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Askesis and anachoresis: use, examination, or rejection of phantasiai in the souci of the self

Askesis y anachoresis: uso, examen o rechazo de las phantasiai en el souci de sí

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Abstract: This article explores the nuanced treatment of *phantasiai* between Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius, highlighting their broader implications for the technologies and the constitution of the self as articulated by Michel Foucault. The shift from Epictetus' use and examination of *phantasiai* to Marcus Aurelius' rejection reveals a significant transformation in Stoic practices of self-knowledge and government of the self. Via *askesis* and *anachoresis*, I aim to show the detailed interweaving of knowledge and power that underlines the processes of subjecthood and subjection, illustrating how these techniques underlie the concern for the government of others within a framework where epistemological concerns are always inherently ethical and political, and how they relate to the *souci* of the self.

Key words: *phantasia*, *souci* of the self, use, examination, *anachoresis*.

Resumen: Este artículo explora el matizado tratamiento de las *phantasiai* entre Epicteto y Marco Aurelio, destacando sus implicaciones para las tecnologías de sí y la constitución de la subjetividad en el marco de Michel Foucault. El pasaje del uso y examen de las *phantasiai* por parte de Epicteto, a su rechazo por parte de Marco Aurelio, revela una transformación significativa en las prácticas estoicas de conocimiento y gobierno de sí mismo. A través de la *askesis* y la *anachoresis*, pretendo mostrar la interrelación detallada de saber y de poder que subraya los procesos de subjetividad y sujeción, ilustrando cómo estas técnicas fundamentan la preocupación por el gobierno de los otros, dentro de un marco en el que las preocupaciones epistemológicas son siempre y esencialmente éticas y políticas, y cómo se enmarcan en la inquietud (*souci*) de sí.

Palabras clave: *phantasia*, inquietud de sí, uso, examen, *anachoresis*.

I. Introduction

Foucault's quest to unearth the mutual and reciprocal production of knowledge and power (*savoir et pouvoir*) (1975: 32) took him, by the end of his life, to wonder about what in English has been usually translated as the "care of the self". Even if the French term (*souci, soucier*)

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can indeed be translated as *care*, Foucault phrases the *souci* as something much more radical, with deeper implications stemming from his research on Hellenistic literature: the *epimelesthai*, a central concept in both *L'herméneutique du sujet* (2001) and in the third volume of his *Histoire de la sexualité* (1997) that designates a concern, a worry, a disquietude to act upon.

It is in the framework of acting upon the worry of the self that Foucault presents the Stoic foundations of this concern, with an evident origin in the Socratic and Delphic formulae (Foucault, 2001: 2 – 7), that nonetheless imply a reconfiguration in epistemological terms that, both in Foucault and in Hellenistic thought, is rooted in a consideration for the government and the conduction of the self and the others.

Even though his recollection of the Hellenistic *corpus* is quite careful, I believe there is still a wide area to explore regarding Stoic concepts, particularly —for the purpose of this paper— regarding the epistemological notion of *phantasia* (φαντασία)², which I would like to heighten from the perspective of Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius. My purpose is to explore the shift in treatment of *phantasiai* in these two authors, from their use (χρησις) and examination (δοκιμάζειν) in the former, to the act of casting them aside (ἀπέρχομαι) in the latter. This shift in treatment, I will argue, implies the development of mechanisms of knowledge and occupation with the self, which subsequently impact the notions of self-control or self-government as essential for the government of others. I believe this pathway should complement the relationship between knowledge and power highlighted by Foucault, casting a light upon two mechanisms of *savoir* and *pouvoir* that are central for Hellenistic and Medieval thought and practice: *ascesis* (ἄσκησις) and *anachoresis* (ἀναχώρησις), transcendental operations that Foucault links to the notion of *phantasia* (2001: 285 and ff).

Granted, this is not to say that it is only through Epictetus or Marcus Aurelius that these concepts were conceived or produced. Foucault himself rightly points out how the practical exercises of acquiring virtue are much older than Stoicism, and how they are also found in Pythagorean and Platonic texts (Foucault, 2001: 302; Hadot, 1996: 276). It is also quite clear that these practices were reinterpreted time and again, particularly in the Christian context (Foucault, 2009: 152)³, developing alongside many other relevant techniques and operations, such as coenobitism (Agamben, 2011) and confession (Büttgen, 2021), if only to mention a couple.

² *Phantasia* can be translated as appearance, image, representation, or impression. A recent approach to the issue in Dinucci (2017).

³ An extensive approach to the “Christian self” in Foucault can be found in Chevallier (2013).

This is, of course, not the proper space to develop a whole account of these practices, but I do believe there is a relevant matter to be addressed in the almost imperceptible shift in treatment of *phantasia* in Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius, which Foucault usually cites together to convey some of the mechanisms of subjection that Foucault baptised as “technologies of the self” (Foucault, 1988).

II. *Phantasia*: involuntary but assented

In the *Attic Nights*, Aulus Gellius narrates his encounter with an “eminent philosopher of the Stoic discipline” that was “frightened” (*pavidum et expallidum*) by the tumult of the sea—an unexpected reaction from a philosopher—, which provided a prosperous moment to discuss Epictetus’ *Discourses* (Aulus Gellius, 1927: §19.1.4 – 6).

