

ETHICAL (SELF-) CONSTITUTION OF THE SUBJECT ON SOCIAL NETWORKS

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Abstract: We presently observe the increasing affirmation of a conception of subjectivity according to which the way we perceive ourselves as subjects is forged in situated social practices, often materialized through discourse while always implying power relations. Such practices circumscribe a space where we become “accessible” to ourselves and to others as subjects and objects. This space constitutes and simultaneously subjects those who partake in the practices. This paper discusses the possibility of (self-)constitution of the subject in times when identity practices are increasingly held through social network profiles. We investigate how the practice of updating and (re-)visiting profiles constitutes a form of criticism of previously established codes and how this might enact what Foucault calls the *ethics of existence*.

Keywords: (Self-)constitution of the subject. Ethics of existence. Later Foucault.

INTRODUCTION

The conception of the subject as a unity endowed with an essence that could be unveiled by the exercise of reason, or self-knowledge, seems increasingly absent from the theoretical approaches investigating the issue in the last few decades (RAJCHMAN, 1995; ALLEN, 2008). A vision that could be called “subjectivist metaphysics”, whose long tradition in philosophy dates from Plato to Kant, gives way to a conception of the subject as an assemblage of forces and relations that constitute an exterior, a relatively stable unity with some provisionally settled regularities. Thus, a philosopher, for

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example, is one whose concrete practices are those that define a philosopher: in the academic context, she or he is one who researchs in philosophy, who lectures and conferences, corrects tests and papers and takes part in committees, boards and academic conferences in her or his area, among many other tasks. By this reasoning, the philosopher would not be the one whose intrinsic nature is discovered as bearer of knowledge that leads to truth, an “expert” by virtue of her or his condition, but rather someone whose set of practices and routines constitute a “philosophical subject” in a movement of *becoming* – a movement that is dynamic and never definitively fixed. A post-modern view of subjectivity will claim that the way we see ourselves and how we conceive ourselves as subjects is forged through these situated practices which often materialize at the level of discourse and always imply power relations. Such practices circumscribe an experiential space within which we become “accessible” to ourselves and to others as subjects and objects of action, knowledge and control. However, far from being a neutral and static space, where we inhabit and observe through objective lens, it is rather a dynamic space that takes shape in the processes, activities and relationships that unfold in or by it (MCGUSHIN, 2005, p. 643). In a two-way movement, we recognize that space when, for example, as academics we engage in teaching, research and extension activities while being constituted as teachers through those very practices.

Bearing these considerations in mind, this paper asks what it means to be a subject in a time when the constitution of identity seems to be marked more and more sharply by the cultivation of profiles in cyberspace, such as those of social networks. We are interested in approaching how that which Foucault (1990 [1984], 1997a [1983], 1997 [1984a]) outlined in his later works as an “ethics of existence” might find a possible space in one’s identity performance on social networks. In particular, we aim to investigate how the regular practice of visiting and feeding profiles on social networks constitutes a form of criticism/questioning of previously established codes and regulations, and how this could constitute ethical work. For this purpose, we look into the ways such practices are materialized through discourse, in the form of a dislocation in the set of statements that determine what can/should be said in whatever discursive practice being held in a particular context (FOUCAULT, 1972 [1969-70]).

Michel Foucault’s thought on ethics and subjectivity presents itself as a promising framework for the kind of analysis we aim at here. Having been little studied in its relations with Discourse Analysis schools taking into account Foucault’s contributions, as well as those in the French tradition of Michel Pêcheux, the period known as “the later Foucault” (early 1980s) points to a vast field of research to be developed. Thus, we propose below a brief outline of the main issues addressed by Foucault in this period, in order then to proceed to a preliminary analysis of the corpus selected for our discussion.

ETHICAL (SELF-)CONSTITUTION OF THE SUBJECT IN FOUCAULT

A philosopher who declared the “death of the subject” in an early stage of his work, Foucault never actually left aside the question of subjectivity. His interest may have become more explicit in his later writings; however, it has never cea-

sed to exist in one form or another (CHOKR, 2007). When launching the challenge to make a “genealogy of the present”, Foucault seeks to understand, first of all, how we historically constitute ourselves as the subjects we claim to be today. Ethics, for Foucault, implies a specific sense of subjectivity: it is the way we constitute ourselves as moral subjects in view of the complex network of power-knowledge in which we are enmeshed. This is achieved through what the author calls an “ethics of existence”, i.e. the specific ways we relate to ourselves – for example, as subjects endowed with a specific form of sexuality that would give us a “true” form of identity. Ethical self-constitution is not reduced, then, to an “awareness of the self”, as a single individual, but rather functions as an active “response” of the subject to the imperatives and moral codes from the outside (and therefore not individually or voluntarily determined) through the cultivation of practices that focus on oneself in one’s conduct. These are the practices through which one aims at knowing and controlling oneself, exploring one’s limits, putting oneself to the test – in sum, *becoming* (FOUCAULT, 1990 [1984], p. 28).

