Roman Stoic Mindfulness: An Ancient Technology of the Self

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ABSTRACT: This chapter examines Michel Foucault's notion of cultivation of the self by focusing on an example of an ancient practice contributing to that goal, namely the attitude of attention or mindfulness proposed by the Roman Stoics Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius. It contrasts this Stoic attitude with modern versions of mindfulness, showing that both the object of attention and the goal of the process are different. It argues that the primary object of attention for Roman Stoic mindfulness was one's philosophical principles. The goal of this practice was virtuous action based upon those principles. It was a technique aimed at ethical self-transformation, unlike its modern counterpart, which is primarily aimed at overcoming distress.

1. Cultivation of the Self

In recent years there has been a renewed interest among philosophers in the notion of cultivation of the self, inspired in large part by the later work of Michel Foucault and in particular the section entitled 'The Cultivation of the Self' in the third volume of his history of sexuality, *The Care of the Self* (1988: 37-68).[1] Foucault was especially interested there in what he called an 'attitude of severity' towards the self that flourished in the first two centuries AD, and in particular a mistrust of pleasures that prefigured and informed early Christian

[1] For the sake of simplicity I cite Foucault only according to the pagination of the translations of his works into English. The original French versions of Foucault 1986 and 1988 can be found in Foucault 1984a and 1984b. The selection of short texts in Foucault 1997 is taken from Foucault 1994, some of which first appeared in English. The most important of these shorter works in the present context are 'Technologies of the Self' (1997: 223-51), 'On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress' (1997: 253-80), and 'The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom' (1997: 281-301).

attitudes towards the body. Although initially motivated by a desire to understand shifts in sexual attitudes between pagan and Christian cultures, Foucault's concerns quickly broadened to focus on 'the insistence on the attention that should be brought to bear on oneself' (Foucault 1988: 41) that he found in the ancient philosophical texts he was reading.

This widening of his interest led Foucault to develop a distinct but related project concerned with the genealogy of the modern subject (Foucault 2016: 22). Indeed, at one point his reflections on cultivation of the self in *The Care of the Self* were intended to become a publication distinct from his history of sexuality project (Foucault 1997: 255). In that separate project concerned with the modern subject, Foucault wanted to explore the origins of the idea that there is a truth about the self that is hidden within and can only be uncovered via some form of hermeneutic process. Foucault traced this attitude back through the Christian tradition to the early Church Fathers. However, when he turned to Greco-Roman sources he thought that the situation there was quite different. Although he saw practices that superficially shared something in common with the early Christian emphasis on confession, Foucault claimed that these were not aimed at the recovery of some hidden, deeper truth within the subject but, rather, were part of a process designed to transform the self (2016: 29-37; 1997: 276). In particular, he became interested in a famous passage by the Stoic philosopher Seneca in which the Roman Stoic describes a process of self-examination at the end of each day:

> The mind must be called to account every day. This was Sextius's practice: when the day was spent and he had retired to his night's rest, he asked his mind, "Which of your ills did you heal today?

> Which vice did you resist? In what aspect are you better?" Your anger will cease and become more controllable if it knows that every day it must come before a judge. Is there anything finer, then, than this habit of scrutinizing the entire day? [...] When the light has been removed and my wife has fallen silent, aware of this habit that's now mine, I examine my entire day and go back over what I've done and said, hiding nothing from myself, passing nothing by. (Seneca, *De ira* 3.36.1-3)[2]

In this passage Seneca is not concerned with confessing his sins in the way in which subsequent Christian writers were, Foucault claimed, but rather with identifying his faults and addressing them. Seneca's motivation is not to uncover a hidden truth about himself; it is to live a more consistent, virtuous, and happy life. The process of self-examination he describes here is simply a tool or technique put to work in the service of that goal.

