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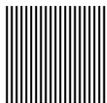
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Agency and Change: Re-evaluating Foucault's Legacy

Raymond Caldwell

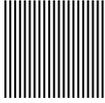
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Abstract. *Michel Foucault's work marks an important break with conventional ontological dualism, epistemological realism and rationalist and intentional notions of individual action and human agency. In these respects his ideas have had an enormous influence on postmodern organization theory and analysis, as well as related forms of social constructionism. In particular, Foucault's ideas have led to a rejection of agency-structure dichotomies and a move towards process-based ontologies of 'organizing/changing' that create new problematics of agency as discourse, talk, text or conversation. While this ontological shift toward nominalism has often provoked a counter-reaction against the 'death of the subject' and the corrosive influence of postmodernism, there have been few attempts to explore how Foucault's decentring of agency is related to new, more positive and potentially emancipatory discourses that redefine the relationship between agency and change, resistance and power in organizations and society. Here it will be argued that Foucault's legacy can be re-conceptualized as a theorization of the decentring of agency consisting of four key components: discourse, power/knowledge, embodiment and self-reflexivity. Redefined within Foucauldian organizational discourses, decentred agency can lead to new possibilities for the exploration of agency as discourse and the broader dispersal of agency in organizations. It will be concluded, however, that Foucault's concept of agency fails as a theorization of change: it breaks the link between the voluntary choice or desire to 'act otherwise' and the moral, political and practical possibilities of 'making a difference'. **Keywords.** autonomy; de-centred agency; discourse; embodiment; identity; reflexivity*



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Introduction

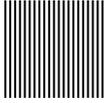
The pervasive influence of Michel Foucault's work on postmodern organizational theory and social constructionist discourses of identity is often seen as an assault on the possibilities of agency and change in organizations (Newton, 1998, 2003; Reed, 1997, 2000). By decentring the epistemological and moral 'subject' of rationalism and humanist thought Foucault appears to remove human agents from centre stage (Carr, 1997; Gergen, 1999; Linstead, 2004). We can no longer rely on the ontological security of subject-object dualisms that allowed us to believe we could gain objective scientific knowledge of the world and the mind. Instead, passive 'subjects' who are the conduits, bearers or sites of discourses of power/knowledge replace the individualist belief in agency as a universal manifestation of rationality, autonomy, choice and reflexivity (Giddens, 1984). Nor are there class or gendered constructs of collective social subjects or actors to which we can refer the possibilities of action and change in the social world (McNay, 2000).

With this apparent destruction of the epistemological and moral subject of science and rationalism and the eclipse of individual and collective social action the very idea of a link between agency and change becomes profoundly problematic. How can there be any possibility of agency, any hope of change, if human actors as moral agents and social subjects are unable and incapable of exercising choice, free will or autonomy?

Among Foucault's critics and defenders the 'negative paradigm of subjectification' has become an interpretative orthodoxy (Allen, 2000; Giddens, 1984; Knight, 2004; McNay, 2000). Critics of Foucauldian organizational theory and constructionism argue that Foucault has no concept of agency because he allowed autonomous 'discursive practices' to become subjectless (Newton, 1998). Similarly, Foucault's defenders argue that agency and realist ideas of self, truth and objectivity must be formally expunged from the exploration of discursive practices and the programmatic goals of post-modern organizational theory, organizational discourse analysis and social constructionism (Gergen, 1999, 2003).

But was Foucault's relentless rejection of humanism, rational self-certainly, and liberal individualistic faith in the power of reflexivity and a coherent moral self, really a wholesale abandonment of any notion of agency (Allen, 2000)? Surely this would contradict the other overarching ambition of Foucault's intellectual *oeuvre* to disclose both 'how human beings have been made subjects' and how discourses of power/knowledge can reveal 'new possibilities for change' (1992: 208). Could the relentless 'decentring of the subject' therefore really mean the death of agency and change? Or, is it possible to have change without an intentional concept of agency?

Here it will be argued that Foucault's work is an original and often powerful attempt to break with subjective and humanistic notions of intentionality or centred agency founded on *rationality, knowledge/expertise, autonomy* and *reflexivity*. Foucault's rejection of ontological dualism and a realist epistemology of the self lead to his attempt to decentre the subject



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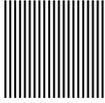
in discourse and somehow theorize without a notion of the self. Instead of the conventional ontological dualities of individual and society, agency and structure, Foucault therefore shifts the focus towards the possibilities of *agency and change*. While this innovation has often been interpreted as a ‘defacing’ of the subject and a rejection of agency, it will be argued that Foucault’s attempt to dispense with the counterpoints to intentional notions of centred agency can be re-conceptualized as a theorization of *decentred agency* consisting of four key components: *discourse, power/knowledge, embodiment and self-reflexivity*. Far from destroying intentional agency, decentred agency allows new possibilities for resistance and the dispersal of agency and change in organizations and societies. Foucault’s apparent destruction of the ‘subject’ is not the postmodern end of agency but its partial reinvention.

There are, however, very serious limitations to Foucault’s reinvention of agency. If one takes away notional concepts of ‘self’ ‘personality’ or ‘agency’ and situates them in self-reflexive modes of power/knowledge discourses, then what possibilities are there for intentionality and choice? If our ‘identity’ is an ever-changing construction in a sea of competing rhetoric’s of self, or the self-divided expression of our polyvocal voices, then identity is constantly in flux, constantly unknown to itself, and we are therefore forever in a state of self-doubt as to why or how we can change ourselves or the world (Gergen, 1999: 80). Ultimately, without a synthetic concept of agency you cannot have a credible conception of change. Agency must include not only the capacity to resist or ‘act otherwise’, but also the possibility of ‘making a difference’ (Giddens, 1984).

The article begins by exploring each of the four key components of *decentred agency*: (1) discourse as a counterpoint to rationalist or intentional ideals of the knowing ‘subject’ of knowledge; (2) power/knowledge and ‘disciplinary power’ as a critique of scientific and expert knowledge that leads to a reformulation of agency as transgression and resistance to power; (3) embodiment or ‘embodied agency’ as a partial critique of notions of intentional agency, autonomy and individual choice and (4) self-reflexivity as a mode of self-formation and identity that provides an alternative to the limited reflexivity of rationalist models of agency. This leads to a broader discussion of the unresolved ontological and epistemological issues raised by Foucault conception of agency and change. Finally, the major limitations of Foucault’s conception of agency as a theorization of change are summarized and the case is made for a critical re-engagement of post-modern organization theory and constructionist discourses with forms of intentional agency.