Foucault’s endeavor to delimit the conditions of possibility that make up the plot of this subjective constitution turns us into critical readers of history, “empiricists” who seek to go beyond the realization that what we are is the result of the work of historically engendered contingencies – the realization that what we are could, in any case, be something else, rather than the unveiling of a universal, timeless, ready-to-be-discovered essence. Foucault seeks in his analytics to make visible the arrangements and connections between the historical discontinuities of concrete and situated practices – those heterogeneous practices that at some point (or several points) intertwined to form the relatively stable and never definitively settled ground on which to sustain the configurations of knowledge, power and truth that we experience in the present. It is in this sense that Foucault’s work constitutes a genealogy: it allows for a historical problematization of what we assume to have always been, besides dislocating its own methodological procedures (already outlined in his early writings) for the treatment of the relationship between discourse and practices, so as to destabilize the certainties and the legitimacy that supposedly mark the present time (KOOPMAN, 2013).

In fact, Foucault has always been interested in the idea of the concrete historical experience, which manifests itself in three corresponding levels (HOY, 1996 [1986], p. 3): 1. the level of knowledge: how concepts, theories and disciplines are formed (which is the level of discourse itself, appearing more explicitly in Discourse Analysis of the French tradition); 2. the level of power: the formation of normative rules that operate in the establishment of regimes of truth and forms of institutional regulation (including therein the modern forms of biopower); and 3. the level of ethics or moral self-constitution of subjects: the relationship of subjects with themselves, which also necessarily involve relations with other subjects.

Focusing on the third level, the philosopher further identifies four interrelated aspects that form the basis of the ethical work of self-constitution of the subject (FOUCAULT, 1990 [1984], p. 26-31, 1997a [1983], p. 307-314). The first is the *ethical substance*, the part of ourselves (acts, desires or feelings) that becomes the material of ethical conduct – the domain on which to focus the ethical work more specifically. The second aspect is the *mode of subjectivation*, which concerns the way in which individuals are urged to recognize their moral obliga-

tions and put them into practice, that is, the specific way in which individuals establish a relationship with the rules and norms. The third aspect comprises the forms and techniques for preparing the ethical work, not only in order to adapt one's behavior to a given rule, but also to transform oneself into a moral subject of one's own conduct. This is what Foucault more specifically calls *practice of the self*. The last aspect is related to what may be called the *teleology of the subject*: a projection of the kind of subject one aspires to be when one behaves morally.

It is possible to view these four aspects in terms of the questions they pose to the subject of ethics (O'LEARY, 2002, p. 12-13; BERNAUER; MAHON, 2005, p. 152), respectively:

- What part of one's life should be submitted to the commission of a care of the self?
- Why should we engage in this practice; what tools and techniques do we have in order to perform such work?
- On behalf of what lifestyle or way of being is this work done?

While the search for such answers does not exactly correspond to a method, we will analyze Foucault's proposal as an analytical device, a theoretical and methodological tool with which to investigate the specific problem that interests us here: the realm of the possible modes of (self-)constitution of the subject on social networks.

But, first, let us see how Foucault's ethics speaks to the vision of the subject which is the basis of Discourse Analysis, so as to identify a possible theoretical articulation as well as an epistemological conflict between the propositions. We believe that such dialogue that already exists between French Discourse Analysis, and Foucault's archaeological phase could be extended to the later Foucault in order to better approach the phenomenon discussed here, thus providing a framework on which to build our analysis.

THE CONSTITUTION OF THE SUBJECT OF/THROUGH DISCOURSE

According to the classical conception in Discourse Analysis, the subject is divided, traversed by ideology, and not the source of what it says. Non-coincident with an empirical speaking subject, it is rather a subject position that assumes every statement from a particular position, a particular discursive formation. As pointed out by Orlandi (2006, p. 18), summarizing the first formulations by Michel Pêcheux, the subject "is a form of historical existence of any individual agent of social practices. It is by examining the discursive properties of the subject that we encounter one's self-image, as a subject of discourse"¹.

The subject is constituted, on this view, by forgetting what determines it, a forgetting that results from the *modus operandi* of ideology. Ideology interpellates individuals into subjects by providing them with a "reality" that is evidence of a "transparent" system, a pre-constructed background upon which meaning is made, i.e. the symbolic order. This subjection, paradoxically, is the very pos-

1 This and all other translations from references originally in Portuguese are ours.

sibility of becoming a subject: one submits to language so as to be the one who speaks, self-signifying. This does not mean that the interpellation is always successful. It is susceptible to failure or misrecognition, which is exactly the condition whereby meaning is dislocated from the already-said, i.e. from the *interdiscourse* setting the conditions of possibility for the saying.