Foucault became especially interested in Greco-Roman techniques such as this. He called these 'technologies of the self', by which he meant practices aimed at self-transformation (Foucault 2016: 25; cf. 1997: 225). Some of these practices, such as the one described by Seneca, presupposed an attitude of self-monitoring, through which the individual could identify mistakes in order to fix

[2] I quote from the translation in Kaster and Nussbaum 2010: 91. Foucault discusses this passage in his 1980 lectures in Dartmouth and Berkeley (2016: 29-30) and his 1981 lectures in Louvain (2014a: 97), as well as his 1979-80 Collège de France lecture course, 'On the Government of the Living' (Foucault 2014b: 239-41).

them. Central to this, Foucault suggested, was an attitude of constant vigilance (Foucault 1988: 41; cf. 1997: 232).[3]

In his accounts of these Greco-Roman practices Foucault drew on a wide range of texts from the first two centuries AD but Stoic authors predominate: alongside Seneca he discusses or mentions Musonius Rufus, Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius.[4] The attitude of attention to the self that he found in the works of these Roman Stoics drew, he suggested, on an earlier Greek tradition of thought that had its origins in Socrates' famous pronouncement that one ought 'to take care of oneself' (*epimeleisthai heautou*).[5] However it was the Roman imperial period that became 'a kind of golden age in the cultivation of the self' (1988: 45). In what follows I want to focus on one aspect of this Roman Stoic attitude of attention that Foucault placed at the heart of the idea of cultivation of the self. I shall call this 'mindfulness'. My primary aim is simply to examine the attitude of attention or mindfulness that we find in the Roman Stoics Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius. In order to do this I shall contrast it with modern versions of mindfulness, suggesting that it differs from the latter both in terms of its object of attention and the scope of its goal. This will lead me to

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[3] For a detailed history of the complex development of Foucault's thought in this period see Elden 2016. As he shows, Foucault's original interest in sexuality developed into an interest in the genealogy of the modern subject via a concern with governmentality (2016: 92-111, esp. 98). Foucault's work on both sexuality and governmentality fed into his subsequent work on technologies of the self. Elden also highlights the centrality of the notion of confession or avowal (*aveu*) for much of Foucault's work, from his earlier work on madness, through his concerns with sexuality, and into his late work on cultivation of the self (2016: 71-8, 112-33). This is especially evident in Foucault's 1982 Louvain lectures (in Foucault 2014a).

[4] Foucault also examines some non-Stoic authors from the period, notably Plutarch.

[5] This phrase comes from Plato's *First Alcibiades* (127e). In Plato's *Apology* (30a-b) Socrates prefers the formulation 'to take care of the soul' (*epimeleisthai tês psuchês*). See further Sellars 2003: 36-9.

differ from some of the existing literature that touches on the topic but also to confirm the account that Foucault gives in his later works.

2. Mindfulness

Foucault has not been the only person to return to the Stoics in recent years. Since the time he was writing there has been an upsurge in popular interest in Stoicism, also focused mainly on the Roman Stoics.[6] Whereas Foucault's interest was primarily historical, these new readers of the Roman Stoics seek to draw on Stoicism as a guide to living. A common theme in these more recent discussions has been to note a perceived affinity between Stoicism and modern mindfulness techniques that have been adapted from Buddhism (e.g. Irvine 2009: 107). The modern version of mindfulness, abstracted from its original context, promotes attention to one's immediate experiences in order to become 'more present' in one's life (Williams and Penman 2011: ix).[7] It is a practice of attention aimed at increasing health, happiness, and general wellbeing. As a practice it requires commitment on the part of practitioners.

A leading introduction to modern mindfulness describes the practice thus:

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[6] There have been numerous books on Stoicism as a practical guide to life, the most prominent of which is probably Irvine 2009. Note also the 'Stoicism Today' project based at the University of Exeter.

[7] As just one example I draw on Williams and Penman 2011, drawing on work done at the Oxford Mindfulness Centre at the University of Oxford, and inspired in part by earlier work by Jon Kabat-Zinn (the author of the preface, cited here). I make no claims here about Buddhism. I draw the contrast between modern mindfulness and Roman Stoic mindfulness simply to bring the latter into focus. My aim is simply to highlight a difference in scope, and not to suggest that one is better than the other.

