Taylor and Foucault on Power and Freedom

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Introduction

The sense in which Foucault's work functions as criticism has long been a source of puzzlement to his readers and the concept of power a focal point for their concern. His apparently neutral accounts of techniques of power lead to complaints that he is normatively confused or that he deprives himself of any basis for criticism of the social phenomena he describes.[1] For most critics, power is an irreducibly evaluative notion and moreover one which is negatively valued. Since it sets limits to the free activity and self-expression of the individual, power is that which must be opposed. This humanist consensus is neatly summed up in David Hoy's remark that 'the antithesis to power is usually thought to be freedom'.[2]

The argument of this paper is that Foucault uses concepts of both power and freedom which do not conform to this view: his descriptive analyses are based upon a concept of power which is neither evaluative nor antithetical to freedom. To show this, I take as a basis for comparative discussion Charles Taylor's article, 'Foucault on freedom and truth'.[3] This provides a useful point of comparison because Taylor is such a strong exponent of the humanist approach which Foucault eschews. He also goes further than most critics in turning the differences between Foucault's approach and his own into criticisms, charging him with an incoherent theory of power. Others have argued that Taylor's criticisms do not always fully address Foucault's position.[4] In what follows, I try to advance this argument by bringing to the surface some of the underlying differences in their respective concepts of power, freedom and subjectivity. My aim in doing so is not only to refute the charge of incoherence but also to restore

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[1] Richard Rorty, for example, suggests that it would not take much to see Foucault as a cyncial observer of the present social order rather than a critic to whom that order is important. See his 'Habermas and Lyotard on postmodernity', *Praxis International*, 4:1 (1984). For other criticisms of Foucault on power, see Nancy Fraser, 'Foucault on modern power: empirical insights and normative confusions', *Praxis International*, 1:3 (1981); Mark Philp, 'Foucault on power: a problem in radical translation?', *Political Theory*, 11:1 (1983).

[2] D. C. Hoy, 'Power, repression, progress: Foucault, Lukes and the Frankfurt School', in D. C. Hoy, (ed.), *Foucault: A Critical Reader* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1986), p. 137.

[3] C. Taylor, 'Foucault on freedom and truth', *Political Theory*, 12:2 (1984), reprinted in D. C. Hoy, (ed.), *Foucault: A Critical Reader* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1986).

[4] W. E. Connolly, 'Taylor, Foucault and otherness', *Political Theory*, 13:3 (1985); M. J. Shapiro, 'Charles Taylor's moral subject', *Political Theory*, 14:2 (May 1986).

some of the consistency and force of Foucault's own philosophical vocabulary. It is true that Foucault only offered a systematic account of his approach to power well after the publications to which Taylor refers.[5] Moreover, it is only at this point that he begins to speak at all of freedom. Nevertheless, I shall argue, he does not so much change his position in this and other later essays and interviews, as render explicit some of the presuppositions of his earlier work.

Taylor on Power and Freedom

Taylor claims that Foucault's concept of power is incoherent, because he uses the term in a way which does not oppose it to freedom:

> He wants to discredit as somehow based on a misunderstanding the very idea
> of liberation from power. But I am arguing that power, in his sense, does not
> make sense without at least the idea of liberation.[6]

Taylor uses the terms 'power' and 'domination' interchangeably, arguing that the exercise of power or domination requires that some form of constraint be imposed on someone. He agrees with Foucault that the exercise of power need not suppose any conscious intention on the part of the agency so doing, since power relations are not confined to situations in which someone imposes their will upon another. However, he does think that power requires a human agent as its target: 'something must be imposed on someone if there is to be domination'.[7]

Understood in this sense, power stands in direct opposition to freedom, in the manner suggested by Hoy's remark. Liberation from power then, is just the removal of the constraint imposed on the agent. Freedom, on this view, is simply the absence of such an exercise of power. Given that the idea of exercising power must admit the possibility of its not being exercised, Taylor can quite correctly claim that power does not make sense without the idea of liberation. The question remains whether Taylor has adequately characterized Foucault's conception of power, as he must if the charge of incoherence is to be proved. I shall argue that he has not, but first, since this objection depends upon introducing a concept of freedom which Foucault is supposed to ignore, it is worthwhile examining more closely the concept of freedom involved.

In claiming that Foucault's concept of power requires a concept of freedom, it is clearly *negative* freedom that Taylor has in mind. Freedom in this sense, to paraphrase Berlin's classic statement,[8] refers to the area within which a person can act without obstruction or interference by others. The emphasis here is on the absence of external constraints to an agent's actions. What counts as a constraint or an imposition, may be construed more or less broadly. For example, a person may be frustrated in the fulfilment of their desires as much by lack of access to resources as by explicit or even tacit prohibitions on certain kinds of behaviour.

[5] Michel Foucault, 'The subject and power', Afterword to H. L. Dreyfus and P. Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1982).
[6] Taylor, 'Foucault on freedom and truth', p. 173 (Hoy, ed., *Foucault*, p. 92).
[7] Taylor, 'Foucault on freedom and truth', p. 172 (Hoy, ed., *Foucault*, p. 91).
[8] Isaiah Berlin, 'Two concepts of liberty', in *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1969).

Taylor shares the view, defended by Lukes and others,[9] that the exercise of power must involve some significant effect on those who are its targets. It only makes sense to talk of imposition, he suggests, against a background of preconstituted desires, interests or purposes on the part of the agent. Moreover, it is only when morally significant desires, interests or purposes are frustrated that we can speak of an exercise of power and a corresponding loss of freedom. Being prevented from satisfying a preference for a particular brand of soap powder does not restrict one's ability to lead a fully human life in the way that being prevented from visiting one's family does.