Now, forms of subjectivation (self-constitution of the subject) in Foucault always obtain from shared and historically constituted social practices. It is not a matter, for the subject, of individually forging one's own subjectivity through a voluntary arrangement. The subject is always already immersed in networks of power and knowledge that determine models of how to behave, how to think. As the author explains in one of his last interviews, the subject actively constitutes itself through practices of the self which "are nevertheless not something invented by the individual himself. They are models that he finds in his culture and are proposed, suggested, imposed upon him by his culture, his society, and his social group" (FOUCAULT, 1997b [1984], p. 291).

It is worth noting, however, that the author had described much earlier in his work, in its archaeological phase, how the subject is constituted by articulating statements produced through a work of archive and memory which actualizes them in each new discursive practice. But it is by questioning the ways in which the subject is summoned to be a subject that it can become another subject – a subject not immune to forms of domination, but aware of these forms and the limits and constraints they may impose. It is in this sense that one can speak of a dual and simultaneous constitution: that of an object and a subject of discourse (FOUCAULT, 1994 [1966])². In line with the three great movements of Foucault's work, as noted above, we can say that the subject has access to itself: 1. from knowledge that is supported by techniques or mechanisms of the symbolic order (among them, the statement [*énoncé*] in Foucault's sense of "enunciative function", not to be mistaken for the sentence)³; 2. from the relations of power-knowledge implied by these techniques (relations that articulate the political discourse, forms of governance that directly affect the bodies in their material practices); 3. and ultimately from self upon self, also under the mediation of generating techniques of the "care of the self" leading to an ethics which is also an aesthetics of existence.

A similar proposition is found in Discourse Analysis about the very constitution of meaning, with discourse being understood as the historical determination of meaning processes. In its quest to grasp the *real of language* in conjunction with the *real of history*, both arising from the conditions of material production of social and political life, Discourse Analysis sees the constitution of identity, itself, as a movement in history – so that subject and meaning are constituted simultaneously (ORLANDI, 2012, p. 74-75). It is also in this connection that Discourse Analysis addresses the issue of ethics. In addition to an element of individual behavior, ethics is seen as an integral part of the production of meaning, as it focuses on the relationship of language (endowed with a materiality, subject to failure) to history in the constitution of meaning and subject. "It

2 And it is on this conception that we justify the use of parentheses in the term (*self*-)constitution.

3 For Foucault, what characterizes an *énoncé* is the fact of its repeatability: that we can assign a subject position to it, i.e. we can determine "what position can and must be occupied by any individual if he is to be the subject of it" (FOUCAULT, 1972 [1969-70], p. 96).

is therefore a general question to language, to discursive knowledge and to the way that knowledge establishes a memory in the keeping of certain meanings and not others” (ORLANDI, 2012, p. 158).

The historical configuration the subject takes on nowadays is that of the legal subject (the citizen), endowed with rights and duties, “origin” of its intentions and “responsible” for what it says and wants. At the same time, this subject operates through a memory of what has been said, to which it has no direct access since it is not the source of meaning. However, being a subject of meaning-making, it is, beyond the question of individual responsibility, a fundamentally ethical and political subject. The work of the techniques of the self in the self-constitution of the subject implies a particular assemblage of subjectivity mechanisms available to a particular social group, in particular socio-historical contingencies. Among these mechanisms are, in an increasingly noticeable way, those involving the relations of individuals to new technologies. Indeed, new technologies, especially digital ones, permeate the subject’s relation to language in a particular way, shifting decisively the question of authorship, the connection between production, circulation and reception of texts, among others.

Subjectivity is not limited to the sphere of the individual; it is enacted in all processes of social and material production, including the media. Thus, the modern subject “consumes” subjectivity in the form of systems of representations or sensitivities.

Subjectivity circulates; it is essentially social, assumed and lived by individuals in their private lives. Putting into circulation statements governing one’s ways of being and acting, the media perform a collective assemblage of the enunciation, crisscrossing collective, social, economic, technological determinations (GRE-GOLIN, 2007, p. 21).

Now, as contemporary subjects, we find ourselves within the limits of modernity, in the full motion of experiencing and trying to understand the work of those determinations, together with their possible breaches, or points of resistance – which makes the search for a “genealogy of the present”, as Foucault suggests, an even more challenging task.