> A typical meditation consists of focusing your full attention on your breath as it flows in and out of your body [...]. Focusing on each breath in this way allows you to observe your thoughts as they arise in your mind and, little by little, to let go of struggling with them. You come to realise that thoughts come and go of their own accord; that *you* are not your thoughts. (Williams and Penman 2011: 4-5)

The aim of this is to see that thoughts are transient and to learn to observe those thoughts without criticism, treating them as something akin to passing weather. The hope is that this will reduce the amount that the practitioner focuses on negative thoughts, which can lead to excessive rumination, anxiety, stress, and even depression. Anxious thoughts about the past or the future should be left to drift by, all the while keeping one's attention on the presence of one's breathing in the immediate moment. In this sense we might say that the advice is simply to relax and to let go of passing thoughts, becoming aware of one's thoughts rather than actively thinking: 'Thinking is not all there is to conscious experience. The mind is bigger and more encompassing than thought alone.' (Williams and Penman 2011: 11)

The claim common among the Roman Stoics that one ought to keep one's attention not on the past or the future but rather on the present moment looks as if it might be proposing something similar:

> If, as I say, you separate from this directing mind of yours the baggage of passion, time future and time past, and make yourself like Empedocles' 'perfect round rejoicing in the solitude it enjoys', and seek only to perfect this life you are living in the present, you

> will be able at least to live out the time remaining before your death calmly, kindly, and at peace with the god inside you. (*Med.* 12.3)[8]

Did Roman Stoics in comments such as this one from Marcus Aurelius share an attitude close to the one proposed by modern mindfulness? Although there are some affinities, I shall argue that there are also important differences. In particular I shall suggest that while modern versions of mindfulness encourage one to pay attention to one's immediate experience in place of one's thoughts, what I am calling Roman Stoic mindfulness had a quite different focus. Although the Roman Stoics did encourage a similar kind of attention to oneself, they also proposed that one continually keep in mind a series of key philosophical ideas so that they can guide one's action at each moment. To put it hopefully not too simply, if modern mindfulness proposes a shift in focus from negative thoughts to experiences, Roman Stoic mindfulness attempts to replace unthinking actions shaped by habits with conscious actions shaped by philosophical principles that are always kept 'ready to hand' (*procheiros*).[9] In this sense it involves an attitude of constant vigilance, just as Foucault observed.

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[8] This and subsequent translations from the *Meditations* (*Med.*) come from Hammond 2006 (occasionally modified), which is based on the text in Farquharson 1944. The theme of living in the present moment recurs throughout the *Meditations*; see further Hadot 1998: 131-37 (where he connects it with the notion of attention) and, in relation to ancient philosophy more widely, Hadot 1995: 217-37.

[9] The notion of keeping philosophical ideas 'ready to hand' (*procheiros*) is commonplace in Roman Stoicism; see e.g. Musonius Rufus fr. 6 (Hense 1905: 25,14-26,5), Epictetus, *Diss.* 1.1.21, 1.27.6-7, 2.1.29, 3.10.1, 3.10.18, 3.11.5, 3.17.6, 3.18.1, 3.22.95, 3.24.103, 3.24.115, 4.1.128, 4.3.1, 4.4.34, 4.4.39, 4.12.1, 4.12.15, Marcus Aurelius, *Med.* 3.13, 4.3, 5.6, 6.48, 7.1, 7.64, 9.42, 11.4, 12.24. Note also Simplicius, *in Epicteti Enchiridion* Preaf. 18-20 (Hadot 1996: 193).

