

Practicing Freedom: On Foucault and Ethics

By

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ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the work Michel Foucault produced in the late years of his life. During these years, Foucault gave many lectures on Ethics that were recently published into works. The thesis argues in favor of the differences he highlights between morality and ethics, and between care of self and knowledge of self. It tries to apply these differences to a modern day culture of the self in order to conclude that we must become aware of the complicated relationship one has with oneself and that this relationship is not simply one based on knowledge or rule-following. The consequence of this new study of self-relations should leave one the freedom, or open up the possibility, of developing different kinds of relationships with others.

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ONE

Introduction

"The displacement and transformation of framework of thinking, the changing of received values and all the work that has been done to think otherwise, to do something else, to become other than what one is – that...is philosophy" - Michel Foucault¹

1. ON ETHICS

Foucault said his work on ethics centralized around the way a human being turns him- or herself into a subject. He believed that the references used for our ethics (religion, social, scientific) were worn out and, because we absolutely need ethics, he thought it useful to use Greco-Roman culture as a historical example of an ethics that existed without the strict constraint of these three references. This is not a new philosophical observation and thinkers as varied as G.E. Anscombe and Bertrand Russell have made similar observations. Russell boldly argued that religions did not have an ethic based on theology but rather established a theology based on their ethic². The difference between Foucault and other scholars who study and write on morality is the diverse strategies they have undertaken to try and change the state of our moral affairs. Foucault undertakes the investigation of morality to show us that our ethical situation need not be as it is currently. It is not about reviving the Greek or Roman ethics, rather, it is the realization of the possibility of building an ethics, or providing a place for an 'ethical imagination', without reference to religion, law, and science. Paul

¹ Michel Foucault, "The Masked Philosopher," in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth, Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984 Volume One*, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Robert Hurley and others (New York, NY: New Press, 1997), 327.

² Bertrand Russell, "Can Religion Cure our Troubles," in *Why I Am Not a Christian*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, Inc, 1957), 201.

Veyne clarifies this point when he states, “[G]reek ethics is quite dead, and Foucault judged it as undesirable as it would be impossible to resuscitate this ethics; but he considered one of its elements, namely, the idea of a work of the self on the self, to be capable of reacquiring a contemporary meaning.”³ Interpreting ethics as an ‘aesthetics of existence’ in the Ancients is interesting because in that culture one learnt to be master of oneself and fashioner of one’s own existence, which implies a certain concern for freedom. The only substantive claim that I take Foucault to be making in his later work on ethics is that when it comes to morality we should give as much attention to ‘care of self’⁴ as we give to the moral code, maybe more, seeing as it is the seat of our ability to form certain subjectivities. Therefore, this is not a thesis about Foucault and ‘aesthetics of existence’, there simply is not enough space for that; instead it will focus mainly on the ethical framework he has established and its modern day possibilities.

2. METHOD

The first chapter will elucidate how ethics, conceived by Foucault, is not the same as morality in the sense that morals are thought of as a code of conduct to be followed and ethics as a certain relationship one has with oneself. What then becomes

³ John Rajchman, *Truth and Eros: Foucault, Lacan, and The Question of Ethics* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1991). p.7.

⁴ I will use the term ‘care of self’ instead of the English translated ‘care of the self’ wherever possible. The reason for this, as Timothy O’Leary discusses, is that the translation is misleading. He explains, “the French equivalent of ‘care of the self’ (with definite article) would be *soin du (de + le) soi*, not, as Foucault always gives, *soin de soi*. A more correct rendition of Foucault’s phrase would...be ‘care of self...if we take Foucault to be writing a history of reflexive practices, rather than practices which target a substantial entity called ‘the self’, then we can more easily avoid the illusion that Foucault’s late work consists of a return to an authentic self or subject. p. 120.

⁵ The aesthetic for Foucault is the realm where we do work on ourselves to give a certain form to our lives. Foucault’s contemporary use of the word is not to be confused with the Greek or Kantian sense of the term. For an in-depth discussion of Foucault’s aesthetics see, Timothy O’Leary *Foucault and The Art of Ethics* pp. 121-138.

important in the study of morality are the reasons for undertaking the moral conduct or exercise on the self. Furthermore, I will briefly describe the current field of morality and then undertake an in-depth explication of the four aspects Foucault believed ethics to be based on; the ethical substance, mode of subjectivation, self-forming activity or ethical work, and the telos of the ethical subject. It is my contention that these four categories are absolutely integral to understanding how the self/morality relationship has functioned and continues to function in our society. At the end of the first chapter I use an example of a Foucaultian interpretation of morals through Ian Hunter's recent work on Kant to show the richness of Foucault's ethical framework for teaching philosophy.

In the second chapter I will discuss the differences that Foucault has drawn between 'knowledge of the self' and 'care of self'. He utilizes the *Alcibiades* to show how the Platonists differentiated between these two concepts and ultimately gave precedence to 'knowledge of the self'. However, you could never achieve this knowledge without 'caring for oneself' and therefore 'care of self' still played a crucial role in one's ability to live a life of freedom. In, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, Foucault argues that "the Cartesian moment" could have very well marked the end of the 'care of self' in modernity. At this moment it no longer mattered what or whom you were in order to gain knowledge, because knowledge became accessible to anyone by virtue of it being available to the mind. These two types of relations that one has with oneself will be explored and their differences interrogated. This will provide an explanation of how philosophy in the West was transformed from a concern with discourse and life to a concern with discourse alone.

