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BECOMING A SUBJECT: THE CASE OF MICHEL FOUCAULT AND PAUL

I. Power and Subjection

The relationship between Paul and Michel Foucault is an uneasy one at best (some would say it is non-existent). I am not the first one to notice Paul's absence from Foucault's writings despite Foucault's intention to discuss Christianity, even early Christianity.¹ And yet, Paul's name crops up constantly when contemporary thinkers attempt to discuss Christianity and Foucault (the already oft-cited names of what is quickly becoming a holy trinity of people interested in both Foucault and Paul come to mind here: Alain Badiou, Giorgio Agamben, Slavoj Žižek; to which one could add at least Jacob Taubès). In this contribution, I bring together Foucault and Paul on the question of the constitution of the subject. In Foucault, one finds a challenging interpretation of the relation between power and self-constitution. I am using this analysis to discuss the way in which Paul navigates the tension between autonomy and subjection—a tension that one can identify across his letters, but that will be discussed here through an analysis of some passages in Romans (Rom 6–8 and 12–15). This allows one to construct a more complex picture of Pauline anthropology and of the use of power in Paul than is sometimes done in treatments of Paul influenced by a Foucauldian hermeneutics.²

In the second half of the 20th century, thinking about the subject—about the self, about the “I”—faced important challenges. Michel Foucault describes the philosophical atmosphere in which he was educated as heavily focused on the subject, as an entity that could ultimately give meaning to this world.³ In reaction

¹ To be precise, Paul does make at least a brief apparition in Foucault's body of work, at the end of his last lectures at the Collège de France, when he talks about the notion of *parrēsia* in the New Testament. See Michel Foucault, *Le Courage de la vérité. Le gouvernement de soi et des autres II. Cours au Collège de France (1983-1984)* (Paris: Gallimard-Le Seuil, 2009), 301.

² For example, Elizabeth A. Castelli, *Imitating Paul: A Discourse of Power* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster-John Knox, 1991).

³ Michel Foucault, “Interview with Michel Foucault,” in *Power: Essential Works of Foucault* (ed. J. D. Faubion; vol. 3 of Rabinow, *Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*),

to this emphasis on the subject, Foucault turned to Friedrich Nietzsche, along with Georges Bataille and Maurice Blanchot, with the aim of (re)discovering new ways of thinking about the subject, ways that would move away from a dependence on the subject to make sense of the world. Foucault sought ways of detaching the subject from itself; thus he asks: "can't there be experiences in the course of which the subject is no longer posited, in its constitutive relations, as what makes it identical with itself? Might there not be experiences in which the subject might be able to dissociate from itself, sever the relation with itself, lose its identity?"⁴ For Foucault, the notion of the constitution—and also of the disappearance—of the subject is related to knowledge, as the end of *The Order of Things* makes clear.⁵ Foucault's reflections on the constitution and the disappearance of the subject can explain his need to redefine the notion of power.⁶ Foucault's interest in power and in the subject should not be seen as two concurrent dimensions of his work; rather, reflections on the one cannot go without reflections on the other.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault begins to trace the shifts in his problematization of power, moving from sovereign power, displayed forcefully and publicly, notably in executions, to a more hidden and pervasive form of power, understood less as punishment and more as discipline. For Foucault, when punishment is executed publicly and theatrically, the force of the sovereign is displayed for all to see. One experiences power in a very obvious manner: "[the public execution] was a manifestation of force; or rather, it was justice as the physical, material and awesome force of the sovereign deployed there."⁷ According to Foucault, it is usually assumed that, when punishment is displaced

239-297, here 248: "In a philosophy like that of Sartre, the subject gives meaning to the world. That point was not called back in question. The subject dispenses significations."

⁴ Foucault, "Interview with Michel Foucault," 248.

⁵ See Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (unidentified collective translation; New York: Pantheon Books, 1971; repr., New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 387: "If those arrangements were to disappear as they appeared, if some event of which we can at the moment do no more than sense the possibility—without knowing either what its form will be or what it promises—were to cause them to crumble, as the ground of Classical thought did, at the end of the eighteenth century, then one can certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea."

⁶ In a later interview, Foucault explains that his interest has always been principally the subject, rather than power. See Michel Foucault, "Le Sujet et le Pouvoir", in *Dits et écrits* (ed. D. Defert and F. Ewald; 4 vols.; Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 4:223: "Ce n'est pas le pouvoir, mais le sujet qui constitue le thème de mes recherches." I am quite comfortable with accepting that explanation, even though many critics of Foucault find his later work on the self as less compelling than Foucault's earlier work on power. For me, approaching the work on power from the perspective of technologies of the self (rather than critiquing the work on technologies of the self from the perspective of the work on power) allows for a form of unity to be found in Foucault's work. I am ready to concede that this unity might be artificially obtained.

