that Foucault skirts. For Gill the self is subordinate to an objectivist, impersonal point of view and is shaped in relation to it. For Foucault there is no objectivist stance that can finally ratify or even characterize the truth of subjects. The truth to which subjects appeal, in their web of interpersonal and intrasubjective relations, is a truth of the subject (its “veridiction”), its obligatory and constitutive character, but not one that is derived from any purely cognizable form of knowledge let alone the objective character of nature, which barely registers in Foucault’s reading except when it is invoked as a normative rule, albeit one whose content is nowhere explored as such (most often under the auspices of what is “according to” or “against nature” *en route* to achieving a “veritable ethical unity” in one’s relations to one’s self and to others).<sup>33</sup> For Foucault, regimes of the self objectify the self, not as an object of knowledge,<sup>34</sup> but in the sense of making it a public project. Hence, they never desubjectify the self. On the contrary, the self, in Foucault’s view, becomes what it is *through this very objectification*, in the way in which the individual “subjects” itself to its mode of existence—as its own object and as an object that is visible to others.<sup>35</sup> It stands open to view and is made visible in the simple tallying of its manifest adherence to a “code of conduct.”<sup>36</sup> And in fact, the subject is a function of its relationship to such a code. For “the subject is nothing more, essentially, than the intersection between rules of conduct that must be remembered and the point of departure for future actions that should conform to this code.”<sup>37</sup> This way of accounting for behavior is a constant in Foucault’s writings on the self from first to last.<sup>38</sup>

A further difference with Gill is that on Foucault’s view subjects do not achieve any kind of prescribed structure. They merely continue to form and to transform themselves. Normativities govern these processes without utterly predicting their outcome. The subject does not discover its internal truth: it produces this in the course of its self-examinations. Foucault’s view is truly holistic and immanentist: subjects belong to “a dense and unbroken physiological web,” at least out-

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<sup>30</sup> Christopher Gill, *The Structured Self*, 193-5; 336-9.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>32</sup> Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, 51, 135, 183, etc.; Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 9, 36, 77 (acknowledging a Platonic influence here), 191, 279, 326, etc.

<sup>33</sup> Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, 157, 162, 176; Foucault, *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling*, 20.

<sup>34</sup> Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 318.

<sup>35</sup> Foucault, *Ethics*, 216-217; cf. *The Courage of the Truth*, 172.

<sup>36</sup> Foucault, *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling*, 99.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>38</sup> E.g., Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 13; *The Government of Self and Others*, 4; *The Courage of the Truth*, 169. In each case the operative terms are “rules,” “code,” and “codified forms of behavior” or “codified structure.” And see below on Augustine. I suspect that this is a residue of Foucault’s structuralism.



side of the Platonic traditions.<sup>39</sup> For Gill, subjects either become structured or they fail, and then are to be considered “unstructured.” Foucault recognizes the categories of the natural and unnatural, as we saw, but he accords these a more relaxed, almost “naturalized,” position in his system, perhaps along the lines of the Stoic view that relegates the majority of one’s acts to the realm of the morally neutral and indifferent. Sexual activity can prove to be evil in “its form and in its effects, but in itself and substantially, it is not an evil”<sup>40</sup>—nor, presumably, is failure to “structure” or shape one’s self. In tendency, Foucault’s theory is ethical, not moralizing or, for the most part, perfectionist (he uses the language of morals and virtue but not in an absolutist sense). Gill’s theory is both moralizing and perfectionist,<sup>41</sup> and it occasionally goes so far as to evoke a standard of “absolute (objective) determination.”<sup>42</sup> These are rough characterizations, because in fact neither Foucault’s nor Gill’s account is contradiction-free.<sup>43</sup> But then, I am not interested in the consistency of their accounts, but only in the well-attested features of the Roman self that they fail to acknowledge—specifically, its essential vulnerability, its limited sense of agency (what we might term its “weak agency”), its dispersive, unbounded character, its absolute contingency in relation to what lies beyond itself, and its fundamental opacity. Given the limits of this essay format, I will restrict myself to three examples, turning first to Seneca, then to Marcus Aurelius, and closing with a brief look at Augustine.<sup>44</sup>

## Seneca

In one of Seneca’s *Dialogues*, we read the following:

What is man? A vessel that the slightest shaking, the slightest buffet, will break... A weak and fragile body, naked, in its natural state without defence, in need of another’s assistance, exposed to all the insults of Fortune, and, once it has given its muscles a good exercise, food for the wild

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<sup>39</sup> Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, 107; cf. *Hermeneutics of the Self*, 282: “the world in which we live.”

<sup>40</sup> Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, 239.

<sup>41</sup> Gill, *The Structured Self*, 152.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 339.

<sup>43</sup> On Foucault, see above. Gill, for his part, never explains the persistence of the subjective, first-personal and individual perspective on the self in a theory from which this perspective has purportedly been ousted by the objective-participant third-person view of the self. The persistence is palpable both in the Roman era and in Gill’s own writing, as when he invokes “the interrelationship of individual or social interactive dimensions” (*ibid.*, 384; cf. 386: “both an individual and a participant dimension”), a statement (or concession) that merely clouds the issue. Nor is the distinction that Gill invokes between “individual” and “individualist” (*ibid.*, 386) robust enough to secure the argument. “Individualist” is almost certainly a straw-man in any case. Far more satisfactory and less rigidly dogmatic is Thomas Nagel’s insight into the inescapable but productive tension between first- and third-person perspectives (Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), ch. 11).