THE EMERGENCE AND CULTIVATION OF SUBJECTIVITY ON SOCIAL NETWORKS

Since its appearance, particularly from the early 2000s, social networks like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram have attracted millions of users, making their visits to these sites a habit integrated into daily routine. By creating profiles on such sites, users come to bear a kind of “social badge”, a name tag which may be fed (updated) with varying frequency and constancy and which may become a true showcase for the individual to show how she/he sees her/himself, how she/he is expected to be seen and how she/he relates to others. There is room, indeed, for a variety of activities and forms of expression on social networks. Cultures that emerge in these spaces can be varied, depending on the interests and bonds that form among the community members therein.

According to Boyd and Ellison's (2007, p. 211) definition, social networks are Internet services which allow individuals to

(1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.

Typically, a profile consists of a unique, personalized page generated by the system from a number of descriptors provided by their "owners", such as age, place of residence and/or origin, place of work and/or study, personal interests (favorite bands, movies, books), all appearing in a section called "About Me" – plus a photo ID, the inclusion of which, although not mandatory, is strongly encouraged.

In the specific case of Facebook, the focus of our discussion, users who are part of the same "network" and are therefore "friends", can freely view each other's profiles or timelines, unless the owner decides to deny access. On the other hand, there are also those that allow unrestricted content access to any user, including non-friends. To befriend someone on Facebook, one needs to send them a request – which may or may not be accepted – or else accept their request. Once a network of friends is started, other names will be suggested, from mutual contacts that can rapidly multiply. The number of friends that a user has at a given time – which can range from a few tens to a few thousand – is displayed to any visitor to a profile or timeline, unless otherwise specified.

Like most social networks, Facebook allows users to leave messages on the profile pages or timelines of friends, which can be done in private (inbox), or openly, either in response to an external post shared in those spaces or to a new message posted there. The posts themselves, as well as the comments, may consist only of text (usually short), or may include links to files and/or photo, audio and video, or a combination of any of these modalities. As a prominent feature on Facebook, there is the option "like" that can be added to each intervention (post or comment) or submitted to an institutional page or fan page, which are other types of profile pages available on the social network. "Liking" those latter types provides immediate access to their contents.

Thus the content of a timeline is constructed from the accurate recording of the sequential accumulation of the various posts and comments added to them. One's timeline shows the construction of a trajectory in the form of a chronological and linear narrative about the user – with the difference that any present or past intervention in such a narrative can be edited or simply hidden/deleted at any time, by determination of its owner.

This brief overview of the functioning of the social network alone raises some initial thoughts. Apparently, we are dealing with a broad platform of communication with multiple potential functions as an "order of discourse". A set of rules for the production and circulation of discourse is in place here so as to multiply the practices that simultaneously work to "avert its powers and its dangers, to cope with chance events, [and] to evade its ponderous, awesome materiality" (FOUCAULT, 1972 [1969-70], p. 216). In this order of discourse, visibility – primarily that of oneself – is presented as a structuring element of experience. As a spectacle in permanent progress, it opens up space for a "self-cultivation" materialized in verbal and non-verbal practices that "feed" one's identity.

But keeping profiles in operation is far from being an unrestricted expression of “freedom”. In addition to technical issues proper (size limit for posts, for example), there is privacy policy and a “decorum”, involving for example the transmission of messages of racist content, which may result in temporary user banning or blocking. There is also the “data providing” factor, which is considered central to the functioning of the system itself as the public disclosure of information such as daily routines, photos and images become contents for potential capture by application programmers and other companies with a view to guiding their marketing activities within a possible range of user interests (FUCHS, 2012; VAN DIJCK, 2012). In addition, there are those who post with great frequency, at times “preaching” messages whose nature one may not want to read – although there is always, as said earlier, the delete option.

The question which concerns us more closely here, however, is precisely how the cultivation of a profile on a network like Facebook could be a form of ethics in Foucault’s sense: a form of moral relationship to oneself. More precisely, we seek to know: what form does this self-constitution take? What regulates the modes of subjectivation? What effects are raised? What relationship with others does it provide? In order to draw an illustrative panel that seeks to answer these questions, we have chosen to focus on the profile of a particular user: a known Brazilian intellectual and professor of philosophy whom we shall call Profilo to preserve anonymity. Also for research ethics’ sake, we point out that although we have been accepted as a friend of that professor (though without personal acquaintance offline), we have equal access to the content of his timeline as anyone else holding a Facebook profile, since he has opted to have all his posts published on “public” mode. The difference lies in the possibility of commenting, which is permitted only to friends. From a vast amount of material, we have selected a few posts and comments published in May and July 2012.