It is thus explained how, for the Stoic, “the mental visions, which the philosophers call *phantasias*” impel the mind towards the perception of an object upon its first appearance, and are neither voluntary nor discretionary, but act “by means of a certain power of their own”, bringing themselves to be acknowledged by men (Aulus Gellius, 1927: §19.1.15). The contrast is then placed upon the assent (“*probationes, called συγκαταθέσεις*”), that allows for those *phantasiai* to be known, which is indeed voluntary and discretionary (§19.1.16), a difference that explains the terror felt by the philosopher, introducing a sense of time and will in the epistemological process: first the *phantasia* is presented—hence the fear—and only then it is assented.

The discussion immediately turns into the question on how a wise man should act, for, says the philosopher, “the wise man does not approve nor consent such *phantasiai*” and instead throws them away, spits them out (1927: §19.1.18). The epistemological difference between *phantasia* and assent transitions here to the ethical difference between the mind of the wise man and the mind of the foolish man, since the latter assents the visions of the mind as they are presented, while the former does not assent and “retains the vigour of his judgement”. This does not mean there is no will mediating the mental process of the foolish man, given that the confirmation (*προσπειδοξάζει*) of the *phantasia* is still quite present and dependent upon his discretions. It simply means that the wise man performs this confirmation in a different way (1927: §19.1.19 – 20), in a way that allows him to disregard those fantasies—in the common sense of something imaginary or improbable—and retain his calm.

Here, two things. Firstly, following Foucault’s own pathway, it is remarkable how the epistemological concern is intrinsically and immediately followed by the ethical—furthermore,

political— question of how to behave and how to rule oneself, which is presented in an indivisible fashion. In other words, the question of the character as posed by the Stoics is the question of the knowledge and ruling of the self, and vice versa. Secondly, if one’s character is always present as a concern, it is because there is always room for discretion when it comes to dealing with *phantasia*, for the impression or vision is not immediately confirmed, but instead goes through assent as a process that can and should be governed. The question, then, is how to achieve such a government of the visions of the mind and what to do with them, considering that the Stoic concept, by the time of Aulus Gellius and Marcus Aurelius⁴, was already tainted as something to be rejected rather than something to be used or dominated, notwithstanding the fact that it is attributed to Epictetus directly. Evidently, I am not interested in the historiographical aspect of how this came to be, but rather in the meaning of the shift in treatment of *phantasia* for the constitution of the government of the self and the others⁵.

I will now begin with Epictetus’ account of usage and examination of *phantasiai*.

III. Epictetus: usage, examination, and domination

In the *Discourses*, Epictetus is quite prolific in the verbs he uses to address *phantasiai*. Far from being mere synonyms, they provide an insight into his own coming to terms with the notion, his own *souci* —if I may play with the linguistics— with the appearances as constitutive of the character and their relation to autonomy and freedom.

The first appearance of *phantasia* in the text comes quite early in relation to the “rational faculty” as capable of “contemplating itself and all other things” (Epictetus, 1890; §1.1.4), which is nothing but a worry about the faculties in themselves, and which will eventually take Epictetus to the distinction between humans and other living entities. However, the way in which he deals with *phantasia* is quite varied in the very first chapter, in what seems to be an attempt to show the meaning and extent of this faculty. He begins by defining it as the “faculty capable of *properly using* appearances” (§1.1.5). Almost immediately afterwards, the use of *phantasiai* will be presented as a supreme and lordly faculty provided by the gods, as Epictetus proceeds to elaborate on the idea of ‘usage’ by saying that it is not only a usage mediated by knowledge or understanding (*i.e.*, χρηστικῆ), but it is a *correct* use (τὴν χρῆσιν τὴν ὀρθὴν) of appearances (§1.1.6 – 7), that is, using them both knowingly and correctly. In other words, the rational faculty in its core implies a query that dwells between *savoir* and *pouvoir*. It is not

⁴ For the chronological dating of *The Attic Nights*, see Holford-Strevens (1977).

⁵ A recent and comprehensive approach to the issue of *phantasiai* in the Stoic tradition in Miller (2022).

difficult to see Foucault's interest, even more so when the notion of 'care' (*epimeleia, souci*) is introduced:

But what says Zeus? 'Epictetus (...) be not ignorant of this: this body is not yours, but it is clay finely tempered. And since I was not able to do for you what I have mentioned, I have given you a small portion of us, this faculty of pursuing an object and avoiding it, and the faculty of desire and aversion, and, in a word, the faculty of [properly] using the appearances (*χρηστικὴν ταῖς φαντασίαις*); and if you will take care of this faculty (*ἢς ἐπιμελούμενος*), and consider it your only possession, you will never be hindered, never meet with impediments; you will not lament, you will not blame, you will not flatter any person' (1890, §1.1.10 – 13).

