Free Will and Psychology
Week 20

Finishing off Foucault

In his work on discipline, regulation and the production of social and scientific order Foucault (e.g. 1979, 1980) described what he called 'normalising practices' where particular sets of behaviours are learned and regulated through a process of comparison. There are a variety of disciplines that can be deployed to perform this normalisation, for example education, professional training, the hospital system and various other systems that are capable of setting normative standards for health and wellbeing. As Hardin (2001) notes 'rewards . . .are measured out for behaviours considered socially permissible. Paradoxically, one of those rewards is being considered normal. To avoid the consequences of being labelled abnormal, and to secure rewards in our culture, people learn to monitor their interactions within a prescribed set of normative standards.' (Hardin, 2001, p. 16)

Being normal, in some important senses is about appearing to be the captain of one's own ship. Freedom and the struggle against constraints and the desire to constantly reconfigure oneself, ones circumstances and one's livelihood are part of an insistent individualised identity project.

Free will is something we cultivate as part of our identity package. Freedom is a lifestyle accessory. Foucault calls the methods and techniques through which we constitute ourselves "care of the self" or "technologies" (or "practices") of the self. This has been a key point in ethical thinking since Antiquity, where philosophy itself was conceived as a practice of self-regulation through a continuous project of self-representation. Such a project means becoming concerned with relationships of truth, power, and desire.

Freedom as a kind of 'deep play' in the Geertzian sense, in that whilst the stakes may be high, it is intimately connected with what it means to be human and with how we present ourselves as worthy, worthwhile beings. Geertz (1983) borrows his notion of 'deep play' from Bentham: "Bentham's concept of "deep play" is found in his *Theory of Legislation*. 'By it he means play in which the stakes are so high that it is, from his utilitarian standpoint irrational for men to engage in it at all. If a man whose fortune is a thousand pounds wages five hundred of it on an even bet, the marginal utility of the pound he stands to win is clearly less than the marginal disutility of the one he stands to lose... Having come together in search of pleasure [both participants] have entered into a relationship which will bring the participants, considered collectively, net pain rather than net pleasures.' (p. 432)

Cultivating the self. Manufacturing the sense of freedom

Psychology in the west has been a kind of 'freedom factory, helping us to create a sense of our own. Foucault's idea of the 'care of the self' refers to an ethical principle popular with the stoics that leads people to cultivate themselves; that is to work to improve themselves. "This 'cultivation of the self' can be briefly characterized by the fact that one must 'take care of oneself.' It is this principle of the care of the self that establishes its necessity, presides over its development, and organizes its practice

(Foucault, 1986, 43). In ancient times this was often understood to involve a "cultivation of the soul" (Foucault, 1986, 45.) In earlier times this was a matter of self-mastery, but over the course of history it became more a matter of learning to shape one's own inner character (Foucault, 1986, 67).

The technologies of the self, Foucault argues, have a long history, in his formulation they go back to the Stoics. The starting place for these technologies is the idea of "taking care of oneself." Once one had fulfilled this principle, one could begin the process of "knowing oneself." (Foucault, 1986, 19-22) There were several interrelated ways of achieving this. These include "letters to friends and disclosure of self; examination of self and conciseness, including a review of what was done, of what should have been done, and comparison of the two." (Foucault, 1988, 34-35) The last technology is that of askesis. This is not so much a renunciation of the self, but a progressive consideration of the self achieved through the acceptance of truth. (Foucault 1988, 35-39) This process is long and involved. It is not something that is easily achieved. Instead, it is a process that takes years of careful reflection.

Rozmarin (2005: 6) has this to say:
> Indeed, there is no certain way of deciding whether self-formation is a path of resistance or a prominent form of power. It must to some extent be a form of power; otherwise it would not be available as an option for political manipulation.

Foucault sees power and power relations as being inherent in societies:
> I do not think that a society can exist without power relations, if by that one means the strategies by which individuals try to direct and control the conduct of others. The problem, then, is not to try and dissolve them in the utopia of completely transparent communication, but to acquire the rules of law, the management techniques, and also morality, the *ethos*, the practice of the self that will allow us to play these games of power with as little domination as possible. (1997: 298).