The choice of the research subject comes from an interest in how the image of oneself is built by a renowned scholar in an area of knowledge largely associated in the common imaginary with scholarship (perhaps of a certain gravity), with analytical and reflective knowledge, supposedly little attuned to forms of “lightheaded” media communication (albeit of an increasing appeal). We do not claim that philosophy and mass culture are necessarily incompatible, or alienated from each other; instances of this approximation are various and seem to have increased in recent times. What particularly concerns us is investigating what subjective forms are taken on by an individual directly associated with that field of knowledge when he ventures into a new context, a new discursive order in which he will invest a significant portion of his subjective constitution.

A first glance at Profilo’s Facebook page reveals the following information: his hometown, the city where he lives, and the university where he teaches (which is the same he attended). Early in the second half of 2012, Profilo had over 4,600 friends (of which only 9 we both shared) and over 70 photos and videos posted (though few by himself). By clicking on the “About” link right below the initial information, we access a second page where there are more details to his profile, including: birth date (but not year), high school (a public one), religion (“I want to believe in a just God, but I find it hard, with so much injustice”), and political inclination (“the green left”), as well as the link to a personal website (outdated by then). In addition, there is a small text in biodata format, first person, sum-

marizing some of his main activities both inside and outside the academia (including columns in magazines and newspapers and television projects).

From this initial survey, it is possible to make some reflections. By accepting a high number of friend requests and having his timeline on “public” mode, Profilo keeps a public ethos on the social network, an option that proves consistent, in terms of content, with what had been done on his personal website. However, this is not to disclose or make available the intellectual production of the author – at least not just that. We will see that in a few posts there are links to articles and other writings by him. But the “curriculum” aspect of his work is just one component of his social network subjective constitution. Returning to Foucault’s categorization, it is possible to say that the ethical substance of Profilo’s subjectivity is not restricted to the cultivation of the figure of the university professor addressing his audience (a wider one) with resources provided by the electronic media. Moreover, the fact that he professes his religious and political preferences already singles out his discourse, making intervene in the *intradiscourse* other discursive formations that are less likely to be heard in the context of an academic conference or even a philosophy class. Still, we must enter Profilo’s timeline to begin answering the questions about what part(s) of the self the ethical work of the constitution of the subject is focused on and how it materializes.

A MULTIPLE MAKING OF SELF (AND OTHERS)

In May 2012, Profilo posted the link to an article published in the newspaper *Folha de S.Paulo* titled “Future Queen of England repeats shoes in the same week”, followed by the lead: “The Duchess of Cambridge Kate Middleton, 30, wore the same shoes on two different occasions this week”. As a comment above the link, we read:

(P1) Haven’t read something so relevant in a long time!⁴

Clearly an ironic statement, criticizing the futility of the reporting and questioning its “news quality” (in a non-sensationalist newspaper), the comment says a lot in few words, and apparently says it all. However, many comments that follow will show that the fact that Profilo chose this as publishable content on the social network and that he expressed it in such a way – through irony, rather than analysis – singled it out as a statement. So as to conjure its randomness, comments succeed one another, echoing and amplifying the ironic tone assumed by the author. In a period of 15 minutes, nearly 40 “likes” and many other comments spring up, among which we read:

(C1) If she repeats her panties, then it’s a crime.

(C2) How have I survived without this information? And the earrings? What do they have to say about the earrings? Vital information for the security of the nation as a whole...

(C3) Wow, really, oh my God. I’m in shock! But now my life has gained meaning. ...

(C4) Reconsidering here the idea that the world will end in 2012 hehehe.

4 All posts and comments were written in Portuguese.

Yet, it is not only a game of irony that is played along the comments thread – a game which bypasses any formality, de-hierarchizing any possible relationship between author and interlocutors. Some see the opportunity to post more analytical reflections:

(C5) The banality of information that is highlighted shows how the news media is waning in importance. Also, it throws wide the true values of consumer society. Repeating shoes, of course, is a no-no, it's degrading. The media sinks along with society; who will be first to reach the bottom of the pit?

(C6) Dictatorship has won today; one who does not yield to this logic is viewed as an outsider in society. If a young person listens to Chico Buarque, you get astonished. But listening to Luana [sic] Santana is normal⁵. When we question news of this “content”, we are considered anti-social, but when we say nothing we are equals. Dictatorship wins... this pseudo-democracy is sad.

Although these are only two in the mass of comments to (P1), they seem to situate their authors in the position of analytical-reflective subjects, much in the way expected to be found in the discursive sphere of the academic debate. Like students interacting in a philosophy class or symposium, more than “friends” in a chat bar proper, the latter interlocutors end up projecting the social network interaction in such a way as to ensure (if not “restore”) the teacher-student relationship, or one of discussant-commentator – even when their formulations will themselves also suggest an ironic *ethos* (“repeating shoes, of course, is a no-no, it's degrading”), or an informal, “non-academic” register (“This pseudo-democracy is sad”. // “who will be first to reach the bottom of the pit?”).