The usage of appearances, so far elaborated as the core of the rational faculty, is therefore characterised by its relation to a proper use, by the fact that it is a shared faculty with the gods, and finally, by the obligation to take care of it, to be concerned by it, for Epictetus adds as a wake-up call: "when it is in our power to look after (*ἐπιμελεῖσθαι*) one thing and to attach ourselves to it, we prefer to look after many things, and to be bound to many things" (§1.1.14).

This last point is not only Foucault's query encompassing *savoir, pouvoir, and souci*, but it is evidently a central theme for Stoic thought, since the preoccupation for the rational faculty presents itself as the only legitimate concern in terms of self-awareness and self-constitution, and it is thus introduced as the necessary action for a being who is capable of properly using *phantasiai* to take *care* of itself. Any other result does not seem akin to the rational faculty, and it is despised by Epictetus, who concludes with the well-known discrimination of things that are in our power and things that are not (§1.1.15 – 17).

Before entering the use of appearances as a concern towards the self, it is worth remembering that Foucault traced several applications of the notion of use (*χρῆσις*) in Greek literature, from the mere instrumental relationship ("utilising a tool"), to a relation towards behaviours, passions, or even towards the gods. Perhaps most interesting is that *chresis* — besides being "especially important in the Stoics" and "at the centre (...) of the entire theory and practice of the care of the self in Epictetus" (Foucault, 2001: 56)— usually implies a "legitimate or appropriate relation": this is the case, for instance, when "using the gods (*theois khrestai*)". It could also mean, Foucault adds, to use "in accordance with the rules of the art", as is the case with the use of a horse which does not imply a mere usage of the animal at will, but rather a proper use according to the rules of cavalry (*ibid.*).

In terms of *phantasiai*, this is relevant because Epictetus usually accompanies the notion of 'using' with an adjective or an adverb that ratifies and emphasises the appropriateness of said use, calling it "correct" (1890; §1.1.7), "assured" (§1.3.4), "good" (§1.20.15) or "according to nature" (§3.3.1), just to name a few. Such an emphasis both underlies and blurs out the line

between the knowledge of the use and its correctness, for the one implies the other. Moreover, this provides a clearer perspective on why Foucault reaches out to Epictetus in order to explain how “taking care of oneself” (*s’occuper de soi-même*) is not to take the soul “as a substance”, but rather as a “subject”, that is, as the entity that is used and administered in a relational and instrumental approach, governed by techniques and the rules they imply (Foucault, 2001: 56 – 57). In other words, it is not a matter of having a soul, but matter of using it correctly as one would with a *phantasia*⁶.

On the other hand, this approach goes back to what Aulus Gellius presented in his recollection of the Stoic thought, namely, that *phantasiai* are not subjected to the will of the perceiver—that it is not simply a matter of stating that appearances are right or wrong⁷—, but that the process of assent implies discretion and therefore appears in the form of a question: if a *phantasia* is not in my command, but *using it properly* is, then how is a *phantasia correctly used*? In other words, what is the correct use of *phantasia* that is facilitated by (and implies a) *savoir*? The answer comes in the form of a very Foucauldian technique: examination (Foucault, 1975: 317 and ff).

Although the assessment or acceptance of a *phantasia* comes naturally, inasmuch as it is constitutive of the rational faculty given by the gods, it does not mean that it is perfect or readily available. Quite on the contrary, it is a faculty that needs to be trained and developed, so much so that it becomes “the chief labour of the philosopher to examine (δοκιμάζειν) appearances, and to distinguish them (διακρίνειν), and to admit none without examination” (Epictetus, 1890; §1.20.7). This examination and discrimination of *phantasiai*, says Epictetus further ahead, requires “much preparation, and much labour and study” (§1.20.13), pointing towards the idea of a “school of philosophy”, that is, a place where this discernment can be properly learned and exercised, which evidently requires a master⁸ and which Epictetus himself would famously call a “clinic” (ιατρεῖόν): a place that does not bring “pleasure, but pain” (§3.23.30).

Hence why the philosopher—or anyone who attends this clinic of the soul—is compelled to sieve said appearances and to not receive them untouched, tracing back the

⁶ One could even argue that in this sense the soul becomes itself a means in order to obtain the purpose of self-government and government of others. On the idea of ends and means on a philosophical approach, particularly in terms of such an instrumentality, see Elettra Stimilli (2023).

⁷ This aspect will in fact show up when Epictetus calls for opposing a “beautiful and noble appearance to throw away a low and filthy one” (1890: §2. 18. 25).

⁸ Speaking about the *Alcibiades*, Foucault adds: “The master is the person who cares about the subject’s care for himself, and who finds in his love for his disciple the possibility of caring for the disciple’s care for himself” (2001: 58).

anguish of the concern with the self, not only as the Socratic worry of the unexamined life, but also refining this examination towards that which constitutes the difference between men and other entities: since only humans can examine *phantasiai*, and this is in fact the only thing that is dependent upon their will, examining one's life turns into a persistent regime of examining the appearances of the mind. On this distinction between the Socratic and the Stoic examination, Foucault:

The examination Epictetus talks about is completely different: it is an examination that deals with representations, that aims to “test” them, to “distinguish” (*diakrinein*) one another and thus to prevent one from accepting the “first arrival” (...) it is a test of power and a guarantee of freedom: a way of always making sure that one will not become attached to that which does not come under our domination. To keep constant watch over one's representations (...) is not to interrogate oneself (as will be done later in Christian spirituality) about the deep origin of the idea that presents itself; it is not to try and decipher a hidden meaning beneath the apparent representation; it is to assess the relationship between oneself and that which is represented, so as to accept in the relation to the self only that which can depend on the subject's free and rational choice (1997, 80 – 81).

