Part III

Media and Modes of Ethical Practice

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Self-Cultivation

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> Wherever and in so far as people's conduct is shaped by attempts to make of themselves a certain kind of person, because it is as such a person that, on reflection, they think they ought to live, to that extent their conduct is ethical and free.

> (Laidlaw 2002: 327)

The turn of the millennium saw three essays published independently of each other that made programmatic proposals for an anthropology of ethics. They each argued, in different ways, that anthropology might fruitfully explore the ways in which people make moral choices, reflect on their lives, and develop moral judgement. Drawing on Aristotelian virtue ethics and Foucault's later writing, they each presented positive propositions for how anthropology might take ethics as a field of study, and how anthropologists might understand the ways in which individuals cultivate themselves as moral subjects. They all did so in response to what they variously identified as lacunae in scholarship at the time and sought to position themselves against the analytic pitfalls of both social determinism and atomistic individualism. Lambek (2000) proposed a focus on the practice of good judgement in particular circumstances, a form of practical wisdom which he argued could not be reduced to either an abstract calculation or an institutional discourse (Lambek 2000: 316). He argued that anthropology might account for both 'the capacity and means for virtuous action as well as the limitations placed upon it' (Lambek 2000: 309). Faubion (2001a) called for the discipline to examine 'the ethical' as an anthropological question. In so doing he sought to provide anthropology with a way of understanding action which avoided either decisionism (economistic or Sartrean), agency, and choice on the one hand, and determinism, structure, and compulsion on the other (Faubion 2001a: 84). Similarly, Laidlaw (2002) sought to introduce an analysis of human freedom to anthropology in part as a way of avoiding the collapse of ethics into social regulation or control. Laidlaw distinguished his concept of freedom from a conceptualization of freedom as acting in conformity with one's

'authentic' self, or freedom as that which is achieved only once relations of power have been removed. Thus, a commitment to steering clear of the polarities of determinism and independence was built into the beginnings of the anthropology of ethics. It is striking then that despite explicit attempts to get past this binary, critics of the anthropology of ethics have remained so attached to it. The criticism of voluntarism or determinism is often levelled in debate about how we might best understand practices of 'self-cultivation' and their place in wider ethical life.

One reason for this might be that a focus on 'self-cultivation' developed in the anthropology of ethics largely through readings of Foucault, a scholar who has generated entirely contrastive anthropological interpretations of his work (see Heywood, Chapter 5 of this volume). In his later work Foucault developed a theory of ethical self-cultivation to account for the kind of relationship one seeks to have with oneself 'and which determines how the individual is supposed to constitute himself as a moral subject of his own actions' (Foucault 2000a: 263). His interest lay in how an individual acquires not only skills but also certain attitudes through 'the modes of action that an individual exercises upon himself' (Foucault 2000b: 225).[1] Foucault sought to carve an analytic space that did not reduce subjectivity to either a given, 'a universal form of subject that one could find everywhere' (1996: 452), or to a theory of the self as wholly subjugated by external forces. In so doing he distinguished his theory of self-cultivation from the two strong interpretations singled out for criticism in different ways by Faubion, Lambek, and Laidlaw: the subject as sovereign and independent or the subject as determined by historical or material forces.

In this chapter I will explore these two interpretations of 'self-cultivation' and their implications: the first, that self-cultivation reproduces a normative social order; the second, that self-cultivation is a matter of individual choice. To foreshadow my conclusion, I will argue that people are neither wholly self-directed nor wholly socially determined, but the value of approaching self-cultivation through a consideration of these positions is that it might draw attention to the existential efforts that people make in the midst of life. Ethnographies of self-cultivation reveal the efforts that people make to shape themselves and the worlds in which they find themselves. How far such efforts go, the form that they take, and the relationships in which they are embedded will be specific to particular

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[1] In developing his theory of ethics, Foucault distinguished between acts (*conduits*) as the real behaviour of people and the moral codes (*prescriptions*) imposed on them (Foucault 2000a: 263). He framed moral codes as the rules or restrictions that apply to everyone and that are enforced through prescriptive agencies such as school, family, or the church. These codes, Foucault argued, vary very little and moral injunctions such as don't kill, don't steal, and don't lie can be found in similar forms across temporally and culturally distant contexts. He understood ethics, on the other hand, to be the kind of relationship that one ought to have with oneself, made up of voluntary techniques or practices that people adopt, and these he understood to be necessarily historically and culturally specific and analysable (Foucault 2000a: 277). Ethics are related to moral codes but can change independently, as in his extended examples of ancient Greek and Christian ethics in relation to sexual practice.

lives, but focussing on practices of self-cultivation enables anthropology to account for the reflective efforts that people make to live well. Secondarily, I hope to show that resisting interpretations of self-cultivation as entirely self-directed or socially determined collapses a second dichotomy prevalent in the literature between those practices of self-cultivation found in 'pedagogic' ethical projects and those found in ordinary life. I will argue that reflection occurs in everyday efforts to live well and that even in contexts with clearly prescribed ethical aspirations, people experience and respond to contingency, conflicting values, and moral complexity.