⁷ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison* (trans. A. Sheridan; New York: Vintage Books, 1995; repr. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 50.

from the public eye and understood less as the revenge of the sovereign and more as a means for the transformation of the prisoner, power becomes more humane and its force is lessened.⁸ A central aim in *Discipline and Punish* is to show that, in this new economics of punishment, power in no way disappears. Rather, it is re-arranged to become more efficient: "... although the new criminal legislation appears to be characterized by less severe penalties, a clearer codification, a marked diminution of the arbitrary, a more generally accepted consensus concerning the power to punish (in the absence of a more real division in its exercise), it is sustained in reality by an upheaval in the traditional economy of illegalities and a rigorous application of force to maintain their new adjustment."⁹

Concomitant with these new manifestations of power, Foucault sees the emergence of a constant need for policing.¹⁰ Various disciplines accompany this need for policing. As Foucault notes in *Discipline and Punish*, disciplines did not come into being in the 17th and 18th century.¹¹ They existed in fact already in "monasteries, armies, workshops," but Foucault remarks that in the 17th and 18th century, they became "general formulas of domination,"¹² aimed at creating docile bodies, which would be increasingly more useful and more obedient.¹³ A good part of Foucault's work in the 1970s will precisely be dedicated to an analysis of this new form of power, of its effects and strategies, what he came to call bio-power. With this new form of power also comes a new narrative of the constitution of the subject, subsequently developed in *The History of Sexuality*.

In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault mentions that the subject constituted by power is the one who obeys. Juridico-discursive power and the obedient subject go together.¹⁴ The establishment of a new analytics of power, focused less on law, prohibition and repressive power, and more on productive strategies of power modifies the manner in which one thinks not only about the subject, the subjected self, but also about resistances to mechanisms of power-something of which Foucault was well aware. Instead of presenting the subject as being absolutely submitted to a power in the hands of the state or of the king, Foucault sees the subject as engaged in multiple relationships of power, on which she depends to construct, deconstruct and reconstruct her identity.¹⁵ In these relationships, Foucault describes each individual's responsibility in the following manner: "The conclusion would be that the political, ethical, social, philosophical

⁸ See Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 74, for example: "Instead of taking revenge, criminal justice should simply punish."

⁹ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 89.

¹⁰ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 87.

¹¹ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 137.

¹² Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 137.

¹³ See Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 138.

¹⁴ See Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* vol. 1, 85: "A legislative power on one side, and an obedient subject on the other."

¹⁵ See for example the reflections Foucault develops in "Afterword: The Subject and Power" (in Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* [2d ed.; Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983], 208-226).

problem of our days is not to try to liberate the individual from the state, and from the state's institutions, but to liberate us both from the state and from the type of individualization which is linked to the state. We have to promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of individuality which has been imposed on us for several centuries.¹⁶ Foucault explores possibilities for new forms of subjectivity in his later work, where he is interested in finding "how the subject constitutes itself in an active fashion through practices of the self,"¹⁷ rather than focus on the way in which the subject might be constituted by a coercive system, be it the prison or the madhouse. In these practices aimed at controlling one's self, Foucault tries to present a positive content to the notion of resistances inside power relationships. It is not only about rejecting who one is or who one is made to be (the subject constituted by external relationships of power), it is also about positively and creatively constructing a self, inventing a self whose life can truly be considered a work of art.¹⁸ These multiple resistances are available to the subject inside the relationships of power themselves. The subject is not stepping outside of power to establish spaces of resistances. Rather, inside these relationships of power themselves, resistances demand to be created. The relationships of power become more than something that the subject needs to oppose or escape time and again. Rather, power itself, and relationships of power, become necessary to the existence of the subject and to the possibility of creating resistances.¹⁹

¹⁶ Foucault, "Afterword: The Subject and Power," 216.

¹⁷ Foucault, Michel Foucault, "The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom," in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth: Essential Works of Foucault* (ed. Paul Rabinow; vol. 1 of *Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*, ed. Paul Rabinow; 3 vols.; New York: The New Press, 1997-2000), 281-301, here 291.

