The concept of power has been debated among philosophers for as long as humans have been able to record. What makes someone or something powerful, and what exactly does that mean to us as individuals? Michel Foucault provides a glimpse at one aspect of power in his article, *Panopticism*. Here, he provides a definition for the “Panopticon:” an all-seeing individual or institution, which may or may not be watching a certain person or society at any given time. Within his pages, Foucault’s arguments present the incredible power of the Panopticon – not as a physical idea, acquired by strength, but as something that is more felt and thought. Its power lies in its ability to frighten, and in the knowledge of what it could potentially do. Panopticism is also present in many forms in all of today’s discourse communities, adding to its mystique and aura, and giving it power over numerous individuals. In analyzing the power of the Panopticon, we see that individuals within a discourse community must remain mindful of the ethics of psychological power, because it is that with which Panopticism instills fear into the members of such a community.

Panopticism is powerful in many ways, but one of these is simply the way in which the Panopticon can take many different forms which are constantly around us in society. Many scholars believe that “the Panopticon should be taken not literally but as a metaphor for surveillance of all types, with emphasis on power relationships” (Dobson and Fisher 307). This means that nearly any instance of surveillance can be classified under the broad range of Panopticism. Foucault notes this early in his argument, as he connects the idea of Panopticism first to a prison, and then to a town which is under quarantine due to a plague (282-284). He connects these two situations by noting the similarities in surveillance, beneath which both are kept. Within the walls of a prison, every move of each prisoner is caught on camera. Likewise, in a quarantine situation, the government steps in to control every aspect of life in the community, so that the disease does not spread to other
communities. Citizens are watched, though as with prisons, there is that uncertainty as to exactly when someone is watching. The comparisons do no stop here, however, for while the Panopticon is generally linked with prisons, the first one ever built was not a prison, but a school for the arts in Saint Petersburg, Russia (Dobson and Fisher 308). Thus, the Panopticon has not always been used as a punitive device. Even now, it is not always used as such. According to Foucault, panoptic surveillance can be employed almost anywhere; in “hospitals, workshops, schools, prisons.” He claims that “whenever one is dealing with a multiplicity of individuals on whom a task or a particular form of behavior must be imposed, the panoptic schema may be used” (293). Foucault’s idea of Panopticism, therefore, states that it is present wherever there is the element of being watched by some all-seeing surveillance, and wherever there is the knowledge that one’s every move may be seen by that strange power. The mere connection of notably bleak and terrible places like prisons to the more common idea of schools and workshops creates a strange and psychologically frightening image of Panopticism. It is everywhere, and its power lies in the fact that this is so.

Another facet of its power comes from its ability to instill fear. In the past, the Panopticon has “left such a powerful mark on public discourse that now merely saying its name is viewed as shameless fearmongering” (Dobson and Fisher 307). Why is this so? The answer is simply that most people do not like being watched. Many are not afraid to admit this either. Knowing that someone is watching, particularly someone who cannot be seen, can create more emotional and psychological problems than can an actual, physical force, such as a violent blow. Some analysts refer to this idea as “privacy harm,” which “describes unwelcome mental states – anxiety, for instance, or embarrassment – that accompany the belief that one is or will be watched or monitored” (Calo 1131). Privacy harm occurs whenever one is under the gaze of Panopticon, since this harm is literally the action of harming an individual by invading their privacy and making them uncomfortable through the process of observation. While some react to it more strongly than others, everyone has
experienced it. Everyone has experienced nerves while being watched, whether it is stage fright, a stumble of speech during a first time on television, or playing incorrect notes in front of the eye of a piano teacher. The notion that an all-seeing surveillance may or may not be observing one’s actions at any given time fosters a sense of anxiety among many which can amount to fear, given enough time. The invisible nature of the observer often adds to and enhances this fear, increasing the amount of power which is held by the Panopticon.