Discourse and the Subject

The relationship between discourse and the ‘subject’ is one of the central problematics of Foucault’s work. Is the subject simply an ‘effect’ of discourse or does the exclusion of the subject from discourse disclose the



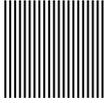
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constitutive possibilities of agency? To begin to unravel this central question one has to briefly explore the shifting and often confusing range of meanings of discourse in Foucault work. At least four meanings can be partly differentiated: discourse as autonomous rule-bound systems of statements, discourse as ‘discursive’ and ‘non-discursive practices’, discourse as ‘power/knowledge’, and discourse as *Discourse*, as a grand meta-narrative against Enlightenment rationalism (Foucault 1972, 1981). All of these meanings allow Foucault (1991) to explore both how the knowing ‘subject’ appears in discourse, and how any form of subject entity (e.g. the self, the rational individual, the moral actor, the author) can be removed from the exploration of discourse.

In his early ‘archaeological’ works Foucault (1972) appears to treat discourses as primarily structured, grouped and regulated by systems of rules which state who can say what, where and how. While these systems of rules appear to exist independently of subjects and their social contexts, they define the conditions or hidden rules through which subjects appear in discourse as intentional actors, moral beings or the more abstract epistemological and thinking subject of knowledge. Discourses are therefore structured in such a way that they can *determine* who the ‘subject’ is as well as defining, limiting and controlling the relation between how subjects perceive themselves in their relation with the world (Foucault 1977: 138). This quasi-structuralist reading of discourse allows Foucault to often assume an objectivistic and even positivistic stance towards discourse, so much so that he appears to conceive the exploration of the hidden functional rules of discourse as a discourse-neutral activity. Discourses can somehow be explicated through ‘pure description’ of their ‘modes of existence’ and operation.

In his later ‘genealogical’ works Foucault appears to partly abandon the idea of disclosing the autonomous functioning of discourses. Discourses are no longer simply independent or free-floating rules regulating systems of statements defining what a particular subject can say about an object. Discourses are also embedded in ‘discursive practices’ and ‘non-discursive practices’, in the way the natural world is understood and social relations and human institutions are organized. Foucault therefore refers to discourse as ‘practices, which form the objects of which they speak’ (1972: 49). This shift towards the embeddedness of discourse in practices is not, however, the embrace of a coherent epistemological position towards objects of knowledge. Rather, Foucault uses discourse as a methodological strategy to fracture and disassemble objects, ideas and concepts. This partly explains why Foucault appears to have no need for an ‘objective’ scientific theory of ‘society’, a concept of social structure or a unified notion of intentional agency: these are all problematic constructs embedded in discursive practices that are discursively constituted within given historical contexts. Similarly, he has no need for a theory of ‘practice’ or a concept of theory *into* practice because *discourse is practice*: ‘theory does not express, translate or serve to apply practice: it is practice’ (Foucault, 1988: xix). For Foucault,



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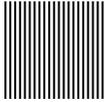
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discourse subsumes the subject, not because the subject is merely an effect of discourse, but because the actions of speaking and acting appear inseparable in discursive practices.

Another characteristic feature of Foucault's genealogical works is the shift towards a view of discourses as a form of power/knowledge that constitutes subjects. Because discourses appear to structure and regulate what statements it is possible to say and the conditions under which they are considered true or false, discourses are a form of 'power/knowledge' (Foucault, 2000). For Foucault, to define what is objective and subjective, what constitutes sane and insane behaviours, rational and irrational action, justice and injustice is to produce knowledge and exercise power over others.

Finally, discourse can refer to broad 'discursive formations' and the 'general domain' of all statements, to almost every activity through which meaning, the self and objects of knowledge are constituted. In this sense Foucault (1977) uses discourse as an alternate category to question the self-construction of the world as an object of study (ontology) and the way we as potentially rational or intentional subjects know or explain it to ourselves (epistemology). But if everything, including our self-conception, is constructed or produced *within* discourse then there appears to be no non-discursive realm outside of the *order of discourse*: 'we must not imagine that the world turns towards us a legible face which we would only have to decipher; the world is not the accomplice of our knowledge; there is no prediscursive providence which disposes the world to our favour' (Foucault, 1981: 67). This defacing of the world 'out there' also becomes the de-naturalizing of the self as a fixed physical or biological entity or a form of self-consciousness or mind to which we can refer our sense experience. The body and the self are experienced through discourse.

Overall, these four overlapping meanings of discourse suggest that Foucault appears to conceive D/discourse/s as partly autonomous and self-referential systems of meaning that *cannot* disclose the relationship between subject and object, discourse and 'reality'. Discourse analysis simply replaces any analysis of how discourse (language, symbols or signs) represents or corresponds to the world (Deetz, 2003; Hardy, 2004). Discourse is therefore the antithesis of Enlightenment rationalism or any attempt at the empirical materialisation of the mind as an object of knowledge. This does not mean, however, that 'objects' or 'things' do not exist independently of thought, consciousness or mind. Rather, Foucault appears to assume a certain 'materiality' to the world, to words and things, although he insists that we cannot refer objects to sense experience, facts or causes that exist outside of discourse. Everything is within discourse, but things can somehow exist independently of discourse. In this sense, Foucault (1972) claims that the material conditions of knowledge are not reducible to ideas of consciousness or mind. It is never clear, however, whether discourse and 'the world', word and thing are analytically separated in the creation of knowledge, or whether they are identical. This equivocal position leaves



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many perplexing questions unanswered. How do you distinguish discourse from the ‘materiality’ of the non-discursive, appearance from reality? Does discourse itself define what is ‘real’ and what it is possible to say? What counts as knowledge within discourse? Can you separate discourse from power? If so, is it then possible to reconnect agency and change?