The last chapter will be dedicated to commenting on current relationships that one has with oneself. It is apparent today that people are extremely concerned with themselves, hence the popularity of the 'self-help' industry. But what is this relationship? Is it one of care? Or, is it one completely based on rule following? And does it offer the individual as much freedom as possible in sculpting their lives? Foucault explains that the main difference between the Ancients and contemporary modes of caring for oneself are the greater degrees of autonomy found in the ancient practices. This highly contested claim will be discussed and, regardless of its historical accuracy or inaccuracy, it will still be argued that our current 'self-help' culture tells people how to live rather than teaching them *thoughtfulness*⁶. This is because in our society, religious (particularly Christian), social, and educational institutions have taken up and altered our techniques of self. When they take up these techniques they transform them in ways that are not identical with the previous techniques and have important consequences for who we are and who we would like to become. Currently, psychologists, religious leaders, gurus, and doctors of all kinds dominate our self-help industry. All claim to have the map to the 'good' life and it is simply a following of their map that will lead you there, rather than a careful reflection upon and creation of one's own map. There is a complete handing over of yourself to these people for their guidance, which almost guarantees that you will never learn to become your own guide.

⁶ "Thought" is defined by Foucault in the Preface to *The History of Sexuality Volume Two* as, "the basis for accepting or refusing rules, and constitutes human beings as social and juridical subjects; it is what establishes the relation with oneself and with others, and constitutes the human being as ethical subject."

My intention is neither to establish a Foucaultian definition of ethics⁷, nor is it to argue that Foucault's work can solve the problems of contemporary moral philosophy. Rather, what I hope to show is that Foucault's later work offers the philosopher an interesting tool for understanding historical and contemporary moral philosophy, even contemporary 'self' improvement based institutions. The 'four-fold' framework that Foucault presents in the first chapter of *The Use of Pleasure* will be shown to be capable of helping us change our conception of moral philosophy.

3. PURPOSE

I believe that through Foucault's historical investigation into the 'care of self' we are able to see how ethics can be thought of as a different modality than what is contemporarily thought to be morals. The 'care of self', as a practice or exercise one performs on oneself in order to constitute oneself as an ethical subject, is an extremely important concept. It helps one to recognize how a shift occurred from 'care of self' to a re-thinking of the moral agent as a certain type of subject who performs actions upon others which may have no effect on the subject as producer of that action. Borrowing the term "etho-poetic" from Plutarch, the 'later' Foucault leaves behind his earlier work on disciplinary categories and focuses on what motivates us to make ourselves into moral kinds of beings. Foucault did not think that he had found the answer to our ethical stagnation; and we should be mindful of his intentions. He stated;

I would certainly not say, 'We have unfortunately forgotten about the care of the self; so here, here it is, the key to everything.' Nothing is more foreign to me than the idea that, at a certain moment, philosophy went astray and forgot something, that somewhere in its history there is a principle, a foundation that must be rediscovered... Which does not mean that contact with such

⁷ I am inspired here by Ian Hacking's "Don't first define, ask for the point" section in Chapter One of *Social Construction*.

and such a philosopher may not produce something, but it must be emphasized that it would be something new.⁸

To write a philosophical paper on Foucault is to try and create new possibilities, which is the sole purpose of the current work, and in itself entails a certain practice of freedom.

⁸ Michel Foucault. "The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom," in Paul Rabinow trans. Robert Hurley and others, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth, Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984 Volume One* (New York: New Press, 1997). p. 295.

TWO

Morals, Ethics, the Difference, and Why it Matters

"The moral earth, too, is round!" – Nietzsche⁹

“What is Ethics?” Almost every, ‘Introduction to Ethical Theory’ book one opens begins with this statement. It seems to be an interesting and complex question, yet is always answered in the simplest manner – “it refers to the ideas or principles recommending how we ought to act.”¹⁰ Therefore, how we ought to act is defined in relation to a code, rule, or our relationship with an ‘other(s)’. In this chapter I will illustrate how this explanation of ethics is too simple to be useful and, therefore, is unable to help us in understanding the history of morality or why we are currently concerned with being moral at all. To do this I will utilize Foucault’s understanding of ethics apart from morals¹¹. Furthermore, I will show that Foucault’s ethical framework produces a much more nuanced, and therefore constructive understanding of historical and contemporary ethics. As an example of the application of Foucault’s framework, at the end of the chapter I will use Ian Hunter’s contemporary reading of Kantian morality in his work *Rival Enlightenments*.

⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*

¹⁰ Michael Tooley, “Ethics, Meta-ethics, and Philosophical Thinking,” in *Introduction to Ethical Theory*, ed. Kenneth F. Rogerson (Orlando: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc, 1991), 2.