However, to the extent that we see freedom as curtailed only by such external constraints, we locate it outside the agent, as subsequent to the agent's decisions and choices. But there are also internal constraints: the psychological effects of insecurity, dependence or trauma may impose limits to the courses of action upon which a person is capable of deciding. More generally, the structure of interests, desires and purposes to which Taylor refers as the necessary background to any imposition, that structure of affects which makes up a particular kind of person, will also determine the kinds of decision of which the person is capable. To the extent that such internal features of a person's intellectual and moral constitution may limit the class of actions capable of being undertaken, these may also be regarded as constraints upon freedom. Moreover, since we are here concerned with the agent's own capacity to act, whether or not there are any external constraints, we may refer to these as positive constraints on freedom.

In doing so, we need not claim that there are different concepts of freedom involved – a positive and a negative freedom – but only that there are two ways in which an agent's capacity to act may be constrained: by external limits to the kinds of act which may be carried out or by internal limits to the kinds of action the agent is capable of undertaking. In using the term 'positive freedom' in this way, I am giving it a different emphasis to that given in Berlin's account. The point is not to deny the importance of the desire for self-government or personal autonomy which, he suggests, lies behind the tradition of theories of positive freedom. Rather, it is to insist upon the importance of individual capacities as preconditions for the exercise of freedom in either sense. His own definition of negative freedom indeed presupposes, on the part of the agent, the existence of such capacities to act, since it refers to the degree to which the agent is left 'to do or be what he (she) is able to do or be'.[10] Clearly, the use that can be made of a given degree of negative freedom will depend upon the capabilities of the agent, on the agent's positive freedom in the sense in which I am using this term.

Positive Freedom: Taylor

Taylor is well aware of this further dimension to the concept of freedom. In an earlier paper, 'What's wrong with negative liberty?',[11] he argues that freedom, if it is to sustain the moral importance attached to it within post-Romantic thought, must include effective self-determination. Thus, he includes among the

[9] Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View* (London, Macmillan, 1974).

[10] Berlin, 'Two concepts of liberty', p. 6.

[11] Charles Taylor, 'What's wrong with negative liberty?', in A. Ryan (ed.), *The Idea of Freedom* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1979). Reprinted in Charles Taylor, *Collected Papers* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1985), Vol. II (subsequent references are to this edition).

conditions of freedom the ability to recognize and act in accordance with those desires and purposes which are constitutive of a person's individual character. Lack of self-awareness or weakness of will, for example, may impair a person's ability to act in ways which will advance their essential projects. Once we think of freedom in terms of self-realization, he argues,

> then we plainly have something which can fail for inner reasons as well as because of external obstacles. We can fail to achieve our own self-realization through inner fears, or false consciousness, as well as because of external coercion.[12]

Throughout his discussion of positive constraints on freedom, Taylor proceeds as though these were largely independent of any social context. While he mentions as examples such things as false consciousness or the inability to override less important but destructive feelings in a relationship, these are presented only as exhibits in an ahistorical moral psychology, without reference to the ways in which they might be themselves effects of the social relations within which individual lives are played out. Taylor points out that positive freedom must involve second-order judgements about desires. It requires discrimination between those desires which we value and regard as part of ourselves and those which we devalue and might wish to reject as acceptable motivational factors. He does not, however, discuss the historical context of such evaluations. One important way in which distinctions are drawn between desires or purposes which individuals have and those which they come to regard as their own is in the context of criticism of, and challenge to, social constraints on the forms of individuality. In this manner, for example, in the context of re-examining assumptions about masculinity, a man might reject certain conscious or unconscious second-order judgements about what kinds of behaviour were consistent with a normal sexual identity; or a woman might reject the kinds of second-order judgements about the sentiments appropriate for 'virtuous' women which abound in Rousseau's discussion of Sophie.[13] Such judgements, along with the beliefs, fears and other emotional responses which accompany them, will typically be supported by external social arrangements, by legal, administrative or education practices and even by bodies of 'scientific' knowledge. For an individual to change his or her own second-order judgements about matters bearing on their identity will normally require, if not actual changes in these external arrangements, at least a belief that such changes are possible. In the examples above, it might require conviction that existing forms of the sexual division of labour and associated affective differences between the sexes are not immutable. Such beliefs may occur in isolation but they are more likely in the context of a movement for change in the relevant area of social life. The literature of resistance to racial or sexual oppression provides many examples of this phenomenon.

Positive Freedom: Foucault

While Taylor does not consider this historical dimension to the discovery of limits to freedom, Foucault explicitly links his own work to the discovery of such

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[12] Taylor, 'What's wrong with negative liberty?', p. 212.
[13] See the passages cited in Genevieve Lloyd, 'Rousseau on reason, nature and women'. *Metaphilosophy*, 14 (1983).

limits. In recent years, there have been a number of movements reacting against ways in which individuals are categorized or constructed as certain kinds of people: as men and women, as consumers with unlimited capacity to acquire new needs, or as clients of administrative, therapeutic and penal practices. The starting point for the analysis of mechanisms of power and bodies of knowledge, Foucault suggests, should be precisely these forms of resistance.[14] Such claims, of course, do no more than signal an external connection between his analyses and certain current political and ethical concerns. Foucault is not a philosopher of consciousness concerned to describe or to theorize the experience of attempting to overcome internal limits to freedom. Rather, his concern is with the external supports of the forms of social consciousness and being. He attempts to chart some of the institutions, practices and bodies of knowledge which help to define and to maintain particular kinds of individuality. The real objective of all his work, he claims, has not been to elaborate a theory of power but 'to create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects'.[15]

Now whether or not this is an accurate characterization of all of his work, it has been one of Foucault's constant theses since *Discipline and Punish* that power creates subjects. Power, he argues, should not be understood only as something which operates in a negative fashion on preconstituted subjects. Rather, 'it is one of the prime effects of power that certain bodies, certain gestures, certain discourses, certain desires come to be identified and constituted as individuals'.[16] This thesis may be understood in at least two ways. First, it may refer to the way in which particular educative, therapeutic or training procedures are applied to individuals in order to make them into subjects of certain kinds. The disciplinary techniques described in *Discipline and Punish* provide one set of examples: to the extent that these are successfully applied to inmates, the result will be obedient subjects, persons with honest habits and a due respect for the law. To say that this was the objective is not to suggest that these techniques were always effective or that they did not sometimes produce results other than those expected.