Power/Knowledge and Resistance

If Foucault’s genealogical works mark a shift from autonomous discourse/s to power/knowledge, the underlying thematic of the ‘subject’ remains—if reconfigured and redefined. For at the centre of Foucault’s often powerful historical exploration of power/knowledge is an examination of the transformations of the self, subjectivity and human agency in the emergence of modern western social and political institutions. One of the most momentous transformations, according to Foucault, occurs with the shift away from ‘sovereign power’ of kings manifest in grotesque ceremonial rituals of torture and public executions to the ‘disciplinary power’ of modernity manifest in the insidious disciplinary regimes of the prison, the factory, the school, the hospital and all the institutions of the modern democratic state (1994: 3–7). These new forms of power reach into subjects through a web of regimes of power and knowledge that regulate the body and mind, including our most intimate behaviour and inner thoughts. What interests Foucault, however, is not only the ubiquity of these new forms of power, or the apparently humane shift from regimes of brutal ‘torture’ to regimes of behavioural ‘correction’, but rather their relation to human subjects: how they impact on how we think, feel and act as ‘subjects’ of power and knowledge.

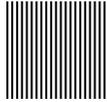
The exploration of the ‘subject’ of power/knowledge discourses takes four forms.

First, Foucault argues that the ‘subject’ is an effect of power and knowledge discourses:

the subject who knows, the object to be known and the modalities of knowledge must be regarded as so many effects of the fundamental implications of power/knowledge and their historical transformations. (Foucault, 1991: 27)

By blurring any distinction between power and knowledge, subject and object, Foucault seeks to destroy the optimism of Enlightenment reason: its faith in individual autonomy and self-identity through rational knowledge of the self and the world (Foucault, 1979: 52).

Second, unlike mainstream theories of power which focus on what power is, who exercises it, how it is distributed and who gains and loses from the use of power, Foucault conceives power as a nominal construct: ‘power is not a thing, an institution, an aptitude or an object’ (Foucault, 1979: 93). Correspondingly, it is not a substance or property of structures or an attribute of individuals. With no realist notion of the ontological



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and epistemological location or power, power appears to be intrinsically disparate and diffuse; it is everywhere because it appears to be everywhere (Foucault, 1994: 202).

Third, power is everywhere not because it is hegemonic, monolithic or all-embracing, but because it 'circulates' or flows though the entire 'social body' by a multiplicity of mechanisms and archipelagos of localized power relations, each of which exercises its own relational forms of power (Foucault, 1988: 38). Because power is something that is relational, something that circulates within and through discourse, Foucault (2000) argues that it must be explored as chains, networks or capillary connections in which individuals are the localized carriers or sites of power, not its 'points of application'.

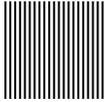
Fourth, power as 'disciplinary power' is so deeply submerged in human subjectivity that it is the embodiment of self-subjugation through self-discipline. This power is productive and positive, not simply repressive and negative. For Foucault subjects as willing selves and 'docile bodies' give themselves up to existing forms of power-knowledge not because they are oppressed or repressed, but because they are capable of exercising power over themselves and others:

If I feel the truth about myself it is in part that I am constituted as a subject across a number of power relations which are exercised over me and which I exercise over others. (Foucault, 1988: 39)

The self is possessed by power, not its possessor, yet it can exercise power over the self and others.

At first reading Foucault's four overlapping domains of power/knowledge and disciplinary power appear to create a bleak image of the human subject and its possibilities. There is no scope for separating power and knowledge, or power and agency. The multifarious forms of disciplinary power arise within discourses of knowledge/power which create insidious modes of subjugation by expertise (e.g. the regulation and surveillance of behaviour) and self-subjugation through self-discipline. These discourses of power-knowledge are dispersed throughout the entire social body. They are not only organizationally decentralized; they are also de-centred from any ontological or epistemological concept of the human subject as an autonomous or rational agent with 'causal powers' (Giddens, 1984, 1993). In effect, Foucault decouples agency and power. The subject is therefore a diffused historically constituted entity, a site of power within discourse, always subsumed or determined by power and apparently unable to step outside itself to unmask or deface this power (Hayward, 2000).

Despite Foucault's (2000) intensive focus on power his work appears to hold out possibilities of agency in the form of discursive resistance. 'Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but it also undermines it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it' (Foucault 1979: 100–101). Like power discourses, discursive resistance appears to be everywhere: it transverses all power relations, it flows through its networks



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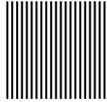
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and it assumes a multiplicity of localised and distributed forms. This allows the possibility of multiple subject positions to emerge within discourses, and so discourses can be subverted by alternative subject discourses. For example, if the self and the body are symbolically inscribed with sexual or gendered self-images that simply only allow the acting out of the power discourses of others, these can be countered with alternative self-images: with a refusal to embrace the disembodiment of the self (McNay, 2000). Ultimately, all discourses begin to unravel once we begin to question claims to self-certainty, truth, power or knowledge.

Although Foucault attempts to conceive discursive resistance as a positive or 'productive' force, rather than simply a negative counter-reaction against rationality or expert knowledge, his analysis is not fully convincing. Processes of discursive resistance are deeply problematic because resistance is situated within power, is itself a form of power and can reproduce relations of power. This renders the power-resistance dynamic fundamentally opaque, and Foucault provides very little analytical or conceptual clarification of what constitutes resistance to power? Nevertheless he insists that resistance is the 'irreducible opposite' of power. But if resistance is a 'strategy of struggle' against power then resistance has to be given some sort of normative or substantive legitimacy—collective or otherwise. Moreover, because discursive resistance as a mode of agency can have no recourse to self-certainty founded on rational knowledge or an ethical stance towards what is 'good' for others or the many, it lacks any imperative claims over our actions. How can discursive resistance be imbued with human agency if it has no connection with intentionality, causal outcomes, normative legitimacy or a collective logic of action? Without an answer to this question, discursive resistance appears as a reactive, transgressive and fragmented counter-action against power that appears all enveloping, normalised and functional. For Foucault, discursive resistance is ultimately a volitional act of refusal; it allows those who our 'subjects' of power to act otherwise and reject their confinement and self-subjugation within pre-determined discourses of power/knowledge.

Embodiment and Identity

Most theories of agency, whether in the form of rational action, intentional behaviour or moral principles of conduct, ignore the 'body'; it forms the invisible shadow of the self. The origins of this mind-body split have a complex intellectual genealogy, but its division is most forcefully stated by Descartes: 'The concept of the body includes nothing at all which belongs to the mind, and the concept of the mind includes nothing at all which belongs to the body' (Descartes, 1984: 158). Similarly, Kant endorses a self-divided principle of reason. Reason is a moral faculty independent of nature and so our rational and moral capacities appear to be forever locked in a struggle with the body as a realm of sexuality and erotic desire. Foucault



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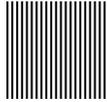
(2000: 12–13) appears to partly challenge these divisions. The body is not simply the outside or receptacle of an activist inner self or mind, but the form that embodies who we are as historical, cultural and gender-specific beings defined by discourse of power and knowledge.