3. Attention

The key term in the Roman Stoic texts I want to consider is 'attention' (*prosochê*). This is not a particularly common word and appears mostly among authors of the first two centuries AD, including Epictetus, Hierocles, Dio Chrysostom, Plutarch, and Lucian (Liddell and Scott 1940: 1522). One of those instances, in Plutarch, is in fact from a quotation of the early Stoic Chrysippus in which he says that there are many things that are not worthy of our attention, such as the choice between a fake or a genuine coin.[10] Sadly the passage does not go on to report what Chrysippus did think was worthy of attention. Elsewhere Plutarch gives his own example: it is important to pay attention and to reflect just before we speak, saying first to ourselves,

> 'What is this remark that is so pressing and importunate? What object is my tongue panting for? What good will come of its being said or what ill of its being suppressed?' (*De garrulitate* 514e, in Helmbold 1939: 464-65)

As we shall see shortly, this example of paying attention to what we are about to say or do fits well with the Roman Stoic attitude towards attention outlined by Epictetus at around the same time. Other instances of *prosochê* in this period, in works by Hierocles, Lucian, and Dio Chrysostom, are all made in contexts not

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[10] See Plutarch, *De Stoicorum repugnantiis* 1045e (Cherniss 1976: 510-13).

relevant here.[11] The only other texts that use the term in the sense under discussion are by Roman Stoics.

4. Epictetus

Turning first to Epictetus, there are a number of passing references to attention (*prosochê*) that overlap with the modern version of mindfulness outlined earlier. In his *Discourses* Epictetus says that 'the first and greatest task of the philosopher is to test the impressions and discriminate between them' (*Diss.* 1.20.7).[12] This is achieved by a continual attitude of attention to one's thought processes (*Diss.* 1.20.10). Elsewhere he exhorts an interlocutor to 'pay attention to yourself' (*prosochê eph' hauton*), which he suggests primarily involves careful observation of one's impressions (*Diss.* 3.16.15). In his account of the ideal Cynic he suggests that although such a person is indifferent to external circumstances, they exercise considerable attention on their own impressions and judgements (*Diss.* 3.22.104). As with modern mindfulness, in these passages Epictetus encourages a fairly general attitude of attention to one's inner thought processes.

However, we find something quite different when we turn to a chapter in the *Discourses* entitled 'On Attention' (*Peri prosochês*),[13] which is the only extended discussion of attention in any of the surviving ancient texts. This chapter opens

[11] See Hierocles, *Elementa ethica* 5.5 (Ramelli 2009: 12-13), Lucian, *Quomodo historia conscribenda sit* 53 (Kilburn 1959: 64-65), and Dio Chrysostom, *Orationes* 34.27 (Cohoon and Crosby 1940: 362-63). Cf. Sorabji 2000: 13.

[12] For text and translation of the *Discourses* (*Dissertationes* (*Diss.*)) see Oldfather 1925-28. References are to the standard divisions of book, chapter, and section.

[13] This chapter is *Diss.* 4.12 (Oldfather 1925-28: II, 422-29).

by insisting on the importance of attention for all human activities. Whatever we might intend to do, it will be better done with an attitude of attention. By contrast nothing is improved by inattention (*Diss*. 4.12.4). Epictetus illustrates this in his typical Socratic fashion (cf. Long 2002) by referring to examples of craftsmen:

> Does the inattentive carpenter do his work more accurately? The inattentive helmsman steer more safely? And is there any other of the lesser functions of life which is done better by inattention? (*Diss*. 4.12.5)

So, attention improves everything. That is one reason to maintain an attitude of attention at all times. Another reason, Epictetus suggests, is that once we lose our attention and let our minds wander off, we are no longer easily able to recover it:

> When you relax your attention for a little while, do not imagine that whenever you choose you will recover it, but bear this in mind, that because of the mistake which you have made today, your condition must necessarily be worse as regards everything else. (*Diss*. 4.12.1; cf. 4.12.6)

Before long, he adds, a habit of inattention develops, which will require considerable work to undo.