Secondly, this thesis may be given an historical sense: new techniques for examining, training or controlling individuals, along with the new forms of knowledge to which these give rise, bring into existence new kinds of people. In this sense, neither delinquents nor habitual criminals existed before the penal institutions and criminal anthropologies of the nineteenth century produced them as identifiable modes of social being. Similarly, while acts contrary to nature may have long been practised, sexual perverts as identifiable types of person did not exist before the latter part of the nineteenth century. Multiple personalities, Ian Hacking claims, were invented around 1875.[17] Foucault's thesis is not confined to the objects of specialized social sciences such as criminology and psychiatry, for it applies as well to our everyday experience of ourselves as sexual beings. Sex itself is no less an historical product, a multi-layered residue of the different ways in which bodies and their behaviours have

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[14] Michel Foucault, 'The subject and power'.

[15] Foucault, 'The subject and power', p. 208.

[16] Michel Foucault, 'Two lectures', in C. Gordon (ed.), *Power/Knowledge* (Brighton, Harvester, 1980), p. 98.

[17] Ian Hacking, 'Making up people', in T. C. Heller *et al.* (eds), *Reconstructing Individualism* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1986), p. 223.

been regulated and interpreted over the centuries. Far from being an auto-nomous agency, he argues, sex is no more than

> the most speculative most ideal and most internal element in a *dispositif* of sexuality organised by power in its hold on bodies and their materiality, their forces, energies, sensations and pleasures.[18]

Hacking calls this historical process of inventing new ways of describing and dealing with human actions 'making up people', in order to emphasize the fact that it involves the creation of new *kinds* of people. Conversely, the advent of new categories and new ways of describing human actions opens up new possibilities for intentional action, since this is always action under a description of some kind. The result may be to alter the limits of positive freedom, to change what it is possible for individuals to do or to become. In this sense, Hacking suggests, making up people 'changes the space of possibilities for personhood'.[19] He points out that this is not just a homogeneous space within which individuals are free to choose particular identities. Rather, there is a continuum between those forms of individuality which may be freely adopted, such as *garçon de café*, member of a religious sect or popular subculture, and those forms which are imposed upon individuals, such as split personality or juvenile in moral danger. A range of penal, quasi-penal and therapeutic agencies in modern society practise this sort of identification of people, imposing identities which serve not only to discriminate between kinds of people, but to fix some in subordinate relations to particular authorities. In this sense, Foucault argues, there is both a government of individuality and a form of government by individualization.[20]

For those caught on the imposed identity end of the spectrum, there is a straightforward loss of freedom in the negative sense and often a loss of positive freedom as well. More generally, however, the spectrum of existing forms of individuality will set limits to what people may do or become in a given society at a given time. Taken together, these will delimit the overall space of possibilities for personhood, thereby fixing the boundaries within which self-realization can occur. The historical and moral dimension to such limits means of course that they are subject to change, and it is here that Foucault locates the strategic aim of his own genealogies: to determine the contemporary limits of our social being. The task of critical thought, which is for him the task of philosophy, is to assist existing movements for change by distinguishing between those elements of present social reality which remain necessary and therefore unchangeable from those which are open to change. Genealogical criticism does this by representing phenomena assumed to be inevitable or inescapable, such as the confinement of the insane or the techniques of disciplinary punishment, as the result of the contingent historical circumstances, as arbitrary or no longer defensible from present standpoints. Feminist analyses of the historical and conceptual bases of sexual difference might also be regarded as engaging in this kind of critical activity; one which 'works on' the present limits of our social being, both in the

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[18] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. I: An Introduction* (London, Allen Lane/Penguin, 1978), p. 155.
[19] Hacking, 'Making up people', p. 229.
[20] Foucault, 'The subject and power', p. 211–12.

sense of investigating those limits and in the sense of contributing to the attempt
to overcome them. Such criticism, Foucault suggests,

> will separate out from the contingency that has made us what we are, the
> possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think . . .
> it is seeking to give new impetus, as far and as wide as possible, to the
> undefined work of freedom.[21]

Freedom here has the status of an abstract principle, realizable in both critical
thought and practical activity alike. We shall see shortly the manner in which
Foucault installs freedom at the heart of human action. Here, he uses the term to
denote the internal dynamic of a certain ethos, a way of being which can include a
certain practice of philosophy; the ongoing attempt to problematize aspects of
our present ways of being, thinking and acting; the attempt to disengage from
them and so open up the possibility of new ways.[22] Freedom in this sense is a
process without a subject but one which nevertheless has consequences for
individual freedom. The 'work of freedom' may be regarded as a process of
cultural self-creation, one which seeks to expand the space of possibilities for
personal identity.