For Foucault (1979) the body is the major site for the insidious discourses of ‘disciplinary power’ and ‘bio-power’ that enact and inscribe who we are as subjects. Disciplinary power works on the body by regimes of subjugation through self-discipline. In contrast, bio-power operates at the macro-level of regulation by diffuse networks of institutional authority which seek to exercise control of populations by regimes of expert knowledge which measure, monitor, normalize bodily behaviours from individual sexual conduct to one’s inner desires (Foucault, 1979: 25). These processes of normalizing sexual behaviours and moral conduct are inseparable from acts of self-scrutiny and confessional self-definition which seek to disclose the ‘true nature’ of the self or our sexuality. In this way the self as a construct is ‘psychologized’ and we conspire in becoming objects for intervention and control by experts (Burrell, 1988: 223).

At times Foucault reading of the ‘disciplining of the body’ by discourses of power and expert knowledge appears to be so all-enveloping that agency becomes invisible (1994: 304). This explains why Giddens (1984) accuses Foucault of defacing the body: ‘Foucault’s bodies do not have faces’ (p. 157). In a world where bodies do have faces, agency is not the endogenous effect of discourses of embodiment, but the intentional ability of individuals to ‘make a difference’ (Giddens, 1984). Giddens (1992) also argues that Foucault’s focus on the body as an effect of bio-power underplays the cognitive and affectual dimensions of self-identity, gender and sexuality. While these criticisms have considerable force, Giddens notions of intentional agency and identity are equally problematic because they seriously underplay the pre-reflexive and embodied aspects of self-identity by conflating identity and agency with the possibilities of choice (Barnes, 2000).

Foucault’s reading of the body is certainly at odds with the cognitive thrust of Enlightenment rationalism and the scientific objectification of the body (Soper, 1995). He appears to reject a dualistic Cartesian view of the world along with the Kantian belief in an abstract moral subject, and he has a deep antipathy to any naturalistic foundations of the self (Foucault, 2000: 10–11). But Foucault’s focus on the body rather than the self, agency or the individual subject is designed primarily to counteract the disembodied self of liberal humanist thought by re-embodiment the self. The self or thinking subject of rationalism is no longer conceived as a bodily organism joined to a self, but a body with the possibility of a face or a multiplicity of faces.

In re-embodiment the self as a corporal being, however, Foucault calls into question the ‘body’ and the ‘self’ as entities that define a coherent identity and the possibilities of human agency. Just as the self has no inner self-certainty that somehow discloses a ‘true self’, so the ‘body’ is a shifting



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nominal construct within discourses of power and knowledge. Foucault therefore argues that:

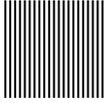
the individual is not to be conceived as a sort of elementary nucleus ... on which power comes to fasten... In fact, it is already one of the prime effects of power that certain bodies, certain gestures, certain discourses, certain desires, come to be identified and constituted as individuals. (Foucault, 2000: 98)

Individuals are not fixed entities, nor are our bodies. For Foucault (1991) the body is the 'inscribed surface of events' within discourses, and the genealogical task of examining these shifting discourses is to de-face power and 'expose a body totally imprinted by history and the processes of history's destruction of the body' (p. 83).

Some feminists and constructionists who wish to affirm an ideal of embodied agency as a counterforce to the sources of oppression and/or repression of women have been attracted to Foucault's (1979, 1986) subversive challenge to the idea of the body as a fixed entity. Certainly, the 'temporalization inherent in the idea of embodiment' allows escape from essentialist notions that sexual differences and gendered behaviours are primarily biologically founded, as well as providing a refuge from scientific naturalism—the idea that behaviours have a causal substrate (McNay, 2000: 25). If perceptions of the body are always changing, and our behaviours cannot be classified as 'natural', then they can be changed by changing the forms of discourse through which they are expressed (Knight, 1997). Foucault's account of the body is therefore potentially powerful because it re-embodies agency, yet allows for change in terms of new discourses of the body.

Other feminists are, however, much more cautious in their critical assimilation of Foucault work, precisely because it limits the possibilities of agency. Foucault's new insights into the potential for discursively re-defining embodied agency and gendered identity are often undermined by his tendency to nominalize the body within discourses of power: 'There is a tendency to conceive of the body as essentially a passive, blank surface upon which power relations are inscribed' (McNay, 2000: 166). The disciplinary regimes of femininity as power/knowledge can therefore appear everywhere and nowhere. This leads to an overemphasis on the symbolic or discursive construction of the body as a faceless object and a corresponding neglect of the social, material and institutional dimensions of gendered norms (Newton, 1998; Reed, 2000). There is also the danger of over-emphasizing the peripheral counter-norms or 'ex-centric' forms of sexuality at the expense of a theorization of the more mundane forms of heterosexuality (McNay, 2000).

More importantly, however, the focus on how bodily inscription and self-subjugation occurs within discourse does not clarify how the self can become autonomous. Existing forms of autonomy are simply treated as rationalist abstractions within which the disembodied self is imprisoned



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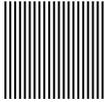
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(Foucault, 1994). Yet Foucault argues that the bodily subjugation of the self can be challenged by voluntary acts of discursive resistance. The body may appear determined, but it is only determined within discourses that could be otherwise, although we are never told how or why this should occur. Foucault can therefore be accused of exaggerating bodily inscription through discourse and in turn exaggerating the unending possibilities of redefining the self within discourse. Paradoxically, Foucault appears to avoid the disembodied self of rationalism by re-embodiment the self, yet he de-naturalizes and de-humanizes the body by removing any sense of its living materiality, substantive properties and socially constituted boundaries (McNay, 2000). For Foucault there is no fixed knowledge of the body or the self, only what is historically imposed and what is voluntarily resisted. By acting otherwise we can destroy the illusions of rationalism and determinism.