¹⁸ See for example James W. Bernauer, *Michel Foucault's Force of Flight. Toward an Ethics for Thought* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press International, 1990), 183. On the concept of life as a work of art, see for example Foucault's reflections in Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" in *The Foucault Reader*, (ed. Paul Rabinow; New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 32-50, here 41. Also published in Rabinow, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, 303-319. I am quoting from *The Foucault Reader*. In French: Michel Foucault, "Qu'est-ce que les Lumières?" in *Dits et écrits*, (ed. D. Defert and F. Ewald; 4 vols.; Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 4:562-578. Also, Michel Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress," in Rabinow, *The Foucault Reader*, 340-372. Also in Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (2d ed.; Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), 229-252, and in Rabinow, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, 253-280. I am quoting the version found in *The Foucault Reader*. This was later translated in French and the French translation was reworked by Foucault: "À propos de la généalogie de l'éthique: un aperçu du travail en cours," in *Dits et écrits*, 4:609-631. See for example 350: "Couldn't everyone's life become a work of art? Why should the lamp or the house be an art object, but not our life?"

¹⁹ See Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power. Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 2: "... power is not simply what we opposed but also, in a strong sense, what we depend on for our existence and what we harbor and preserve in the beings that we are."

As Judith Butler has indicated, power, understood thus, does not remain “external, pressed upon the subject, pressing the subject into subordination” rather, it contributes to the constitution of the “subject’s self-identity.”²⁰ In the role that subjection plays in the constitution of the self, one needs to redraw the boundaries of the categories of autonomy and subjection and to redefine the opposition between the two entities. The subject, which is often seen as necessary for agency, is in fact “also understood to be an *effect* of subjection.”²¹ As a result of that complex relationship between subjection and self-constitution, Butler proposes a redefinition of subjection inspired by Foucault’s work on power: “a power *exerted on* a subject, subjection is nevertheless a power *assumed by* the subject, an assumption that constitutes the instrument of that subject’s becoming.”²² Subjection and self-agency are no longer simply opposed, rather, as Butler writes, the “subject might yet be thought as deriving its agency from precisely the power it opposes.”²³

Ambivalence and complicity are at the center of this understanding of power and agency. When trying to redefine a new understanding of the subject, this combination is interesting and one can find it at work inside Paul’s letter to the Romans. In contrast to some of the Foucauldian readings of Paul—which see Paul as exercising a form of sovereign power on his addressees, a power coming from the top, functioning mainly through imitation and aimed at disciplining the bodies and the practices of the young Christ believers in the communities Paul has established²⁴—I suspect that power plays an ambivalent role in Paul’s relationships with his communities and functions at multiple levels, delineating a complex bond between autonomy and subjection, a bond that Paul accepts with ease. In contrast to the power of the disciplines, which aim at automatic obedience, where a particular signal automatically elicits a particular response,²⁵

²⁰ Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 3.

²¹ Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 11.

²² Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 11.

²³ Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 17.

²⁴ See especially Castelli, *Imitating Paul* and Stephen D. Moore, *God’s Beauty Parlor and Other Queer Spaces in and around the Bible* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2001) and *Poststructuralism and the New Testament. Derrida and Foucault at the Foot of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994). In this issue, see Ronald Charles’s article, “The Report of 1 Corinthians 5 in Critical Dialogue with Foucault.”

²⁵ See for example what Foucault says about the commands needed to implement a discipline that creates a well-functioning machinery out of individual bodies (*Discipline and Punish*, 166): “This carefully measured combination of forces requires a precise system of command. All the activity of the disciplined individual must be punctuated and sustained by injunctions whose efficacy rests on brevity and clarity; the order does not need to be explained or formulated; it must trigger off the required behaviour and that is enough. From the master of discipline to him who is subjected to it the relation is one of signalization: it is a question not of understanding the injunction but of perceiving the signal and reacting to it immediately, according to a more or less artificial, prearranged code. Place the bodies in a little world of signals to each of which is attached a single, obligatory response: it is a technique of training, of *dressage*, that ‘despotically excludes in everything the least representation, and the smallest murmur’; the disciplined soldier ‘begins to obey whatever he is ordered to do;

the type of obedience that Paul is seeking to establish through various techniques of power is a creative and imaginative obedience, where the subject needs to find her own way of being obedient. The docile body which is created through disciplines becomes here a body disciplined so as to show creativity in its obedience (Rom 12:1-2 for example).

In the relationship that Paul establishes with his communities, power is less a unilateral force employed by the apostle and more a network of relationships that interact in dynamic ways. Before proceeding to analyze the relationship between Paul and his communities, we should first consider more closely the manner in which the individual is constituted through subjection. Romans 6-8 offers a first place to present Paul's understanding of the construction of the self.