While fear of observation is a great part of their fear, many also fear the Panopticon simply because they know it has power, and will fear anything that they know has great power. In one of her books, teacher and author Joan Wink relates a theory that “women’s fear of horses is really a disguised fear of power.” She continues to say that she herself had not been afraid of horses in her youth, but had grown to be so as adolescence arrived and her mind, which was naturally increasing in knowledge of the world, grew to fear their power over her in both speed and strength. She then strove to conquer this fear, eventually succeeding, and emphasizes that this story is not a story about a horse, but “a story about fear of power” (Wink 172). This narrative shows the psychological nature of power at its utmost by relating the way it can exist simply because of one’s entrance into adolescence. Wink came to fear horses simply because her mind grew to recognize the fact that they were capable of possibly hurting her in many ways, despite the fact that she had loved and very much enjoyed riding horses as a youth. Her knowledge, wisdom, and common sense had all increased with her entrance into adolescence, allowing her to see the horse’s power, whereas her younger self had been blissfully unaware. It is a prime example of the way in which power itself is always feared, as long as it makes sense to an individual that the institution in question does, indeed, have power. This example also grants us the eerie notion that as we increase in wisdom and common sense, our likelihood to succumb to fearing power will increase.
People thus fear the several different forms of the Panopticon, and it is that fear which is responsible for the majority of its power. Why is this? It is because the fear changes behavior. Fear of an all-seeing surveillance generally spurs good, or at least careful behavior among those watched. The Panopticon’s “invisibility is a guarantee to order. If the inmates are convicts, there is no danger of a plot . . . if they are schoolchildren, there is no copying, no noise, no chatter, no waste of time” (Foucault 287-288). This shows that if someone or something is watching, and the possibility of punishment exists within the minds of the people, behavior will change. For another example, consider religion. In almost any faith, there is the concept of one omnipotent God, who sees everything, and who will punish poor behavior. From an early age, many Christian children are told to behave because “God is watching.” Parents instill this fear of God within their children because it creates a reason for them to behave, even when no visible person is present. As for adults, if they believe in an afterlife where their sorrows may be discarded, then priests and other holy beings will hold a position of power over them in being able to prescribe the behavior that will enable entrance into that life (Higgs 452). Nearly every aspect of almost any religion quite clearly reflects the influence of similar psychological power. A study was done in 2007 which reported that priming individuals with religious words influenced their behavior “outside of their conscious awareness” (Randolph-Seng and Nielsen 119). By this, we see that even mentioning the idea of God and using religious words affects behavior. Those who believe God is always watching are more likely to behave themselves when they are alone due to fear of punishment, thus demonstrating the incredible power of the Panopticon, which is ever intended to “raise the level of public morality” (Foucault 294). They are able to do this because psychological fear drives people to obedience. The Panopticon is powerful because it is everywhere, and it is powerful because every human has natural discomfort with observation, and a natural fear of punishment.
In studying the way fear can control people, we observe that power in and of itself is mostly psychological. The fact that it results from minds filled with fear is one example, but there are several more. Power also results from uncertainty. If someone is unsure of what another can or cannot do, the latter will have a certain kind of power over the former. This may relate back to the idea of being unaware as to exactly when the surveillance is watching, and when it is not. Foucault discusses how many punitive establishments are run based on “the principle that power should be visible and unverifiable. Visible: the inmate will constantly have before his eyes the tall outline of the central tower from which he is spied upon. Unverifiable: the inmate must never know whether he is being looked at at any one moment; but he must be sure that he may always be so” (288). The uncertainty associated with Panopticism is clear from this quote. Foucault, here as well as in his earlier pages, is careful to use the image of the original Panopticon: the architectural figure used to spy upon prisons (285). Prisoners who never know when they are seen are affected psychologically by this power, and must change themselves accordingly. These ideas support the notion that most power is psychological. The mind games involved are great and various, as prisoners torment themselves with terrible uncertainty – the same uncertainty that is present in so many other ways among us today, the minute we step into a supermarket and feel self conscious of our attire in front of the security camera. If one is feared or believed to have power, or if it is unknown what one can and cannot do, that being will possess what the original constructors of the Panopticon surely intended: power over the minds of the people.

There are situations where Panopticism is not intended to frighten but to ensure safety, but even in these cases, there will still be an element of fear. Even if the powerful individual or institution that is watching is not of a prison, and is meant to protect rather than punish, fear will still be present because “even the shepherd protects his sheep, but he does so to serve his own interest, not theirs, and when the time comes, he will shear or slaughter them as his interest dictates”
(Higgs 453). Power, even good power, will always be feared; the psychological nature of power does not distinguish the good from the bad, and simply sees possibilities associated with it. For example, the Bible tells the story of Christ’s crucifixion as done because of human fear. He does only good and miraculous tasks, yet His power scares the people, which eventually leads them to turn violent against Him. “In the dark of night,” writes one Biblical analyst, “a ‘friend’ and a mob came to arrest Jesus; violence led to more violence and soon even those who had been followers were pulled down into the vortex of hate and fear” (Siker 388). The fear of His power thus overcame even those who had previously approved of and appreciated Him. Furthermore, in the book of Matthew, Pilate asks the people what crime Jesus has committed, “but they shouted all the louder, ‘Crucify him!’” (NIV Study Bible, Matt. 27.22-23) Their fear enables them to act in ways which appear surprisingly violent and cruel, and mutes their ability to communicate effectively or provide a reason for the crucifixion. His power frightens them, because just as with Panopticism, there is the element of uncertainty. Power, though perhaps good, always has the possibility to be the opposite. It is possibility which creates fear, and which subsequently creates power.