Foucault, Self-Cultivation, and Social Control

Throughout his work, Foucault sought to explore the relationship between governance, knowledge, and power (see Heywood, Chapter 5 of this volume). In his early work (1979) he developed his theory of 'biopower' defined simply as the ability 'to make live or let die': in modern society, power is not enacted through overt force and submission but through more subtle means of shaping behaviours, preferences, and choices through practices that encourage self-disciplining techniques, such as the spatial layout of towns, education, or surveillance – what Foucault referred to as 'governmentality'. The concept of governmentality does a lot of analytical work for Foucault. It provides a way of accounting for both the more formal apparatuses of state administration and their interventions in people's lives, and the less formal ways in which human actors are incentivized or enticed to govern themselves. Thus, in one reading of Foucauldian governmentality, it is through self-cultivation that the docile subject 'makes herself up' and reproduces a normative ideological structure. This internalization of a 'top-down' form of subject formation reflects Goffman's (1961) emphasis on the ways in which (total) institutions cultivate specific subject positions and moral obligations, or Asad's impressive early work (1993) on the ways in which individual priorities are brought into line with institutions through techniques of asceticism and bodily discipline. Thus, subjects are not only the products of forms of power but they also willingly enact their own subjugation through practices of self-cultivation. The argument runs that self-cultivation is an effect of broader knowledge practices or social forces (family, neoliberalism, economics, religion, bureaucratization) and the will of the individual, and her capacity to reflect on how she might wish to live and work towards that aim, is symptomatic of these. If ethical projects in which the 'self' is cultivated rest on well-formed normative understandings about being in the world, then self-cultivation leads to the reproduction of social organization through predefined self-care practices in ethical modes.

The most sustained, and cited, example of this approach to self-cultivation is found in Rose's theory of psychological governance. Rose argued that, in post-welfare societies in which governments had to devise ways of 'governing at a distance', psychology offered a promising logic for strategies of regulation and that this was met by a second form of psychological governance 'from within', what Rose nicely refers to as the governance of the 'soul' (1989).[2] Psychological knowledge was passed down by experts and internalized by individuals. In the long run, he argues, this internalization would be far more influential than formal structures of psychological regulation because it bound citizens 'to a subjection that is more profound because it *appears* to emanate from our autonomous quest for ourselves, it *appears* as a matter of freedom' (Rose 1989: 254; emphasis added). The subjects of governance became 'Active individuals seeking to "enterprise themselves", to maximise their quality of life through acts of choice, according their life a meaning and value to the extent that it can be rationalised as the outcome of choices made or choices to be made' (1996: 57). Thus, for Rose, it is the *freedom* of actors that enables them to become objects of governance; although in the end, he thinks, this is only an appearance of freedom. In the emphasis on the incitement of psychological subjectivity, either in the governance of populations or the governance of the soul, expert knowledge regulates risky groups and 'makes up' individuals. In such analyses society may be flourishing or failing (it is usually the latter) but the efforts of the individual to reflect upon her obligations and engage in moral reasoning are taken as the effects of social forces, which ultimately serve to reproduce those forces.

The challenge of theorizing self-cultivation in this way is that if the self is so constituted by the material or social conditions that surround it, it has no capacity to go beyond them. In this way, everyday self-cultivation creates subject positions through the moralizing mechanisms of biopower and what appears to be ethical practice is revealed to be yet more 'unfreeeedom' (Robbins 2007). What is lost in such an approach is any opportunity to account for people's capacity for moral reasoning and ethical reflection. Furthermore, it implies that citizens unwittingly act against their own interests by engaging in practices of self-cultivation, thereby perpetuating the system. The argument egregiously purports to take reflection seriously, but then concludes that even efforts towards self-cultivation are themselves the symptoms of strangulating social forces. Efforts to shape the self in the light of values are revealed in spite of themselves to be the reproduction of oppressive ideologies and people's aspirations to lead good lives, variously understood, are rendered naïve. Elsewhere, I have argued that such analytic frameworks take forms of

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[2] Almost certainly here Rose is referring to Foucault's playful inversion of Plato, when he says, at the end of *Discipline and Punish*, that 'the soul is the prison of the body'.

power both too seriously and not seriously enough (Cook 2016). People are rendered the marionettes of larger social forces as self-cultivation practices become the unwitting tools of their self-subjugation. Or, alternatively, no analytic space is left to account for the efforts that people make to improve their lives except as a form of false-consciousness. The analysis does not account for those aspects of self-cultivation practices (or engagement with psychological knowledge) that lie beyond social forces or are motivated by optimistic, hopeful, or even utopian ideas about the human condition. And we are left with no analytic space to account for people's ethical intentions to bring something new into being through practices of self-cultivation except for in bad faith (no matter what they say they're doing, they're *really* enhancing oppressive social forces). Through the efforts that subjects make to pursue happy lives, variously understood, a system of inequality and disenfranchisement is reproduced. In this analysis, however, it is practices of self-cultivation themselves which are the means of subjugation.