What does it actually mean to examine and discriminate the appearances of the mind? How does one actually learn to rule over *phantasiai* in this school-clinic? By means of a regime that philosophers should conduct upon themselves in the form of meditation, daily writing, and most importantly, by “exercising themselves” (ἐν τούτοις γυμνάζεσθαι) (Epictetus, 1890; §1.1.25). This metaphor of exercise shall appear with some recurrency in the form of a perennial practice that occupies the time —“every morning, every man whom you see, every man whom you hear” (§3.3.14)— and points towards the idea of the philosopher constituting himself as “the true athlete (ἀληθείαις ἀσκητήης), the man who trains himself (γυμνάζων ἑαυτόν) to deal with such appearances” (§2.18.27). Not only gymnastics, however, as one would train the body, but rather an *askesis*: a perpetual devotion to the discrimination of appearances. With a linguistic transparency that would become loaded with Christian meaning, this becomes indeed an *ascetic* practice, a regime of examination of *phantasiai* that is also a regime of *souci* of the self.

The meaning of an appropriate use (*chresis*) —which implies knowledge and correctness — is thus only fully grasped under this construction of an ascetic practice: only one who is chronically occupied with the examination of appearances is truly capable of avoiding being fooled by *phantasiai* as they are immediately or naturally perceived. Therefore, use implies a proper use, proper use implies examination, and examination entails such an exercise, all of which is encompassed in terms of facing external representations on the one hand, and regarding the soul as a subject of this *souci* on the other. As Foucault insistently points out, this “work of thought upon itself” takes “the form of a steady screening of representations:

examining them, monitoring them, and sorting them out” (1997: 79). Furthermore, he emphasises the metaphors Epictetus uses, which will “have a long career in Christian spirituality, but they will take on quite different values in it” such as the “night watchman”, that stops the entry to the city (Foucault, 1997: 80; Epictetus, 1890; §3.12.15), which will ultimately lead once again to the theme of *savoir* and *pouvoir*: the examination of appearances is not a matter of mere curiosity, it is an admission test, a checkpoint of sorts, a form of (self) control⁹.

Foucault’s reading is not misled. Evidently, the *askesis* and *dokimazein* that Epictetus has in mind is not something performed for a standalone purpose, but rather, it becomes a mechanism to rule oneself properly, to conquer the self by dominating *phantasiai*:

By placing these objects on the other side, you will conquer (νικήσεις) the appearance: you will not be drawn away by it. But in the first place be not hurried away by its rapidity but say, ‘Appearance, wait for me a little: let me see who you are, and what you are about: let me put you to the test’ (δοκιμάσω) (...) And if you are accustomed to this gymnastic exercise (γυμνάζεσθαι), you will see what shoulders, what sinews, what strength you have. (§2.18.23 – 26).

The circle is finally drawn. Here the *askesis* of examination makes a full transition: it becomes a mechanism of *nikesis*, a regime of examination that allows for the domination of appearances, which in turn points towards a *phronesis*, that is, towards becoming a wise man. On the one hand, this means being capable of distinguishing good from evil, (§1.20.6) on the other hand, it means behaving properly in any given circumstance, just as the philosopher should in the tumultuous sea.

Now, since the capability of ruling oneself is the prerequisite to rule others, it is no surprise that Epictetus draws a line that marks the distinction between humans and other entities, cementing an idea of natural hierarchy that relies on this difference of mere use and proper use of appearances. Firstly, he says, plants do not even possess the use of appearances—hence why “you do not apply the term good to them”—and even if some irrational animals do possess said use, “they have not the faculty of *understanding* the use of appearances” (§1.20.6). Thus, not only being capable of *phantasiai* as the perception of a phenomenon, but rather an appropriate use of appearances—a use mediated by a *savoir*—defines the distinction between humans and other creatures. As I said earlier, however, this is not purely an epistemological claim, for Epictetus declares that the reason for such a difference in the use of *phantasiai* is rooted in a natural disposition of pre-eminence, “for [irrational animals] exist for the purpose of serving others, and they exercise no superiority” (§1.20.6).

⁹ At the end of the passage, Foucault directly translates *dokimazein* as “*contrôle*” (1997: 80).