Power(s) and Paul's Construction of the Subject (Rom 6-8 and Rom 12-15)

In Butler's reflections on *Discipline and Punish*, the notion of subjection, of *assujetissement*, plays a central role. Using Foucault, she sees *assujetissement* as a key notion for establishing the link between subjection and autonomy: "*assujetissement* denotes both the becoming of the subject and the process of subjection—one inhabits the figure of autonomy only by becoming subjected to a power, a subjection which implies a radical dependency."²⁶ The worldview which emerges in the background of Paul's letters is traversed by powers taking hold of persons and dictating their behaviors as well as allegiances. In Romans 7, for example, the reader witnesses an epic battle between the cosmic powers of sin, of the law and of God, and one of the outcomes of the battle is the constitution of the subject, through subjection to the appropriate power.

While it is attractive to modern readers to interpret Romans 7 as Paul's introspective analysis of his conflicted inner life, before he became a Christ believer,²⁷ it is generally agreed that Paul is in fact developing a reflection on the relationship of sin and law, and specifically, a defense of the role of the law in the emergence of sin and an inquiry into the law's inability to offer a solution to the problem of sin.²⁸ However, it can also be read in order to determine the manner

his obedience is prompt and blind; an appearance of indocility, the least delay would be a crime' (Boussanelle, 2)."

²⁶ Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 83.

²⁷ Krister Stendahl's now famous article "Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West," *HTR* 56 (1963): 199-215; repr. in *Paul Among Jews and Gentiles and Other Essays*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 78-96, went a long way in asking scholars to move away from a reading of biblical writers in general and Paul in particular that was preoccupied by contemporary issues. See for example this statement ("Paul and the Introspective Conscience," 95): "we should venture to suggest that the West for centuries has wrongly surmised that the biblical writers were grappling with problems which no doubt are ours, but which never entered their consciousness."

²⁸ See for example for this reading: Neil Elliott, *The Rhetoric of Romans. Argumentative Constraint and Strategy and Paul's "Dialogue with Judaism"* (JSNT.SS 45; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), 245 and Luke T. Johnson, *Reading Romans. A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Macon, Ga.: Smyth&Helwys, 2001), 116-122.

in which Paul sees power at work in the construction of the self. When Paul takes up the relationship of sin and law, he does so in the anthropological framework he has set up in chapter 6 and that he will modify slightly in chapter 8. In chapter 6, this anthropological framework describes Paul's addressees as slaves. In the life that preceded their union with Christ, human beings were enslaved to sin (Rom 6:6). This enslavement should not be conceived simply as an obligation to serve a particular master, even though it is also that. Rather, as the metaphors of Rom 7:17.20 make clear, in slavery, the master truly inhabits the slave's body and mind. An outside power takes hold of the body of the slave and dwells (*oikēō*) within her. The slave then becomes a representative for her master, and is forced to act on the master's behalf and to conform her own will to the will of the master.

Slavery is thus not only a matter of obedience, but also a matter of identity. The identity of the slave is decided by the identity of the master, and the slave comes to represent the master.²⁹ This intimate connection between master and slave also helps to lend another dimension to the violence of the expressions used by Paul (6:2 "we ... died to sin;" 6:4 "we have been buried with him;" 6:6 "our old self was crucified") to describe the passage from one master to another. It is necessary for the old identity of the person to be destroyed completely in order to be recreated under the authority of a new master. One has to die to escape a previous master (see also the point made by 7:1-4). The power of the new master allows for the re-creation of the person, still a slave, but a slave to whom a new identity has been given because of her relationship to a new master.

When Paul develops his understanding of the person as anchored in its relationship to a master, he indicates the level to which subjection to a pervasive power is central to his understanding of the subject. Autonomy of any sort is not an option for the individual as Paul conceives her. Rather, the subject is destined to a life of service. Both old and new life are services, as Gerd Theissen notes.³⁰ Consequently it appears that we have here a perfect example of a subject constituted by power. The subject only exists because of its relationship to power: "subjection is, literally, the *making* of a subject, the principle of regulation according to which a subject is formulated or produced. Such subjection is a kind

²⁹ This is in keeping with the conception of the good slave in the Roman world. See for example J. Albert Harrill, *Slaves in the New Testament: Literary, Social and Moral Dimensions* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 21: "The Roman notion of mastery defined the ideal slave not in terms of obedience to individual commands of the master but in terms of having accepted the master's wishes so fully that the slave's innermost self could anticipate the master's wishes and take the initiative. Romans did not want automatons for their slaves"; 23: "Rather than merely following individual orders in mechanical fashion, the good slave (*servus frugi*) completed and developed what the master had only suggested or even unconsciously desired—a task that in the practice of Roman slaveholding encouraged the actual slave to develop moral intuition."

