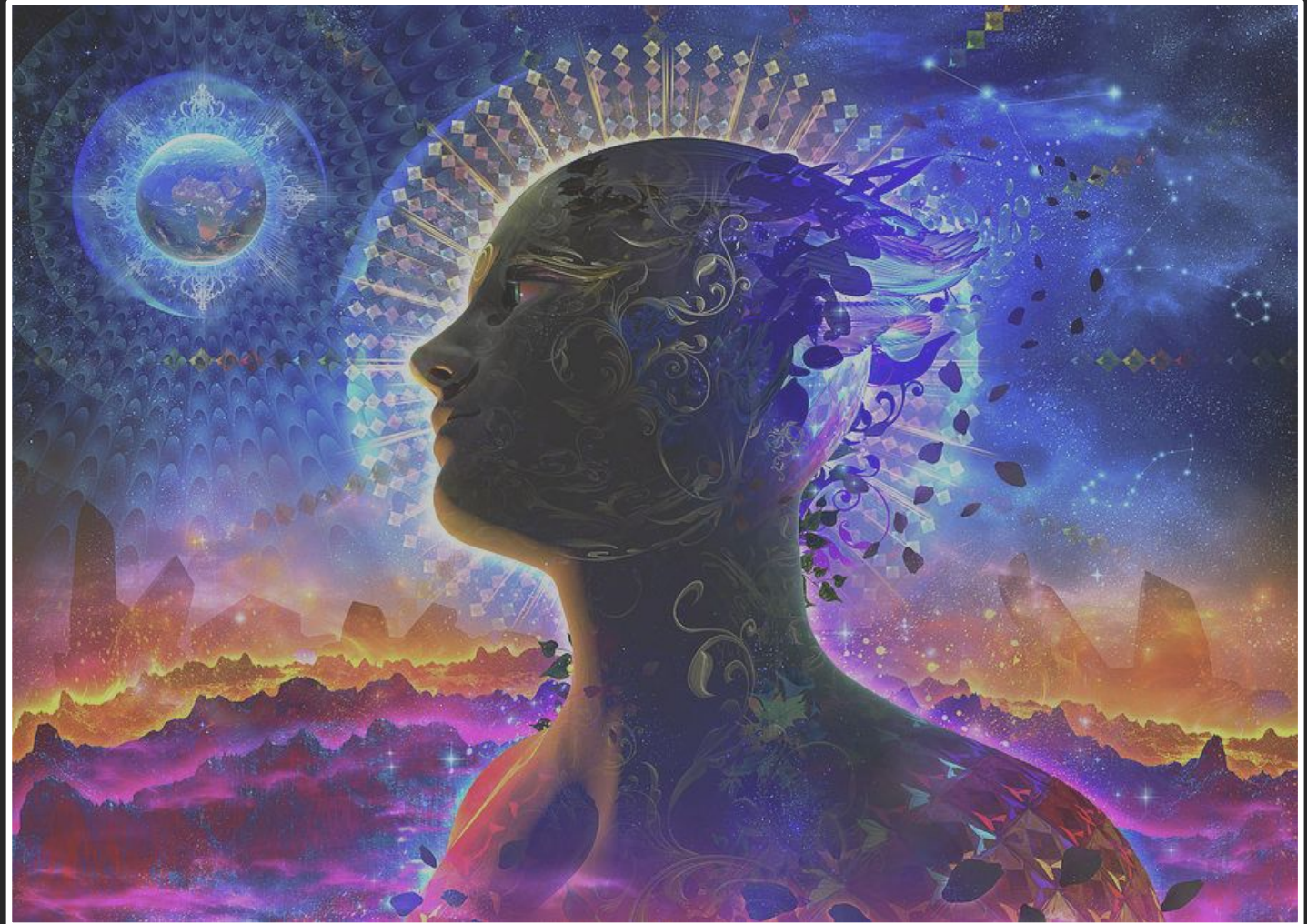


# HIGHER EDUCATION AS STUDENT SELF-FORMATION

- What are the outcomes of higher education? Direct effects and mediated effects
- Students at the centre: As consumers? Empty vessels waiting to be filled? Or something more?
- Education as student self-formation
- Autonomous and reflexive agency, the will to learn, knowledge
- Self-formation and social formation
- Conditions that maximise agentic self-formation in higher education
- Concluding remarks