From a poststructuralist philosophical orientation, the self is not an independent thing, but it is an idea created through the grammatical structure within our languages (Hardin, 2001) As Butler (1999) argues:
> Look, I think that the [idea] that a person has about who they are, when they say 'I,' what they refer to. 'I', it's not an easy thing saying 'I', and we don't come into the world saying 'I', you learn it. And you learn that there are certain circumstances in which you say it and certain ones that you don't. And sometimes when you're really young there's lots of confusion about what's 'I' and what's not 'I'. Right? … So the 'I' gets established over time and certainly its grammatical use gets established over time. And grammar you will remember is also about appropriateness and learning when and where and what and how.

As Hardin (2001) adds, if we learn the notion of 'I' through language, then a different set of questions surfaces for researchers. In opposition to a humanist construction, in which language is descriptive, a poststructuralist orientation focus is on how the world out there – and the world 'in here' - is produced through language.

Foucault describes how it is possible for us to transcend the subjectivity into which we have been constructed:

> For Nietzsche, Bataille and Blanchot . . . experience is trying to reach a certain point of life that is as close as possible to the 'unlivable', to that which can't be lived through. . . . In Nietzsche, Bataille and Blanchot, experience has the function of wrenching the subject from itself, of seeing to it that the subject is no longer itself, or that it is brought to its annihilation or its dissolution. This is a project of desubjectivation. (Foucault, 2000: 241).

Coming up to the present time there is an emphasis in the late 20th century on developing a subjective sense of freedom. In contemporary Western culture people cultivate their personal and psychological qualities.

Locus of control and self esteem
In US research which has looked at this variable, having an internal locus of control is considered to be a 'good thing'. For an extended account of the relationship between this work and philosophical notions of free will see Waller (2004). Those with an internal locus of control are likely to wear seatbelts, likely to do well in school, successfully stop smoking, practice contraception and safer sex, deal with marital problems directly, make money and delay instant gratification in order to achieve long term goals (Findley and Cooper, 1983; Lefcourt, 1982; Miller et al, 1986). A number of other features of this orientation have been noted, for example it is possible to encourage school students to adopt a more hopeful attitude, and believe that effort, self-discipline and good study habits are effective and worth developing, their grades tend to go up (Noel et al, 1987). Successful people tend to see failures as flukes or accidents or to use them as a cue to change their approach. Insurance salespeople who view failures as controllable tend to sell more policies and are half as likely to quit during their first year than their more pessimistic colleagues (Seligman & Schulman, 1986)

Internal loci of control are perhaps part of the US way of conceiving of the self. In more collectivist cultures, such as Japan maybe it works differently. Weisz et al (1984; Moghaddam et al, 1993) suggest that Americans make more internal attributions and the Japanese make more external ones. However, there are important differences in style - Americans try to influence the world by means of 'primary control', by influencing their environment directly. Japanese tend towards 'secondary control' where they accommodate themselves to others. Coopersmith (1967) saw self esteem as 'a personal judgement of worthiness, that is expressed in the attitudes an the individual holds towards himself(sic)'. This may be in terms of an overall judgement or in terms of specific areas of our lives and activities.
High self esteem children expressed opinions readily, were confident about their perceptions and judgements, expected to succeed at new tasks, were more often chosen as friends by other children, were not unduly worried by criticism and enjoyed participating in things.
Low self esteem children were isolated, fearful, reluctant to join in, self conscious, over-sensitive to criticism, consistently underrated themselves, tended to underachieve in class and were preoccupied with their own problems.
Coopersmith identified the origins of self esteem in child rearing practices. High self esteem corresponded to firm and consistent enforcement of limits on the child's behaviour, together with a good deal of acceptance of the child's autonomy and

freedom within those limits. Also, it is believed to be enhanced in families which treated children as important and interesting people in their own right, seeking the child's opinion, stressing the child's rights and encouraging discussion. In such households, reasoning was valued as a method of obtaining compliance and co-operation.