   It is not just a question of increase in the kinds of individuality available but
also of dissociating these as far as possible from the forms of domination within
society: an enlargement of the possibilities for self-determination and a new
economy of power. The political problem, in Foucault's view, is not to liberate
the individual from the state but to liberate us from certain forms of state power
and certain kinds of individuality linked to that power: 'we have to promote new
forms of subjectivity'.[23] Accordingly, it is insufficient to represent Foucault's
work as concerned with expanding the sphere of negative freedom open to
individuals. Rather, it is directed at enlarging the sphere of positive freedom in
the sense in which I am using the term.

The Subject of Freedom

There remains a fundamental difference between positive freedom as it is
conceptualized by Taylor and positive freedom as this applies to Foucault's
work, a difference which has to do with what each of them presupposes as the
bearer or subject of positive freedom. We can see this most clearly in relation to
another distinction Taylor draws in his earlier article between 'exercise' and
'opportunity' concepts of freedom. He argues that the concept of positive
freedom requires more than just the absence of internal obstacles to action. To be
free in this sense the agent must already be a certain kind of person, one which
exercises effective control over its actions. A free person must already practise the

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[21] Michel Foucault, 'What is enlightenment?', in P. Rabinow (ed.), *The Foucault Reader* (New
York, Pantheon, 1984), p. 46.
   [22] In a 1984 interview, in the context of redescribing his history of thought as a history of
problematizations, Foucault offers the following redefinition: 'Thought is freedom in relation to
what one does, the motion by which one detaches oneself from it, establishes it as an object, and
reflects on it as a problem.'; 'Polemics, politics and problematizations', in P. Rabinow (ed.), *The
Foucault Reader* (New York, Pantheon, 1984), p. 388. See also John Rajchman's account of Fóucault
as a 'philosopher of freedom' in *Michel Foucault – The Freedom of Philosophy* (New York, Columbia
University Press, 1985).
   [23] Foucault, 'The subject and power', p. 216.

kind of self-understanding and moral discrimination involved in 'strong evaluation'. Positive freedom, Taylor argues, requires an 'exercise concept', in contrast to notions of negative freedom which typically rely upon an 'opportunity concept' of freedom. For theorists of negative freedom such as Berlin, being free is just a matter of what we can do, 'of what it is open to us to do, whether or not we do anything to exercise those options'.[24]

Now it is true that if freedom is defined simply as the absence of external constraints upon action, then an opportunity concept is all that is required. But there is a sense in which positive freedom, even in Taylor's sense, still depends upon an opportunity concept. Exercise concepts and opportunity concepts of freedom are not a disjunctive pair. Rather, the exercise of certain capacities presupposes the opportunity to do so, whether these are capacities for self-examination or for action in the world. Prior to both concepts of freedom then, is the notion of capacity, of what we are able to do, whatever kind of person we are.

To be a person at all is to be a certain kind or kinds of person; in Foucault's terminology, it is to be various determinate kinds of subject. As such, there will always be some internal limits to action. The kinds of discrimination between motives, the kinds of self-awareness and self-control that Taylor regards as essential to positive freedom, can only be practised in relation to those aspects of the self for which the capacity to do so exists. As we have seen, there will be an historical and moral dimension to the presence of such capacities. Which aspects of our social being are matters for decision and which simply given or unchangeable will vary over time.

Nevertheless, what we might call the degree of freedom open to individuals in a particular culture is increased if what were previously taken to be necessary limits are no longer so. In this case, the space of possibilities for personhood has changed, regardless of whether or not a given person has actually exercised any new options. It is in this sense that Foucault's work bears on positive freedom, albeit in a manner that does not require an exercise concept but only an opportunity concept of freedom. Unlike Taylor, he is not concerned with the full range of conditions which must be satisfied before we would call someone a free person but rather with the forms of social being within which individuals may be more or less free.

At this point, we can begin to see more clearly the fundamental difference between Foucault's project and the conceptual structure which supports it, and those of Taylor and other humanist critics. For Taylor, the subject of freedom is an agent capable of 'strong evaluation'. That is, an agent capable of judging and differentiating between its own desires and motivation, and of taking responsibility for its actions. This is a moral subject, both in the sense that it is a subject to which moral judgements may apply and in the sense that it is a moral ideal. For Taylor, it is an achievement of western civilization which we cannot ignore, if only because it is part of our present moral and political identity. Once power is conceived in terms of imposition upon this subject, it inevitably acquires a negative value. Power is that which sets limits to self-realization of the subject. It is therefore antithetical to freedom.

Foucault's theoretical anti-humanism, by contrast, consists in the refusal to privilege any such *a priori* conception of the subject. He writes on the basis of the

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[24] Taylor, 'What's wrong with negative liberty?', p. 213.

anti-naturalistic assumption that the forms of subjectivity through which individual human lives are lived are not natural but constructed from an underlying and undetermined reality. He refuses to endorse any ideal of human nature. Instead, in later writings, he advocates an open-ended ethics of self-creation. 'From the idea that the self is not given to us, I think that there is only one practical consequence: we have to create ourselves as a work of art'.[25] Such a view clearly presupposes the existence of a human capacity for active self-transformation. Similarly, Foucault's genealogies presuppose some conception of the human material to which the techniques of individualizing power are applied, and some conception of that which resists the operations of power. What Foucault relies on, however, is much less than the determinate kind of person assumed by Taylor. It is no more than the very thin conception of a subject of action: a being capable of acting, capable of responding in one way rather than another to a given situation.

There is a sense in which the critical strategy implicit in Foucault's writing has always presupposed the existence of such a capacity for action outside the text. Thus, if his genealogy of the modern power to punish offered no proposals for prison reform, this was in part because the problem 'is one for the subject who acts – the subject of action through which the real is transformed'.[26] Only in later essays does he relate this subject of action to the concept of freedom. In effect, the acting subject is a subject of freedom but only in so far as the latter is defined by a certain capacity or power to act. Far from being antithetical to power, the concept of freedom as it applies to Foucault is very close to the concept of power, in the primary sense of that term.