Given that the worry about the unexamined life is presented not only as if the —rigorous, persistent, daily— examination were its own teleology¹⁰, but instead as a means to dominating oneself, and by extension others (Foucault, 2008); it is worth noting a twofold movement in this idea: on the one hand, the fact that the rational faculty is a gift shared with the gods, provided by nature as an ordained part of the cosmos and, as such, not susceptible to change. On the other hand, the proper use of this faculty is that which relies upon humans, and thus the care for such a gift becomes a duty that ought not to be neglected, a responsibility that must be addressed. Epictetus' worry is centred on the fact that, although the faculty of ruling is indeed provided and even compelled by nature, the means to achieve a *proper* ruling are absent insofar as one is not prepared. Ruling is therefore, for humans, a natural faculty that must be used, an 'obligatory donation' of sorts.

The first wing of this crossroads is shown in the correct use of appearances as the purpose of the natural gift of reason (Epictetus, 1890: §1.20.5), but also, so it seems, as the criterion by which the very correctness is measured, since using appearances according to nature is to tend towards truth and good, whilst straying away from this relation to nature seems to spring falseness and evil. On this, Epictetus:

The material for the wise and good man is his own ruling faculty (...) the [labor] of the wise and good man is to use appearances conformably to nature and as it is the nature of every soul to assent to the truth, to dissent from the false, and to remain in suspense as to that which is uncertain; so it is its nature to be moved towards the desire of the good, and to aversion from the evil (1890: §3.3.1).

The second part of this thought springs with the idea of the obligation of taking care of oneself, which animals simply do not endure given that nature already takes care (*se soucie*) of those who are pre-determined to serve. As Foucault points out:

It is in Epictetus no doubt that one finds the highest philosophical development of this theme. Man is defined in the *Discourses* as the being who was destined to care for himself (*souci de soi*). This is where the basic difference between him and other [living] creatures resides: the animals find "ready prepared" that which they need in order to live, for nature has so arranged things that animals are at our disposal without their having to look after themselves, and without our having to look after them" (1997: 61 – 62).

For Epictetus, humans are preordained to rule, indeed, but at the cost of an *askesis* of reason that consists in the interminable worry for the appropriate use, examination, and domination of

¹⁰ Stimilli explores this idea of something having itself as its own teleology in terms of the Aristotelian *entelechia* and its relationship with nature, technique, production, and reproduction (2023: 41), as well as Benjamin's own idea of a "teleology without scope" (2023: 95).

appearances. The disposition to rule involves therefore a mechanism of self-knowledge, a ‘technology of the self’.

Furthermore, renouncing this duty is unthinkable, for it would entail a *sfumatura* between humans and animals —needless to say, an unacceptable subversion of the cosmos—, which takes the form of an equalisation to other creatures and the consequent incapability to rule. On this idea, Epictetus says that “the ass (...) does not exist for any superiority over others”, for if it were the case —along with “the faculty of comprehending the use of appearances”—, he would not be subjected to the rule and service towards humans, but instead would be “equal to us and like to us” (ἴσος ... καὶ ὅμοιος) (§2.8.7 – 8). This not being the case, however, other living creatures are already taken care of by nature as servants, and thus the gift of ruling others is entangled with the occupation of the self.

In a very telling metaphor of this disposition of government of others, that involves soldiers and cattle, Epictetus says:

For animals not being made for themselves, but for service, it was not fit for them to be made so as to need other things. (...) Now as soldiers are ready for their commander, shod, clothed, and armed: but it would be a hard thing for the chiliarch to go round and shoe or clothe his thousand men: so also nature has formed the animals which are made for service, all ready, prepared, and requiring no further care (ἐπιμελείας). So, one little boy with only a stick drives the cattle (1890: §1.16.2 – 5).

Soldiers, who respond to a *strategos* as cattle to a boy with a stick, represent in this passage the living creatures that, even if capable of using appearances, are never in command, for they have not prepared themselves to do so, that is, they have not trained in their proper and knowingly usage. Uncapable of discernment of falsehood and truth, of good and evil, or simply put, unwise; they are bound to be guided. If the due diligence in self-occupation is unobserved, the price to pay is that of not being able to rule. As Foucault concludes, “the care of the self, for Epictetus, is a privilege-duty, a gift-obligation that ensures our freedom while forcing us to take ourselves as the object of all our diligence” (Foucault, 1997: 62).

To recapitulate, *phantasiai* in Epictetus are to be used in a proper manner, only achievable by means of perpetual self-occupation (*epimelesthai*), amounting to an *askesis* in which the usage becomes an examination and a domination of appearances: nothing less than the domination of the self as the prerequisite for ruling others. To use properly, to examine persistently and to be able to dominate are the relations of Epictetus towards *phantasiai*, not only for the sake of truth —undoubtedly present for the philosopher—, but also for the ethical and political relation of a *savoir* that concedes a *pouvoir*. If Foucault’s reading is to be taken in its full meaning, and indeed for Epictetus “man is the being who was destined to care for

himself”, then it must mean that this self-worry, this *souci*, conveys the anguish of being compelled to rule by a gift of nature, and the necessary condition of ruling oneself by ruling one’s assent upon *phantasiai*. Moreover, in the operations that are conducted towards the *phantasiai*, it is possible to find at least one instance in which the relation towards the soul becomes both the subject and the object of an endless exercise, one that settles the terrain for self-government and the government of others, and whose absence implies the submission to heteronomy in the form of a shepherd with his flock: being either one or the other depends on the government of *phantasiai* and the government of the soul.