¹¹ In his introduction to *The Gay Science*, Bernard Williams reminds us that this separation from morals is not a new separation. For example, Hegel had distinguished between *Sittlichkeit*, the ethical outlook embodied in a society’s customary practice, and *Moralität*, an abstract, reflective, code such as that insisted upon in Kant’s philosophy. Philosophers as various as Ronald Dworkin, and Williams himself, also make the distinction.

1. MORALS

In, *The Use of Pleasure*, Foucault tells us that morality is an ambiguous term, which consists of at least two elements. The first element is "code-oriented" and is subdivided into two parts, the "moral code" and "codes of behaviour". The moral code is a rule of conduct, it describes "a set of values and rules of action that are recommended to individuals through the intermediary of various agencies such as the family...educational institutions, churches, and so forth."¹² A few very brief examples of moral codes would be; the family lesson so often heard by children from their parents 'do onto others as you would have done to you', or the normative principle proposed by utilitarianism – the right thing to do in a situation is that which promotes the greatest amount of "happiness" (human good) for all persons involved, and lastly, all the 'Thou Shalt Not's of the Ten Commandments.

The second part, the "codes of behavior," is what people actually do, or in other words the action taken, in relation to the code/values that are recommended to them. We can see how this part of morality is what causes moral theorists the most trouble. For example, one could tell their children to 'do onto others as you would have done to you' over and over again, and the child may follow that rule half of the time. Likewise, the problems with the 'greatest happiness principle' of utilitarianism are well known and

¹² Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure: The History of Sexuality Volume Two*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, Inc., 1985), 25.

have proven the theory to be one which faces serious challenges. Lastly, even the most devout Christian has probably broken one of the Ten Commandments in their lifetime.¹³

Through this bifurcation of "code-oriented" morality Foucault thought it possible to undertake a history of "moral behaviours" or a history of "moral codes". Both would involve two very different things. Neither of those concepts, or their investigation, however, was what he ended up being most concerned with. Foucault's concern lay with what he believed to be the second element of morality, or what he termed "ethics-oriented moralities". He would like us to understand ethics as, "the elaboration of a form of relation to self that enables an individual to fashion himself into a subject of ethical conduct."¹⁴ In this ethical realm of morality, the way in which one, literally, 'brings oneself' to either obey or transgress a moral code is what becomes most important.

It is this second element, the field of ethical self-constitution, Foucault recognizes as undergoing considerable historical changes – whereas the elements of the moral code itself appear to barely change at all. Foucault divides this second element of morality, 'ethics', into four aspects; and it is here that we first encounter the ethical framework he will use to analyze and map ancient ethics. As Timothy O'Leary explains,

"[F]or Foucault, if we wish to analyse a system of ethics, and especially if we wish to understand its history, we must divide it into these four constitutive elements: the ethical substance; the mode of subjection; the forms of elaboration of self (or the techniques of the self); the telos (or the mode of subjectivity towards which the ethics aims)."¹⁵

¹³ Hence, Russell's observation that theology may not be the basis for ethics but the other way around.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 251.

¹⁵ O'Leary, Timothy, *Foucault: The Art of Ethics* (New York, NY: Continuum, 2002), 41.

I will not explain this framework any further here, as it will be addressed in full in the next section of this chapter. All that needs to be clear at present is that morality, for Foucault, consists of two main parts; one part is based on codes - "moral codes" and "codes of behaviour", the other is based upon "forms of subjectivation."¹⁶ The 'forms of subjectivation' constitute the groundwork for what Foucault believed to be a possible "historical ontology of ourselves," or an investigation of how we have been fashioned and continue to fashion ourselves as ethical subjects.¹⁷ He is careful to explain that the two elements of morality can never be entirely dissociated, though their independent development is possible.

In this section I have suggested the field of moral philosophy is much more complex than what is traditionally thought. If we are to really understand and teach others about morality we must distinguish, the question of "ethics" from the question of a moral code. Because,

[i]t is one thing to issue an interdiction; another to determine whether people actually obey it. Still another is to invent a way for people to become not simply moral agents, but moral kinds of being or persons. That is what Foucault calls "ethics." Given a more or less explicit set of prescriptions and interdictions—what Foucault calls a moral code—one can examine the practices through which people were incited to acquire a moral nature.¹⁸

A general criticism that is made towards Foucault's separation of morality into-moral codes/moral behavior, and ethics, is that he essentially turns morality or contemporary moral problems into an individualistic project, with no concern for community. John Rajchman explains that in stressing "subjectivity" and "subjectivization" Foucault did not intend to abandon a social or collective ethic in favor of an individual or private one.

¹⁶ Subjectivation can be understood as 'self-stylization' in this context.

¹⁷ James W. Bernauer and Michael Mahon, "The ethics of Michel Foucault," in *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*, ed. P. 148.

¹⁸ John Rajchman, *Truth and Eros* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 90.