³⁰ Gerd Theissen, *Psychological Aspects of Pauline Theology* (trans. J. P. Gavin; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 182. Theissen also remarks that these two services are in fact quite different.

of power that not only unilaterally *acts on* a given individual as a form of domination, but also *activates* or forms the subject.³¹ Without a master to serve, there would simply be no subject and no identity given to the person. With such an understanding of the subject, autonomy and self-agency disappear, and Paul presents this disappearance of self-agency in an anguished manner in 7:14-25. The “I” inhabited by sin can will the good, but is utterly incapable of achieving it (7:18), revealing that the “I” no longer belongs to itself (7:20) and has, for all purposes, lost its capacity to act on its own. Subjection is no longer accompanied by the constitution of a self who would in fact be the autonomous subject of her own actions. For Paul, the slave can only be liberated from this situation by divine intervention from the outside (7:24-25). Autonomous resistance is no longer an option, because the self has fallen entirely into the hands of the power of sin.

If liberation occurs through outside intervention, the new self simply becomes the slave of another master; power changes hands, the identity of the subject is transformed because of the new master, but the fact of subjection has not been changed. There is no ambivalence between subjection and autonomy; autonomy is simply not an option. However, Paul modifies the use of the metaphor of slavery when he goes into the description of new life, life under the authority of the spirit.³² In 6:19, Paul, when developing the contrast between slavery to sin and slavery to righteousness, indicates that he is “speaking in human terms because of your natural limitations,” hinting that the metaphor of slavery might not be completely appropriate to describe the conditions of the Christ believers in the new life gained through Christ’s death and resurrection.

In 8:15-17, Paul proposes a language more adapted to the manner in which he understands the conditions of human beings who are experiencing the new life in the spirit. The Christ-believers are no longer in a relationship of slavery to God; rather, they have received a spirit of adoption, which enables them to enjoy a relationship of kinship with God. This point is made in an even more forceful manner in Gal 4:1-7, which presents the evolution from slaves to children of God.³³ At first, the people of God were no better than slaves, serving under the

³¹ Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 85.

³² Who the master actually is in the new life is not completely clear, in Paul’s description in Romans. Paul writes that his addressees’ master is “righteousness” (6:18.19) but he also describes them as being “enslaved to God” (6:22), as belonging “to him who has been raised from the dead” (7:4), as “slaves... in the new life of the Spirit” (7:6).

³³ Gal 4:1-7: “¹My point is this: heirs as long as they are minors, are no better than slaves, though they are the owners of all the property; ²but they remain under guardians and trustees until the date set by the father. ³So with us; while we were minors, we were enslaved to the elemental spirits of the world. ⁴But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, ⁵in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. ⁶And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’ ⁷So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir through God.”

law (Gal 4:3). With the sending of Christ, however (Gal 4:4-5), the status of the people of God changed: no longer slaves, they became children of God, enabling Paul to conclude in Gal 4:7: "So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child, then also an heir through God." In this new status, the obedience that Paul envisages is not a contractual obedience, where the slave is a mere puppet in the hands of her master; rather Paul wants his addressees to flourish in a relationship of free obedience. Thus, the Christ-believers are given power, through the gift of the spirit, so that they can now freely embody the demands of the law. In contrast to a situation where they were forced to act in the ways of sin, the Christ-believers are now in a position to freely embrace and enact the demands of the law. In this new relationship with God, made possible by Christ and by the spirit, a new understanding of subjection comes into play. Paul is comfortable with the idea that service in the hands of the right master can free the individual for autonomous action. In a way, Rom 6-8 reflects the manner in which God frees the subject so that she can now act on her own and be master of her own actions. The power that creates the subject is, in a way, now accompanied by the power of the constituted subject, even if at the same time the subject needs that initial creative power to emerge as an autonomous power.³⁴

In that context, subjection is not experienced as a distressing situation, which puts the subject at odds with herself—in the manner in which it was when sin was the master—rather it allows for peace (8:6) and life (8:11). Subjection thus is not just about serving a master, but, in serving the right master, Paul argues that the self is reconciled with itself and freed for meaningful actions in the world. In its action in the world, the self has to represent the authority and *ethos* of the master (see 8:4 for a general formulation of the principle but also 12:2; 13:14; 15:5.7 for specific instances) but the self is invited to do so with creativity and freedom.