A question remains, however, regarding how the necessity for domination becomes the angst for rejection, such as it is presented in Marcus Aurelius, or to phrase it differently, when is it that *anachoresis* joins *askesis* in the treatment of *phantasiai*.

IV. Marcus Aurelius: rejection and retirement

Although usage, examination, and domination seem to be the ruling dispositions in Epictetus towards *phantasiai*, their rejection is not entirely absent. In the third book of the *Discourses*, while speaking about that upon which a man should “train himself” every day, he speaks of “applying the rule” of things that are dependent or independent of one’s will:

What have you seen? A handsome man or woman? Apply the rule. Is this independent of the will, or dependent? Independent. Take it away (αἶρε ἔξω). What have you seen? A man lamenting over the death of a child. Apply the rule. Death is a thing independent of the will. Take it away. Has the proconsul met you? Apply the rule. What kind of thing is a proconsul’s office? Independent of the will, or dependent on it? Independent. Take this away also: it does not stand examination: cast it away: it is nothing to you (1890: §3.3.14 – 19).

Here, only one possibility when one finds something that is not dependent upon his or her will: to reject it, to cast it away. Needless to say, training oneself to dominate something is a far call from rejecting it entirely. By principle, the *askesis* of *phantasiai* would not imply their rejection, but rather a close relationship, a continuous exposure to the point of domination, as one would do in training one’s body to perform a physical prowess or to endure a poison. Moreover, appearances for Epictetus so far are not loaded with a negative connotation, but they seem to be simply the natural procedure by which knowledge is produced; granted, a procedure that needs to be filtered, but not necessarily something to cast aside.

This could be merely how Epictetus himself came to terms with his notion of what is dependent or not on the will, a figure of speech that allowed him to explain and extend his thought. However, such a disposition towards *phantasiai* will reappear with a strong emphasis

in Marcus Aurelius which, as Pierre Hadot points out, already regarded appearances with mistrust, not on account of the appearance itself, but rather because of the emotion and the judgment it immediately provoked:

It's about separating the representation from the emotion (that is, from the false representation) that comes along with it and that provokes in us disquiet, sadness, or fear. Because of that, the word "representation" (*phantasia*) is usually loaded for Marcus Aurelius with a certain affective value since it designates not only the image of an object, but the image of an object accompanied by a false judgement concerning said object (Hadot, 2002: 174)¹¹.

Indeed, Marcus Aurelius' rejection of appearances is not only quite palpable but also recurrent throughout his *Meditations*. In the second book, for example, he advises to behave in a "Roman and masculine" fashion, and not to be carried over by *phantasiai* (1908; §2.5), while in the fifth book he declares it easy to "banish and erase every upsetting or unwelcome *phantasia*" in order to be "immediately at ease" (§5.2).

In this case, the "false judgement" is the *phantasia*, in a synecdoche that implies that appearances are essentially opposed to tranquillity. The next step is thus clear for Marcus Aurelius, for tranquillity being the most desirable state, it follows that rejecting appearances is the guarantee of such an easiness of living. Just as with Epictetus and the gymnastics (*askesis*), this calls for a procedure, for a technique that allows to reject appearances as the obstacles that impede the goal of tranquillity: the separation from *phantasiai*. Granted, Marcus Aurelius will not formulate such a separation in the same scholastic (*skholastikos*) fashion as his master (Foucault, 2001: 136). In his own training (daily writing, etc.), from which the *Meditations* stem, he seems to be searching for and reaching out to that which would allow him to dominate himself. Hence, he does indeed begin with examination, saying that "defining or describing" appearances allows to see them "stripped to their essence" (ἔστι κατ' οὐσίαν, γυμνόν), which amounts to questioning or examining (ἐλέγχειν) everything that comes across in life" (Marcus Aurelius, 1908; §3.11.1 – 2)¹². This is an evident echo of Epictetus, which will also show up in Seneca and in the early training of Marcus Aurelius himself, particularly in his letter to his "suavissimo magistro", Fronto (Foucault, 2001: 156 – 157). Nevertheless, the *Meditations* often approach the idea of rejecting *phantasiai* for the sake of tranquillity, not as standalone purpose, but rather as the necessary condition for both happiness (εὐδαιμονία) and a proper governing part of the soul (ἡγεμονικόν) (Marcus Aurelius, 1908; §7.17.1).

¹¹ Hadot provides an interesting contrast between Marcus Aurelius and Epictetus (2002: 165 and ff), a passage that is cited directly by Foucault (2001: 292).

¹² For the link to the monastic exercises, see Michel Foucault (2001: 286 and ff).

From here, a familiar theme develops: the idea that a *souci* (*epimelesthai*) for the self is part of the act of self-ruling and the act of ruling others —evidently on a different plain, given that Marcus Aurelius is in fact the ruler of his time—, which can only be achieved by casting away appearances.