<sup>44</sup> I recognize that this paper at times makes larger claims than can be backed up in the compass of a short essay. I hope to revisit the issues in the near future.

beast, prey to everyone; a patchwork of feeble and fluid elements that pleases the eye only in its external features,... doomed to decay,... a flawed and useless thing.<sup>45</sup>

Seneca repeats some of the phrasing and all of the thought in a meditation on earthquakes:

If you want to be afraid of nothing, regard everything as something to be afraid of. Look around and see what trivial things can destroy us: not even food, not liquid, not waking, not sleeping, is beneficial except in moderation. Now you will realize that we are mere bodies, insignificant and frail, fleeting, destined to be destroyed with no great exertion. Without doubt this is the only danger we face, that the earth quakes, that it is suddenly shattered and drags down the things on its surface!<sup>46</sup>

Earthquakes have this kind of effect on the (self-)conception of subjects. To contain the force, as it were, of the earth's quaking by relegating it to the status of a mere geophysical disaster located in some time and in some place would be to misread the force of Seneca's thought. The fact that the earth trembles so violently is a symptom of an underlying instability within the very heart of the Real. The world, on Seneca's view, just is the equivalent of an earthquake. Earthquakes are events that deprive us of privilege and make us into another object in the world, albeit a diminutive one. The destitution of the self that Seneca is pointing to in both these passages can be achieved in countless ways beyond squaring oneself up to a concrete threat of nature in its sheer and brutal objectality. One of these ways, perhaps the most common if the least recognized, is the confrontation of a subject with some form of an abyss: not material objects, but their utter negation—let's call this an abyssal object. Seneca knows this experience too. He arrives at it the way many other ancients do, by inquiring into, or rather *picturing*, time in its most unfathomable dimension. The trigger to this chain of reflections is the phrase (or the idea) "just now":

I seem to have just lost you, for what is not 'just now' (*modo*) when you are remembering? Just now I sat as a boy before Sotion the philosopher, I began to plead cases just now, I stopped wanting to plead just now, I stopped being able to plead just now.

But what is this "just now"? It is a point on the edge of an abyss. Thinking of this "now" and the "now" that follows and the one that "just" was leads to a greater reflection, and a greater imponderability:

The speed of time is infinite, something more obvious to those looking back. For it slips by those preoccupied with present problems: the passing of its headlong flight is so gentle. You ask the reason for this? Whatever time has passed is in the same condition: it is observed in the

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<sup>45</sup> *Dialogues* 6.11.3 in Seneca, *Dialogues and Essays*, translated by John Davie. With an introduction and notes by Tobias Reinhardt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); slightly adapted.

<sup>46</sup> Seneca, *Natural Questions*, 6.2.3.

same way and buried together: everything falls into the same abyss. And yet there cannot be long lapses of time in a business that is altogether short. We live for only a point in time, and so much less than a point, but nature has mocked even this tiniest thing with the appearance of a longer period [from infancy to youth to old age itself]. How many stages it has placed in such a cramped entity! It is just now that I escorted you on your departure, and yet this 'just now' is a good portion of our life, such that we should reflect that its brevity will one day run out. Time used not to seem so swift to me: now its pace seems unbelievable, whether this is because I feel the deadlines being brought closer, or because I have begun to pay attention and calculate my losses.<sup>47</sup>

In scanning Foucault's theory of the ancient self, one will look in vain for anything that can quite measure up to the magnificence and the depth of Seneca's self-destituting reflections. Here is how Foucault treats the question of time, indexed to the *epimeleia* that goes into "a whole set of occupations," be this tending to one's household, one's political subjects, the sick or wounded, the gods, or one's self:

It [viz., all this] takes time. And it is one of the big problems of this cultivation of the self to determine the portion of one's day or one's life that should be devoted to it. People resort to many different formulas. One can set aside a few moments, in the evening or in the morning, for introspection, for examining what needs to be done, for memorizing certain useful principles for reflecting on the day that has gone by... One may also from time to time interrupt one's ordinary activities and go into one of those retreats that Musonius, among so many others, strongly recommended. They enable one to commune with oneself, to recollect one's bygone days, to place the whole of one's past life before one's eyes, to get to know oneself... This time is not empty; it is filled with exercises, practical tasks, various activities. Taking care of oneself is not a rest cure. There is the care of the body to consider, health regimens, physical exercises without overexertion, the carefully measured satisfaction of needs [etc.].<sup>48</sup>

Quite plainly, Seneca's meditations are operating on an entirely different level and in a different "time-zone" from Foucault's. Is Foucault even describing the same object? For Foucault, working on one's self is closer to medicine and to art than it is to ethics. The principles involved are procedural, but they are also global: they apply across a range of domains or contexts. What the historian of subject-formation retraces, then, are in the first instance these mechanisms and their transfers from one domain to another, and only secondly the behaviors themselves. Selves, particularly Roman selves, are thus the product of a grid-like system of rules, codes, and conduct, which are in turn of greater diagnostic value than the selves that they produce. Abstract theoretical prob-

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<sup>47</sup> Seneca, *Letter* 49.2-4.