# WHAT ARE THE OUTCOMES OF HIGHER EDUCATION?

- Higher education generates *direct* effects or outcomes in its own right in two main ways –
  - education
  - production and communication of knowledge
- Higher education is also associated with *mediated* effects which rest on its interactions with *other social sectors*, and where the value of the activity is externally defined.
- These social outcomes include the production of skilled labour power (employable 'human capital'); the allocation of opportunities and credentials across populations; the formation of citizens of a polity; contributions to tolerance, international relations, etc. Most discussion is about these mediated social effects, but higher education



# WHEN 'STUDENT-CENTRED' IS NOT THE REAL DEAL

- The contribution of higher education is advanced by focusing on the core functions (education and knowledge) while enhancing the social connections
- The 'education' function can only mean the full extent of potential student development in the context of knowledge. However, maxing the education function is blocked by two obsolete models, which often coincide:
  1. The model of the student as empty vessel waiting to be filled – the student as other-formed – misses the absolutely central role played by the student's *own agency* in the learning process
  2. The model of the student as economic consumer (of a preparation in employability) sidesteps the knowledge aspect, and imposes a fluctuating external valuation which robs both education and student/graduate of agency. Here 'student-centredness' is nothing more than a power of market exit which cannot be exercised



# BASIC IDEA OF STUDENT SELF-FORMATION

- Learning is becoming in knowledge. Only the learner does the actual becoming. This is an irreducible aspect of all education
- All going well, higher education is a reflexive process of self-formation and establishes, or deepens, ongoing self-making, grounded in self-aware agency. When this happens it is deeply empowering, throughout life
- Higher education is just one of the domains where people transform themselves through the never-ending ‘work of the self on the self’. What distinguishes self-formation in higher education is (a) the immersion in knowledge; and (b) for full-time students, numerous opportunities for varied sociability and encounters with multiple ways of seeing
- The essential elements of higher education as self-formation, which are integrated are (1) the autonomy of the learner (2) reflexive



# AUTONOMY AND REFLEXIVE AGENCY

# ARCHER ON STRUCTURE, SOCIETY AND AGENCY

- ‘Structure’ includes material resources, hierarchies, and also ‘ideational’ culture, including language, knowledge and information
- ‘Society takes shape from, and is formed by, agents, originating from the intended and unintended consequences of their activities’ (Archer 1995, p. 5)
- Neither structure nor agency is ‘immutable’, fixed. Both are emergent and relations between them are always open. ‘The human being is neither pre-given nor socially constructed’ (Archer 2000, p. 50).
- ‘People are not puppets of structures because they have their own emergent properties’ (Archer 1995, p. 71).
- ‘We are simultaneously free and constructed and we also have some awareness of it’ (Archer 1995, p. 7)



Archer, M. (1995). *Realist social theory: The morphogenetic approach*. Cambridge UP

Archer, *Being Human: The problem of agency* (2000). Cambridge UP

# ARCHER ON THE INNER SELF AND REFLEXIVITY

- ‘The causal powers proper to agency itself ... are the powers which ultimately enable people to reflect on their social context, and to act reflexively towards it, either individually or collectively’ (2000, p. 308). Different people have varied responses to same conditions (1995, p. 70)
- Our self-consciousness as persons ‘emerges early in life and is the source of reflexive self-consciousness which lasts throughout life’ (2000, p. 255). In ‘this rich inner life of reflection upon reality’, this ‘inner conversation’ with ourselves, we give shape to our lives (2000, pp. 9-10).
- The inner conversation links structure and agency, it is ‘the mode of articulation between people and reality’ (2000, p. 306). It ‘enjoys its own relative autonomy, temporal priority and causal efficacy’ (p. 193).
- Reflexivity embodies continuous self-evaluation, ‘like a conscience’ (2003, pp. 26, 32, 73).