This oscillation between determinism and counteraction, between bodily inscription and embodied agency as resistance partly arises because Foucault refuses to fully theorize subjectivity and agency in relation to the body. Instead, notions of autonomy and self-reflexivity are subsumed into the self-subjugation of disciplinary power that is the opposite of ideals of self-constitution and intentional agency. It is only in his later work that the regimes of control over docile bodies are opened-up with a more normative notion of self-reflexivity (Foucault, 1991: 351). This allows an ethical consideration of a positive aesthetic ideal of autonomy and self-formation through ‘technologies’ of self-discipline, and a broader reconsideration of the connection between agency and change (Foucault, 1986). But this again raises more perplexing questions: can one have an active notion of the self or self-creation without rebuilding an intentional or centred notion of autonomy and agency within discourse (Giddens, 1984)? How can self-knowledge become self-liberation unless there is a clear separation between power *and* knowledge? Can self-discipline as a moral and ethical form of self-reflexivity lead to a model of ethical conduct? Can Foucault really find a way of re-centring agency and change by reworking the virtues of self-discipline beyond regimes of disciplinary power? Can we act otherwise *and* make a difference?

Self-Reflexivity and Ethics

Foucault’s early work on disciplinary power and discourse disassembles a unified notion of reflexivity by abandoning the epistemological and moral subject of rationalism. By situating reflexivity within discourses of knowledge/power Foucault calls into question the idea of an objective or neutral observer and challenges rationalist epistemologies to justify their ideal of reflexivity. Moreover, because Foucault wants to theorize without any notion of a subject he not only undermines rationalism but also the possibility of critically scrutinizing the relationship between the self and discourse by invoking any subject-object, mind-body dichotomies.



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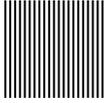
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By refusing a modified rationalism that moves from a privileged epistemological subject to a more inclusive ideal of rational dialogue between potentially autonomous and reflexive agents, Foucault has been attacked as an 'irrationalist' (Habermas, 1986). This charge resonates. Foucault never appears to envisage the possibility of a participative dialogue or 'dialogical self' leading to reasoned causes and agreed outcomes within discourses of knowledge and power (Taylor, 1989). Nevertheless, Foucault always rejected the charge of irrationality and his later work consistently emphasized the 'indispensability' of modernist ideas of reason and enlightenment, as well as their limits and dangers (1996: 394).

Overall, the conventional notion of reflexivity has served the traditions of rationalism well because it allows for a realist notion of reality 'out there' to which reflexivity can refer in deciding what constitutes knowledge and what makes for effective action. The reflexivity-practice interface therefore allows for the adjudication between knowledge claims, and a self-questioning exploration of the moral presuppositions of knowledge. There are hypothetical causes in the real world and reasons to act and so human agents are not at the mercy of determinism or, worse still, victims of moral impotence in the face of evil (Taylor, 1989).

There are, however, considerable problems for a notion of agency if one distances reflexivity from reason and treats it as a self-referential category within discourse. Once the connection between reason and self is broken there are few limits to the possibilities of self-reflective doubt. Everything can be questioned including the once apparently invincible self-certainty of the rational self—'*I think therefore I am*'. In this sense Foucault inevitably goes much further in challenging the limits of any notion of self-reflexivity. By arguing that ideas of individuality, intentionality, rationality and unconscious motivations are located within the workings of discourse of knowledge and power Foucault historicizes any notion of a truly self-conscious or autonomous subject. Furthermore, Foucault almost totally de-naturalizes the subject by stripping *our* apparently universal notions of 'human nature' and 'humanity' of any hypothetical causal-biological or moral-political foundations. The subject is essentially wiped clean to be historically written and rewritten anew.

While Foucault's early work effectively destroys the pretensions of rationalism and scientific naturalism regarding self and human nature he still appears interested in a notion of self with agency; or an ideal of decentred agency with discursive self-reflexivity. Unlike many postmodernists and constructionists, Foucault somehow wants to keep the hope of an activist notion of agency implicit in his work, both as a vaguely therapeutic device and a transgressive counterforce to self-subjugation. For the destruction of the rational self is designed to create a discursive space for the emergence of a politics of transformation that allows polyvocal selves within new discourses of self-identity (Gergen, 1999). By creating a profoundly problematic relation between self and self-reflexivity, however, Foucault appears to give no guidance on how subjects can become agential selves through



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the creation of new self-identities within discourse. To do so, Foucault would have to specify a link between agency and change, resistance and self-transformation.

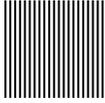
These issues are emergent in Foucault's early work, and they have strong Kantian undertones. He sometimes describes his methodological task as the strategic analysis of emergent contexts of interaction, concerned with the self-formation of the self or agential selves by processes of action, self-reflexivity and self-discipline, thus allowing the subject to exercise freedom, autonomy and moral choice in a multiplicity of shifting and unique historical contexts (1979: 387). This is an underlying theme that is also captured in Foucault's famous insistence that 'power is only exercised over free subjects' (1992: 221). But it is only in his later 'ethical' writings that one detects a clear shift towards a positive reading of self-constitution and self-creation through 'strategic' (i.e. rational and intentional) modes of self-discipline. The 'negative paradigm' of defaced disciplinary power and self-subjugation is reconfigured as the formation of an autonomous and reflective self through discipline, conceived as an 'aesthetics of existence'. Kant's transcendental subject is brought down to earth and imbued with creative potential.

With this shift Foucault argues that his central concern is to develop 'a historical ontology in relation to ethics through which we constitute ourselves as moral agents' (1991: 351). Again, this project is counter-posed as a critical reengagement with the metaphysical ontology of the rational self proposed by Enlightenment ideals of autonomy and freedom (Chan and Garrick, 2002). But unfortunately, Foucault never completed this project, although there are clear indications that it was part of a boarder attempt to reconnect 'agency' with reflexivity, creativity and change: 'All my analyses are against the idea of universal necessities in human existence. They show the arbitrariness of institutions and show which space of freedom we can still enjoy and how many changes can still be made' (1988: 233).

Discussion: Agency and Change

Does Foucault's exploration of the 'decentring from (and of) the subject' within discourses of power/knowledge and his related explorations of embodiment and self-reflexivity lead to a coherent theorization of the relations between agency and change—perhaps the central creative ambition of his work? Or, does his conception of decentred agency remain trapped in notions of autonomous discourse, a Panopticon vision of disciplinary power and a politically and morally impotent idea of docile bodies forever entangled in self-reflexive and self-referential discourses?

There are certainly fundamental problems with Foucault's notion of D/discourse/s and these become dramatically apparent when discourse is applied to the exploration of self, subjectivity or agency. If the self is constituted within self-referential discourses or shifting discursive practices that appear to have no secure ontological or epistemological



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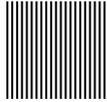
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foundations, then how can we reconstruct alternative notions of the self that escape the circular entrapments of discourse? Without the narrative idea of an historical continuity to the self, a moral ideal of a 'true self', or an intentional notion of an empirical self somehow made 'real' through rational knowledge, Foucault appears to have on way of reconnecting discourse and self, agency and change?