While addressing the *phantasia* as his interlocutor, the emperor asks her to “go away” for he has “no need of her”, after which he claims that it is “only an ingrained habit (ἔθος) that has made it possible” for her to —the verb is quite telling— “rule” (ἀρχαῖον) (1908; §7.17.1). In other words, the principle and ruling capacity of the *phantasia* is embedded in habit. It follows that one who is ruled by appearances cannot rule himself and, consequently, cannot rule others. The concern is thus the same as in Epictetus, but the method, the mechanism, changes: while Epictetus calls for the perpetual training in the use of appearances, Marcus Aurelius disregards them as unnecessary and calls for the conscious rejection of the habit of trusting in them.

This is not to say that Marcus Aurelius disregards completely the idea of assent, which implies the constant exercise of discrimination, and it is clearly present throughout his *Meditations*. He does not abandon Epictetus’ idea of good and bad *phantasiai* either. In fact, he provides an alluring metaphor for this notion, when he says that “the soul is dyed with appearances” and entrusts himself to dye it with other types of *phantasiai* (*v.gr.* well-living) (Marcus Aurelius, 1908; §5.16). Nonetheless, the image of appearances dyeing the soul, tainting it, and polluting it is also quite telling of his mistrust towards them, as pointed out by Hadot. Moreover, in what could be deemed as a surprising shift —if not for the fact that the ethical and the political are clearly underlying the epistemological—, he then proceeds to add that one of those “good appearances” is the one that propels the rational animal to live in community, which immediately afterwards he describes in the hierarchical fashion that already appeared in Epictetus:

Is it not plain that the inferior exists for the sake of the superior and superior for the sake of one another? Superior the animate in front of the inanimate, the rational in front of the animate (Marcus Aurelius, 1908; §5.16).

The bridge can be clearly traced, not only because of the hierarchical disposition of the cosmos —common place of thought by the time—, but also because of the fact that, since rational animals are superior to both animate and inanimate beings, it follows that, in order to reach *eudaimonia* as tranquillity and achieving proper command of the soul, as the foundation of commanding others, one needs to attend to the habit of being seduced by unexamined

appearances, which again, is only a faculty provided to rational beings, and presents itself as a duty of care (*epimeleia*):

There are three things of which you are composed: body, spirit, mind (σώματιον, πνευμάτιον, νοῦς). Of these, the first two belong to you insofar as it's your job to care for them (ἐπιμελεῖσθαι) but properly speaking, only the third is really yours (...) if, I say, you detach your command center (ἡγεμονικοῦ) from what has become attached to it as a result of its being attracted by bodily feelings, and from all that is to come and all that has gone, and make yourself (ποιήσης τε σεαυτόν), in Empedocles's words, "a rounded sphere, rejoicing in encircling solitude," and train yourself to live the only life you have, that is in the present moment, you'll be able to pass what remains of your life, up until your death, with a mind that is tranquil in itself, kind to others, and at peace with your *daimon* (Marcus Aurelius, 1908; §12.3).

A procedure of separation is required, an abstraction of the ruling part of the soul from the world, from its contact with the self, for only in casting aside such a contact, namely, in casting aside *phantasiai*, it is possible to achieve tranquillity.

This entails, of course, an epistemological perspective. Via the example of a melody, Foucault notes Marcus Aurelius' effort to always "look from above" (*kataphronein*) instead of looking from the inside, and his compulsion to strip away every part of a whole, developing a certain contempt for the contemplated object. The reason is, yet again, control. This way of approaching the object "preserves the superiority" of the observer and prevents him from being carried away by the beauty of the melody. It is a method of observation that, ultimately, ratifies one's self-rule over life and *phantasiai* (Foucault, 2001, 289 – 290). From Marcus Aurelius' perspective, the reality is abolished for the sake of the assented moment of tranquillity, and therefore the movement of the world cannot dominate nor diminish the subject:

And suddenly we realise that there is nothing good in all of this, in these notes, in these movements. And from the moment there is no good in them, we do not have to seek them out, we do not have to let ourselves be dominated by them, we do not have to let ourselves be weaker than them, and we will be able to ensure our mastery and domination (Foucault, 2001: 290).

In other words, once tranquillity is achieved by setting aside appearances, the world does not longer exercise domination over the self, and self-ruling becomes possible.

Clearly, for Marcus Aurelius such a separation from *phantasia* is not devoid of training or practice (ἐκμελετήσης)¹³, and it is in this framework in which he proposes a retirement (*anachoresis*) from the world, not in the menial sense of simply going away, but in the exercise of inhabiting the soul by disregarding the appearances provided by the world.

¹³ Foucault also highlights the link with the value of the *phantasia* and the usage of a certain technique or "virtue" in order to face the content of such a representation (Foucault, 2001: 285).

Before entering the famous passages of *anachoresis*, however, a brief annotation on the gymnastics that were somewhat inherited in the emperor's thought. As was the case with Epictetus' examination, the rejection proposed by Marcus Aurelius must be persistent, repetitive, perennial: it must be practiced "everywhere and continuously", in a behaviour that implies a diligent occupation (ἐμφιλοτεχνεῖν) and impedes anything out of reach to "flow into" the self (1908; §7.54). Thus, the call for an unrelenting vigilance over the self is fully present also in this retirement, which instead of being a passive stance, imposes labour, examination, repetition.