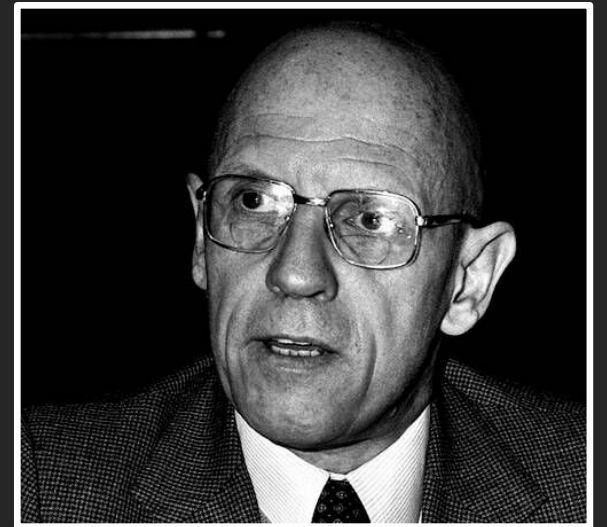


Archer, *Structure, agency and the inner conversation* (2003). Cambridge UP

# FOUCAULT: WE GROUND OUR AUTONOMY AND FREE OURSELVES THROUGH 'THE WORK OF THE SELF ON THE SELF'

In the last years Michel Foucault moves away from the ways we are controlled to how we can free ourselves. Margaret Archer calls it 'the late foucauldian project of self-formation and self-enrichment' (2000, p. 34), embodying 'a more robust self-concept' (p. 19). Foucault calls it a 'theoretical displacement' from the conflation of power-knowledge to 'the relation of self to self and the constitution of oneself as a subject' (p. 33)

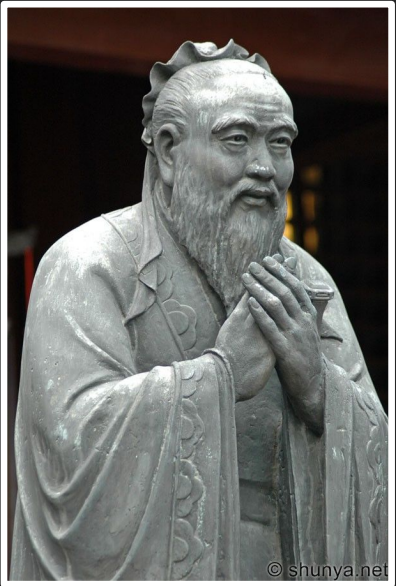
- The key is the development of the autonomous will through regimes of self-making. Despite external social constraints we can form ourselves through the often arduous 'work of the self on the self, an elaboration of the self by the self, a progressive transformation of the self by the self' (Foucault 2005, p. 16).
- Foucault reviews Greek and Roman practices of reflexive self-criticism and self improvement - meditation, self-examination, rules of ethical conduct, truth telling (parrhesia), the Platonic idea of the 'other world' and the Cynics who practised truth by living 'the other life' often outside society
- The self is the only condition that we fully control – the only object we can freely will 'without having to take into consideration external determinations' (p. 133)



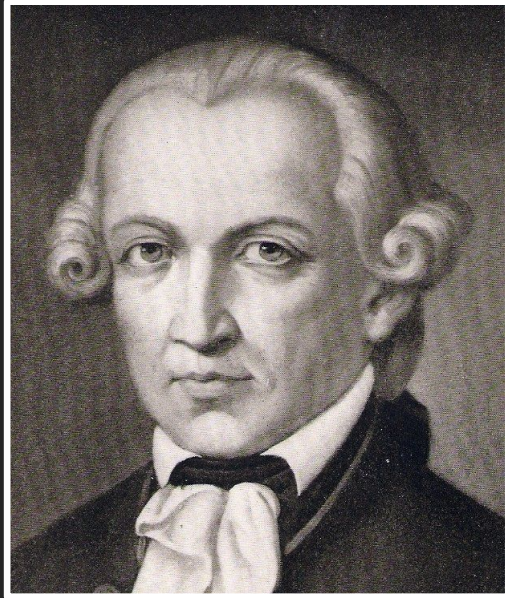
Michel Foucault , *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the College de France 1981-82.* (2005). Palgrave