<sup>48</sup> Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, 50-1. Elsewhere this is captured by "the notion of free time (*skholē* or *otium*)" one disposes of—freely, at "leisure," at "will," and "without having to take into consideration external determinations"—in order to take care of one's self (Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 112, 133). Self-care is a luxury on this view.

lems are replaced by attention to down-to-earth practices. More precisely, speculations about the self are treated as the secondary by-product of these primary formative practices, if at all. The sheer functionalism of Foucault's procedural analysis of the self falls short of the Senecan reality.<sup>49</sup> How do you *schedule* meditation on the self when the very medium in which that self-reflection is to obtain is itself being shown to be a problem, and an abyssal one at that?<sup>50</sup>

In another letter Seneca notes how staring blank death in the face makes one wince with vertigo: even the bravest of men will go "blind with dizziness if he looks down on an immense depth (*vastam altitudinem*) when standing on its brink (*in crepidine eius*)" (57.4). So cast, the brink of life begins to resemble the brink of nothingness. This response to nullity is not one of cowardice; it is a natural and unavoidable feeling, and it cannot be addressed by reason.<sup>51</sup>

There's only more point that needs to be made about Seneca's insight into this abyss: destitution of the self is not an aberration: it is one of the commonest ways in which subjects are *formed* in antiquity. Self-destitution, paradoxically, is a finely honed technique of the self, a *practice* that produces—literally *constitutes*—the self. Unfortunately, it is not the kind of technique that is catalogued or even envisaged in Foucault's project on the hermeneutics of the self (which tracks not deformations, but only formations, of the self) or on any other theory of the emergence of the subject in Greece or Rome known to me. Part of Foucault's problem is that he takes for granted that selves exist in some unprecarious state, when in fact what I believe we find in the ancient literature is an attempt to cultivate a sense of precarity at the heart of what it is to be a self. For a second confirmation, let us turn to Marcus Aurelius.

### Marcus Aurelius

Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*, as they are now called, date from the late second century CE. Book 1 opens with a tribute to the various sources of moral and ethical inspiration in his life, starting with his ancestors and parents, then several teachers and instructors or philosophers, and culminating with the gods, who serve to ratify the foregoing list of debts in Marcus' moral education. The list, appearing where it does, impresses on the reader a particular feature of Marcus' stance towards himself that is borne out in the rest of his essay: it is remarkably *other-directed*. The self

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<sup>49</sup> See Foucault, *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling*, 100, quoted above. And cf. Foucault, *Ethics*, 365 on the "instrumental meaning" that distinguishes pagan techniques of the self from later Christian "spiritual" ones.

<sup>50</sup> Part of the problem is that Foucault insists on the fundamental "ontological adequacy of the self" to itself as being either the premise or the telos of self-inquiry (dossier notes quoted by Gros in Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 533). The same thought appears in the lectures: "the objective of ascesis in Antiquity is in fact the constitution of a full, perfect, and complete relationship of oneself to oneself" (*ibid.*, 320). The rest has to do with the way Foucault reads Seneca's project as protecting the subject rather than exposing it to risk (*ibid.*, 307) and with the way he treats Roman philosophers in general as seeking to locate whatever appears to the mind as a stable, knowable, and describable object (*ibid.*, 294), uncontaminated by contingencies of any kind (*ibid.*, 133).

<sup>51</sup> *Itaque et vultum adducet ad tristitia, et inhorrescet ad subita et caligabit, si vastam altitudinem in crepidine eius constitutus despexerit: non est hoc timor, sed naturalis adfectio inexpugnabilis rationi.*

to whom he addresses his work (its title comes down to us as "To Himself") is substantially indebted to others.<sup>52</sup> As Marcus fleshes out his *Meditations* it becomes clear that the self enjoys only a relative autonomy in the world, and that its nature is fundamentally involved in the nature of others and of the universe. Care of the self, on this view, is a care for others. In interpersonal terms, care of the self translates into a belief in the fundamental sociability of the self. In physical and metaphysical terms, it translates into a version of the Stoic doctrine of *sumpatheia*, according to which everything in nature is connected with everything else, and indeed, not merely connected but interpenetrating, dispersed, and forever reassembling into new configurations of parts and wholes.<sup>53</sup>

To speak of selves, then, is to speak of momentarily circumscribed entities that have a tenuous grasp on identity. Selves are not self-authoring or authorizing, nor are they individuals, that is, indivisible entities who are defined atomistically in contrast to other individual selves or objects, even if they do have a sense (one could say, illusion) of being autonomous subjects. Each soul is a speck of the universal soul, a mere fraction of that larger entity, which alone has a claim to identity (4.40). This is the source of its real debts (the kinds of debt that are on display in Book 1 are a first-person, self-to-other version of these larger, cosmic connections). Souls are transient things, they come and go, they enter into individual bodies, and then they "are diffused, and are burned up when they are taken back into the generative principle of the universe," ceding a place to the souls to come (4.21). On this view, which is Heraclitean in its wild embracement of flux and change, our souls have no abiding features and not even a unity of any kind (5.23; 10.7).<sup>54</sup> Lavishing attention on one's self is, accordingly, a futile exercise, and to this extent Foucault's picture of someone caught up in a problematization of the self, anxiously taking her pulse, quantizing her pleasure quotients, tallying up what are "frankly... unimportant details,"<sup>55</sup> and measuring her