Rather, he wanted to rethink the great question of "community": the question of how and why people band together, of how and why they are bound to one another; and the question of the passion or eros of our identity... Thus we do not have to see the ancient ethical question of how best to live as either an individual or a collective matter. It is rather a question of the kinds of individuality and of collectivity of which we are capable at a time and place, and of the relations they suppose with particular sorts of government and self-governments, knowledge and self-knowledge.¹⁹

An interesting comparison can be made of the criticism mentioned above against Foucault's later work, with the criticism launched by Hegel against Stoicism itself. "Stoicism, claims Hegel, is an inward-looking philosophy that mistakenly takes disengagement with the outside world to be a form of freedom."²⁰ Max Stirner picked up this line of criticism in, *The Ego and His Own*, and was responded to by Marx and Engels. They defended Stoicism by stating: "The Stoical wise man by no means has in mind 'life without living development', but an *absolutely active* life, as is evident even from his outlook on nature, which is Heraclitian, dynamic, developing and living" (Marx & Engels 1964:144).²¹ Foucault's work also has this active dimension in consideration when speaking about ethics, but it always retains an individualistic²² tone. To that part of the criticism we could almost hear Epictetus responding for Foucault when he says,

[P]hilosophy does not promise to secure anything external for *humans*²³, otherwise it would be admitting something that lies beyond its proper subject matter. For just as wood is the material of the carpenter, bronze that of the statuary, so each individual's own life is the material of the art of living.²⁴

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 99-100.

²⁰ John Sellers, *Stoicism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 151.

²¹ Ibid., p. 151.

²² It is curious that this charge of individualism is waged against Foucault so often, as he pays careful attention to explain the three different types of attitudes one can have concerning individualism in *The Care of the Self: The History of Sexuality Volume III*, Part Two: The Cultivation of the Self, 42.

²³ My emphasis. One should also refer to Nietzsche on this point. In, *The Gay Science*, he says, "The popular medical formulation of morality (the originator of which is Ariston of Chios), 'virtue is the health of the soul', would, in order to be useful, have to be changed at least to read, 'your virtue is the health of your soul'. For there is no health as such, and all attempts to define such a thing have failed miserably. Deciding what is health even for your *body* depends on your goal, your horizon, your powers, your

This passage from Epictetus is part of his response to a man who asks him how he can stop his brother being angry with him. Epictetus tells the man that he should be concerned only with his own reaction to his brother's anger and not with his brother's anger at all. If one desires to take up philosophy to cure one's own soul then they should do so, but they should not take up philosophy with the sole purpose of curing others. Only the angry person can cure his or her own anger.

Thus the Stoic physician of the soul is not some form of evangelical therapist who is intent on trying to cure the souls of everyone he meets; rather he is focused on a more personal and private task, although – like Socrates and Diogenes the Cynic – he may try to encourage others to embark on that very same personal work for themselves.²⁵

However, does this seemingly idolization of concern for oneself mean that Foucault was trying to become a 'Stoic physician of the soul'? This is certainly not the case and in the following section I will show why.

2. ETHICS

Foucault wrote much about Christian experiences of subjectivity and through his investigation was led to the insight that the major political issue of our time was how a person is defined and how one's relationship to one's self is organized.²⁶ In order to understand how we 'organize' our relationship with ourselves, Foucault undertook a

impulses, your mistakes and above all on the ideals and phantasms of your soul. Thus there are innumerable healths of the body; and the more one allows the particular and incomparable to rear its head again, the more one unlearns the dogma of the 'equality of men', the more the concept of a normal health, along with those of a normal diet and normal course of an illness, must be abandoned by our medical men. Pp. 116-117

²⁴ (Diss 1.15.2)

²⁵ Sellars, p. 35.

²⁶ James W. Bernauer and Michael Mahon, "The ethics of Michel Foucault," in *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*, ed. P. 146.

historical investigation into ancient ethical relationships of self. Ancient ethics were interesting to Foucault for various reasons, but two in particular seem to be the most important. First he tells us,

[F]rom Antiquity to Christianity, we pass from a morality that was essentially the search for a personal ethics to a morality as obedience to a system of rules. And if I was interested in Antiquity it was because, for a whole series of reasons, the idea of morality as obedience to a code of rules is now disappearing, has already disappeared. And to this absence of morality corresponds, must correspond, the search for an aesthetics of existence.²⁷

Foucault saw similarities between the ethical situation of the Greeks and our current ethical situation. This did not mean that we would find the resolution to our ethical stagnation in the Greeks.²⁸ This is what makes his particular thought much different from current work on virtue ethics. There is no space in our culture for virtue ethics because our problems and our environment will not find an answer in frameworks that were applicable for certain peoples living within a certain culture, at a certain time. This does not mean, of course, that history is not useful or nostalgia is not healthy but it is insofar as it helps us think about ourselves in the present. However, he did find it interesting to uncover the similarities between our ethical problems and the Ancients. Many of the ethical questions and problems addressed by them continue to be addressed by us today, but just because the problems remain the same this does not lead directly to the conclusion that the answers would then be the same as well.

²⁷ Michel Foucault, "An Aesthetics of Existence," in *Michel Foucault: Politics, Philosophy, Culture – Interviews and Other Writings, 1977-1984*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman (New York, NY: Routledge, 1988), 49.