The form of the moral exhortations that Paul develops in Romans 12:1–15:13 is essential to understand the manner in which subjection also leads to greater autonomy for the subject and to a sense of self-agency. In the opening verses of what is often seen as a section in which the apostle delineates the ethical consequences of the change of identity he has presented before (Rom 1–8), Paul presupposes certain abilities in his addressees, abilities which should allow them to develop a community that gives glory to God (15:6) and is centered around the needs of the weaker members of the community (14:1 and 15:1). In particular, Paul assumes that the Christ believers in Rome are able to use their bodies and their minds in ways that are pleasing to God (12:1-2). Autonomy and freedom are presumed in the opening verses of 12. Paul does not present his addressees with concrete commands about the way in which they should organize their

³⁴ See Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 14: "Power acts on the subject in at least two ways: first, as what makes the subject possible, the condition of its possibility and its formative occasion, and second, as what is taken up and reiterated in the subject's 'own' acting. As a subject of power (where 'of' connotes both 'belonging to' and 'wielding'), the subject eclipses the conditions of its own emergence; its eclipses power with power. The conditions not only make possible the subject but enter into the subject's formation. They are made present in the acts of that formation and in the acts of the subject that follow."

communities; rather he invites the members of the churches in Rome to display a spirit of initiative in the manner in which they will act to please God. They are invited to use their minds to discern the will of God (12:2). It is their responsibility to let their minds perceive new ways of organizing the world, ways that might be at odds with the predominant structures of their world, but that are aligned with God's plan for the world.³⁵

As children of God, they are gifted with a certain measure of freedom and it is their responsibility to use it. At the same time, Paul is clear about the limitations placed on that freedom. It does not belong as a right to the Christ-believers, rather it is given to them through divine intervention and its availability to believers depends upon a correct relationship with God. The Christ believers are limited further in their use of this freedom by the fact that their freedom should be employed in a manner that honors God and respects the needs of the weaker members of the community. At no point does Paul envisage an absolute freedom. Rather it is a relational concept for Paul, that provides, and at the same time limits, the autonomy of the Christ believers. There *is* autonomy, however. When Paul gives ethical instructions to his addressees in Romans, he avoids establishing specific and detailed rules or commandments. The Jewish law is not abolished, but it also is not read in a casuistic manner. Rather, Paul sketches the outline of an *ethos* that the Christ believers are asked to inhabit, individually and personally. The addressees do not find casuistry in Paul's instructions to them. They find an ethical orientation that should allow them to model their freedom creatively.

This rapid reading of Rom 6–8 and Rom 12–15 indicates that power functions at several levels for Paul. Clearly, power plays a central role in the constitution of the subject. It is power (whether one understands it as the power of sin or the power of God) and subjection to power that allows the self to find a relationship to herself. In Paul's view, this relationship can be in need of redemption, as is the case when sin takes over the person, or can be considered as a process of freeing. Clearly, however, the self cannot simply auto-affirm itself. It needs an outside power to come into existence. For Paul, when this power is divine power, mediated by Christ's death and resurrection and the spirit, the self has a chance of establishing itself as an authentic human being, able to use her freedom in a respectful manner for the good of the community and to honor God. The constitution of the self through divine domination institutes a tension between self-agency and subjection that is central to the understanding of the Pauline

³⁵ For example, the perception of hierarchical structures would be at odds with the organization of the Roman Empire. In the community, the weaker elements should be given predominance. Also at odds with the mentality surrounding the Christ-believers would be the treatment of enemies alluded to in 12:14,17,19 or the association with the lowly (12:6). Chapter 13:1–7, which is usually seen as endorsing the structure of the Empire, should not be misread in Paul's theory of the State. Rather, it indicates that Christ believers owe obedience to human authorities, not because of their natural right of allegiance, but in as much as they represent God's authority. In theory at least, this leaves the door open to resisting these authorities if they start acting in ways that are not in agreement with God's will.

subject. Paul argues that self-agency, which was nonexistent when the subject lived under the rule of sin (see the description in 7:15-25), can in fact only become a reality once the subject is freed from the hold of sin and leads a life characterized by its belonging to God. Self-agency is directly dependent upon divine intervention.

