Introduction

The first part of this book is devoted to cultural evolution or, as Foucauldians would have it, to the genealogy of recent practices that have become known as self-technologies. Technologies of the self such as therapy, counseling, and self-help (Chapter 1: Sabine Maasen, Barbara Sutter and Stefanie Duttweiler) are prime examples of self-technologies. They are characterized by the various ‘operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being’ that people make either by themselves or with the help of others in order to transform themselves to reach a ‘state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality’ (Foucault, 1988, p. 18). Foucault deliberately chose the term genealogy to evoke Nietzsche’s genealogy of morals as it highlights complex or non-spectacular origins, and to refer to the fact that utterly mundane practices are part and parcel of what we conceive as particularly significant achievements.

In this vein, our modern understanding of ourselves as being highly individualistic and voluntarily acting selves does have a complex, discontinuous, and partly inconspicuous history. As to the latter, the following two chapters probe into the culturally evolved tradition of linking selves and society by way of practices that seem utterly self-centered. A rich body of literature on self-help, but also on the foundational practice of confession, testifies to the paramount importance of self-technologies in bringing about willing selves that today are capable of competently governing themselves and others (family, neighbors, communities). Current projects such as ‘values education’, ‘moral education’, ‘citizenship education’, ‘personal and social education’, and so on, have emerged, none of which would be intelligible without these highly practiced
techniques of telling the truth in order to adequately govern oneself and/or others. Likewise, a mass society would not be possible without its members’ capacity to do so. Notably, our current society of control can, and indeed does, rely on this capacity and the self-evidence of constantly monitoring and regulating oneself. The very evidence of this activity is, for a large part, rooted in a network of practices and institutions based on such self-technologies.

However, it is also firmly rooted in a long cultural tradition of relating selves to their society. ‘Contemporary notions of confession are derived not simply from the influence of the Catholic Church and its strategies for confessing one’s sins (where sin is mostly equated with sexual morality so that confession became the principal technology for managing the sexual lives of believers), but from ancient, pre-Christian philosophical notions.’ Furthermore, they have also been ‘profoundly influenced by confessional techniques embodied in Puritan notions of the self and its relation to God, and by Romantic, Rousseauian notions of the self’ (Besley, 2005, p. 83). Ever since, the confessional practices have been part of the secular world: they have been integrated into medical and then into therapeutic and pedagogical models in contemporary secular societies.

In their various forms and fashions, self-technologies are systems of power/knowledge. ‘At least for the study of human beings,’ power and knowledge ‘cannot be separated: in knowing we control and in controlling we know’ (Gutting, 2003, p. 6). Modern societies of control embed this mechanism in most intricate ways. More specifically, control is achieved largely by the internal monitoring of those controlled. Indeed, the current selfhelpers must be skilled in their own subjection, in organizing and sustaining themselves as calculable, classifiable, responsible, self-regulating, and, hence, ‘governable’. This notion and practice, far from being invented only just recently, is but the latest transformation of techniques of self-thematization (Hahn). It is based upon, and, indeed, is itself a ‘technology of the will’.

Namely, as Alois Hahn and Marén Schorch show in minute detail in Chapter 2, the current notion of free will and responsibility cannot be disconnected from its Christian roots, notably not from its core practice of confession. In the confessional, the sinner was led to speak about their (sinning) self – his or her deeds, words, and thoughts. All sins had to be confessed and (shamefully) repented. The confession makes sinners speak about themselves – it is a generator of self-thematization, out of which a (willing) self emerges.

While leaving the reconstruction of the confession and its modern successors (autobiographies and other self-generators) to the authors, we
would like to stress the multitude of ways in which confession has indeed operated as a technology of the will. To begin with, sins have to be conceived as deeds, words, or thoughts directed against God's will. Confronting God with one's rebellious will is, in a way, the sin of all sins. Some theories of sin even insist on the fact that it is the very act of agreeing-to-sin, that is, the will to sin, which deserves damnation in the first place. Yet, in order to confess, one has to overcome one's feelings of shame and guilt: the very act of confession proves a strength of will by way of submitting oneself to God's Law. The more the notion of sin enters the domain of inner motives, fantasies, and unruly thoughts, the more the minute workings of the will have to be brought to the surface by way of willful inspection: deeds, words, and thoughts may both indicate and provoke one's will to sin. When the Reformation increased the frequency and ubiquity of these self-inspections, the confession towards oneself, one's wife or husband, or spiritual guide became an ongoing activity. One had to scrutinize not only every possible way in which one may have sinned, but also scrutinize one's (sinful) biography, emerging from it in order to learn about one's chances for Eternal Salvation.

To summarize: confession, in its Christian as well as its modern variants, is a prime technology of the will. The technique is to make the sinner speak, that is, to induce the will to confess his or her sins that, in turn, are regarded as willfully enacted deeds, words, or thoughts against God's will. To be sure, this did not occur without guidance: so-called penitentials (summae confessorum) instructed both the priest and the sinner on how and what exactly to confess (Maasen, 1998). For instance, in 1867, Gaume issued a penitential in late medieval style. Before explaining the questions the priest was to ask, a third of the manual is devoted to his tasks before, during, and after the act of confession. The first chapter introduces the priest to his different roles throughout the process. Acting as a father, doctor, teacher, and judge, the priest's foremost duty is to evoke a truthful confession. The manual even offers introductory remarks such as, ‘Say everything without hesitation and do not be ashamed. It does not matter that you did not examine yourself sufficiently. It will suffice if you answer to my questions … You should have no doubt, God will excuse you, if you have good intentions …’ (Gaume, 1867, p. 67). The manual thus provides the priest with a pedagogic program, explaining his tasks, teaching him by examples, and giving meticulous instructions on how to behave in different situations. In the following chapters, there are detailed instructions that elaborate on the actual sins that may have possibly been committed. These instructions are designed to guide the priest in his attempt to elicit a truthful and complete confession.
In this way, calling confession a technology is more than just a metaphor: rather, the term ‘technology’ highlights the systematic character of the Christian discourse on willing selves. It defines a problem (sins against God’s will), outlines its dimensions (sins of thoughts, words, and deeds), offers a way to its solution (willful confession), and specifies sub-goals (shame, remorse, penance) which help to willfully control the state of perfection. Thus, viewing confession as a technology allows us to see the will emerging as both a vehicle and the target of systematic self-inspection, producing a self-conscious and responsible self.

The rise of self-help should therefore not be considered a transitory cultural fad. It should rather be seen as a correlative of practices and techniques based on neoliberal governmentality. It is a mode of rule that signifies the emerging audit culture (Powers) that increasingly exerts control by means of, not against, individuals. It both disciplines and makes use of their agency, ultimately, by way of self-technologies.

References


Gaume, J., Handbuch für Beichtväter (Regensburg: Georg Josef Manz, 1867).