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<sup>52</sup> See R. B. Rutherford, *The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius: A Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 9 and 13 on the title and 48 on the character of book 1: "There is quite simply nothing else like Book I of the *Meditations* in the whole of classical literature. Even its links with the rest of the work have never been very satisfactorily established." Perhaps this is so only because scholars have been looking too ardently for the proprietary self of Marcus in this work. Translations are from Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations, with Selected Correspondence*, translated by Robin Hard. With an introduction and notes by Christopher Gill (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>53</sup> On this last concept, see Thomas G. Rosenmeyer, *Senecan Drama and Stoic Cosmology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989) and Brooke Holmes, *The Tissue of the World: Sympathy and the Nature of Nature in Greco-Roman Antiquity* (forthcoming).

<sup>54</sup> Cf. David Sedley, "Marcus Aurelius on Physics," in *A Companion to Marcus Aurelius*, edited by Marcel van Ackeren (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), pp. 396-407 (<https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118219836.ch25>); here, 401 on the "fluid" self in Marcus' theory, which is the only one that "really counts." The idea is glossed by Sedley two pages earlier in language that may sound shocking to us, but is no more so than Marcus' own formulations: "For Marcus, in the long run *you are your ingredients*, and everything else is likewise identical with its material constituents" (399).

<sup>55</sup> Foucault, *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling*, 101; cf. Foucault, "About the Beginning," 208.

biorhythms in order to gauge the sexual act,<sup>56</sup> seems a far cry from what Marcus is presupposing and recommending. Institutional relationships are likewise in scant evidence in the *Meditations*, and the same is true of bodily regimens. In point of fact, they are utterly minimized. From his father Marcus learned how little (how moderately) one should care for one's body. Outward appearances are valueless. "He [sc., Marcus' father] attached little importance to his food, or to the fabric and colour of his garments, or to the attractiveness of his slaves." "He rarely had need of a doctor's help, or medicines, or external treatment," and so on (1.16). He was a very bad Foucauldian, in other words.<sup>57</sup>

In fact, the body for Marcus is nothing but a temporary housing for the *equally* temporary soul, whose destiny is not to rise up, Platonically, to a higher level of existence (to become even *more* purely ensouled), but rather to re-enter into the cycle of existence, to change its texture and to become another element of the world, never the same as it is or was, permanently and continually othered in an ongoing and joyous reassemblage amidst all that is, the totality of which just is this process of reassemblage: "You entered the world as a part, and you will vanish back into that which brought you to birth; or rather, you will be received back into its generative reason through a process of change" (4.14).

If one were to speak of care of the self here, one would have to speak of the universe's own care for its own self: it is the universe that is a single living creature (a *zōon*) endowed with a single soul and with its own singular perception, driven by its own single impulse, and demonstrating "how intricate and densely woven is the fabric formed by their [sc., all things'] interweaving" (4.40). Perhaps such a being *does* care for itself. If so, it does not do so in the way that Foucault outlines. Nor is the care of individual souls that we find in the *Meditations* exactly like the care and self-fashioning of the self that we find in Foucault. Rather, individuals care for themselves insofar as they strive to approximate to the reality of this one Being. And to do so, they must embrace themselves as transient and momentary figments of this universal entity.

This is Marcus' doctrine of the *unbounded self*. But as I said, it bears little resemblance to Foucault's fretting, anxiety-driven, and self-absorbed subjectivity,<sup>58</sup> or to Gill's objective-participant subjectivity, which is founded on a dialogic (interpersonal, interactive, communal) but

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<sup>56</sup> Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, 126.

<sup>57</sup> Or else Foucault is not entirely consistent. In *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* Foucault briefly indicates that Marcus' conception of the self "tends towards a dissolution of individuality" (307). Here, Marcus' physics points Foucault momentarily in the right direction.

<sup>58</sup> See esp. Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 50, 202, 218-19, where the focus is on the inward-looking and self-regarding aspect of Marcus' philosophy ("the self striving towards itself" as its own "objective," 202)—what is sometimes considered to be the sign of a "fortress mentality" (A. A. Long, *From Epicurus to Epictetus: Studies in Hellenistic and Roman Philosophy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, Oxford University Press, 2006), 34; see *ibid.*, 38). Foucault is more on target in a later section (Foucault, *ibid.*, 290-308), where he focuses on the self's place in nature.

not an ecstatic relation of the self to others and to nature.<sup>59</sup> Indeed, Gill's selves are atoms that communicate with one another without stepping outside of themselves. Nor is Marcus' ontology of the self exactly "flat" in the sense described above. On the contrary, it is at times deep and at times eccentric, although it is mostly free of all such associations, because at bottom it describes a world that is in radical flux. We might further say of the worlds of nature and of the self that they are both radically *extimate*, which is to say that they have no inside and no outside.<sup>60</sup> Instead, each enjoys an intimate exteriority, like the Moebius band that, curving back on itself in an endless loop, is permanently in excess of itself. What is more, these two worlds are ultimately one. If you follow the path of the outer world far enough you will find yourself deep within your own world, and the reverse is true as well, though in actuality you won't have traveled an inch.