In what ways might we challenge such a life-denying and bleak analysis? It is clear that self-cultivation involves putting oneself in the care of experts, such that the power dynamics of technologies of domination and technologies of self are conjoined. How, then, are we to make sense of self-cultivation as anything other than the reproduction of a normative moral order? How can people's (individual or collective) efforts towards self-cultivation be understood on their own terms, ensconced as they necessarily are in a world of socio-economic, political, and structural causalities? Foucault himself sought to address this question. In response to readings of his earlier work on governmentality, he worried that his emphasis on domination had left him open to misreading (see 2000b, 2000c), stating categorically in an interview in 1984 that 'The idea that power is a system of domination that controls everything and leaves no room for freedom cannot be attributed to me' (2000d: 293). In much of his later work Foucault sought to address the challenge of social determinism levelled at his earlier work (by none more so than himself; see 2000c: 177; see also 2000e: 201–3; 2000b: 225) through a sustained focus on ethics. He conceived of power as 'capillary' (more like blood vessels that run through the body than the strangulation of bindweed) a necessary and productive aspect of *all* social relations. For Foucault, ethical self-cultivation is always a response to injunctions to make oneself a certain kind of person *within* configurations of power, and in order for action to constitute ethical self-formation, it must involve some degree of freedom. In the genealogy of ethics, Foucault continues the exploration of power that was so central to his earlier work on prisons, asylums, and clinics, but here he rearticulates the nature of power through a radical retheorization of freedom. Foucault distanced himself from two common uses of 'freedom': that acting freely is to act according to one's 'true' desires and that acting freely is only possible in the absences of constraint, domination, or control. Rather,

freedom for Foucault is the practice of reflection within power relations in the light of ideals which are necessarily historically and culturally contingent.

Foucault used the verb 'subjectivation' (*assujettisement*) to emphasize a process of reflective self-formation and referred to *practices* of subjectification as 'techniques or technologies of the self'. These are the practices through which 'the individual is supposed to constitute himself as a moral subject of his own actions' (Foucault 2000a: 263). In a quote that has had more citations than the serenity prayer, Foucault defines technologies of the self as practices

> which permit individuals to effect by their own means, or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.
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> (Foucault 2000b: 225)

Importantly for his theory of self-cultivation, engagement with such techniques requires reflective thought. For Foucault, 'thought' is the capacity for self-awareness.

> Thought is ... what allows one to step back from [a certain] way of acting or reacting, to present it to oneself as an object of thought and to question it as to its meaning, its conditions, and its goals. Thought is freedom in relation to what one does, the motion by which one detaches oneself from it, establishes it as an object, and reflects on it as a problem.
>
> (Foucault 2000f: 117)

This capacity for reflection enables the objectification of some aspect of the self (habits, thoughts, relationships, reactions) in order that it might be 'problematized': brought into view, reflected on, and worked on. For Foucault, the capacity to do this is what 'establishes the relation with oneself and with others, and constitutes the human being as an ethical subject' (Foucault 2000e: 200).

Foucault divided ethical self-cultivation into four components. First, he refers to that part of the self which is the object of thought and focus of ethical work as the 'ethical substance' (*substance ethique*). For example, the problematization of ethical practice may be focussed on desire, the body, the will. Work on the 'self' in order to become the subject that a person aspires to be is work on the 'ethical substance' in Foucault's terms – be that the soul, the emotions, the pleasures – and that which is the concern of ethical judgement may not always be the same part of oneself. Second, Foucault demarcated the mode of subjectivation (*mode d'assujettissement*) to inquire into how people are encouraged to recognize moral obligations. The mode of subjectification is the way in which a person evaluates and

engages in living as a particular kind of being, or a subject of a quality. For example, relating to ideals or duties from a particular role or status: as kin, as an individual, as the faithful. Third, the activity, training, or exercise (*pratique de soi* or *askêsis*) by which the self is formed; that is, the specific work that the person must perform on her ethical substance in order to become a certain kind of subject. These are the activities that a person undertakes in order to shape some part of themselves, their views, reactions, responses, through engagement in practices. Fourth, the aim of practices of self-cultivation is classified as the *telos*: that which is sought through practice, the kind of person that one seeks to become as a result of ethical practice, or towards which one aspires.

This theory of self-cultivation was a categorical refutation of theories of self-cultivation as social determinism. It rests on recognizing the capacity for reflection (something which Foucault took to be a near human universal), holding that the subject is free to the extent that she has the capacity to reflect upon and respond to invitations or injunctions to make herself into a certain kind of person. Such an approach has been a productive analytic for exploring the place of reflection and effortful self-cultivation in diverse ethnographic contexts (cf. Laidlaw 1995; Faubion 2001b; Robbins 2004). But debate about the extent to which people are reflective has contributed to the other end of the polemic that Foucault sought to position himself against, raising the question: if the subject who self-cultivates is not wholly determined by social forces, she is free to cultivate herself 'any which way'?