²⁸ Many people are misled by Foucault's return to ancient ethics in his discussion of the 'care of self.' It cannot be stressed enough that he is not in any way endorsing a return to any ancient ethical system. He has said in many places, "I think that history preserves us from that sort of ideology of the return." See the interview, "Space, Knowledge, and Power" for a more detailed discussion of the matter.

Furthermore, ancient ethics contained two ethico-political elements that Foucault championed throughout his life; their ethics were not meant to be universal and their goal was not normalization²⁹. He argues, in favor of ancient ethics that,

... everything was a matter of adjustment, circumstance, and personal position... therefore in this form of morality, the individual did not make himself into an ethical subject by universalizing the principles that formed his action; on the contrary, he did so by means of an attitude and a quest that individualized his action, modulated it, and perhaps even gave him a special brilliance by virtue of the rational and deliberate structure his action manifested.³⁰

Living ethically was a proposal more than an imposition, and it was not explicitly linked to any legal-institutional system. If you wanted happiness in your life you tried to learn to live a certain way. Learning to live your life with a certain style usually entailed two very important components: discourse and practice. Therefore, the point was not simply to "set forth a doctrine, but rather to guide the interlocutor towards a determinate mental attitude."³¹

Foucault may have focused most of his attention on Stoic philosophy because it leaves us the most striking example of the division in philosophy between the categories of theory and practice. Stoic philosophy is "not merely a series of philosophical claims about the nature of the world or what we can know or what is right or wrong; it is above all an attitude or way of life."³² This becomes very clear in the writings of Epictetus.

For him, philosophy itself was an attempt to transform one's way of life and philosophical discourse/theory was only the first step, and possibly of the least

²⁹ 'normalization' – the increasing rationalization, organization, and homogenization of society in modern times. The definition of normalization can be found in many of Foucault's writings, but I chose this particular one from David Couzens Hoy's work "Power, Repression, Progress" (p.131) for its simplicity.

³⁰ Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure: The History of Sexuality Volume Two*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, Inc., 1985), 62.

³¹ Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy As a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson, trans. Michael Chase (New York: Blackwell, 1995), 91.

³² John Sellars, p.2.

importance, in this undertaking. The practical side of philosophy consisted of exercises which,

aimed at transforming our habitual ways of acting in the light of the philosophical theories that we have mastered in the classroom...It is one thing to be able to say what is truly good and what is only apparently good; it is quite another to act immediately and consistently in the light of that understanding.³³

Ethics today is usually "concerned with the proper treatment of other people,"³⁴ and this ancient attitude towards ethics as a practice of the self has all but disappeared. Arnold I. Davidson points out a crucial aspect of Foucault's thought when he tells us one of the reasons Foucault returns to the Ancients in discussing ethics,

[O]ne of the great virtues of ancient thought is that knowledge of oneself, care of oneself, and one's style of life are everywhere so woven together that one cannot, without distortion, isolate any of these issues from the entire philosophical thematics of which they form part. If we ignore these dimensions of the moral life, we shall be able to do justice to neither history nor philosophy. And, without doubt worse, we shall not be able to take account of ourselves, of who we have become, of how we might become different.³⁵

At the beginning of my work I pointed out the fact Foucault was not endorsing a re-emergence of ancient ethics for our present day situation, but rather, I would argue he is advocating the need to investigate this 'practical' part of philosophy (the relationship you have with yourself when you act).

One of the most common and important criticisms launched toward philosophers today is that their work is 'arm-chair' and they have lost touch with the world outside of the university. Moreover, most people believe the members of an academic community do not live what they write, or even more strikingly they tend to say everything for everyone else. Foucault believed speaking for others to be an appalling practice for the

³³Ibid., p. 46-47.

³⁴ Introduction to Ethical Theory, p. 3.

³⁵ Arnold I. Davidson, "Ethics as Ascetics: Foucault, the History of Ethics, and Ancient Thought," in *Foucault and the Writing of History*, ed. Jan Goldstein (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1994), 80.

academic, and the academic could live his or her life 'philosophically' – that is, take up their life as their own personal work of art. For example, his involvement in the GIP (Groupe d'Information sur les Prisons), "was not a pressure group demanding reforms and it did not attempt to speak on behalf of prisoners...the group's self-defined task was to empower prison inmates to speak for themselves."³⁶ There are too many philosophical/political theorists who write hundreds of pages about justice and have never given a moment of their time to any cause promoting justice – or forming themselves into a just individual. In ancient Greece they would not be said to be practicing philosophy at all, but rather something else; Sophistry³⁷.

It is difficult as a reader of Foucault's later work not to attribute to him a nostalgic attitude for some aspects of ancient ethics, as there is a concrete tone of fondness for ancient spiritual exercises in his lectures on *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*. And, he has been quoted as saying that Seneca's *Letters* were some of the most beautiful works he had ever read. This is where the most important criticism of his historical work can and is launched, particularly by Pierre Hadot. First, however, Hadot does acknowledge similarities between his definition of 'spiritual exercises' of the self and what Foucault terms 'techniques of the self.' He says Foucault's "description of the practices of the self – like, moreover, my description of spiritual exercises – is not merely an historical study, but rather a tacit attempt to offer contemporary mankind a

³⁶ David Macey, *Michel Foucault* (London, UK: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2004), 97.