Marcus does recognize a kind of interiority and a kind of autonomy of the self, but these are heavily qualified by the overall trajectory of his thought and its premises.<sup>61</sup> On the one hand, he recommends retreating "into" oneself whenever one wishes to discover a bit of tranquility: "for nowhere can one retreat into greater peace or freedom from care than within one's own soul, especially, when a person has such things within him that he has merely to look at them to recover from that moment perfect ease of mind... So constantly grant yourself this retreat and so renew yourself" (4.3). At times Marcus gives the impression that what lies "hidden within us" is a kind of secreted agency, an inner self—"the person himself" (*anthrōpos*)—that, in its invulnerability, resembles a mighty citadel (10.38; 8.48). To this agency (the *hēgemonikon*, or rational ruling center of the soul) can be ascribed the power of self-fashioning that Marcus also, at times, acknowledges—the capacity for self-motion and self-alteration, in virtue of which a person "arouses itself, and adapts itself, and fashions itself according to its will," and "makes whatever happens to it appear to itself as it wishes to be" (6.8; cf. 5.19).

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<sup>59</sup> Examples of a productive modeling of selfhood through ecstatic relation, interruption, dispersal, and diaspora may be found in Jacob Bernays, *Grundzüge der verlorenen Abhandlung des Aristoteles über Wirkung der Tragödie* (Breslau: Eduard Trewendt, 1857), sec. IV (see James I. Porter, "Jacob Bernays and the Catharsis of Modernity," in *Tragedy and Modernity*, edited by Joshua Billings and Miriam Leonard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), pp. 15-41); Étienne Balibar, *Spinoza and Politics*, translated by Peter Snowdon, revised and enlarged edition (London: Verso, 1998); Gilbert Simondon, *L'individuation à la lumière des notions de forme et d'information* (Grenoble: Millon, 2005); Judith Butler, "The Desire to Live: Spinoza's *Ethics* under Pressure," in *Politics and the Passions, 1500-1850*, edited by Victoria Kahn, Neil Saccamano, and Daniela Coli (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), pp. 111-30; and Judith Butler, *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012). The Stoic conception is intensely social, political (metaphorically speaking), and de-individuating.

<sup>60</sup> See Jacques-Alain Miller, "Extimité," *Prose Studies* 11, no. 3 (1988): 121-31 (<https://doi.org/10.1080/01440358808586354>) for the concept of extimacy. And cf. 5.27 on the constant practice of exhibiting one's soul to the Gods, a trait shared with Epictetus (2.14.11) and with Seneca (*Letter* 83.1).

<sup>61</sup> To be sure, a factor may be the tendency of Stoicism to countenance (render compatible) apparently contradictory extremes, as in its embrace of fate and responsibility, self-sufficiency and alterity, the individual and nature, etc. But there is more at stake here than a generous tolerance for extremes.

This does bring to mind Foucault's self-fashioning subject, but there are important differences. The agency on Foucault's account is located in the subject, not in the soul: the soul is what is shaped, while the subject supervises these modifications, and in this way modifies itself. Thus, for example, it is the *dream* that "alters the soul," not the other way around, just as the soul is normally the object of cultivation while it is the person that does the cultivating (one "takes care of" and "perfects the soul").<sup>62</sup> One suspects this has to do with Foucault's treatment of the soul as an ethical substance that has a virtual physical extension, that is, as an object of a flat ontology that is easily accessible to direction and influence from another agency, rather than his treating it as part of a monistic ontology in which the soul moves the way the universe moves. Differently put, Foucault is intent on conferring agency on his subjects. The "art of living," which permits self-fashioning to come about, can occur in no other way. But doesn't Marcus do the same? Doesn't he too endorse "an art of living" (11.29)? He does. But his art is of a different sort altogether, as is his idea of agency.

Self-mastery is not the same thing as self-determination in Marcus' book. For one thing, the soul is never a self-identical object, nor is it the goal of the rational soul to remain self-identical. Quite the contrary. Our natures are not given, they are breathing, changing things, constantly altering in the face of changing realities, constantly taking in and dispersing sensations and perceptions. Such is the composite nature of souls: they are literally "put together" from their environment. What we are today is not what we were at birth: "for all this was taken in only yesterday or the day before as an influx from foodstuffs or the air breathed in," all of which changes (10.7). "Is one afraid of change? Why, what can come about without change?" (7.18). We are the living proof: "And do you not see that change in yourself is of a similar nature?" (7.18). Change is the law of all that is; it is the characteristic feature of universal nature (7.18; cf. 7.19; 7.23; 5.23; 2.17)—just as it was for Heraclitus, to whom Roman Stoicism is deeply indebted. Marcus' term for such activity is *suntithēmi* or *sugkrinein*, "put together," not "fashion" (5.8: *tēi poiiai sunthesei*; cf. 2.17: *sugkrinetai*). The one place where he uses *poiein* to convey the same thought (*poioun heauto*), which brings to mind the idea that a subject can indeed make itself, he quickly adds the qualification, "makes whatever happens to it appear to be as it wishes it to be" (6.8). The qualification indicates adaptation rather than fashioning, and this is as one might expect. Real agency is not located in subjects; it is located in *nature* (cf. 8.6), just as the verbs above have as their grammatical subject nature or the *hēgemonikon*, not the self.<sup>63</sup> Even where selves perform the work of fashioning (as in