It is partly because Foucault finds the idea of a self with a rational, intentional or realist centre of gravity to be so deeply unpalatable that he cannot imbue the 'subject' with the moral and political possibilities of changing the world. To search for any epistemological and ontological security of the self, or any realist notion of 'causal agency' is futile. Yet, Foucault wishes to reinstate new possibility of 'agential selves' that can discursively recreate new discourses and dialogues of self-identity and embodied agency. We are not what we are; we are who we can become. But is this dream of transcendence possible without a concept of intentional action or the causal power of agency, and hence some tentative notion of realism? Foucault never gives clear answers to this question and so his work ends-up producing a series of equivocations regarding materiality and discourse, realism and nominalism that continue to haunt postmodernist and constructionist discourses of the self, subjectivity and agency (Gergen, 1999; Hardy, 2004; Newton, 1998).

Despite Foucault's (1972) many oblique references to materiality his rejection of a return to epistemological realism appears to rule out any serious attempt to reconnect agency and change, rationality and causality. Essentially Foucault wants to argue, contra-naturalism, that there is no reality outside discourse. To suggest that 'things', or 'objects' in the world, or attributes of the self, should be endowed with ontological and epistemological substance or a moral and political reality is a dangerous metaphysical illusion. Ontologically things may appear to exist independently of thought or consciousness, but epistemologically they enter discourses as things we give names to. The analysis of how we mirror, represent and understand the world through discourse is replaced by the analysis of discourse—the mirror itself becomes the object (Deetz, 2003: 425).

This nominalist reading of discourse is perhaps most evident in Foucault's (1999) early exploration of the shifting historical discourses of madness. Ideas of madness are constituted as stable objects of knowledge (epistemology), which are supposed to rest on naturalistic distinctions between reason and madness (ontological) but which are actually shifting objects and classifications derived from discourses in the human sciences and medical psychiatry (Parker, 1992: 31). In this sense, Foucault's method of analysing madness is not simply to ask what is regarded as madness within a given historical period, but rather 'to ask how these divisions are operated' within a specific discourse: what methods are used to define it, how does it circulate as a category and how are the distinctions between the sane and insane maintained (Foucault, 1999). Ultimately, for Foucault madness is not a fixed mental condition with pre-discursive or innate



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biological properties, but the shifting expression of the specific social and historical conditions in which human subjects are 'historically alienated' by the medical discourses of insanity.

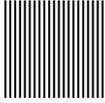
At first reading this is a provocative and illuminating position. It punctures the pretensions of science and reason in the face of the shifting pathological 'object' of madness and it allows the 'subject' of madness *itself* to speak. Yet, the virtues of scientific classifications that are social-psychologically realist are that they can reflexively expose the presuppositions and potential reifications implicit in objects of knowledge (Archer, 2003). Within scientific discourses there are rules of evidence, of what can be claimed as objective or true. Ultimately, this allows prescriptive claims to entry scientific discourse as the aims or goals of knowledge, and this in turn reinstates possibilities of expert knowledge and intervention, as well as agency and change.

For Foucault, however, any realist re-centring of agency and change by connecting expertise and intervention must be treated with considerable caution. Such a connection would be a reflexive extension of the self-defining subject of rationalism from which Foucault wishes to escape. If the relationship between discourse and reality, agency and change can be conceptualized using the expert knowledge of objects or intentions, then how do you ensure that you are not simply reproducing new forms of power/knowledge? Who decides what things or objects belong in each category and how do we know when someone is using realist ontological categories to further moral, political or ideological ends?

Moreover, rationalist and realist notions often have more empirical efficacy in naturalistic discourses of the psychical or biological foundations of behaviour, while their applications to cultural constructs of gender; ethnicity, race or moral and political ideals of agency can be enormously problematic. Push realistic assumptions and intentional categories of action too far and you can end-up with crude positivism or unbounded naturalism (Barnes, 2000). Instead, of exposing the 'order of things' as the 'order of discourse', realism can therefore cover-up the self-reflexivity of knowledge that should be part of scientific discourse (Foucault, 1972: xi). Ultimately, the danger of shifting the project of Foucauldian studies of society, organizations or the self towards realism is that it may surreptitiously recreate a crude variety of naturalism.

Foucault, of course, rarely comes close to embracing a version of epistemological realism, despite his various references to 'materiality' and the broader intention of his work to locate discursive practices within social and institutional contexts. Epistemological realism would be a return to the idea that there is an essential self within discourse and that there is an external reality or real entities outside discourse. For Foucault the idea of an existing or pre-discursive self is rejected. Anti-essentialism and anti-realism therefore appear to go together.

Unfortunately, the implications of Foucault's legacy for organizational theory and constructionist discourses are rarely consistent on this matter



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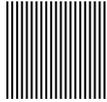
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(Rowlinson and Carter, 2002). Anti-essentialism can be a basis of rebuilding a bridge to realism (Parker, 1998; Al-Amoudi, 2007). This is perfectly understandable. Some Foucauldian organizational theorists and constructionists drift back towards some variant of realism because they need to find an ontological and epistemological foundation for the self-constitution of the subject (Newton, 1998). For without the translation of the subjectivity of subjugated selves into 'agency', moral and political action becomes problematic—if not impossible.

In contrast to Foucault's ambivalence towards a reinstatement of realism his reading of discourse would appear to drift towards the conventional self-refuting stance of relativism (Hacking, 1999). Foucault claims that his exploration of discourse is an alternative to humanism and scientism because it recognizes that the self-defining subject of rationalism divides the self and the self from nature. Enlightenment discourses of rationalism are also suspect because they limit the possibilities of reflexivity: self-reflexivity is unending and so the search for truth is an illusion. In a world without any metaphysical anchorage, moral certainty or real foundations all discourses and all voices are apparently valid and equal (Foucault, 1996).

Foucault, of course, does not formally espouse a position of relativism or constructionism. Rather, he assumes a neutral stance of historical self-understanding towards all discourse, all concepts of reality and all evaluative positions. This represents the exploration of discourse as the historicist equivalent of the metaphysical trans-valuation of all values (Nietzsche, 1974). Questions of what is 'truth', what 'values' should we affirm and how we interpret subjectivity and human agency do not require answers. For all such questions will simply reproduce competing discourses which express their own culturally relative presuppositions of what is true, what is good and how we should act in the world (Foucault 2000:8–9). In this respect, Foucault appears to be, despite his protestations, an unrelenting relativist in his openness to competing discourses.