At first glance this looks like it might share much in common with modern versions of mindfulness. The carpenter or helmsman who is fully in the present

moment and focused on the task in front of him will no doubt work better than one distracted by extraneous thoughts. However, although Epictetus would probably agree with that statement, it is not what he has in mind here. The sort of attention he is concerned with is not on the task at hand, even if he claims that greater attention will improve whatever one happens to be doing at the present moment, but in fact on something else. The things to which we ought to pay attention are, he says,

> First, these general principles, and you ought to have them at your command (*procheiros*), and without them neither go to sleep, nor rise up, nor drink, nor eat, nor mingle with men; I mean the following: [1] No man is master of another's moral purpose (*proairesis*); and [2] In its sphere alone are to be found one's good and evil. It follows, therefore, [3] that no one has power either to procure me good, or to involve me in evil, but I myself alone have authority over myself in these matters. (*Diss*. 4.12.7-8)

Epictetus is suggesting that in whatever task a person undertakes they ought to keep these three philosophical principles ready to hand (*procheiros*). The continual attitude of attention that Epictetus insists is vital is not to the task itself but to these principles that ought to inform everything a person does. The goal underlying and uniting these principles is autonomy or freedom (*eleutheria*), which for Epictetus is an essential component of a good life. If someone is able to live a life informed by these principles then no external agent or event will have the power to upset their equanimity. If anyone suffers from mental disturbance (*tarachê*), this is simply due to a lack of training in developing the appropriate attention to these fundamental philosophical

principles (*Diss*. 4.12.13). This is a skill that can be learned, like any other art or craft, echoing Epictetus's wider conception of philosophy as an art of living (*Diss*. 4.12.14; cf. *Diss*. 1.15.2 with Sellars 2003).

In this spirit of training, Epictetus repeats the point he has just made and his three principles. We ought to keep these principles ready to hand (*procheiros*) and do nothing without them (*Diss*. 4.12.15). These principles should always come first. However he adds some further guidance that also ought to be continually kept in mind:

> And next we must remember [4] who we are, and [5] what is our designation, and [6] must endeavour to direct our actions, in the performance of our duties, to meet the possibilities of our social relations. (*Diss*. 4.12.16)

This second set of principles is concerned with our social roles and relations. Throughout the *Discourses* Epictetus says that one ought to conform to such roles. It is worth noting, though, that here he puts them in second place. He also insists on the primacy of the first set of principles by describing them as God-given (*Diss*. 4.12.11-12), which for a Stoic could equally be rephrased as given by Nature. The fundamental principles that ought to inform all our actions refer to our natural constitution, but we ought to pay attention to our social obligations as well.

Epictetus concludes by acknowledging that it is impossible for a human being to be completely free from fault. However it is possible to strive to be as free from fault as one can. In order to do that, one must never relax one's attention (*Diss*.

4.12.19). A continual state of vigilance is required. Yet as we have seen, this vigilant attention is not to oneself in a very general sense but specifically to the philosophical principles that ought to guide one's actions.[14]

5. Marcus Aurelius

We find further examples of this concern with attention (*prosochê*) in the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius. If Epictetus outlines the theory, then Marcus gives us some examples of what this might involve in practice. Indeed, the *Meditations* as a whole might be read as a series of written exercises designed to remind the author of the central philosophical ideas that he wants to keep ready to hand. It is not difficult to see the imprint of Epictetus on the *Meditations*, and we know that Marcus read the *Discourses* and admired them (cf. *Med.* 1.7 with Hadot 1998: 59-70).

Like Epictetus, Marcus warns against the dangers of letting one's attention wander off:

> Do externals tend to distract you? Then give yourself the space to learn some further good lesson, and stop your wandering. (*Med.* 2.7)

He also takes up the analogy with craftsmen:

> Just as doctors always have their instruments and knives at hand (*procheiros*) for any emergency treatment, so you should have your

[14] On this point I differ from the views in Bonhöffer 1894: 147 and Sorabji 2000: 13, 252.