# ANTECEDENTS OF REFLEXIVE AGENCY IN HIGHER EDUCATION



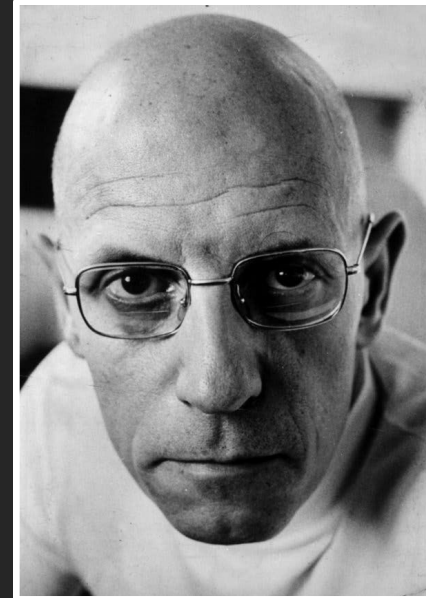
Confucius:  
The Confucian learner is engaged in a continuing and never finished process of self-perfection, explicitly informed by moral and ethical dimensions



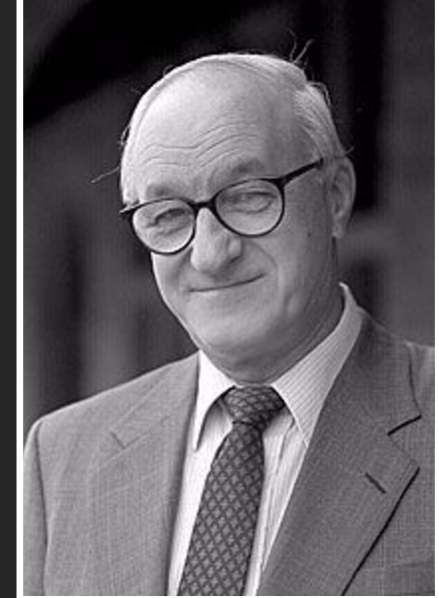
Immanuel Kant:  
Bildung and Enlightenment: 'man's release from his self-incurred tutelage through the exercise of his own understanding ... without direction from another' (Kant 1784/1992, p. 90)



Lev Vygotsky:  
'The true development of thinking is not from the individual to the social, it is from the social to the individual' (1986, p. 136)



Michel Foucault:  
The self is the only object we can freely will 'without having to take into consideration external determinations' (2005, p. 133)