At the same time, once the Christ believers are restored, they do possess freedom to act and are given new and exciting possibilities to embody their new identity as children of God in the communities and in the world surrounding them. Because of that tension between freedom and service to God, Paul is forced to negotiate the various ways in which his addressees can use the freedom which he insists has been given to them. In these negotiations, I maintain that Paul is not unaware of workings of power. Rather, to use Foucauldian language, he inscribes his discussion of freedom and of liberation into networks of power and seeks to establish relationships of power which, though they do not suppress power, use it in respectful ways. In that context, inside the community of Christ believers, power relationships are completely redefined. Paul invites believers to establish relationships that embody alternative modes of relating to each other, and that place the needs of the weakest members first.

A similar tension between subjection and autonomy is at work in Paul's own relationship to his communities. Perhaps in a less apparent way in Romans, Paul expects his addressees to submit to his authority and to put the good of the community ahead of their own needs. In that display of authority, Paul can (and has been) read as displaying a form of bio-power over his congregations, with the purpose of disciplining his addressees and constructing communities that would be testimonies to Paul's example and authority. Scholars often note that Paul presumes that his communities need to imitate him and owe him obedience because of Paul's particular relationship to Christ. In Paul's exhortative language and in his calls to imitation, it is easy to depict him as an authoritarian apostle wary of the freedom that his addressees might demand. I suspect it might be more helpful to think of Paul as negotiating relationships of power in this case as well. Clearly, Paul is conscious of the authority that he can use over his communities. At the same time, however, in the identity he defines for his addressees, he also empowers the Christ believers to whom he writes with the same type of power that is given to him. In Romans, the Christ believers are not invited to conform their mind to Paul's mind; rather they are given means to identify the will of God. This ability, one they share with Paul, can lead them to imagine new and creative ways of being a community of children of God. The lively discussions that Paul had with his communities—to which we have a limited access through Paul's letters—show that Paul's use of power was far from being unilateral and imposed from the top. It is not, to use Foucauldian categories, a sovereign form of power, but rather is akin to a form of bio/disciplinary power, which is subject to shifts, changes and offers multiple points of resistance. It reveals that Paul and his communities were involved in dynamic relationships of power that had the potential for volatility, but also contained possibilities for the creation of truly new communities. The fact that we actually have access to these debates through the Pauline correspondence

attests to the fact that Paul was either unsuccessful at establishing or unwilling to establish an authoritative power structure over his communities.

Conclusion

When it comes to the constitution of the subject, Foucault is concerned primarily with rejecting the notion of the subject as a transcendental category, to which would belong a fixed identity. Rather, he wants to establish the need for multiple resistances, combined with a necessity to reject what one is forced to be, and a constant impetus to create oneself anew. As a subject who constantly has to recreate itself, the Foucauldian self is characterized by incompleteness, by unquietness and by the will and necessity to escape the notion of a given identity. Part of that creative process includes the need for the self to destroy what she already is in order to escape an imposed and created identity and to see unperceived possibilities. Foucault is preoccupied with delineating spaces in which to anchor that constant work of destruction and transgression, spaces in which the self can work on herself and shape herself into a work of art. In these spaces, it is the responsibility of the person herself to figure out what can and cannot be done in order to use power in respectful ways: "... if I don't say what needs to be done, it isn't because I believe there is nothing to be done. On the contrary, I think there are thousands of things that can be done, invented, contrived by those who, recognizing the relations of power in which they are involved, have decided to resist them or escape them. From that viewpoint, all my research rests on a postulate of absolute optimism. I don't construct my analyses in order to say, 'This is the way things are, you are trapped.' I say these things only insofar as I believe it enables us to transform them. Everything I do is done with the conviction that it may be of use."³⁶ The solution for Foucault is not to offer some sort of recipe to escape power or relationships of power. Rather, it is necessary for each individual to use invention in order to accomplish the critical work necessary to deconstruct mechanisms of power and imagine new ways of using power.

Remarkably, this is very close to Paul's own project with the communities he founded. With all the risks that it implies, Paul is willing to give his addressees spaces of freedom and negotiate with them what can and cannot be done inside these spaces. But neither Paul nor Foucault use power to engage in casuistry or to develop bodies of law that dictated how to act in specific cases. Rather they are aware of the dynamics at work inside relationships of power and believe that the individual has to construct her own identity from within these relationships of power.

For Foucault, inside these relationships of power, each individual has the chance and responsibility to develop her life as a work of art and to depend on no one else but herself to do so. Foucault insists that the notion of a self that would create itself in a vacuum is an illusion. His archeological and genealogical analyses are a testimony to the fact that outside forces delineate and construct

³⁶ Foucault, "Interview with Michel Foucault," 294-295.

identities for the subject. At the same time, becoming conscious of the constructed dimensions of identity is also a way for Foucault to challenge individuals to think beyond the obvious, to see what cannot yet be seen and to apply it to their own life.