Power

Etymologically, the word 'power' is derived from the latin *potere*, to be able, the ability to do or act. In this sense, power is something which inheres in an individual or body of some kind. We may think of it as a potential or capacity to do certain things or to make some kind of difference in the world, even if this is only that which is entailed by existing as a certain kind of being. For relatively complex beings such as ourselves, the power of an individual will include the ability to develop certain specific capacities, such as those involved in intellectual, aesthetic or moral judgement and action. For this reason, C. B. Macpherson proposes the term 'developmental power' for that part of human nature which a truly democratic society should allow to flourish.[27] The development of human capacities may well require the presence of convivial relations with like beings. Nevertheless, the power of an individual or body at any given moment is logically independent of any relation to others.

Modern political theory, by contrast, has tended to concentrate upon power which is exercised over others or power which is exercised in cooperation with others. One influential tradition defines power in terms of the ability of some

[25] Foucault, 'On the genealogy of ethics', Afterword (1983) to H. L. Dreyfus and P. Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 237.

[26] Michel Foucault, 'Questions of method', *I & C*, No. 8 (1981), 13.

[27] C. B. Macpherson, 'Problems of a non-market theory of democracy', in *Democratic Theory: Essays in Retrieval* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1973).

individuals, groups or institutions, to significantly affect the actions of others. The problem then arises of deciding exactly which kinds of significant affecting properly involve the exercise of power. Another tradition defines power in terms of the ability to act in concert with others, in the pursuit of collective goals. For Hannah Arendt, for example, 'power is never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together'.[28] In both cases the concept of power essentially involves a relation to others, thereby establishing its difference from the non-relational concept of power outlined above. Hanna Pitkin makes this difference the basis for a distinction between two concepts of power:

> One man may have power over another or others and this sort of power is indeed relational, though it is not a relationship. But he may have the power to do or accomplish something all by himself, and that power is not relational at all.[29]

Since Taylor clearly belongs to the tradition which sees power as power over others, I shall leave aside the views of Arendt, Parsons and others to concentrate on this distinction between 'power over' and 'power to'.

While the conceptual distinction between these two senses in which we speak of power is clear and unambiguous, in practice we find them closely interrelated. For example, one person's power over another may derive from his or her own personal capabilities – to cajole, seduce or beat the other into submission. Ultimately, we could say that every successful exercise of power over others requires that the one doing so had the power to carry it off. We can see that this is not just a definitional requirement but a real one in those cases where a person is unable to exercise power successfully in a situation which calls for it: say, a teacher unable to control an unruly class.

Conversely, a person's power to do certain things may be derived from their power over others. The enslavement of some by others allows the masters to assign them to subordinate tasks, which assist in the conduct of the master's own enterprises. In view of the historical importance of this effect of the exercise of power over others, Macpherson coins the term 'extractive power' for the ability which some acquire to make use of and derive benefit from the capacities of others. Extractive power involves the transfer to one body of part of another's power to do things. It depends upon the exercise of power over another. In these terms, Macpherson is able to suggest that the purpose of political power in class societies is to maintain the extractive power of the dominant class.[30]

Armed with these distinctions, we can define domination in turn as a further, more concrete result. Domination is the effect of a relatively stable system of extractive and political power, the result of an established set of asymmetrical power relations, where the possibility of reversal has been removed. Relations of domination may of course be established between individuals as well as between

[28] Hannah Arendt, 'On violence', in S. Lukes (ed.), *Power* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1986), p. 64.

[29] Hanna F. Pitkin, *Wittgenstein and Justice* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1972), p. 277. Arendt draws a parallel distinction between 'power', which for her is relational, and 'strength', which is 'the property inherent in an object or person and belongs to its character, which may prove itself in relation to other things and persons, but is essentially independent of them', in 'On violence', p. 64.

[30] Macpherson, 'Problems of a non-market theory of democracy', p. 47.

groups or social classes. Everyday domestic economy in patriarchal societies involves domination in this sense. What is crucial is the exercise of power over another in order to maintain a form of capture of the other's own power or capacities. Domination cannot therefore be identified with 'power over' or with imposition upon a subject, as it is by Taylor. Rather, like repression, it is a particular effect of some modes of action upon the actions of others, just as political power is a specific form of power over others. Presupposed by all of the relational forms of power and their effects, however, is the non-relational concept of power. 'Power to' is the primary term in this progression from the abstract to the concrete. The power of an individual or body to act in certain ways is logically independent of relations to others and empirically the precondition of any action upon other bodies. In this sense, 'power to' is conceptually prior to 'power over'.

It should also be apparent that this distinction between two senses of power parallels the distinction made earlier between two kinds of freedom. Negative freedom corresponds to the absence of an exercise of power over the agent, which may or may not be implicated in a relation of domination. Positive freedom corresponds to the agent's power to act in certain ways or to achieve its own ends independently of any benefit derived from power over others. Discussions which stress the moral importance of positive freedom or personal autonomy often do so in language which is very close to the concept of power in its primary sense. What is emphasized is the ability to control, direct or author one's own life. T. H. Green is explicit on this point: 'When we speak of freedom as something to be highly prized, we mean a positive power or capacity of doing or enjoying something worth doing or enjoying'.[31]

The importance of these distinctions is that they enable us to clarify the conceptual structure of Foucault's discussions of power. In particular, I shall argue, his successive formulations always presuppose the primacy of 'power to'. Critics of his work generally fail to recognize this and proceed to draw a variety of reactionary political conclusions from his remarks. They complain that he paints a bleak picture of the inescapability of power, meaning 'power over' or domination, or that he provides no grounds for thinking that resistance is possible. Taylor's claim that Foucault's concept of power is incoherent is based on similar confusions. In his criticism of Foucault, he does not distinguish between power and domination, much less relational and non-relational concepts of power, and he refers only to negative freedom. As a result, his criticism largely misses its mark.