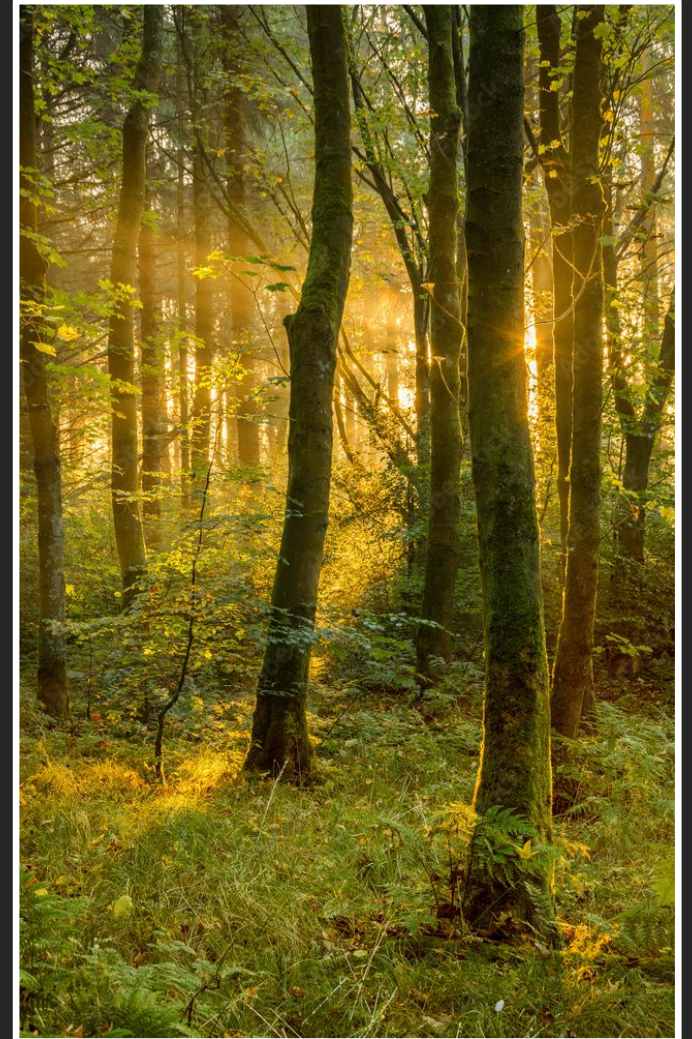


Albert Bandura:  
Self-belief, and 'the most distinctive human characteristic is the capability for reflective self-consciousness' (1986, p. 21)

THE WILL TO LEARN AND  
IMMERSION IN KNOWLEDGE

# FEATURES OF SELF-FORMATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

- The will to learn and the will to know
- Immersion in knowledge, a social-relational (collective) form that is both appropriated individually and shared
- Teaching as source and guide in knowledge
- A wide range of other potential mediums and mirrors for reflexive development, including diverse social relations, disciplinary lenses and inter-cultural perspectives
- Time and resources permitting, (1) potentials in social, cultural, and political activism; (2) mobility and exploration of the wider world during the higher education years



# THE WILL TO LEARN: E.G. CONFUCIAN SELF-CULTIVATION

- ‘Person-making is at the heart of the Confucian heritage of educational thinking’ (Zhao and Deng 2016). ‘It has long been held that self-cultivation is the precondition’ for developing ‘the critical and creative potential of the individual and enabling him or her to fulfil social responsibilities and functions’ (pp. 2-3).
- “Autonomy and personal agency’ are integral to Sinic learning (Li 2012, p. 132). Li (2006, p. 483) cites Saari (1990), in whose studies Chinese children ‘developed an “inner self” in order to retain a private space of their own’,
- The starting point for Chinese people’s learning affect is establishing one’s will (*lizhi*), commitment to learning’ Li 2012, p. 163) with the whole ‘heart and mind’ (p. 164), often by six or seven years, primarily at home (p. 14)



Zhao, G. and Deng, Z. (2016). Introduction. In G. Zhao and Z. Deng (eds.), *Re-envisioning Chinese education: The meaning of person-making in a new age* (pp. 1-9). Abingdon: Routledge

Li, J. (2012). *Cultural foundations of learning: East and West*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Li, J. (2006). Self in learning: Chinese adolescents’ goals and sense of agency, *Child Development*, 77(2), 482-501.

# IMMERSION IN KNOWLEDGE: A FUNDAMENTAL ASPECT

- Immersion in knowledge replicates the infant process of self-formation, in which the self is nurtured in speech community, triggering self-awareness (Vygotsky 1978), but in higher education the student engages with knowledge consciously
- For Ashwin et al. (2014) people use powerful knowledge to transform themselves and their capacity to respond to and shape their environments
- Disciplines mediate between Archer's continuous inner self and the wider world, transforming the inner conversation and build capabilities in social intervention. For Bernstein (2000) the disciplines foster differing kinds of reflexive consciousness that 'shape who we are, who we think we can become and what we think we can do'.



Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of the higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press

Ashwin, P., Abbas, A. and McLean, M. (2014). How do students' accounts of sociology change over the course of their undergraduate degrees? *Higher Education*, 67(2), 219-234

Bernstein, B. (2000). *Pedagogy, symbolic control and identity: Theory, research and critique*. Revised Edition. Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield

# THE SOCIAL DIMENSION

# HOW THEORISTS INTERSECTING WITH SELF-FORMATION SEE THE RELATION BETWEEN INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIAL

AGENTIC PSYCHOLOGY (Bandura, Ryan and Deci etc)

FOUCAULT

higher education

prior social conditions and relations

individual person emerges

seeks social connection via shared speech

self-formation of reflexive agency

immersed in social knowledge and learning

self-determining and socially active

shares structuring of social relations

VYGOTSKY

DEWEY AND AMERICAN PRAGMATISTS

CONFUCIUS AND KANT

# SELF-FORMATION AND SOCIAL FORMATION

- Student agency does not evolve in a vacuum and it continually intersects with relations of power. Concentrations and absences of capital, hierarchy, poverty, discrimination and racism impose constraints on freedom of action and restrict the capacity to take initiatives, retarding self-formation
- Yet all social structures are partly open. By working on themselves, agents can affect relations of agency and structure. By itself higher education cannot overcome social inequalities, but it provides knowledge and fosters the self-forming agentic capability that is crucial to more effectively dealing with and surmounting inequality
- Should higher education shape the self-formation of students in terms of prescriptions for the better society? Confucianism and Bildung say 'yes'. But *which* ideal society? Who decides? Rather than prescribing the future society in a changing world, higher education, operating with relational principles such as socio-economic equity, anti-racism and respect for cultural diversity, should enhance the scope of students and graduates to make the life and society they





SOME IMPLICATIONS

# CONDITIONS THAT ENHANCE STUDENT SELF-FORMATION

- Policy, administration, services and pedagogy that support emerging student agency and protect inclusion and tolerance
- *Adequate financial support for full-time study*
- Access to teachers and learning resources
- Cultural and aesthetic resources
- Experiences of student mobility (Marginson 2014)
- Large diverse peer groups and ample opportunities to interact with peers
- Time in the learning programme to read, talk and create individual and collective works, including extra-curricular
- Spaces in which to work, meet and converse including off campus locations



Marginson, S. (2014) .Student self-formation in international education. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 18(1), 6-22

# EMERGING RESEARCH RELATED TO SELF-FORMATION

- Yusuf Oldac study of the self-formation of mobile Turkish students in educational, social and civic settings, in four different countries, Oxford DPhil (CGHE seminar 206)
- Soyoung Lee study of student self-formation in academic processes, with Korean students in Korea and UK, DPhil in progress (CGHE seminar 226)
- Potential longitudinal studies of individual student self-formation using ethnographic techniques
- Potential studies of reflexive student agency focused on the 'inner conversation', working with and adapting research techniques used by Archer (2003)
- Potential work on agentic formation in different disciplines, and online. Studies that intersect with the self-formation paradigm include work in progress in Chemistry and Engineering by Paul Ashwin and colleagues



# FINAL THOUGHTS

- Self-formation takes student development further than do its antecedents. Confucianism, Bildung and Newman now seem to underestimate autonomy and the scope for creative reflexivity. They see education as an induction into societies with fixed pre-given values. Students need teachers, and a curriculum, because students are mostly neophytes in the knowledge in which they are immersed. Yet students in higher education are also adults, with an essential will. They are not educational objects but subjects, and they will make the world as they wish
- Self-formation by reflexive student agents, immersed in knowledge, is a condition of higher education, a central process of higher education, and the most important outcome of higher education. Like all large ideas in education, such as equality of opportunity, higher education as student self-formation is both a norm to pursue and a living reality. By no means all students achieve it. The self-formation mission is always incomplete. Yet it is often achieved, and it is both necessary and sufficient to the education function in higher education