The sense that one is a valuable and effective entity is central to many attempt to get people to adopt healthful behaviours and avoid taking risks. As Bandura (2004, p. 144) puts it:

"Social cognitive theory specifies a core set of determinants, the mechanism through which they work, and the optimal ways of translating this knowledge into effective health practices. The core determinants include *knowledge* of health risks and benefits of different health practices, *perceived self-efficacy* that one can exercise control over one's health habits, *outcome expectations* about the expected costs and benefits for different health habits, the health *goals* people set for themselves and the concrete plans and strategies for realizing them, and the *perceived facilitators* and social and structural *impediments* to the changes they seek."

However, this view of self esteem and self efficacy is not shared by everyone: Ellis (1998, p. 251) says "much work on self-esteem seems to pathologize marginalised individuals or groups as 'possessing' low self-esteem. . . the ways in which self-esteem is measured and applied . . . may contribute to or reinforce the marginalisation of already subordinated groups."

So in a sense 'self esteem is a political variable that is as much about maintaining social divisions as it is about helping children. It is something that we see less of in ethnic minorities, girls and the working classes or the unemployed.

Existentialism

As Waller (2004) reminds us, a sense of exaggerated internal control *without* a sense of self-efficacy is the fundamental problem in existentialist accounts of 'free will'. Existentialists claim that we must "make ourselves" by our own self-defining choices. Whilst we are inescapably embedded in a physical, historical world which we cannot think away, our choices must be unshaped by this history this environment or our character. We are absolutely in control of our choices, and bear the full weight of moral responsibility for those choices and these inform the kind of person we become (Sartre, 1956: 553). These choices have to be made with no fixed principles (Sartre 1947, 22), and often without any sense of direction or social support, and —because we are made by our choices, not our environment (Sartre 1956: 436, 440) — without even an environmental history to orient us. We are inescapably in control of choices which seem mysterious and which must be taken in a state of profound uncertainty and with no confidence:

". . . I find myself suddenly alone and without help, engaged in a world for which I bear the whole responsibility without being able, whatever I do, to tear myself away from this responsibility for an instant" (Sartre 1956: 556).

Thus, in this view we have complete internal control but limited self-efficacy, and what might have been a healthy, confident, natural process of making free choices becomes instead a stressful and bewildering ordeal. This is what Waller (2004) calls a 'sickly model of free will' where a sense of internal locus of control is maximized while self-efficacy is destroyed. So from an existential point of view free will is a kind

of burden, and it is little wonder that existentialists feel a desire to escape the problem of free will.

Therapies and free will

The idea of free will has also been an underlying issue within theories about psychotherapy. As Slife and Fisher (2000, p. 85) put it, "either we are independent of, and thus free of, the antecedent conditions that could determine our "will" or we are dependent on, and thus determined by, such conditions. The point, at this juncture, is that psychologists have relegated themselves—by definition—to a modernistic dualism that assumes the two constructs are incompatible (Slife, 1994). Many psychotherapists may overlook this theoretical incompatibility, viewing their clients' behaviors as reflective of both free choices (e.g., self-generated factors) and deterministic constraints (e.g., reinforcement history). Still, these mixed conceptualizations are formulated in spite of psychological theorizing. That is, free will and determinism are incompatible assumptions, by definition. The problem with these definitions is that current research seems to support the mixed conceptualization of these therapists. For example, factors such as decision making, self-generated motivation, and self-awareness have demonstrated significance in client care and change (Bakan, 1996; Bergin & Garfield, 1994; Binswanger, 1991; Howard, Myers, & Curtin, 1991). These factors have long been associated with some variation of free will because they are difficult to conceptualize as factors that are solely determined by one's environment and/or biochemistry. Similarly, factors such as biological constraints, situational restrictions, and past experiences have also been related to therapy effectiveness (Bogen, 1995; Harcum, 1991; Loewenstein, 1996). These factors have long been associated with variants of determinism and are difficult to understand as factors that provide a person with the ability to "act otherwise.""

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