Foucault on Power and Freedom

In 'The subject and power', Foucault provides a definition of 'power over' or at least a definition of the domain in which such power relations are established. Moreover, he does this in a way which establishes a conceptual link between relational power and power in its primary sense, but the term he uses for what we have been calling 'power to' is freedom in the positive sense. Thus, we can find in this definition a response to Taylor's charge of incoherence. Here, Foucault

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[31] T. H. Green, 'Lecture on liberal legislation and freedom of contract', in *Works*, Vol. III, edited by R. L. Nettleship (London, Longmans, Green, 1899–1900), p. 371.

defines power in a manner which gives it an essential relation to freedom, but it is not the same freedom, nor the same relation, as those envisaged by Taylor.

Foucault's definition of the domain in which relations of power occur is extremely broad. Power is exercised wherever there is action upon the actions of others. The situation described by Taylor in which there are restrictions placed upon an agent's ability to realize significant desires or aspirations would evidently constitute an exercise of power in these terms, but so would many other situations not covered by Taylor's characterization. Foucault makes no mention of imposition, nor of the presupposition which this requires, namely a preconstituted set of desires, interests or purposes on the part of the agent on whom power is exercised. The very constitution of such a set, the formation of certain kinds of person, may involve an exercise of power in Foucault's terms. He suggests that power may perhaps best be understood in terms of the sixteenth-century notion of government: to govern is to 'structure the possible field of action of others'.[32] Clearly, government can take many forms over and above the simple repression or inhibition of an agent's ability to realize their significant desires or aspirations.

What distinguishes an exercise of power from other kinds of action upon the actions of others, such as communication or violence, is that it treats the other as an acting subject. The exercise of physical force, which treats the other as an object, does not therefore constitute a power relation, although the threat of violence may. Relations of power exist only when they involve forms of action upon the actions of others which leave open a range of possible responses. Foucault's definition agrees with Taylor's in supposing that power is only exercised over agents but it is not the same concept of an agent in each case. For Foucault, it is only the thin conception of agency which is involved in the idea of a being free to act, in the minimal, positive sense of the term 'free'. In this sense, Foucault says, power presupposes freedom: 'power is exercised only over free subjects and only insofar as they are free'.[33] The power here is 'power over' but the freedom referred to is not negative freedom. It is not the sphere of possible actions which is reduced by the exercise of power but the sphere of possible actions which must remain if the relationship to the agent is to be a power relation. In other words, Foucault defines 'power over' in terms of the positive freedom of the agent on whom it is exercised. To do this is not to deny the connection between 'power over' and negative freedom on which Taylor insists. It still follows that negative freedom is the counterpart to 'power over', or at least to some forms of action upon the actions of others.

Foucault's definition however, places the emphasis on freedom in a different sense, the one which we have seen is equivalent to power in its primary sense. That is why the relationship between power and freedom is not one of opposition or antithesis, as it is in the case of 'power over' and negative freedom. Rather, freedom in the positive sense is both a condition of power being exercised and its precondition. It is the condition or 'permanent support' of the exercise of power in the sense that if the agent to whom a relationship of some kind is established does not remain free to act, then it is not a relationship of power we are dealing with. It is the precondition of any exercise of power in the sense that the agency

[32] Foucault, 'The subject and power', p. 221.
[33] Foucault, 'The subject and power', p. 221.

exerting power must also be free to act: 'freedom must exist for power to be exerted'.[34] Foucault thus counterposes power not to freedom which would result from its absence, but to the freedom of the agent on whom it is exercised. As a result, a more complex relation between them emerges.

> At the very heart of the power relationship and constantly provoking it, are the recalcitrance of the will and the intransigence of freedom. Rather than speaking of an essential freedom it would be better to speak of an 'agonism' [a combat] – of a relationship which is at the same time reciprocal incitation and struggle, less of a face to face confrontation which paralyses both sides than a permanent provocation.[35]

Power and Force

It is true that Foucault's earlier discussions of power made no mention of the will or the freedom of those on whom power was exercised. In *Discipline and Punish* and the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, it is the bodies of individuals rather than free subjects which are the protagonists in the power relations which he describes. Nevertheless, while he does introduce a different language in defining power in 'The subject and power', the underlying conceptualization of power remains the same throughout. 'Power to' was always the primary notion, at once both the basis for and opponent of 'power over'. In those earlier books, however, the distinction was registered by means of a terminological difference between power and force.