What we would like to point out here, from the analysis of these exchanges, is that they should not be read only as a turn-taking game of irony in which the speakers are placed in similar subjective positions. More remarkably, perhaps, they signal the coming-to-presence of an image of strength for Profilo, the known and prestigious professor of philosophy: a subject position restoring his warranted hierarchical position as an individual who can say what he wants, but now in a context other than his “niche”, and yet, or even because of it, will exert a marked impact on the discursive practice.

One could counteract this analysis citing the fact that Profilo does not enter the thread of comments directly. His voice is not heard again until his next post. However, it seems that precisely this “silence” allows us to advance the argument. It is not because Profilo just “keeps on listening” that he fails to exercise a power relationship. Somehow the tone of the comments is re-directed in by his projected *ethos*. But, more particularly, while the opening made possible by the free flow of comments “liberates” the author from his role as teacher/intellectual in front of an audience, it allows for this relationship to go on reconfigured in new ways, and without there being any control over it. One can get a glimpse here of a *mode of subjectivation* (the second of the four aspects of ethical self-constitution in Foucault) which simultaneously constitutes the subject and its

5 Reference to Luan Santana, a popular young Brazilian singer of country music.

other: a mode of subjectivity that is characterized by the maintenance of dialogue without guarantees – dialogue that allows for the pre-established and expected protocol of “play my game: I talk, and you answer” to coexist with the new and unexpected effects of “play the game, and tell me what you think”. So it is that the subjects begin to situate themselves in relation to the rules of the order of discourse that are presented to them, seeking to gain control over what could be taken in their practices as mere “chance events”.

This reading, we suppose, arises at this point as a possible interpretation, and therefore lays no claim to “correctness”. It is perhaps only “true” in a manner consistent with Foucault’s genealogy since it occurs within a partially stabilized *game* of truth (more than a *regime* of truth), which after all constitutes the materiality that discourse analysts count on. We now turn to a second set of exchanges that will further that reading.

Less than a month after (P1), Profilo published a series of posts on his reading of *A Love of Swann*, by Marcel Proust. Of these we reproduce the first, third and fourth:

(P2) Reading Proust, *A Love of Swann*. I read it the first time decades ago!

Amazing how it reminds me of *Love, Stendhal*, but of course better (no slur to *Stendhal* at it). A fantastic alternation between the verb in the imperfect tense, which expresses *Swann*’s feeling of fantasy love, and in the perfect tense, to tell an action, an event – which makes for an attractive inaccuracy, leaving us wandering between what the character does and what he feels. Rarely can an author, like Proust, express so well what goes on in the heart.

(P3) Continuing with *Stendhal* and Proust. *Stendhal*: How does one fall in love? First, the admiration (how good it should be to kiss her!). Then hope (I’ve got chances). That’s why no normal person falls for Gisele [Bündchen]; one needs hope. After that, in order for the passion to keep on growing or simply existing, [there’s] an alternation of fear (did I lose her?) and hope (she likes me). Full satisfaction disenchant. The sheer frustration ends with all love and passion. This is all a thing of the mind, of course, and it may well be just a fantasy. Proust: *Swann* falls for a woman who does not attract him at all, physically. But he needs to go through years of frustration before love ends. There is always a little bit of hope that still remains. He overcomes this after a dream in which *Odette*, curiously, betrays him with *Napoleon III*. As it is a totally frustrated love, he lives it as a disease.

(P4) Example of sheer madness: boys who, some 20 years ago, stormed Globo TV station to save [popular TV host] *Xuxa* from those bastards (namely, Globo) that kept her prisoner. It was horrible, they ended up dead by security. Does anyone remember? This is a case of devotion (how I wish I could kiss her! save her!) plus unfounded hope (*Xuxa* will like me! she’ll Love me! I WILL save her!). Which resulted in death. (That illustrates what I said about love for *Stendhal*. When we only look at beautiful photos of actresses, but do not imagine we will marry them, we are still sane).

One first aspect to point out in this sequence is that, although marked by the careful insights of an experienced reader, Profilo's analysis is not exactly literary, in the traditional sense - at least it is not the literary criticism that is done in genres such as the essay or the journal article. There are in (P3) and (P4) elements of orality that fit in as comments that could possibly be made in a seminar discussion or in a paper presentation. In fact, what is offered here comes as a sharing of views on an everyday experience, which can be observed in the first few lines of (P2): Reading Proust, *A Love of Swann*. I read it the first time decades ago! Amazing how it reminds me of *Love, Stendhal*, but of course better (no slur to Stendhal at it).