³⁷ "Sophists – people who developed an apparently philosophical discourse without trying to live their lives in accordance with their discourse, and without their discourse emanating from their life experience." From, Pierre Hadot, "Philosophy and Philosophical Discourse" in *What is Ancient Philosophy?* P. 174.

model of life..."³⁸ This similarity, though, may be misplaced by Hadot. First of all, Foucault is not doing a 'historical study', he is undertaking a genealogy³⁹ and the difference is of paramount importance. Secondly, Foucault is not trying to offer anyone a 'model of life', that would be too close to prophetism⁴⁰ for him. What I believe him to be doing is offering a framework upon which one can better understand what has and continues to constitute us as moral beings. It is through the utilization of his four-fold ethical framework that criticism about our subjectivity can then be launched, and pockets of resistance found.

Hadot's main criticism of Foucault is that he limits the 'care of self' to the realm of ethics alone and does not take into account the aspects of physics and logic. These two aspects constitute the entire other two thirds of ancient thought. Hadot argues,

[B]y not attending to that aspect of the care of the self that places the self within a cosmic dimension, whereby the self, in becoming aware of its belonging to the cosmic whole, thus transforms itself, Foucault was not able to see the full scope of spiritual exercises, that physics (and logic), as much as ethics, aimed at self-transformation.⁴¹

Foucault, however, is not endorsing a Stoic conception of the world (which Hadot seems to do with his work on Marcus Aurelius), he finds interesting is the ancient idea that the *bios* was conceived as a material to be shaped. Foucault, however, states explicitly that

³⁸ Pierre Hadot, p. 208.

³⁹ Genealogy – "a form of history which can account for the constitution of knowledges, discourses, domains of objects, etc., without having to make reference to a subject which is either transcendental in relation to the field of events or runs in its empty sameness throughout the course of history." (Truth and Power, 59) For a more complete discussion of Foucault on genealogy see the entire article, "Truth and Power", also "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History." Both in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984)

⁴⁰ Foucault thought we had to get rid of the call for prophetism and start to build our own ethics. See the Stephen Riggins Interview in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth, Volume I*. p.121-133

⁴¹ Arnold I. Davidson (ed.), "Introduction," in *Philosophy As a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, trans. Michael Chase (New York: Blackwell, 1995), 24-25.

it is not necessary to relate our ethical problems to scientific knowledge and this statement is in direct contradiction with a Stoic conception of life itself. Nevertheless, he is not trying to revitalize a Stoic movement for our time. The historical analysis of Stoic, Epicurean, and Cynic practices of self are useful for Foucault because,

[F]or centuries we have been convinced that between our ethics, our personal ethics, our everyday life, and the great political and social and economic structures, there were analytical relations, and that we couldn't change anything, for instance, in our sex life or our family life, without ruining our economy, our democracy and so on. I think we have to get rid of this idea of an analytical or necessary link between ethics and other social or economic or political structures.⁴²

Furthermore, one could argue that some Stoic figures rejected parts of the Stoic system while retaining others. For instance, Cicero "rejected Stoic epistemology... [yet] endorses Stoic ethics, or at the very least admires the Stoic ethical ideal. Not a Stoic himself, Cicero is a relatively sympathetic and well-informed onlooker."⁴³ Foucault's position is much closer to that of Cicero, than, say of Seneca. He is playing much more the role of onlooker than devout follower.

From the fact that the 'self' is not given to us, Foucault believes it necessarily follows that we have to create ourselves as works of art⁴⁴. He tells us we should want to be 'poets of our lives'. This seems to be the main point Foucault's later work undertakes. Nietzsche said it and Foucault tried to live it, along the way leaving some "tools" so that we too may start to think of our own lives as works of art. In, *The Gay Science*,

⁴² Michel Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress," in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth, Essential Works of Foucault: 1954-1984, Volume One*, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Robert Hurley and others (New York, NY: New Press, 1997), 261.

⁴³ Sellars, 21.

⁴⁴ For a complete discussion of Foucault and the aesthetics of existence see Timothy O'Leary *Foucault and the Art of Ethics*. He offers a complete discussion of what aesthetic means for Foucault and how it differs from mainstream understandings. What is important for my discussion is that aesthetic means the ability to be transformed, not beautiful in any sense of the word.

Nietzsche tells us to "become who we are,"⁴⁵ to create ourselves. One should be reminded that Nietzsche is not talking about a project of authenticity, or discovery of a 'true self', rather it is a program of creation that may have no end. Just as a poem takes the reader to unforeseen places, this is also possible for one's life. This seems to be the only prescription Foucault makes in his work on the 'self' – or ethics.

3. THE ETHICAL FRAMEWORK

Through the historical investigation into ancient ethics Foucault was able to pinpoint four key elements of one's ethical relationship to oneself. He hoped these four elements would be useful in highlighting the complexity involved with ethical relationships of self. It is helpful to describe what Foucault terms 'the four main aspects of ethics' in reference to an example, and I will use the same example he uses in *The Use of Pleasure*; infidelity, to help explain these four characteristics.