> doctrines (*dogmata*) ready for the recognition of the divine and human, and the performance of every action, even the smallest, in consciousness of the bond which unites the two. (*Med.* 3.13)

In one passage, particularly interesting in the present context, Marcus picks up on the fundamental principles outlined by Epictetus:

> Whenever you suffer pain, have ready to hand (*procheiros*) the thought that pain is not a moral evil and does not harm your governing intelligence (*dianoia*): pain can do no damage either to its rational or to its social nature. [...] Remember too that many things we find disagreeable are the unrecognized analogues of pain – drowsiness, for example, oppressive heat, loss of appetite. So when you find yourself complaining of any of these, say to yourself, 'You are giving in to pain.' (*Med.* 7.64)

Despite using different words (e.g. *dianoia*, in place of *proairesis*), Marcus is making the same basic points as Epictetus: i) pain, insofar as it is external, is neither good nor evil and ii) pain cannot damage or control the ruling part of the mind. If someone can attend to these principles at all times, then they will maintain their autonomy and freedom from mental disturbance. Marcus also makes a nod here towards Epictetus's distinction between our natural-rational and social natures.

A couple of paragraphs later in the *Meditations* Marcus comments:

> The way nature has blended you into the compound whole [of soul and body] does not prevent you drawing a boundary around yourself and keeping what is your own in your own control. Always remember this: remember too that the happy life depends on very little. (*Med.* 7.67)

Here Marcus is reminding himself to pay attention to some key philosophical ideas, taking up the content of Epictetus's basic principles, namely that i) the ruling part of the mind is completely within one's control and ii) that nothing else is required for a good life. Although Marcus and Epictetus formulate things differently, the basic underlying ideas are the same.

Marcus also gives us a slightly fuller account of the role of attention to philosophical principles. In *Meditations* 4.3, which one commentator has described as the key to the whole work (Brunt 1974: 3; cf. Rutherford 1989: 29), he outlines a process of retreat aimed at refocusing his attention on those principles before returning to everyday life (cf. Gill 2013: 120-21). He describes this as a period of repair or renewal (*ananeôsis*). The aim of this retreat is to reflect on basic and fundamental philosophical ideas:

> No retreat offers someone more quiet and relaxation than that into his own mind (*psuchê*), especially if he can dip into thoughts there which put him at immediate and complete ease: and by ease I simply mean a well-ordered life. So constantly give yourself this retreat, and renew yourself. The doctrines you will visit there should be few and fundamental, sufficient at one meeting to wash

> away all your pain and send you back free of resentment at what you must rejoin. (*Med.* 4.3)

Marcus then goes on to tell us the doctrines he has in mind to which we ought to pay attention. The first set relate to social relations with other people:

> Recall the conclusion that rational creatures are born for each other's sake, that tolerance is a part of justice, that wrongdoing is not deliberate. (ibid.)

A second set are concerned with human finitude:

> Look at the speed of universal oblivion, the gulf of immeasurable time both before and after, the vacuity of applause, the indiscriminate fickleness of your apparent supporters, the tiny room in which all this is confined. The whole earth is a mere point in space: what a minute cranny within this is your own habitation, and how many and what sort will sing your praises here. (ibid.)

Marcus sees this period of retreat as an opportunity to remind himself of these basic ideas, presumably in response to or in order to ward off falling into inattention. One might also see it as an opportunity to work through the philosophical arguments in support of these principles, that is, to remind himself of the reasons to hold them as well as their content. Marcus concludes his own reflection by echoing one of the basic principles we saw earlier in Epictetus – the autonomy of the ruling part of the mind – while adding his own concern with the impermanence of things:

> And here are two of the most immediately useful thoughts you will dip into. First, that things cannot touch the mind (*psuchê*): they are external and inert; anxieties can only come from your internal judgement. Second, that all these things you see will change almost as you look at them, and then will be no more. Constantly bring to mind all that you yourself have already seen changed. The universe is change; life is judgement. (ibid.)

The two ideas that Marcus focuses on here are summarized as briefly as possible in the final sentence: *ho kosmos alloiôsis, ho bios hupolêpsis*. This is presumably in order to aid their memorization. After the period of retreat during which Marcus works through the content of the philosophical principles he ought to keep ready to hand, he returns back to his everyday life with these two ideas (taken from Stoic physics and epistemology respectively) firmly in his mind so that they can inform whatever it is he has to do. It is to these principles that he directs his attention.