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<sup>62</sup> Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, 10, 45, 48, 136, 156, etc. Exceptions are rare. See *ibid.*, 134, where the soul is said to perform its own therapy on itself. Some of this variety has to do with the sources that Foucault is citing at any one moment, but his own proclivities to phrase the activity of caring are more significant than the sources he uses. The same holds for the earlier historical material covered in Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure: Volume 2 of The History of Sexuality*, translated by Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1985), e.g., 49: "absolute power over the soul"; 74: "instruments used in the direction of souls"; 77: "art of [viz., practiced on] the soul," etc. See also Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, e.g., 47.

<sup>63</sup> For the distinction, see, e.g., 10.24: "What does my ruling centre mean to me?"



8.32: “you must fashion (*suntithenai*) your life one action at a time”), that work is less an autonomous fashioning than an adaptation to the dictates of nature. For nothing is accomplished that is not also “in accordance with the nature of the whole” —for it “could hardly be accomplished according to any other nature, whether embracing the universe from outside, or contained within it, or existing independently outside it,” for no such outside exists nor does any part within or without subsist autonomously of nature, subjects included (6.9).<sup>64</sup>

When we retreat into ourselves, what we discover there is not the homunculus agent that we putatively are, but rather a connection with everything that “we” are not. We discover a dynamic contingency that is never the same except in some aggregate sense that we will never comprehend, but can only dimly glimpse. We stand on a precipice surrounded by “*the abyss of time*” (4.50; 12.7; 5.23). The best that a rational subject can hope to do is to *yield* to this unalterable set of conditions, to freely become what it is—an emanation of nature—, and to accept its own radical contingency and fragility. The stance is consistent with Stoic fatalism, which perhaps more than anything else colors Marcus’ view of ethical attitudes and behavior (7.57, the doctrine of *amor fati*). Whether peering within itself or within others, whether looking up or down upon all that can be seen, the subject *glimpses* the most universal structures of nature that stand revealed to her but which, *pace* Gill and others, are in no way objective or objectifiable in any sense that is meaningful to the human mind. And then she gives way, ceding herself, to them.<sup>65</sup> Subjects do best, on Marcus’ account, not when they interfere with nature, but when they get out of its way (e.g., 8.50). Ethical behavior, then, is concessive rather than active, or, if we prefer, actively concessive (cf. 5.10: “no one can force me to disobey [nature’s] will”): one must embrace dispersal, as the self learns to accept that “the work of universal nature is this, to remove what is here to there, to transform it, and to take it from there and convey it elsewhere. All is change” (8.6). Everything changes, and yet nothing is ever new: it is simply renewed—and then is “swift to pass,” and finally “to vanish” (6.36; 7.1; 7.10).

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<sup>64</sup> Nature, too, we can say, is a compliant entity: it obeys *itself* (6.1), which may be no more than a tautology. Whatever nature does it does for a reason. What is that reason? Look for it in what nature does: its reason is immanent to its activity and not extricable from it.

<sup>65</sup> The point for Marcus is not that nature is an object that can be known, but that it is an unalterably changing entity whose only unity is that it is all that is. He shows a remarkable indifference to pinning down its ultimate philosophical character apart from a few tidy and general principles. See 5.10 (“realities are concealed,” etc.); 2.17 (“our destiny [is] beyond divining”). His nonchalant indifference to deciding between competing physical theories, mostly Stoic or Epicurean (8.17, etc.), is consistent with this stance. Such knowledge is an indifferent, morally and in every other respect. Seneca holds the same view: “Time rolls on by a law that is fixed, but beyond our ken; indeed, what difference does it make to me whether something is known to nature which is unknown to me?” (*Letter* 101.5). In other words, Nature is opaque. Cf. Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, 5.10: “this murk and filth, this unending flux of substance and time,” i.e., of nature. Human nature is equally opaque, not least because it shares the same nature and the same opacity as the universe: “We know we have a mind, but we don’t know what the mind is” (*Letter* 121.12).

One of the most intriguing features of Marcus' account of the self, his acknowledgement that subjects are dangerously perched over an abyss of time, is in fact, I believe, a hallmark of Roman theories of the self. With it comes a good deal of uncertainty and an equal amount of urgency. Uncertainty stems from the fact that the universe in its temporal character, and in every other way, is unknown and unknowable. The self, inasmuch as it belongs to the universe as one of its elements or "emanations" ("outflow," *aporrhoeia*, 2.4; cf. 2.17), enjoys (or suffers) these same traits. Urgency of a moral sort follows on the heels of uncertainty: if time is abyssal and we occupy no more than a pinprick in this larger picture, then "our" time is swift to pass indeed. "The time of our existence is a point, our substance a flux" (2.17; cf. 6.36: "a point in eternity"), just as time is itself "an unending flux" (5.10). When we turn to Augustine, we find that this kind of problematization of the self reaches a new height of urgency, for at stake is nothing less than the salvation of the soul itself.