This first post gets 96 "likes" and 22 comments, whose authors sometimes add detailed descriptions of the works discussed, sharing their own impressions, at times responding to Profilo as "experts" or just thanking him for the reading tip. Examples of this latter case include:

(C7) Great! A good reading suggestion. Appreciate it.

(C8) I reserved Sunday to dust my books. I've got *The Red and the Black*, by Stendhal, and *Swann's Way*, by Proust. Soon I intend to do my reading and take a look at the verbs this time.

(C9) Good idea - also read it long ago - I will reread.

Once again in this series there stands out a reenactment of the master-disciples relationship, in which the words of the former, while not in a formal teaching position here, are taken by their interlocutors as reading as well as conduct recommendations. Still, one cannot properly speak of "author's intention" here, since the effect his words stir up is precisely what constructs the interaction, in the open dialogue that will be established. One commentator even takes the chance to verbalize a proposal, probably driven by the theme of the work being discussed, but perhaps only "virtually" utterable:

(C10) Oh [Profilo] ... marry me! Your erudition and sensitivity make me giddy!

There is also a small internal exchange, in which an interlocutor responds to another, enacting the legitimacy of a debate participant who has as much right to voice his opinion as the one who supposedly presides:

(C11) I've never read Proust, is it too elaborate or can I read it easily?

(C12) You can read it all right, and it is very good!

Once Profilo unfolds his "literary analysis" over a few posts, the comments seem to penetrate more into the details of the work (as in (P3)). What draws our attention, however, is the way some of the interlocutors begin to manifest themselves in the position of viewers/readers of a serial product, as if consuming a cultural good:

(C13) [Profilo], just go on with these analyses, which to me, are true gifts ... hugs!!!

- # (C14) passion is always interesting and sick, keep toasting us to your brilliant analyses,
 # (C15) I'm loving the view of the analysis of this book, I think I'm falling in love, lol still do not know with whom, certainly with the book, GONNA READ IT!!!
 # (C16) Hey [Profilo], here between us, your discussion on passion is better than in the references, huh? You've aced it!

Despite the fact that Profilo's voice is not directly manifested as the debate plays out, this begins to take on a specific form, counting with comments on the issues discussed borrowed from other references – other readings that are also of interest to other commentators who will respond to each other. The subjective position assumed by Profilo, which is one of transmitting knowledge beyond an informal exchange of views, is emphasized, however, in the process whereby the incident involving TV host Xuxa in (P4) comes to “illustrate” the problem of love as a form of disease, woven throughout the previous analyses. Curiously, many of the 17 comments that follow the post revolve around the forgetting and even questioning of the veracity of the episode in question:

- # (C17) Is this story true? Didn't know. Sounds like a dark tale on the cultural industry.
 # (C18) Could it be that the old German has spread out his tentacles into my neurons? [Profilo], I can't remember anything at all...
 # (C19) Is that true? Never even heard of it...

Here again, less expected effects emerge on the surface of discourse, redirecting the debate towards “testifying” on the event reported which, among many other possibilities, is just one example of the larger theme. Such that Profilo intervenes directly with two comments: the first in response to a reader who posts a link to the digital archives of *Folha de S.Paulo* newspaper, the other to readers indicating a second reference, registered on a YouTube video:

- # (C20) Thanks, namesake! Amazing that this story has disappeared from so many people's memory. In fact, I haven't found it on Google. In the entry for Xuxa on Wikipedia there's nothing (obviously).
 # (C21) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9G8KDQ63Jos> Jornal da Manchete: Xuxa's Failed Kidnapping – Jornal da Manchete's news update from 08.07.1991, narrated by Eliakim Araujo, reporting that some idle kids had tried to kidnap that blonde TV host who used to beat up the children when she worked on that TV station...

Drawing on resources that allow one to reactivate the memory of the story, resources that social networking offers in a very accessible way, one catches a glimpse of an investigative journalist's conduct, adding a new dimension to the already diverse positions that have been built by ProFilo through his social media practice. The incident with the TV host, almost prosaic in the history of rumors and incidents involving celebrities like her, does not seem to matter much in itself. What is fueling Profilo here is rather the cultivation of a relationship with his interlocutors that entails care with the information conveyed, attention

to the non-triviality of the written word – a care, finally, with his projection as a public figure who is responsible for what he says, while keeping open the dialogue, woven from an intersection of statements that are not always expected and even potentially destabilizing of subjectivities assumed to be pre-existing.