Despite the negative connotation with which such psychological power is described, it is not always a bad thing – fearing power has its pros and cons. If no one feared power, then ultimately any form of organized control system would not work. Power itself is not powerful if no one will respect it, once again proving its psychological aspect. Along with power comes (usually) the ability to inflict punishment, and if there is no fear of power, then there is no fear of punishment. This might encourage one to do almost anything he or she desires, however heinous or illegal, proving that “public fear is a necessary (though perhaps not a sufficient) condition for the viability of government as we know it” (Higgs 448). If there were no fear of power, police forces would not be feared, and crime would escalate to unimaginable heights. There would be chaos and mayhem. Our current governmental system relies heavily upon the idea that citizens must fear its power, and if
they did not, the power would not exist. On a separate scale, if there were no fear of power, even
the most kind-hearted of children would exercise their natural affiliation to mischief without fear of
being reprimanded by a parent or any adult. Indeed, given this point of view, the psychological fear
through which the Panoptic schema governs may be seen as a “technological fix for society”
(Dobson and Fisher 308). Some still avoid taking this viewpoint, concerned with the ethics involved,
but since surveillance seems to change behavior for the better in several situations, many believe that
this fear of power is a benefit to society as a whole.

Fear of power has its cons as well, however. In Foucault’s essay, firstly, we see Panopticism
portrayed chiefly in a negative light, with his comparisons and references to prisons and plagues
darkening the mood and creating a pestilential atmosphere throughout. In addition to this, there are
many cases where we see the negative aspects of fearing power in our every-day lives. One example
would be Joan Wink, who lost many joyful years of horseback riding due to her fear. Less specific
examples include cases of bullying. The average bullied child may never be physically harmed at all,
but will often succumb to the bully's wishes simply because he or she fears the power of the bully,
and fears the bully’s potential capabilities. One victim of bullying states, “I was targeted by a small
group of bullies who felt that they could chase me, tease me, and make me feel fearful in their
presence. I found myself looking over my shoulder and constantly worried that I would be
confronted by this gang of boys” (Schultz 12). Here, we see the presence of a great deal of
psychological torment and abuse. While this narrative does not exactly indicate the presence of
much physical abuse (though some may be implied), it presents the great fear this person had of the
gang’s power. “Bullying is about a struggle with power,” writes the same victim; “the bully feels
powerful and the victim feels powerless” (Schultz 12). Bullying is thus an example of the way fear of
power can negatively impact society, and in particular the weaker members of each discourse
community. Regardless of whether it can be related to Panopticism in any other way, a bully may
resemble the Panopticon in that both have power, both are feared, and both have a strong impact on the minds of those beneath their jurisdiction.

Fearing power is an element of society that clearly exists, and whether it has a positive or negative impact, there remains a necessity to be aware of it. It is clear from the many different opinions of Panopticism – and psychological power in general – that its ethics are in question. Foucault writes, “The practice of placing individuals under ‘observation’ is a natural extension of a justice imbued with disciplinary methods and examination procedures” (309). Here, through his analysis of the overall punitive focus, he demonstrates his opinion of Panopticism as unethical due to its obsessive drive for discipline and justice. Through privacy harm, it primarily serves to instill fear and rule through this medium. Others have noted the benefits of this system, particularly in regard to improved behavior under scrutiny. Is there an ultimate truth here which tells whether the fear of power associated with Panopticism is good or evil? Perhaps there is, but no two sides will ever agree on that subject. Therefore, the mission of the individuals within today’s society – members of all discourse communities – must be to remain mindful of the ethics involved in fearing power. Psychological principles will always be at work among us, yet attempting to understand why we do things, particularly in relation to others, may increase not only our enjoyment of socialization but our safety as well. For example, coming to an understanding of the way a bully psychologically affects him may aid a young boy to find his voice, or at least to find an outlet and a way to feel empowered. In addition to this, it may be beneficial to keep in mind the ways cameras and other means of surveillance affect us on a daily basis. Sometimes it is necessary to pause in a course of action, and think of the reasons behind this action. Is it being done out of necessity, or in response to some pressure, such as privacy harm? Humans react to observation in various ways, and Foucault notes the effect of these reactions as they relate to power over the mind. Within his pages, Michel Foucault encourages the members of each discourse community to finally observe themselves and
their own habits, particularly those habits which give power to someone else. His insight into the inner workings of Panopticism likewise encourages us to remain mindful of the ethics involved with power, and the consequences of fearing it, for if we do this, only then will we truly be an ethical race.

While power is an extremely broad and complicated idea containing several different branches and facets, its psychological aspect is perhaps the most frightening, especially as it relates to Foucault’s idea of Panopticism. The Panopticon may no longer exist structurally in today’s society, yet we see its remnants every day in various forms. These forms are what serve to prove to us that power is psychological. Observation changes behavior, as does the possibility of observation. This results in fear, which results in power. Power then leads to fear of power, which leads to uncertainty, which leads to more behavioral changes. It is a never-ending chain which has been running through social discourse throughout history, and will continue its course unscathed. While many argue its negative aspects, others see its necessity in regard to law enforcement and such, and accept it as a permanent institution. Regardless of its beneficial or malevolent nature, however, it is merely the ethics of which it is necessary to be aware. Fearing power is a natural aspect of humanity, and obtaining a thorough understanding of this aspect is the key to ultimately living harmoniously within our respective discourse communities.
Works Cited