Consider the analysis of disciplinary power in *Discipline and Punish*. The disciplinary techniques involve forms of exercise of power over individual and collective bodies, a technology of power which acts in the first instance upon bodies. The body which is the target of these techniques is not, however, a mere passive surface as some critics have supposed.[36] It is not an inert body which is given inactivity as well as form by the operations of this power. Rather, it is a body composed of forces, and the objective of discipline is to ensure the docility of that body and at the same time enhance its forces, to produce 'subjected and practised bodies'.[37] Discipline was supposed to improve some of the capabilities and therefore the 'power to' of those on whom it was exercised. For at least some of the techniques involved, there was no necessary connection with 'power over', since they were taken over from monastic practices of self-discipline which 'although they involved obedience to others, had as their principal aim an increase in the mastery of each individual over his own body'.[38]

Disciplinary power was also a means of establishing and maintaining relations of domination and subordination within a range of newly developed or transformed institutions. Its attractiveness to those exercising power lay precisely in its multivalent applicability and in its manner of combining the objectives of economic and political efficiency. The same techniques of spatial distribution

[34] Foucault, 'The subject and power', p. 221.
[35] Foucault, 'The subject and power', p. 222.
[36] Scott Lash attributes to Foucault a conception of 'bodily passivity' and a 'pessimistic vision of agency' in 'Genealogy and the body: Foucault/Deleuze/Nietzsche', *Theory, Culture and Society*, 2:2 (1984).
[37] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (London, Allen Lane/Penguin, 1977), p. 138.
[38] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 137.

and of the routinization and training of actions could enhance the military, educative or productive forces of collections of bodies, while maintaining strict coercive control over them. Discipline was thus a means of reinforcing the capture of individual capacities while increasing their productivity.

The coexistence of each of these three aspects of Foucault's analysis of discipline – the enhancement of bodily forces, the exercise of power over bodies, the maintenance of domination – can be seen in the following passage.

> Discipline increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes those same forces (in political terms of obedience). In short, it dissociates power from the body; on the one hand, it turns it into an 'aptitude', a capacity which it seeks to increase; on the other hand, it reverses the course of the energy, the power that might result from it, and turns it into a relation of strict subjection.[39]

There is a proliferation, even a confusion, of terms here: force, power, aptitude, energy, subjection. What stands out, nevertheless, is the way in which the concept of discipline as a specific form of 'power over' presupposes another concept of power, power as a quantity of force or energy which inheres in the body, and which discipline then seeks to transform into, on the one hand, various kinds of useful capacity, and on the other, a relation of subjection, turning back the body's force against itself.

In the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault restates this same conception of power in more abstract form, but in a way which still makes explicit the secondary character of 'power over'. He defines power in this sense as derivative of the more fundamental concept of force. 'Power's condition of possibility . . . is the moving substrate of force relations which, by virtue of their inequality, constantly engender states of power'.[40] Power in the relational sense is here defined in terms of an underlying conception of the social field as composed of centres of force, rather like a Boscovitchian physical universe.[41] It is the difference between these point-centres of force, their quantitative inequality, which permits the stronger to exercise power over the weaker.

'Force' here does not carry its everyday sense of a synonym for violence. Foucault does not, as some critics suppose, base power relations on a propensity for violence or indeed on any other supposed universal characteristic of human nature.[42] Rather, he defines power relations as effects which result from these primary inequalities of force, where 'force' is itself an abstraction. The force in

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[39] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 138.

[40] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. I*, p. 93.

[41] Ruggiero Boscovitch (1711–87) developed a theory of matter in which the individual, rigid atoms of earlier theories were replaced by dimensionless point-centres of force. Nietszche read Boscovitch and adapted his ideas in extending his theory of the world as will to power. He also rejected atomism in favour of a world in which there are only 'dynamic quanta, in a relation of tension to all other dynamic quanta'; see W. Kaufmann (ed.), *Will to Power* (New York, Vintage, 1968), paragraph 635. Gilles Deleuze draws upon passages such as this from Nietzsche's notebooks in developing his account of the will to power and its relation to active and reactive forces in Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (London, Athlone Press, 1983). Deleuze's theorization of power is acknowledged by Foucault as having been important for his own understanding of the concept; see 'Intellectuals and power', a conversation between Foucault and Deleuze, in D. Bouchard (ed.), *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1977).

[42] Philp, 'Foucault on power', p. 39.

question should be understood as prior to any determinate modality of action, prior even to bodies themselves in so far as individual bodies may be regarded as complex arrangements of forces. The force in question here is no more than a capacity to act or to be acted upon, a capacity to effect and be affected.

Since power is always exercised over other forces, the possibility of resistance to it is never entirely eliminated. This is the point of referring to the primary force field as a 'moving substrate': to allow that the differential relations between forces may change, new alliances may form and old ones break up. A power relation in one direction may be turned back or redirected. The same points which serve as adversaries, targets or supports of particular power relations may in turn become points of resistance. Foucault suggests that 'where there is power there is resistance'.[43] Finally, while power relations are themselves secondary effects, dependent on the primary differences between forces, the relatively stable forms of domination exercised by some social forces over others are derivative in a further degree. Power in this extractive sense, Foucault suggests, is an overall effect: 'it is the name that we attribute to a complex strategic situation in particular society'.[44]

Clearly, the terms in which Foucault discusses power in *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality* are not the same as those employed in 'The subject and power'. Nevertheless, what remains common to both the earlier and the later conceptualizations is the way in which 'power over' is counterpoised in an adversarial relation to 'power to'. The relationship between power and force in the earlier texts parallels that between power and freedom in the later. Despite their differences, all these texts conceive of the object on which power is exercised as a power or set of capacities. That which exercises power must also be a power in this sense, a superior force, not necessarily of the same kind. It is not bodily forces, for example, which impose discipline, but political, economic or institutional forces. Despite these differences in kind, the forces exercising power and those on which it is exercised engage in constant struggle, in mutual incitement either to resist or to introduce new measures to counter resistance. In doing so, they thereby establish at least their common nature as forces. Throughout Foucault's writing on power, whether it is described as a relationship to forces or a relationship to freedom, the form of the 'power over' relation remains the same: an agonistic relation between centres of power in the primary sense, 'power to'. In this sense, the definition of power relations in 'The subject and power' introduces no departure from the earlier accounts.