Self-Cultivation, Ethical Substance, and the 'Idealized Idealistic Individual'

If Foucault positioned himself against an interpretation of the subject as determined by social forces, he refuted an alternative interpretation of subjectivity in his work: that of the subject as sovereign or independent. The 'self' of self-cultivation was not to be understood as 'the idealized idealistic individual' (Lambek 2000b: 12; for a sustained critique of this reading, see Faubion, 2001a, 2014). While Foucault understood reflection as creating the possibility of a relation to the self, and thereby viewed the relation to the self as 'ontologically prior' (2000g: 287), he understood the 'other' as a necessary condition for reflective practice. A person finds techniques and models of subjectification in his culture. They are 'proposed, suggested, imposed upon him by his culture, his society, his social group' (Foucault 2000g: 291). The emphasis on self-cultivation is not, then, a distinction between self and others located entirely in the subjectivity of the individual. Modes of subjectification, in Foucault's terms, are culturally shared. As Laidlaw puts it, 'the reflective motion of "stepping back" is not negated by the fact that in order for this to be possible you have to be standing somewhere in particular to begin with' (2014: 124). But it is also

the case that that which is cultivated, Foucault's ethical substance, may extend well beyond what might be termed an 'individual'. Some have argued that the 'self' of self-cultivation is located in collectives, for example in a religious or caste group in which collective and individual self-fashioning become co-constitutive (Cook 2010; Evans 2016; Heywood 2018; Pandian 2009). Taking this further, Faubion has argued that 'the ethical subject can be a composite subject of an indefinite number of players and places' (2011: 16). On Faubion's terms, any system capable of conscious self-formation could be considered an 'ethical subject'. Contrastively, Venkatesan highlights that it is also important to examine relations *within* oneself, what she refers to as 'auto-relations' (Venkatesan 2014).

In fact, once we begin to explore the categories of self and ethical substance, it becomes unclear that self-cultivation need be in any way limited to the individual. For example, in instances in which rebirth, karma, or the incorporation of the deceased into kin groups are prevalent, it seems clear that ethical life extends beyond the boundaries of the individual body, and beyond the boundaries of a life. The self that one is cultivating may be that of a future life and it may result from the actions of former lives. For example, Laidlaw draws on a Foucauldian framework of self-cultivation in his consideration of the Jain religious practice of fasting to death (*samadhi-maran*). While very few Jains undertake the *samadhi-maran*, it is understood as the most fitting end of a Jain life (2005: 186). In Jain ascetic practice, progress towards enlightenment and release from the sin of *himsa* (violence) is attained through the reduction of desire and emotion through ascetic disciplines such as fasting. The Jain ideal of human perfection is a systematic negation of actual human life, and the practices by which this ideal is realized are a matter of enlightened self-interest 'where the "self" whose interest is at stake is not that of the living person but the imagined future purified soul one could become after enlightenment and death' (Laidlaw 2002: 321).

How the self is defined and the extent to which it is cultivated are not prescribed by Foucault's analytic framework and, indeed, we find ethno-graphic variation in all four of his categories: ethical substance, modes of subjectification, technologies of the self, and telos. That which constitutes the ethical substance may be a clear ontological claim about human nature, for example that the 'real' self is a pure soul or that the self is 'really' an impermanent compound of cause and effect. But it may also be a more general ambition held about life, such as an aspiration towards happiness, fairness, or absence of ill health. Similarly, the modes by which people are encouraged to engage in self-reflective cultivation may be highly prescribed through institutions (such as those of family, religion, or state) or they may be 'opt-in', temporary allegiances with others or private motivations within oneself. Furthermore, the activities by which people seek to shape themselves may be prescribed and ascetic, requiring sustained commitment and discipline (forms of asceticism such as

meditation, fasting, confession, and penance have all been the focus of analyses that have fruitfully drawn on Foucault in this respect). Meanwhile, others require little to no self-denial, are integrated into daily life, and are often very light-touch – for example, meditation (again), diary keeping, exercise, food intake, and clothing. Similarly, self-cultivation may be aimed towards a clearly defined unitary telos, such as enlightenment, union with God, immortality, and so on. Or it may have vaguely defined aims and may sit within multiple and sometimes competing aspirations. Thus, while Foucault makes a general claim that humans engage in ethical self-cultivation, the form that this takes, and the extent to which subjects are motivated to and capable of doing so, are empirical questions: the nature of the ethical substance, the relationships and institutions in which reflection is encouraged, the practices through which cultivation occurs, and the ends towards which people strive will be historically and culturally variable, and they will always and necessarily be located in shifting power relations which can become more or less asymmetrical through time (see Laidlaw 2014: 108–9).

In one of the most sustained anthropological considerations of Foucauldian self-cultivation (see also Faubion 2011), Laidlaw (2014) considers reflective self-cultivation as a constituent part of human life. Drawing on the later writings of Foucault and the philosophical tradition of virtue ethics, most notably Bernard Williams, Laidlaw argues that virtue requires acquiring the practical judgement that will lead to the good being chosen for its own sake (see also Lambek 2008): 'Being or not being courageous, honest, or generous is something one is responsible for because it is how one has chosen, *and continues to choose*, to be' (Laidlaw 2014: 74, emphasis in original). In the Aristotelian account, a virtuous disposition is cultivated through habituation leading to increasingly intelligent discernment (Laidlaw 2014: 74). This *phronesis* is not the exercise of abstract rationality on the part of an autonomous moral agent, nor can it be reduced to a single choice or an act of will. Practical wisdom is both developed out of experience and informs experience, offering wisdom or guidance for how to act in situations one could not have predicted or has not experienced before. The good life is presumed to be lived in and with community and directed to ideals that encompass collective goods. It is bound up with practices that both express and help in the cultivation of character. As Laidlaw argues,