### Augustine

Part way through the *Confessions*, Augustine has a revelation: "I had become to myself a vast problem (*factus eram ipse mihi magna quaestio*)" (*Confessions* 4.4.9; trans. Chadwick). Augustine's confessions are literally built around this impasse. The problem that Augustine has become is not one that he ever solves. The refrain is repeated in towards the end of the *Confessions*: "In your eyes, I have become a problem to myself, and that is my sickness" (10.34.50). Coming face to face with himself is like facing an abyss. All the techniques of the self, of self-introspection and of self-recollection, do nothing to assuage the pain of this kind of confrontation, which is both existentially and spiritually threatening and anything but an assuring index of self-discovery.

The standard view has it that Augustine discovered the interior self for the first time in antiquity.<sup>66</sup> Foucault's view is more nuanced than this, but also more ambivalent. Christian asceticism, he says, is a continuation and an intensification of earlier pagan practices of the care of the self.<sup>67</sup> But it also represents a decisive shift in the self's formation towards a new hermeneutics of the self. Augustine slots perfectly into this paradigm shift. He invented the genre of autobiography, despite obvious precedents (what Foucault calls "self-writing").<sup>68</sup> He linked writing the self to confessing the self in a new, monumental way ("confession is a mark of truth").<sup>69</sup> And he

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<sup>66</sup> See, for example, Charles H. Kahn, "Discovering the Will: From Aristotle to Augustine," in *The Question of "Eclecticism": Studies in Later Greek Philosophy*, edited by John M. Dillon and A. A. Long (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 234-59; Phillip Cary, *Augustine's Invention of the Inner Self: The Legacy of a Christian Platonist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>67</sup> "Christian morality is nothing more than a piece of pagan ethics inserted into Christianity" (Foucault, *Ethics* 180). In point of fact, much of the time paganism is for Foucault nothing but a latent form of Christianity; see Porter, "Foucault's Ascetic Ancients."

<sup>68</sup> Foucault, *Ethics*, 207-22 ("Self Writing"); *ibid.*, 233 for the precedents.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 248.

did so by “objectifying the soul.”<sup>70</sup> The key moment to this inward turn, for Foucault, is the power of recollection: “the writer constitutes his own identity through this recollection of things said.”<sup>71</sup> Along with this new Christianized ascetics of the self is born a new kind of subjectivity and personal identity—a hermeneutics of the self, whereby the self, conceived as harboring a truth or secret within, is obliged to divulge itself through self-avowals and self-recognitions, and in this way “binds” itself to a new regime of truth, a regime that Foucault says “hardly existed before Christianity”: “one of the most fundamental traits of Christianity is that it ties the individual to the obligation to search within himself for the truth of what he is.”<sup>72</sup>

Here, self-formation is less about fashioning the self as a work of art (the aesthetics of existence) than it is directed at instilling within the self a code of expectations and then at operating this code on and through the self—in essence by decoding what the code reveals about who one essentially is.<sup>73</sup> The functionalism of Foucault’s model of Greek and Roman subjectivity is still in place. Much of the earlier operating code remains in effect.<sup>74</sup> We might say that only the aesthetics have changed, the stance in which the self relates to itself. But to say this is to say a great deal. The model is now progressivist (the self is slowly marching forward through history towards a Cartesian and eventually a Freudian finale). It is also increasingly certain of its target. The self no longer lives on the surfaces of codified behaviors. Instead it is lodged deeply within individuals as their defining and essential characteristic. It is that which the code is designed now to decode. A quick look at Augustine will determine if this model of the self is sufficiently complex to characterize him. I doubt that it is.

At first blush, when Augustine descends into his storehouse of memories he discovers a rich interior world of the self, which does indeed seem to betoken a new, or at least deeper, phenomenon in the landscape of the ancient self:

I come to the fields and vast palaces of memory, where are the treasuries of innumerable images of all kinds of objects brought in by sense-perception. Hidden there is whatever we think about... When I am in this storehouse, I ask that it produce what I want to recall, and immediately certain things come out... There sky, land, and sea are available to me together with all the sensations I have been able to experience in them, except for those which I have forgotten. There I also meet myself and recall what I am, what I have done, and when and where and how I was affected when I did it, [etc.]. (10.8.12-14)

So enthralled is Augustine with his powers of memory that he finds himself caught up in a veritable omnipotence fantasy. The entire outer world of experience seems to be available to him in

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 217.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 213.

<sup>72</sup> Foucault, *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling*, 91; 92; 100.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>74</sup> Foucault, *Ethics*, 266.