Concluding Remarks

Apart from showing the inappropriateness of certain kinds of criticism, what follows from the fact that Foucault uses concepts of power and freedom unlike those assumed by critics such as Taylor? One consequence is that understanding the conceptual structure of Foucault's talk of power enables us to appreciate better the critical strategies deployed in his work. Consider his analysis of sexuality as an historically constructed *dispositif* of power and knowledge. Taylor admits that to accept his argument that our very constitution as sexual beings is

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[43] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. I*, p. 95
[44] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. I*, p. 93

an effect of power, undermines the romantic idea of liberating a natural but repressed sexuality. Such an idea might lead us to believe that we gain freedom by throwing off sexual prohibitions, Taylor says, when in fact we remain 'dominated by certain images of what it is like to be a full, healthy, fulfilled sexual being'.[45] In other words, we might conclude, this is not an exercise of power on the relational model. The constraints upon our freedom as sexual beings are not merely negative, external constraints but positive, internal conditions of our present nature as subjects of a sexuality. One of the important obstacles to change in this area, in Foucault's view, is the very belief that there is a natural or authentic sexuality, something which can be normal or abnormal, healthy or pathological. Taylor concludes, however, that Foucault's account supports a second-order liberation, a liberation from the 'ideology' of an authentic sexuality waiting to be expressed, and eventually a liberation from the constraints imposed on us by the whole apparatus of sexuality. In addition, he argues that this conclusion is inconsistent with Foucault's 'Nietzschean' conception of truth. For such a second-order liberation from the whole ideology of a natural sex would still be a form of liberation through access to the truth. It would work by rejecting as false the idea that there is an authentic sexuality underneath our repression. But, Taylor argues, Foucault's relativism in regard to truth would not allow him to accept such a liberation.

Foucault's epistemology is not something I can go into here. It would require another paper to discuss adequately the differences between him and Taylor on this point. In any case, one does not need to go very far into the issue to see that the objection depends upon a contradiction largely of Taylor's own making. In the first place, it is only his own underlying humanism which allows him to draw this conclusion in the terms in which he does. His humanism, in the precise sense that he remains committed to the idea that there is an inner self on whom power is exercised, allows him to conclude from the argument that our sexuality is an effect of power relations and that this must be imposed on something. In this way, what might otherwise be understood as restrictions on our positive freedom created by our character as sexual beings, become conceptualized in terms of negative constraints upon this inner self. Only by thinking in these terms does it make sense to talk of a second-order liberation. Who or what is being liberated here?

Secondly, it is not clear that Foucault would need to reject entirely the conclusion which Taylor draws, even if he would not describe it in the same terms. He does want to undermine the idea that human sexual behaviour and desire is something about which there could be a single, ahistorical truth. He wants to discredit the idea that our being sexual subjects of a certain kind is, or should be, a matter of truth at all, rather than a matter of choice. To think that sexuality is a matter of truth implies that there is something objective and necessary about it, whereas Foucault wants to depict it as an effect of arbitrary and contingent historical forces and therefore open to change. The basis for this critical strategy in Foucault's writing however, is not the appeal to another truth but his nominalism; that is, his assumption that such categories of human, social being are constructed out of an underlying reality – bodies and their pleasures in the case of sexuality.[46]

[45] Taylor, 'Foucault on freedom and truth', p. 161 (Hoy, ed., p. 79).
[46] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. I*, p. 157.

The point of a genealogy of sexuality as an apparatus of power and knowledge is not to claim that this falsifies or distorts a true mode of being but rather that the claims to truth produced by or within the terms of this historical construct are not justified. Far from being ruled out by Foucault's 'Nietzschean' conception of truth, this approach is entirely consistent with it. Such an historical relativism would, of course, be inconsistent with the more familiar critical strategy which denounces error from the standpoint of truth but that is not a strategy which Foucault adopts.

The same historical relativism is also consistent with the more positive strategy which Foucault adopts in the later volumes of his *History of Sexuality*. Here, it is a matter of proposing another truth, of showing that we can find within the European cultural tradition itself other ways of being subjects of a sexual experience. A Nietzscheanism which refuses to countenance absolute Truth is not thereby debarred from accepting any truths. The sexual ethics of classical Greek men which Foucault describes in *The Use of Pleasure* is of interest precisely because it is not one which seeks to justify itself by reference to truth. It does not claim any foundation in nature but is rather recommended for political and aesthetic reasons to those who would adopt it. As such, Foucault claims, this is an ethic which presupposes a freedom on the part of the men to whom it was addressed, a positive freedom in relation to their own character as sexual beings. It is this which he suggests may be of interest to present ethical concerns in the Greek ethics of self-mastery: not an alternative ethic of sexual conduct but another way of seeing ourselves as sexual subjects, as beings who can, in this respect at least, create themselves.

Adopting such a conception of ourselves might be described as liberation, in the sense that it involves an awareness of possibilities for change where there were none before. But awareness of possibilities is not change itself and it would be inappropriate to describe the transformation involved in becoming such a person as 'liberation'. For this term remains tied to the idea of power as an imposition upon a preconstituted subject, as that which sets negative limits to freedom. As such, it is a reactive conception of change. Moreover, we have seen that in the case of sexuality the constraints are constraints on positive freedom. Power is involved at the level of our constitution as sexual beings. It is implicated in our beliefs, desires and our capacities for pleasure. Change at this level is not a matter of the subject becoming free of such effects of power but of becoming a different kind of subject. It is an active and not a reactive process. In this way, we can understand Foucault's overall critical strategy, his work on the contemporary limits of our social being, as amounting to the recommendation that we regain the power of self-definition and self-constitution, individually and collectively, that is, as a culture. Far from being a liberation from power, this process is better described as one of empowerment, as an increase in freedom in the full, positive sense of the term.