> While the acquisition of a virtue might begin with being told what to do and being given examples to follow, and continue through encouragement and punishment, its full mature realization requires the attainment of a conscious understanding of who one is and what one is doing, of on-going reflective endorsement based on critical self-understanding.
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> (Laidlaw 2014: 74–5)

Practices by which people develop practical wisdom and a virtuous charac-
ter are shaped by social context and are historically specific; they are
a pervasive aspect of social life and a communal enterprise. Laidlaw built
on a Foucauldian concept of 'freedom' for anthropology. In this analytic
framework, actively responding to the ethical question of how one ought to
live is understood as the exercise of self-constituting freedom (cf. Laidlaw
2002: 324). Freedom is located in the potential for reflective consciousness,
but it necessitates self-discipline in order to be actualized. As Laidlaw articu-
lates it, 'Freedom, though grounded in the general potential of reflective
consciousness, is the always-qualified and provisional outcome of on-going
efforts and reactions; it therefore stands not in opposition but requires
self-discipline' (Laidlaw 2014: 108–9). It is as a result of this that people not
only choose, but continue to choose, to act virtuously as a result of conscious
self-understanding through ongoing reflective confirmation.

By highlighting the relationship between moral judgement and self-
cultivation, Laidlaw is able to demonstrate that moral life is at least to
some degree self-made, freely chosen or aspired to. That is to say, there are
at least some aspects of moral life that are associated with forms of moral
choice and moral self-making. But Laidlaw's argument also accounts for
situated moral judgement and deliberation and is based on a recognition
of the moral pluralism of life. Laidlaw characterizes moral life as plural,
necessitating moral deliberation in complex worlds, and seeks to account
for the operation of practical reason and judgement in everyday life.
People may engage in multiple ethical projects, informed by conflicting
values and aspiring towards mutually contradictory aims, or practices of
self-cultivation may sit at odds with other forms of desire. This is reflected
in Marsden's work on masculinity in the Chitral region of northern
Pakistan, in which pious Muslims contend with the inconsistencies and
contradictions of leading virtuous lives (2005). Young men in the region
aspire to piety but also seek to realize other values that are understood to
be in tension with it. Marsden demonstrates that local forms of masculin-
ity interact and are enacted at different kinds of events, which are evalu-
ated according to different criteria and modes of judgement. Similarly,
Schielke (2015) emphasizes that people live with multiple and often con-
flicting desires and values, and that even great aspirations are experienced
as ambiguous in their pursuit. Writing about Egypt against the backdrop of
the 2011–13 uprisings, Schielke argues that even when people pursue an
aspiration that appears totalizing, such as the moral and spiritual commit-
ments of religion, the obsessive passion of romantic love, or the economic
calculus of making money, these ideas are inconsistent with each other in
their coexistence in daily life. These tensions and contradictions may at
times be oppressive or violent, but at others they may 'present themselves
as a complex patchwork of different kinds of hope, different senses of
living a good life' (Schielke 2015: 11). In so doing, he emphasizes 'the
specificity (situational and historical) of conditions that compel people to

engage in a reflective questioning about their proper being and possible values and actions' (Schielke 2015: 20, ff. 10). What this highlights is that neither practices of self-cultivation nor the values that inform ethical reflection are necessarily singular or unitary. Ethical self-cultivation is situated in broader moral lives that extend over time, are shared with others, and are informed by collective goods. The potential for reflective consciousness is met by the degree to which people are motivated to engage in effortful practices of self-cultivation in potentially multiple and conflictual ethical projects.

Pedagogic Projects versus Ordinary Life?

So far, I hope to have shown that the framework needed to understand practices of self-cultivation must eschew a contrast between them as either determined by broader structures, be they social, economic, or ideological, or as occurring at the level of the individual and as a matter of individuated subjectivity. We have seen that a limitation of the first position is a determinism that affords no analytic space to account for the motivation or intention that informs self-cultivation: people's efforts are revealed to be the reproduction of an ethical regime, but we gain no account of the ways in which the subject might act upon herself and upon the social structures in which she finds herself. By unpacking the second position, I hope to have shown that the category of the ethical subject need not be an 'idealized individuated individual': that modes of subjectification are culturally shared, that the 'self' that is cultivated may extend beyond an individual subject, that self-cultivation may be pursued committedly or on an ad-hoc basis, and that practices may be informed by plural and inconsistent values. Given this, if the subject of self-cultivation is neither wholly determined by social forces nor capable of a profound reflective and self-directed liberation, what is the place of self-cultivation in ethical life?

Debate about this question has informed much scholarship in the anthropology of ethics. Das has critiqued the place of reflection in anthropological theory, arguing that attending to ethics in projects of self-cultivation which seek forms of transcendence or the cultivation of the 'good', however conceived, misses the immanence of ordinary ethics. She argues that anthropological theory needs

> a shift in perspective from thinking of ethics as made up of judgments we arrive at when we stand away from our ordinary practices to that of thinking of the ethical as a dimension of everyday life in which we are not aspiring to escape the ordinary but rather to descend into it as a way of becoming moral subjects.