“the stomach of [his] mind” that has virtually cannibalized reality (10.14.21), all of it accessible on demand and at a glance. Delirious with newfound power, he discovers within himself “a vast and infinite profundity”; its reach is “immeasurable” (10.8.15; 10.17.26). But as he sorts through the images retained in his mind, Augustine’s pleasure turns into a nightmare: “I run through all these things. I fly here and there, and penetrate their working as far as I can. But I never reach the end” (10.17.26). The profundity turns into an abyss within: “who has plumbed its bottom?” The more that Augustine lingers within this recollected world, the less certain he is of its value. He does not uncover himself (not even that “inner man” to whom these memories attach, 10.6.8) nor does he discover any truths secreted within. All that he experiences is a frustration with the attempt to do so. Memory is marred by forgetfulness and by its very impressionability: images are retained “without any conscious act of commitment (*non commendata*),” and what is meaningful without commitment? (10.14.22). How do you remember what you forget? The question is intimately tied to another: how do you confess what you do not know? (10.5.7). “Reflecting on the powers of memory turns into agony and despair. “I myself cannot grasp the totality of what I am” (10.8.15). “Who can find a solution to this problem?” (10.16.24). “What then am I, my God? What is my nature? It is characterized by diversity, by life of many forms, utterly immeasurable... The varieties there cannot be counted, and are beyond any reckoning, full of innumerable things” (10.17.26). Memory is a false lure (and yet how many readers have taken the bait?): it makes Augustine more present to himself than to God (10.5.7). Augustine does not discover or invent the self, let alone a hermeneutics of the self. On the contrary, what he discovers first is that the self is the name for an abyssal problem with no end or solution, very much in line with Heraclitus’ original insights quoted earlier, and then that this self is negligible in comparison with its truest purpose, which is to abandon (“transcend”) its own mental universe and to discover God, who dwells outside the mind (“but you are not there”), beyond and above it (10.25.36). The trouble is that the problem of the self never goes away. Augustine remains the “problem” that he always was.<sup>75</sup>

If one insists on speaking of a cultivation of the self in a paradigmatic case like Augustine’s, then one must at least acknowledge that the self is being fashioned here not as a conduit to self-knowledge or to some non-illusory truth about oneself,<sup>76</sup> but only as an abyssal problem—it is a veritable crisis of understanding—that finally must be abandoned in favor of a truth that the self does not contain but rather that contains it from without. Destitution and extroversion of the

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<sup>75</sup> One of the best accounts of this episode in Augustine’s *Confessions* is found in Jean-Luc Marion, *In the Self’s Place: The Approach of Saint Augustine*, translated by Jeffrey L. Kosky (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), esp. ch. 5 and e.g. p. 288: “The aporia of the self... never disappears.” See also Andrea Nightingale, “The ‘I’ and ‘Not I’ in Augustine’s Confessions,” *Arion* 23, no. 1 (2015): 55-78.

<sup>76</sup> See Foucault, *Ethics*, 178 on “the Christian discovery of the self”; *ibid.*, 243 on “purity of the soul” as “a consequence of self-knowledge.” Further: “the criterion of purity consists in discovering the truth in myself and defeating illusions in myself” (183), but the reverse is the case: truth resides outside the self, not within it; to think otherwise is to be prey to an illusion, and what is equally damaging, to be prey to an illusory self.

self, not veridiction, and certainly not discovery, let alone fashioning of the self by the self,<sup>77</sup> are the key characteristics of the Christian self, a self that, after all, is made by God and not by mankind ("he made me," 10.6.9).<sup>78</sup> The parallels with Marcus and Seneca are undeniable. But even more characteristic of the Christian self, in contrast to the earlier Roman self, is the anxiety that such an effort produces, and its interminable prolongation. Augustine never ceases to be a problem to himself. "I have become a problem to myself, and that is my sickness." He is never healed. Only death and resurrection can promise a solution to his predicament.

These differences aside, there are significant continuities between the earlier and later Roman views that deserve to be acknowledged. Of these, one stands out in particular. Philosophically achieved selves of the sort that are found in Seneca, Marcus, or Augustinian are not "formed" in antiquity, nor do they "emerge" there. They are ongoing *emergencies*, ongoing experiments in living on the edge and *in extremis*, the aim of which is to find an ethical relationship not in the first instance not to one's self, but rather to the unfathomable dimensions of the world in all its absolute and irrevocable necessity. Only at this price of radical destitution is a relationship to oneself and to others possible. The experience of the self is that of a never-ending crisis. Reading these documents from the past, we can immerse ourselves in a culture that valued neither cognitive certainty nor self-mastery, but something far more precious: the dangerous experience of becoming who one is.<sup>79</sup>

James I. Porter,  
Chancellor's Professor of Rhetoric and Classics,  
University of California, Berkeley  
Californien 94720,  
USA  
jiporter@berkeley.edu

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<sup>77</sup> Pauliina Remes, "Inwardness and Infinity of Selfhood: From Plotinus to Augustine " in *Ancient Philosophy of the Self*, edited by Pauliina Remes and Juha Sihvola (Dordrecht and London: Springer, 2008), pp. 155-76 174.

<sup>78</sup> See Foucault, *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling*, 165: "exagoreusis [avowal of oneself] was a question of destroying and renouncing oneself."

<sup>79</sup> Thanks to Richard Alston, Shreyaa Bhatt, and an anonymous reader for extremely helpful comments on earlier versions of this essay.