Thus, we conclude that this sequence of exchanges keeps on ethically constituting Profilo as he experiences different aspects of himself, at times defying a pre-constructed image of expert and scholar, at times using this same image to establish a more horizontal dialogue with his interlocutors or even to make visible an attentive reader of ordinary daily life – someone who is capable of approaching an episode supposedly unworthy of consideration by a professor-philosopher and interpreting it in the light of the objects of “high culture” through which, theoretically, he circulates with greater ease. In this process, Profilo not only submits to the rules of a game he set out to conduct, and which necessarily implies a relationship with others, but at the same time works through how these rules constitute his own subjectivity, operating what Foucault, in his categorization, called the elaboration of the *care of the self*.

CONCLUSION

The hypothesis that the subject (self) is ethically constituted through discursive practices in a virtual environment does not assume that therein resides the “whole” of its identity. Indeed, as we have seen, there is not a “whole”, an essential identity of the subject, but rather an ongoing process of building and testing focused more intensely on one specific part of oneself – i.e. Foucault’s ethical substance. The emphasis that Foucault gives on the “self” in the work of the practice of self should not lead to the false perception of an autonomous consciousness that fully exercises its choices and is able to forge a new ethics, unconstrained by external ethical imperatives. Rather, the work is always a negotiation within relations of power constitutive of the experience and therefore always-already present (LAIDLAW, 2014). The ethical work of (self-) formation of the subject implies, primarily, the cultivation of practices whose ideal aspiration would lead to a reduction of forms of social domination and suffering to which one may be subject in a given time.

In the specific case of the subject we chose to focus on, we advance the hypothesis that the ethical substance of self-making lies in experimenting with – and ultimately resisting the subjectivation of – a public pre-constructed image of the “renowned philosopher-professor”, with a view to amplifying the spectrum of his activities as perceived by “public thinking”. By establishing and carefully maintaining a communication channel that is less mediated and with a more diverse public, made up of “friends” not necessarily arising from pre-existing offline communities, our subject submits the supposedly homogeneous element associated with a more publicly endorsed facet of his subjectivity to an opening, an encounter with the other that objectifies while subjectifies him in new ways. And in the process, since it is a dialogue (albeit fleeting and tangential), this encounter also consequently affects the ethical (self-)constitution that these other subjects do for themselves, who at times respond as expected of a pupil/student to a master/teacher, at times play partners in a game of unpredictable results and whose rules are constructed in the full practice of playing.

In turn, there begins to delineate in this space “a response to the present”, i.e. a response to the historical determinations that interpellate us into acting in certain ways, into identifying with certain positions and taking on certain identities – an ethical response to moral imperatives which, in turn, may be refracted (destabilized) as a result of those very practices: those contingent and concrete meetings made possible, in the specific case here, by the active engagement in social networks.

As an overall conclusion, from an analysis which certainly would require greater depth in some other space, we can say that the ethical work of (self-) constitution of the subject as configured on social networks becomes strongly intertwined with the four aspects that form its base, as described by Foucault: the ethical substance, the mode of subjectivation, the care of the self, and the teleology of the self. Mutually implicated, and hardly separable, those four aspects contribute not to a stable and homogeneous constitution of the subject; they rather allow for experimenting with other possible subjectivities, negotiated in every concrete exchange and submitted to a process of permanent displacement. The particular way in which this process unfolds provides individuals with a “critical ontology” of themselves (which is simultaneously an “ontology of the present”): a positioning, an *ethos* or philosophical attitude whereby the critique of what we happen to be, as claimed by Foucault (1997c [1984], p. 319), is both a historical critique of the limits imposed on us and the possibility of going beyond them in a constant process of (re-)inventing our subjectivities.

A (AUTO)CONSTITUIÇÃO ÉTICA DO SUJEITO EM REDES SOCIAIS

Resumo: Observa-se, atualmente, a crescente afirmação de uma concepção de subjetividade segundo a qual o modo como percebemos a nós mesmos como sujeitos é forjado em práticas sociais situadas, frequentemente materializadas por meio do discurso, enquanto sempre implicando relações de poder. Tais práticas circunscrevem um espaço em que nos tornamos “acessíveis” a nós mesmos e aos outros como sujeitos e objetos. Esse espaço constitui e, simultaneamente, submete aqueles que participam das práticas. O artigo discute a possibilidade de (auto)constituição do sujeito em tempos em que as práticas de identidade ocorrem cada vez mais nos perfis de rede sociais. Investigamos como a prática de atualização e constante (re)visita de perfis constitui uma forma de crítica de códigos previamente estabelecidos, e como isso pode encenar o que Foucault chama de ética da existência.

Palavras-chave: (Auto)constituição do sujeito. Ética da existência. Último Foucault.

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