> (Das 2012: 134)

Mattingly critiques Foucauldian approaches to self-cultivation, arguing that they are 'anti-humanist' because the telos of self-cultivation is known in advance and the 'self' is understood to be an effect, rather than a cause, of action. She argues that the limit of the post-structuralist position is that it

> has insufficient conceptual resources to reveal how individuals struggle to judge how to realize 'best goods' in the singular circumstances that ordinary life presents them with. It tells us a lot about school, so to speak, but much less about the vagaries – indeed the tragedies – of human action and experience.

(2012: 179)

She asks: what of those contexts in which the primary work of ethics is not in the learning of ethical self-cultivation, but in the deliberation of moral decision-making, in contexts in which 'best good' is not clear? Mattingly argues that social spaces are sites of 'moral experimentation' in which people test possibilities as 'researchers or experimenters in their own lives' (2014: 16). With little control over where actions will lead, each act is an experiment in unfolding lives of moral becoming, each moment belonging to a history of experiences and anticipating hoped-for futures. Through the metaphor of the 'moral laboratory', Mattingly reveals that even in the face of bleak circumstances, life contains possibility, and her ethnography is a sensitive account of struggles of moral choice demanded of families under the threat of moral tragedy. Her moving ethnography is testament to the moral complexity and uncertainty of ordinary life. For Das and Mattingly, then, self-cultivation acts as a useful pivot point to establish a distinction between the ethics of ordinary life and situations that call for 'a "stepping back" kind of reflection' (Mattingly 2014: 482). In the final section of this chapter, I will explore this separation between everyday ethical deliberation and pedagogic projects of cultivation to argue that practices of self-cultivation occur in everyday contexts that exceed them and that even in contexts of prescriptive ethical pedagogy people deliberate and respond to the particularities of everyday contingency. In so doing, I seek to highlight the situated character of ethical cultivation and moral decision-making amidst the particularities of practical action.

Two recent critiques that address the place of self-cultivation in ethical life focus on the challenge of identifying the 'self' with an autonomous self-made subject. Positioning herself against Foucault-inspired approaches to ethics, Mattingly argues that self-crafting may not be in line with predetermined ethical projects, that moral becoming is embedded in particular lives, and that best goods are to be judged in specific circumstances. As an alternative to Foucauldian approaches, she develops a theory of 'first-person virtue ethics', which for Mattingly is 'humanist' in the pre-modern sense of emphasizing the fragility of life and the

vulnerability of action in the face of circumstances beyond human control. Contrastively, in an examination of revelatory dreams in Cairo, Mittermaier (2011, 2012) argues that the concept of self-cultivation obscures modes of religiosity that centre on being acted *upon*, because it emphasizes intentionality and deliberate action. She argues that revelatory dreams 'exceed the logic of self-cultivation' (2011: 5): such dreams may be *invited* through practices of self-cultivation, but they come 'from elsewhere'; self-cultivation is not the means by which they are *produced*, reminding us of the unpredictability of divine intervention and the contingency of life itself (2012: 247).

In both cases, an argument is made for recognizing the unpredictable and uncontrollable nature of life, and in both cases, it is argued that an idea of self-cultivation is too 'controlling': that it does not allow due analytic attention to contingency, uncontrollability, or moral luck. Mittermaier argues that the literature on self-cultivation depends on an idea of an autonomous subject (2012: 260). In contrast, Mattingly positions herself against the free cultivation of the self, arguing instead for the importance of a first-person 'self' in ethics, including in ethical self-cultivation. Both anthropologists point to the fact that there is much in life that is uncontrollable: that despite practices of self-cultivation, much lies outside the governance of the self. Does this mean, then, that self-cultivation has no place here? Far from being a refutation of theories of self-cultivation, these authors provide helpful insight into the place of self-cultivation in ethical life. As we have seen, self-cultivation is not premised on an idea of an independent self-cultivator and projects of self-cultivation occur in the midst of broader ethical lives. In the case of prophetic dreams, that which is cultivated is the capacity to receive the dreams, but the dream itself remains the control of the cultivated dreamer (see also Lambek 2000b on the cultivation of mediumship). As Mittermaier writes, 'dream-visions act upon and through the dreamer; they compel dreamers to act (including to engage in practices of self-cultivation); and they might be the outcome of practices of self-cultivation' (2012: 252) by which they are invited rather than produced. Similarly, Mattingly foregrounds the social practices that are 'the various day-to-day technologies of self-care that people draw upon to cultivate, or try to cultivate, virtuous characters' (2012: 179), while also seeking to account for 'the human predicament of trying to live a life that one is somehow responsible for but is in many respects out of one's control' (2012: 179). That is, both critiques highlight that the 'self' of self-cultivation may not be an autonomous subject and that there is much in moral life that exceeds a logic of self-cultivation, either because the 'self' is acted upon by other forces or because some aspects of moral life are concerned with negotiating the ambivalences of ordinary life rather than 'cultivation' per se.[3]

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[3] In some cases, of course, what may be being cultivated is, precisely, the capacity to do this kind of negotiation.