Yet here too there are equivocations. The apparently relativistic exploration of discourse also incorporates an undercurrent of monist idealism: the idea of discourse as grand Discourse (Alvessen and Karreman, 2000). For Foucault every appeal to words such as 'experience', 'consciousness', 'agency' as ways of capturing what is true or accurate with respect to what there 'is' becomes an infinite regress to other words that refer to other words that ultimately lead to a realization that discourse and reality, self and other, mind and body, experience and nature are inseparable. This curiously holistic notion, beyond the relativism of discourse, suggests that Foucault's seemingly neutral stance towards discourse has more in common with the ambitions of Hegelian idealism to reabsorb the self-defining but self-divided subject of Enlightenment rationalism and scientism into a new embodied self (Taylor, 1986). It is no surprise then that some Foucault-inspired constructionists have ended up reinstating various versions of idealism, with strong utopian undertones (Gergen, 2001: 422).



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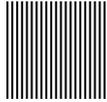
Undoubtedly Foucault would be wary of any attempt to chart a course through relativism to idealism. He would certainly be deeply uncomfortable with an all-enveloping or universal notion of discourse that restored a metaphysical intent to dissolve subject–object dichotomies into each other: a back door to old style Hegelian idealism appears firmly closed (Foucault, 2000: 12). In Foucault’s post-structuralist worldview the idea of a subject of history or any hint of a subject within discourse is antithetical:

What is this anonymous system without a subject, what thinks? This ‘I’ has exploded...this is the discovery of the ‘there is’. There is one. In some ways one comes back to the seventeenth century point of view, with this difference: not man but anonymous thought, knowledge without a subject, theory with no identity, in God’s place. (Foucault cited in Eribon, 1991: 161)

Despite Foucault’s objections, this curiously hyperbolic and disjointed rejection of any notion of a subject-centred vision of the world has strong transcendent resonances as a counter-memory against Enlightenment rationalism (Habermas, 1987). If Hegel was concerned with the final reconciliation of the subject in history, Foucault wishes to banish all reference to any form of subject, to relativize all ‘epistemes of truth’ and to dissipate any search for the foundations of *our* cultural identity (Foucault, 1977: 162). This is a morally courageous position, but it also carries profound intellectual dangers. Discourse as an anti-metaphysical position invoked to destroy the ‘subject’ of all humanistic discourses of knowledge can itself become a metaphysical inversion of Hegel’s Euro-centric world spirit: *Discourse* as the transvaluation of all values. Hegel’s humanism in which the subject and object of history are reconciled is replaced by an equally virulent anti-humanism in which subjectivity, identity and the intentional sources of moral and political action are torn asunder.

What allows Foucault to partly escape the dangers of grand Discourse as the metaphysical assent to a new episteme of the ‘politics of truth’ counterposed to rationalism, is his constant focus on the genealogical exploration of discourses of power/knowledge that define and redefine the different ways in which human beings have been ‘made into subjects’. The grand intent may be polemically anti-humanistic and anti-rational, but Foucault often succeeds in historically exposing the multiplicity of historical forms that inhumanity imprints on the face of the human. If Hegel’s humanistic rationalism was designed to see beyond the ‘slaughterhouse of history’ and disclose the ‘rose in the cross’ of the present, Foucault’s anti-humanist history explores the rituals of torture, mutilation and execution that mark the dominance of ‘sovereign power’ and the transformation of rationality into the disciplinary power of knowledge that subjugates the body, the mind and the self. This allowed Foucault to ‘bring *evils* to light’ but he refused the humanistic and rationalist assertion that ‘the negation or overcoming of these evils will promote a good’ (Taylor, 1986: 69).

Despite this apparent moral agnosticism, Foucault envisions the possibility that within discourses of knowledge and new forms of disciplinary



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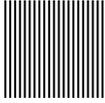
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power, we can recover and rediscover *our-selves*. Paradoxically, discourses that make us into subjects also allow the creation of a space for discursive resistance and change (Foucault, 1979: 100). Within discourse Foucault therefore appears to allow for the possibility of self-transformation, despite his assault on the possibilities of intentional agency. By somehow resisting what we have become we create possibilities for redefining what we are and what we can become—we rediscover embodied agency. But how does this occur? Can discursive resistance be imbued with agency? Does Foucault really engage with the possibility of creative human agency that can change the social world?

If Foucault partly charts the move from reflexivity to self-reflexivity from disembodied agency to embodied agency and beyond he gives no guidance on how the polyvocal selves he envisages can become agents of new identities and new discourses of the self. This has created a profound set of difficulties for Foucauldian organizational theory and constructionist discourses that seek both critical self-reflexivity and the promise of new identities founded on new acts of refusal and resistance (Gergen, 2003; Newton, 1998). For once self-reflexivity starts it appears to have no resting point (Reed, 2000). Acts of self-reflexivity, resistance and change are themselves discursively constituted and therefore potentially infinite. Given this circular process of self-reflexivity and self-explication can never really be complete; it can never specify an end, goal or purpose to which resistance and change are directed. Foucauldian organizational theory and constructionist discourses are therefore constantly in danger of occupying an infinite space of discursive possibilities, filled with nothing but discourses about discourses, possible agential selves with no agency, change without any fixed starting point or outcome.

Conclusion: Acting Otherwise or Making a Difference?

Four major criticisms of Foucault's conception of agency and change have been made. First, Foucault's most influential works tend to treat agency as an exogenous effect of discourse and power/knowledge. He therefore underplays the central importance of intentional action in any notion of agency (Davidson, 2001). Second, without a distinction between power and knowledge it becomes almost impossible to imbue agency with the 'causal power' to transform knowledge into action, or to create a substantive distinction between the powerful and the powerless. As a result agency becomes counteraction identified with resistance to power as an emergent and potentially voluntaristic act—we have the irrevocable power to act otherwise. Third, Foucault appears to challenge the conventional mind-body split and naturalism in his temporal treatment of 'docile bodies' as faceless objects, but he does not provide a coherent theory of embodied agency or embodiment (McNay, 2000). Instead, he re-embodies the apparently 'alienated' self of scientific discourse and liberal humanist thought by denaturalizing the body as a realm of infinite refashioning;



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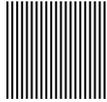
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there are no limits beyond the assertion of our will to become 'who we are'. We are, in principle, equally free to choose our bodies, as we are free to choose ourselves. Fourth, Foucault's early attacks on ontological and epistemological dualism lead to the advocacy of a form of hyper-reflexivity in which there is no fixed 'truth' or object to which self-reflexivity can refer. The self as a subject or object of knowledge therefore appears to be determined by discourses of power/knowledge and yet the self is ultimately free-floating in a world of mobile subjectivities.