The first aspect is termed the 'ethical substance' – it is the part of oneself which is taken to be the relevant domain for ethical judgment. For Foucault, the 'ethical substance' or prime material of moral practice, in the case of infidelity, would be the inner struggle the spouse experiences with their soul and desires. It is not the acts or outward behaviours that are the ethical substance but the watchfulness and strain of the individual's 'will' in trying to do the right thing. Therefore, if one were to focus exclusively on the act of infidelity itself, the ethical substance is completely overlooked and has no way of finding resolve.

⁴⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, p. 187.

The second aspect is the 'mode of subjection' - again in the case of infidelity it would be the way the married individual established a relationship to the rule of fidelity. In most cases of infidelity the individual believes they broke the rule because they see themselves as members of a community that basically accept fidelity as a norm and want to be in the business of preserving it as a custom. However, as Foucault reminds us, there are other ways to relate to the rule/norm. You may find yourself practicing fidelity because you are trying to uphold a spiritual tradition that you inherited from your family, or you may want to be an example for your children, or you may simply want to give your life a certain 'style' or form that upholds standards of perfection. This list is certainly not exhaustive, but the main point of the 'mode of subjection' is that one needs to interrogate and know what their mode consists of. They must be aware of this so they are clear about why they feel remorse for what they have done, and only then is it possible to start to change the behavior if they wished to do so.

The third aspect is the 'ethical work'. This is the activity that is undertaken by an individual on themselves in the hopes of becoming "the ethical subject of one's behavior." For Foucault, the 'ethical work' has endless forms. He says in the case of fidelity; it can be practiced in many ways - one way is in the form of a sudden, all-embracing, and definitive renunciation of pleasures; it can also be practiced in the form of a relentless combat whose vicissitudes - including momentary setbacks - can have meaning and value in themselves; and it can be practiced through a decipherment as painstaking, continuous and detailed as possible, of the movements of desire in all its hidden forms, including the most obscure. We can see how Foucault's conception of

'ethical work' is exclusively work done on oneself for oneself, not necessarily by oneself, but always for oneself.⁴⁶

The fourth and final aspect is the 'telos of the ethical subject'. This feature of ethics is what incorporates all of our activities into a style of existence. Hence, moral actions are not seen as single actions in reference to one particular event, they are parts of a 'pattern of conduct'. The moral action always has as its goal a certain mode of being. What one could call the particularly existential component of this ethics. Foucault describes the many other moral goals one could have when practicing the ritual of fidelity: we can be aspiring to a complete mastery of ourselves, one can be practicing a radical detachment from the world, one can be trying to achieve a certain tranquility of the soul, or striving for a purity that will ensure one's salvation after death. Again, the *telos* is a striving of the self for the self; it is not always a strict observance of what others would want.

If one applies this four-fold ethical framework to a Christian system of morality it will elucidate how certain schools of morality can vary and start to appear very differently under its application. Such an application to Christianity would conclude with;

a characterization of the ethical substance based on finitude, the Fall, and evil; a mode of subjection in the form of obedience to a general law that is at the same time the will of a personal God; a type of work on oneself that implies a decipherment of the soul and a purificatory hermeneutics of the desires; and a mode of ethical fulfillment that tends towards self-renunciation.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ This entire explanation is taken from *The Use of Pleasure: The History of Sexuality Volume Two*, pp 26-28.

⁴⁷ Michel Foucault, *The Care of the Self: The History of Sexuality Volume Three*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, Inc., 1986), 239.

It is clear how the same framework applied to the same rule or interdiction can result in a very different relationship to oneself depending on the type of style one is trying to give to one's life. This exemplifies the richness and capability of the framework to explain why we have and continue to want to be moral beings. It also draws important attention to the differences and sources of conflict people face when they find themselves in moral dilemmas.

Arnold I. Davidson argues that Foucault shows us how to write a history of ethics that does not collapse into a history of moral codes. Furthermore, Davidson states, Foucault's conceptualization allows us to examine the connections, the kinds of dependence and independence, among these four aspects of ethics, thus showing us the various ways in which continuities, modifications, and ruptures can occur in one or more of these four dimensions of our relation to ourselves. He says,

[I]n some historical periods, for example, the ethical substance may remain constant, while the mode of subjection gradually alters; or the telos may stay continuous, while the self-forming activity is modified. In other periods, the ethical substance, mode of subjection, self-forming activity, and telos may be so inextricably intertwined that they undergo change together, thereby resulting in an entirely new form of the self's relationship to itself.⁴⁸

In Hadot's terminology, Foucault's aim was to isolate certain spiritual exercises, which cannot be reduced to a code of good conduct, whose aim was the exercise of wisdom, and the philosophical way of life. Furthermore and parallel to Hadot's argument that the "spiritual exercises gradually became almost eclipsed by a conception of philosophy as an abstract, theoretical activity, so Foucault, on a different level, argued that codes of behavior gradually came to be emphasized at the expense of forms of subjectivation."⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Davidson, p.70.

⁴⁹ Arnold I. Davidson, "Spiritual Exercises and Ancient Philosophy: An Introduction to Pierre Hadot."