With this in mind, it is possible to grasp the full meaning of the retirement as a mechanism that allows for the rejection of appearances in benefit of tranquillity and self-ruling. Marcus Aurelius clarifies that is indeed not about "retiring (ἀναχωρήσεις) to the countryside, the sea or the mountains", as many idiotic (*i.e.* untrained, or unprepared) people do; but rather the natural possibility to retire into oneself (εἰς ἑαυτὸν ἀναχωρεῖν), into one's soul, which he calls the "most peaceful and untroubled retirement", emphasising that it is available to everyone (*i.e.*, every rational animal) and at every moment (1908; §4.3.1).

Needless to say, this echoes the privilege-obligation of the rational faculty when compared to other living creatures according to Epictetus, and Marcus Aurelius is quite reiterative in the prescription of doing it repeatedly (1908; §4.3.1). The *ostinato* that characterises the *askesis* becomes also indispensable for the correct practice of *anachoresis*: not simply a retirement, but one that must be incessantly practiced, trained, and developed as would be the case with any other art or discipline.

Just as Foucault says of the entirety of the care for the self, *anachoresis* is not "an empty time", but rather a technique involving a "long process of reactivating general principles and rational arguments that persuade one not to let oneself be irritated by others, by accidents, or by things" (1997: 57). The reason why there is a long process involved lies, in part, in the difficulty of dealing with *phantasiai*, for their rejection implies the need to deploy an epistemological detachment that preserves one's freedom and autonomy, and in doing so maintains the relationship to the soul as both the subject and the object of this repetition, as the commanding centre (ἡγεμονικὸν) as well as the immaculate object that cannot be tainted.

This is not so much a far call from Epictetus' lesson, but rather its progression, although admittedly one that relies on the mistrust of the contact of the self with the world, on the weakness of the false judgments that *phantasiai* provide. In a Foucauldian language, subjected only to the self—as obligated to self-vigilance and self-ruling—and not subjected to the (appearances of the) world.

The conclusion of the passage, I believe, recollects Marcus Aurelius' advancement of the retreat as what could be deemed a technology of the self as conceived by Foucault. Here, Marcus Aurelius compares the soul to a "little estate of one's own upon which retirement" is always possible (1908; §4.3.4). The metaphor is telling, not only because of the same natural disposition that conceded the rational faculty in Epictetus, namely, a gift from the gods that is already present even if not perfect; but also, because it clarifies the double function that the soul plays: it is the sanctuary that ought to be shielded from *phantasiai*, and it is the *locus* upon which domination and ruling is to be exercised. This is ratified by saying that, in making one's priority not to be "agitated", one becomes free and see things like a "man, like a human being and a citizen", even if, nevertheless, a mortal animal (§4.3.4).

In this instance, however, beyond proper use and examination, the government of the self and the government of others (Foucault, 2008) relies upon a retirement into the soul, both as a refuge from *phantasiai* and as the primary extension of one's domain.

V. Conclusion

Here, I have shown how, even if both Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius coincide in the need to address the understanding of appearances as a gift-obligation that separates humans from other living beings, the way in which they take upon this understanding distances to the point where one entrusts himself entirely to the gymnastics of the usage, while the other, extending upon the rigorousness of the former, casts aside the world for the sake of an *eudaimonia* that relies on tranquillity and self-ruling. On the one hand, an *askesis* of perpetual exposure to examination and usage, on the other hand, an *anachoresis* into the soul as the primary object susceptible of domination.

This process illustrates how the subject becomes a site of knowledge and power, the place where knowing becomes commandment and where commandment becomes the rule of the self as the requisite to rule others: ultimately, it shows the interstice between the eminent subject that governs and the subjected entity that follows. While Foucault's analysis provides a foundational and a deep understanding —mostly in his courses— in terms of the role of *phantasiai* as the epistemological foundation of for the concern of the self, the filigree of the shifts within Stoicism suggests additional layers of complexity in the development of the corresponding techniques over the soul.

Both *askesis* and *anachoresis*, moreover, demand an uninterrupted labour upon the self, which begins by addressing the *phantasiai*, be it in terms of external appearances or even in

terms of some sort of mischievous deception of nature. If Foucault's own worry throughout his life was to trace "a genealogy of the constitution of the subject" (Foucault, 2013: 25) then I believe such a difference in treatment ratifies this intertwining between knowledge and power as constitutive of that very subject, situated in a historical framework in which ruling one's soul is of the utmost importance, and will subsequently become the cornerstone of the many instances and techniques implied in the construction of said subject.

Whether facing the turmoil of the sea or the challenges of deceit as an emperor, or even the simple act of being a mortal capable of interrogating perceptions, the *souci* of the self as a concern of knowledge implies a *souci* of the self as the foundation of government over one's own domains and, eventually, over others. The government of the living and the construction of the subject will both pass through the thorough examination of—and retirement into—the realms of the soul.

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