6. Summary Thus Far

We now have a clearer picture of how Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius conceived the importance and role of attention. I suggested earlier that we might call this a type of mindfulness. However it is a type of mindfulness different from the version abstracted from Buddhism that has become popular in recent years. That version is often presented as a process of removing negative thoughts by focusing attention on one's immediate experiences instead. The Roman Stoic version differs from this in two ways. First, it is concerned not merely with

removing negative thoughts but, more importantly, with imbedding positive philosophical doctrines. Thus it is not simply a technique that anyone can practice, no matter what their existing beliefs might be (cf. Williams and Penman 2011: 6); rather it is a process of reaffirming or rewriting one's philosophical beliefs. Second, the attention it advocates is not to one's experiences or even to one's thought processes but instead to the positive philosophical doctrines that ought always to be ready to hand.

It is also worth noting that although Epictetus presents this as a task aimed at overcoming bad habits, he is not proposing to replace them with good habits. Indeed, any habit, however well formed, is ultimately an unthinking mode of behaviour, and this is precisely what Epictetus wants to challenge. Whatever someone does, he insists, ought to be done with his core philosophical ideas fully present in the mind.

7. The Purpose of Stoic Mindfulness

Proponents of modern mindfulness are fairly clear about the purpose of their technique: to reduce a variety of forms of mental distress, including stress and anxiety, and to promote happiness (Williams and Penman 2011: 5-6). The Roman Stoics were also clear about the purpose of their version of mindfulness. Two reasons recur again and again. The first concerns inner resolve: combating procrastination and already-formed bad habits. Epictetus closes his chapter on attention by making this sort of point:

> When you say 'Tomorrow I will pay attention (*prosochê*)', I would have you know that this is what you are saying: 'Today I will be

> shameless, tactless, abject; it will be in the power of other men to grieve me; I will get angry today, I will give way to envy.' Just see all the evils that you are allowing yourself. But if it is good for you to pay attention tomorrow, how much better is it today. (*Diss*. 4.12.20-21)

The second reason concerns the influence of others on us in social situations, as Epictetus outlines in his *Handbook*:

> Avoid entertainments given by outsiders and by persons ignorant of philosophy; but if an appropriate occasion arises for you to attend, be on the alert (*procheiros*) to avoid lapsing into the behaviour of such laymen. For you may rest assured, that, if a man's companion be dirty, the person who keeps close company with him must of necessity get a share of his dirt, even though he himself happens to be clean. (*Ench*. 33.6, in Oldfather 1925-28)

The Roman Stoics suggest that one ought to remain in a continual state of vigilance in order to avoid these two dangers. Both are dangers because they undermine one's ability to act virtuously according to philosophical principles. Thus, ultimately, the final purpose of Roman Stoic mindfulness is to enable one to live a good and virtuous life. This shares with modern mindfulness the goal of mental equanimity but has this further ethical goal as well. Thus while we can say that both versions are practices that require commitment, they differ in their scope.

8. Back to Foucault

I opened by suggesting that this Roman Stoic attitude of mindfulness was central to the notion of the cultivation of the self that preoccupied Foucault in his later works. As I said then, Foucault claimed that this involved an attitude of continual vigilance. That claim has been borne out by what we have seen in the texts of Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius. Foucault also rightly stressed the role of philosophical principles in this process. In a lecture entitled 'Subjectivity and Truth' from 1980 Foucault noted that in Greco-Roman philosophy:

> The objective of philosophical training is to arm the individual with a certain number of precepts which permit him to conduct himself in all circumstances of life without his losing mastery of himself or without losing tranquility of spirit, purity of body and soul. (2016: 28)

Foucault connected this with the role of self-monitoring in Roman Stoicism and how it differed from confession in the Christian tradition. When, for instance, Seneca or Marcus Aurelius reviewed their own faults, the motivation was not a confession of sins but rather the more mundane task of simply noting mistakes that reflected moments when the relevant philosophical principles had not been kept fully ready to hand (Foucault 2016: 31).