While Foucault's vision of the decentring of power and the decentring of agency undoubtedly opens-up new possibilities for rethinking agency and change in organizations and societies, it also closes down ideals of agency founded on intentional action, knowledge, autonomy and reflexivity (Giddens, 1984). If organizational theory and construction discourses are to seriously rethink 'agency' and 'change' in a post-Panopticon world of organizational networks, increasing global complexity and risk, they will have to reconnect decentred agency with centred agency (Lash, 2003). This will require a systematic exploration of four key questions:

How can intentional, future-oriented action and forms of discourse be mediated through practice? When Foucault's later work returned to the possibilities of self-formation through 'intentional and voluntary action' he began a belated reengagement with intentionality and rationalism (Habermas, 1986: 107). But this was short-lived and Foucault still remained deeply resistant to the idea that a viable concept of agency should incorporate an intentional notion of rational action that circumscribes the possibilities of practice. Decentred agency appears as the antithesis of rationality and any belief in the translation of theory into practice—discourse is practice. Most varieties of postmodern organizational theory and constructionist discourse have taken this hostility to intentionality and rationality to its logical conclusion and rejected ontological dualism and with it any realist concept of subjectivity, the self or agency (Carr, 1997; Chan and Garrick, 2002). Even the traces of 'backdoor determinism' (Reed, 2000) implicit in Foucault's early work are subsumed into new forms of apodictic indeterminism (Gergen, 1999, 2003). We confront a world without structures, without 'objective' knowledge, without 'others', and without the possibilities of social or political action informed by reasoned discourse. This carries all the dangers of a return not only to idealism but also to old-style voluntarism.

The second synthetic question further highlights these issues. How can 'knowledge' rather than discourses of power/knowledge provide a basis of self-knowledge and self-creation, of agency and change? Foucault's work rarely faces up to the central importance of separating knowledge from power (Lukes, 2002). This is essential if one is to construct a viable concept of the casual power and creative possibilities of agency. In his remorseless attempt to steer clear of epistemological subjectivity and any form of subjectivism, however, Foucault appears to end up removing any causation from individuals by relocating objectivity and practice



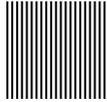
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in a neutral stance towards discourse. Yet it is clear that any synthetic concept of agency must include both the causal power of action and the creative possibilities of agency; each of which requires an epistemological space outside the over-determination of power/knowledge. With such a synthetic conceptualisation, agency is not simply an either/or dichotomy: an intentional application of power against resistance, nor a volutaristic form of resistance against power. Unfortunately, Foucault decentres intentionality while re-centring discursive resistance as a possible realm of emergent choice beyond power/knowledge. The result is that agency becomes the indeterminate emergence of marginalized, transgressive and volutaristic acts of resistance to power, rather than the creation of alternative definitions of what power is, how it is legitimated and how it can be transformed.

This overemphasis on counteraction is also reinforced when the third synthetic question is posed. Can the notion of embodied agency include an exploration of an ideal of autonomy and its ethical limits? Foucault's attempt to re-embody the abstract knowing subject of rationalistic thought becomes an attempt to de-naturalize and de-subjectivize the body and the self. But a temporal notion of agency is analytically and morally vacuous unless it engages with the scientific insights into what might define us as biological entities, and what socially limits the possibilities of our autonomy as social beings. Because Foucault brackets these questions his analysis of bodily inscription through disciplinary power and bio-power is unable to clarify a rounded or realistic notion of autonomy (1991: 351). Autonomy as a sub-category of agency is stranded outside of nature and social time. By following Foucault down this path, postmodern organizational theorists and constructionists create an impossible image of autonomy; they go to extremes in denying any traces of naturalism and determinism. Any privileging of the social over the individual or the natural over the social is denied. This can lead to a wholesale abandonment of 'agency' as a limiting construct (Gergen, 1999). Yet even Foucault (1986) realized in his later work that you cannot really subvert subjectivity, rationality and individualist motions of choice, unless you redefine a viable counter-concept of autonomous agency.

Finally, how can self-reflexivity be linked to a positive object of self-knowledge or self-formation that defines new possibilities of identity and moral-political action rather than a negative image of self-subjugation? Foucault (1991) tries to answer this question in his later work by linking self-reflexivity to an ethical ontology of self-formation. However, his notion of self-creation through an 'aesthetics of existence', reproduces a strong undercurrent of voluntarism that again conflates agency with the malleability of the self through ethical self-discipline. Just as his original notion of power/knowledge narrows agency to resistance or counteraction, so correspondingly does his later ethical ideal of self-formation as self-reflexivity end in the possibility of an indeterminate and infinitely



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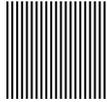
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malleable self. This sets-up an impossible and ultimately Utopian mission for self-reflexivity as a source of agency and change.

A synthetic and practice-oriented concept of agency would have to mediate between classical ideas of intentional action, autonomy and choice and ideals of embodied agency as always changing and always open to re-invention. This cannot be achieved by invoking a stand-off between realism and nominalism, nature and society, faced and de-faced power, stasis and change, a fixed universal self of rationalism and the forever changing and indeterminate subject of a postmodern polyvocal self. Foucault is partly responsible for perpetuating these false dichotomies; even though his later work was inspired by the search for a deeper realm of autonomy and self-reflexivity that would somehow escape the insidious reach of universal reason and disciplinary power. What Foucault managed to rescue, however, from the grand metanarrative of rationalism and intentional agency was incomplete and theoretically flawed, not because it does not match up to an abstract moral imperative of autonomy, but because it limits agency and change to discursive resistance, counteraction and transgression; to all the forms of agential power that are other to the self and its polymorphous expressions. At the core of Foucault's notion of agency and change is not a moral vision or a programmatic political mission to *make a difference* but an aesthetic, erotic and voluntaristic desire to *act otherwise*.

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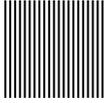
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