Even though Paul certainly does not see in his addressees the need or the possibility to construct their identity on their own, he uses the relationships of power at work inside his communities in a manner that is both more subtle and more creative than simply imposing a policing discipline. Rather, the power and authority he displays in his work as apostle, he actually also put in the hands of the Christ believers, inviting them to display the same rights and responsibilities that are Paul's because of his status of child of God. In Paul's understanding of the subject, autonomy and subjection are related to each other in a manner that is strikingly similar to the ways in which Foucault works with the notion of *assujetissement*. The subject is created by a power that defines the individual in some measure, and attaches her to a particular identity, but the self also has the space to redefine her relationship to that power and her identity. In fact part of the task of the Christ-believers is precisely to take hold of the power given to them, through Christ's death and resurrection and through the work of the spirit, in order for them to create communities that reflect this new power. Neither Paul nor the Christ believers can really know exactly what these communities should look like, but they are invited to use their creative power, their intelligence and their bodies to imagine a community that reflects the new kind of power with which they have been gifted. In this work of critical imagination, Christ-believers are invited to reproduce a process that comes close to Foucault's own method of constructing and deconstructing the genealogies at work in the surrounding culture. They have to identify the dominating mechanisms at work inside the community and in the world around them, critique them and construct an alternative community. In this process, they are bound to engage in power relationships and in power struggles, among themselves and with Paul. Foucault's analyses of power allow seeing the dynamic dimensions of these struggles and invite to move away from a dominant-dominated dichotomy, in order to envision strategies of power at work among members of a community, seeing power as a positive and productive force at work inside the Pauline communities.

As such, power relationships are never suppressed, and the person is asked, whether in an individual or in a community context, to always reinvent herself inside these power relationships. One can thus ask if the person can ever attain true freedom or if the notion of constructing the self, whether it be through technologies of the self or ethical and religious exhortations, is simply yet another way for power to bind the person more strongly to an identity created for her and by her. The difficulties related to the constitution of the subject are perhaps most apparent in Paul's anthropology since the apostle is completely comfortable with the notion of a human being who is only "free" when she creatively serves the proper master, thus embodying almost perfectly the notion of disciplining power. In the discussion of the construction of the self, the categories of free and subjected might not be the most helpful ones. Construction

of the self is not about becoming completely free in neither Paul nor Foucault, even if for different reasons (to put it somewhat simply, for Paul, you are always serving a master, for Foucault, you can never construct yourself outside of relationships of power). It is rather about negotiating what agency is given to the individual, and how it comes to play in the relationships of power one is forced to negotiate.

The reader of both Paul and Foucault quickly realizes that the question of agency is no longer simply about free will and determinism, but needs to be problematized in different terms. Agency, as Todd May puts it in a review of Jeffrey T. Nealon's book, *Foucault Beyond Foucault: Power and its Intensifications since 1984*,³⁷ "is not strictly a problem for Foucault, because agency is everywhere".³⁸ It is not that the person can or cannot do something—we have seen that for both Paul and Foucault, the person is never completely free or completely enslaved—but the question becomes how resistance to power can be intensified.³⁹ Nealon writes: "The Foucauldian question or problem is not so much *uncovering* resistance, as it is a question of 'tuning' it—finding channels, concepts, or practices that can link up and thereby intensify transversal struggles into larger, collective but discontinuous movements".⁴⁰ In that perspective then, even practices of the self can be seen as disciplining forces on the subject, perhaps even self-imposed, and the intensification of power in this case might need to be matched by an intensification of resistances.

Neither Paul nor Foucault give solutions regarding what these new resistances should look like. In the case of Paul, it is not even clear whether resistances to the self-disciplining to which the Christ believers should submit themselves are desirable; but perhaps the lively dialogues which can be traced in the apostle's letters to his communities are traces of the manner in which a Christ-identity took shape for the apostle's addressees, somewhere in the middle of games of power and resistances, before an institutionalization took place and fixed the various positions into orthodoxy and heresy.

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³⁷ Jeffrey T. Nealon, *Foucault Beyond Foucault: Power and its Intensifications since 1984* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008).

³⁸ Todd May, "Review of *Foucault Beyond Foucault: Power and its Intensifications since 1984*", *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews* [<http://ndpr.nd.edu/review.cfm?id=12364>], 2008.

³⁹ See *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Nealon, *Foucault Beyond Foucault*, 106.

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