A further way in which this Roman Stoic monitoring differed from Christian confession, Foucault suggested, was that it was not concerned with uncovering a deep hidden truth within the individual (a hermeneutics of the self) but instead was part of a process designed to transform the self (a cultivation of the

self). Thus when he referred to 'the cultivation of the self' and to 'technologies of the self' that contribute to this process, what he had in mind was an approach to the subject that saw it as something to be moulded rather than uncovered (cf. Foucault 2016: 36). The wisdom of the Stoic sage, for example, is not some inner truth about the individual concerned but rather something forged through a series of practices and techniques. It is the product of hard work.

In an interview entitled 'On the Genealogy of Ethics' given a couple of years later, in 1983, Foucault insisted that his work on these Greco-Roman technologies of the self was simply part of his genealogical investigation into the origin of the modern subject and that there was no question of reviving them as a living option today (Foucault 1997: 256). In a further interview given the following year, 1984, Foucault suggested that it might in fact be possible to take inspiration from ancient practices, although only to create something new appropriate to our own contemporary situation (1997: 294-95). Yet in that same interview he also hinted that such technologies of the self could contribute to developing the subject as a site of resistance against external forces and so become a 'practice of freedom' (1997: 282-83). It is, he concluded, through self-mastery of the sort that we find Roman Stoic mindfulness that the individual can develop freedom from external forces (1997: 301).

Indeed, Foucault had already been explicit in his 1980 lecture about how his new interest in ancient technologies of the self might be integrated with his earlier reflections on power relations:

> Power consists in complex relations: these relations involve a set of rational techniques, and the efficiency of those techniques is due to

> a subtle integration of coercion-technologies and self-technologies. [...] In short, having studied the field of government by taking as my point of departure techniques of domination, I would like in years to come to study government – especially in the field of sexuality – starting from the techniques of the self. (Foucault 2016: 26)

This is not to suggest a simplistic opposition between external powers of domination versus internal technologies of the self, for Foucault also acknowledged the ways in which technologies of domination sometimes 'have recourse to processes by which the individual acts upon himself' and ways in which technologies of the self can become 'integrated into structures of coercion or domination' (Foucault 2016: 25). Thus, without committing himself to the revival of any particular ancient practices or beliefs, Foucault thought that the general idea of cultivation of the self via technologies of the self was consistent with his earlier work on power and could contribute something to thinking about power relations and freedom in the present day.

Indeed, in the second volume of *The History of Sexuality* Foucault suggested that these technologies of the self might form the basis for a new way to think about morality (Foucault 1986: 25-32). There he drew a contrast between prescriptive code-based moralities and other ethics-based moralities in which

> the emphasis is on the forms of relations with the self, on the methods and techniques by which he works them out, on the exercises by which he makes of himself an object to be known, and on the practices that enable him to transform his own mode of being. (Foucault 1986: 30)

The distinction that Foucault had in mind here shares something in common with the contrast between deontological ethics and virtue ethics in debates in the Anglophone world. For present purposes, however, it helps to bring into focus the function of the ancient technologies of the self with which Foucault became preoccupied. They formed part of an ethics grounded in the cultivation of the self.

9. Conclusions

My aim here has been to reflect on the notion of cultivation of the self by focusing in on one example of an ancient practice contributing to that goal, namely the attitude of attention or mindfulness proposed by the Roman Stoics Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius. Along the way I have contrasted this with modern versions of mindfulness, showing that both the object of attention and the goal of the process are different. As we have seen, the primary object of attention is not one's experiences or oneself as such but instead one's philosophical principles. This requires, as Foucault commented, an attitude of continual vigilance. The goal of this practice is virtuous action based upon those principles. Roman Stoic mindfulness, then, is a technique aimed at ethical self-transformation, unlike its modern counterpart, which is primarily aimed at overcoming distress. In this sense we can see how it might form part of a project of cultivation of the self.

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