The perceived tension here between cultivation and deliberation is collapsed once we recognize that practices of self-cultivation are always and necessarily located in contexts that exceed them. The extent to which one might self-cultivate in the 'self's production of itself' (Faubion 2011: 48) will always be encompassed in larger moral worlds which call for ethical judgement and deliberation. Furthermore, once we recognize analytically that what people can do is only partially in their own hands, we can account for practices of self-cultivation in which outcomes may be surprising, satisfying, or disappointing, as well as for hope, ambiguity, and sometimes tragedy in the efforts that people make to live good lives under conflicting demands (see also Orsi 2005). This provides an important way of understanding how people face the unpredictable and how people account for forces that lie beyond human control, be they understood as happenstance, the whim of the Fates, or structural forces. As Schielke argues, 'The question of how to have existential power over one's condition is also a question of what works, and if it works, how it works' (Schielke 2015: 217). This reflects Kuan's theory of an 'ethics of trying' in her consideration of parenting in China. Parents face the pressures of ensuring 'children's academic survival while attending to them as psychological selves' (Kuan 2015: 13), which they experience as forms of moral burden and ethical responsibility: 'the moral problem consists of whether one has tried everything possible to secure the good life for one's child in the face of intense social competition' (Kuan 2015: 18).

The foregoing has argued that practices of ethical self-cultivation are located in the messiness of ordinary lives that exceed a logic of self-cultivation. Is it the case then that in those contexts in which subjectivities are shaped through clearly prescribed normative technologies, life is morally unitary and does not demand responses to situated contingency and moral perplexity? For example, in contexts of formal religious training and pedagogy, is self-cultivation a straightforward matter? Is human life here also haunted by vagary and tragedy or is it all 'school' and pedagogy? In the anthropology of religion, analysis of the cultivation of virtue has provided a rich descriptive and analytic tool for accounting for formal religious training in Buddhism (Mair 2015), Christianity (Elisha 2011; Engelke 2007; Luhrmann 2005), Islam (Mahmood 2005; Marsden 2005; Hirschkind 2006; Asad 2003; Evans 2016), Jainism (Laidlaw 1995), and Hinduism (Fahy 2017; Parish 1994; Prasad 2007). For example, Lester (2005) demonstrates that Catholic postulants in a Mexican convent engage in bodily practices in order to shape their subjectivities in what they experienced as a progressively acute discernment of God's plan: 'they learn to retell and reinterpret the stories of their fleshy selves – their struggles and temptations, difficulties and triumphs – as reflections of their changing relationship with God' (2005: 20). As the phenomenological experience of embodied gendered dynamics is transformed, the self is 'mobilised along a different trajectory' (2005: 19). Postulants progressively

learnt to experience their bodies as mediating worldly and spiritual aspects of self, and in so doing they came to inhabit new forms of femininity. Lester demonstrates that postulants understand the process of self-formation through religious training as both a personal calling and an urgent social and political obligation through which they address gendered tensions in Mexico. In my own work, I have explored how monks and nuns in a Buddhist monastery in northern Thailand gain experiential insight into the Buddhist truths of impermanence, suffering, and non-self through meditative discipline (Cook 2010). By bringing the three characteristics (as they are referred to) into their awareness on a moment-by-moment basis through mental discipline, the monastics with whom I work explicitly intend to change their worldview and cut attachment to a sense of self. Through meditation, monastics intend to experience, not just to know, that there is no 'self' (Cook 2013). The bodily and mental disciplines of meditation are both externally and self-imposed: the practice is institutionally prescribed and guided by a teacher, individuals choose when and how often they do intensive retreat, and meditation requires work done on the self, by the self. Focussing on the place of *mae chee*, precept-holding nuns, in Thai monasticism, I show that the development of the Thai meditation movement has been crucial in the development of an increasingly respected identity for female renunciates (see also Cook 2009). The opportunities are limited for women to receive full ordination in Thailand and *mae chee* ordination is only partial. Through the monastic duty to teach and embody the principles of meditation, renunciate women take on highly prestigious religious roles, enabling *mae chee* to define themselves and be defined by others as monastics. The embodiment of the principles of meditation is both a monastic duty and the means through which monastics cultivate detachment from a sense of self.

In these examples, we see projects of self-formation through religious practices. The self 'acts on' the self in the cultivation of gendered and bodily dispositions specific to forms of religious aspiration and value. The work of cultivating soteriological insight or a transcendent subjectivity is informed by clear cosmological and ontological understandings of the world and one's proper relationship to it. And specific forms of religious subjectivity are cultivated in the context of broader social relations and institutional hierarchies. At the same time, they require ongoing reflective practice on the part of a subject not easily classified as 'individuated'. Arguably here, then, these are the 'stepping-back' sort of pedagogic cases which might be distinguished from the messiness of 'everyday' moral contingency and plurality. However, what these two ethnographies reveal is that projects of self-cultivation are located in broader social contexts requiring moral deliberation and response to contingency.

In my study of Thai monasticism, I showed that while soteriological practice focuses on the psycho-physical 'self' and relates this to a moral and cosmic order, self-cultivation occurs in the social relationships of the

monastic community. Renunciation is not achieved through the act of ordination alone and monastics live in a small community replete with gossip and pettiness, sickness and misfortune, which informs and exceeds the work of self-formation. Disagreements between monastics are rarely publicly displayed but gossip about the behaviour of individual monastics is part of daily discussion. Interestingly, navigating mundane occurrences and interpersonal relationships is commonly presented as an opportunity for further practice. In Lester's Mexican convent study, the challenges of coming of age during a period of rapid transformation in Mexico informed intimately personal and nationalist concerns for 'young women grappling with what it means to be a Mexican woman in a time of rapid cultural change' (Lester 2005: 302). Young women who enter the convent experience anxiety about the uncharted territory of their lives and the transformational process that they experience leads to new understandings of their own womanhood during a time of intense social, economic, and political transition (Lester 2005: 266). Thus, even in a context of highly prescriptive ethical imperative, responses to the daily stuff of life require the exercise of judgement and reflective decision-making. And while people respond to structural conditions, they seek to navigate, master, and push the limits of the worlds in which they find themselves (cf. Jackson 2011). By avoiding a contrast between theories of unreflective everyday existence on the one hand, and pedagogic projects of reflective self-cultivation on the other, a focus on self-cultivation can reveal the ways in which people come to live in the midst of the social conditions that they navigate (cf. Faubion 2011: 20), and we can begin to explore the ways in which subjectivity and culture are dialectically constituted.

Conclusion: Reflection in the Midst of Life

In this chapter, I have argued that reflective self-cultivation is found in moral lives, informed by competing moral demands and the uncertainties of practical action. The rejection of the binary between theories of the self as so informed by its circumstances that it has no ability to exceed or transform them, or the self as capable of a profound self-liberating self-directedness (Seigel 2005: 9), enables an empirical consideration of the potential and extent of self-cultivation. It is for this reason that the study of projects and practices of self-cultivation has been a central focus in the development of the anthropology of ethics, ranging from those in monastic and formal religious institutions of various kinds, through to more informal and fragmentary forms. It has been drawn on in political anthropology in work on activism (Heywood 2018; Dave, 2012) and experiences of the state (Pandian 2009; Singh 2015), in studies of kinship, reproduction, and mothering (Clarke 2009; Paxson 2004, 2006), in medical anthropological work on engagement with science (Martin 2010), and in

therapeutic interventions (Cook 2015; McKinney and Greenfield 2010; Summerson Carr 2013).

Much of the anthropology of ethics rests on the foundational premise that people reflect upon their circumstances and aspire to cultivate virtues in their responses to the vicissitudes of life. Anthropologists have high-lighted that the ways in which people reflect upon themselves and seek to act will be informed by the particularities of specific contexts, and that there are at least some aspects of life that are self-directed and self-made. At the same time, they have highlighted that action can be morally risky, achievement can be precarious, and that humans are vulnerable to hap-penstance. How we make sense of reflection, as a universal capacity informed by the particularities of specific contexts, and its relationship to practices of self-cultivation is the focus of many of the debates in the anthropology of ethics (Heywood 2015; Keane 2016; Laidlaw 2014). As Heywood argues, it is the reconciliation between the universal and the particular that provides much of the theoretical deliberation in the anthro-pology of ethics: moral reasoning and reflection are universal capacities, and those capacities are contextually inflected (Heywood 2017: 44). Anthropologists in the 'ethical turn' have theorized 'reflection' in differ-ent ways. Das (2012: 138) and Lambek (2015) recognize some kind of reflection as an important component in ordinary ethics. Keane (2010: 69) highlights the ways in which people step back from their lives in his distinction between first- and third-person perspectives (see Mattingly 2014: 26 for a comparative approach). Similarly, for Clarke, ethical reflec-tion is 'utterly normal' (2014: 799), and Robbins (2016) reminds us to focus on the reflective aspects of ethical life, rather than collapsing them into habit or 'culture' (see also Lambek 2000a). In this chapter, I have sought to avoid a contrast between unreflective everyday ethical life and pedagogic projects of reflective self-cultivation. Rather, the lens of self-cultivation enables an analysis of the place of reflection in effortful practices, be they located in 'pedagogically' oriented forms of ethical life or embedded in the routines of daily life.

I have argued that moral lives are complex and rarely homogenous, and that people are often faced with diverse and sometimes conflicting values and that self-cultivation occurs in the moral pluralism of messy everyday life. The dialogic self-constitution of the subject in social relations reminds us that practices of self-cultivation occur in worlds which exceed that which might be shaped or influenced by the self. This does not negate but rather supports the fact that people reflect on their circumstances and aspire to cultivate virtues in their responses to the vicissitudes of life. As Laidlaw has argued, 'The claim on which the anthropology of ethics rests is not an evaluative claim that people are good: it is a descriptive claim that they are evaluative' (2014: 3). The question then becomes an empirical one, to enquire into the form and the extent of self-cultivation in specific lives without reducing it to a thin analysis of either atomistic individualism or

social determinism. While we can find ethnographic examples to illustrate the distinction between 'pedagogic' projects of self-cultivation and moral deliberation in the ongoing uncertainty of everyday life, there is no analytic reason why the distinction is necessary: forms of reflective self-cultivation are found in the 'midst' of everyday practice to varying degrees, and in contexts of intense ethical training people remain vulnerable to moral plurality and the contingency of messy everyday life.

Acknowledgements

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