To conclude, my interest in Foucault's ethical framework stems from two questions I posed to myself. The first question being; what purpose does contemporary moral philosophy serve? Secondly, and, more importantly, does contemporary moral philosophy provide a theoretically useful basis upon which to understand and, hence, possibly change the way the modern subject views him or herself? Foucault's understanding of ethics is able to answer these questions because it makes explicit how we relate to ourselves as specific kinds of subjects who govern ourselves in particular ways. To indicate what part of oneself one judges, how one relates oneself to moral obligations, what one does to transform oneself into an ethical subject, and what mode of being one aims to realize is to indicate how one lives, therefore, to characterize one's style of life.

Many of Foucault's most damning criticisms come from those wary of his ability to provide us with criterion to discern what is wrong or dangerous in our society. He has remarked in interviews that everything is dangerous. Nonetheless, his seeming unwillingness to value any values is extremely problematic for many theorists. An interesting response to this criticism comes from Ian Hacking and his emphasis on Foucault's close engagement with the philosophy of Kant. He states,

"[A]mong the radical novelties of Kant was the notion that we *construct* our ethical position. Kant said we do this by recourse to reason, but the innovation is not reason but construction. Kant taught that the only way the moral law can be moral is if we make it. Foucault's historicism combined with that notion of constructing morality lead one away from the letter and the law of Kant, but curiously preserves his spirit."⁵⁰

Critical Inquiry Vol. 16, No.3. (Spring, 1990): 481-482.

⁵⁰ Ian Hacking, "Self-Improvement," in *Foucault: A Critical Reader*, ed. David Couzens Hoy (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1986), 239.

Hacking goes on further to advise those who criticize Foucault for 'leaving us no place to stand', so to speak, to start their critique with Kant. Coincidentally, but for different reasons, that is where this discussion is about to go...to Kant.

4. Foucault and Kant

There is an interesting relationship between Foucault, Kant, and Stoicism that has yet to be written about in an extensive manner. It is not within the scope of this work to address it completely. However, I know that such an endeavor would be interesting and fruitful, and hope in future work to address it in such a way that would do it justice. The purpose of this section is to use Ian Hunter's work on Kant to show that a Foucaultian ethical framework is being utilized and the results are a richer understanding of Kantian morality.

It is my contention that Kantian morality has been traditionally understood and taught as a moral code to be followed by all members of the human community (a form of cosmopolitanism). Therefore, little attention, or at least not enough attention, has been spent on how the Kantian constitutes his or herself as a moral subject of their own actions. Before I begin my discussion of Kantian morality, it should be known that it is not within the scope of this work to even touch the surface of much Kantian scholarship or thought; however, a brief introduction will suffice for the purpose of the current issues.

My introduction to Kant's moral philosophy took place in a first year philosophy course and subsequently in a second year morals class. Philosophy departments traditionally teach introductory moral theory in the following manner - a theory is

presented by stating its basic arguments and then a criticism is presented as to why those arguments are problematic or the theory is unsound as a whole. Kant's moral theory is usually presented somewhat like the following:

1. To have moral worth, an action must be done from duty
2. An action performed from duty does not have its moral worth in the purpose that is to be achieved through it but in the maxim by which it is determined
3. Duty is the necessity of an action executed from respect for the law.⁵¹

Kant's moral theory is deontological and rests on a synthetic a-priori law; the Categorical Imperative. Now, a deontological theory proposes that an act or rule is inherently and intrinsically right or wrong, or good or bad, independent of the consequences or outcomes it produces. This definition is somewhat contentious, as some argue that it misrepresents deontology, in the sense that deontology is any theory for which the rightness or wrongness of actions is not exclusively a function of consequences. This means that consequences can matter, but they cannot be the only variable in the decision process. Still, various thinkers, such as John Rawls, have criticized deontology on the basis that leaving out possible outcomes in an ethical choice is irrational and contemptible. Moreover, it may very well be impossible.

We can see how the two main criticisms of Kantian morality must follow from the previous premises stated above. The first main criticism is that the Categorical Imperative does not tell me why I should do my duty. Perhaps I want to be selfish or irrational. Secondly, the question remains of whether a categorically determined moral imperative could ever justify "impure means". In other words, are there rule exceptions?

⁵¹ This discussion is based on notes taken by me in a first year introductory philosophy class. They resemble the content of the text, which was, *Dilemmas and Decisions: A Primer in Ethical Theory* (Toronto, ON: Harcourt Brace, 1994), 131-162.

Or, could there exist exceptions to ethical imperatives? This is important because, it seems that most people would not want all categorical imperatives to be followed without exception. One could add 'except for Kant', of course. Now that I have briefly sketched a popular philosophical understanding of Kantian morality, I will undertake a comparison of this interpretation with the one offered by Ian Hunter in his work, "Kant and the Preservation of Metaphysics."

5. KANTIAN MORALITY AS AN ETHICAL ACTIVITY

The first thing that is striking about Hunter's work is his illumination of the traditional/popular emphasis in Kantian scholarship on action and not inner motives. Recall the three points made above about the Kantian sense of duty; each one explicitly references the action of the subject without a complete explanation of the importance of inner motives. Most introductory texts on morality claim that Kant is trying to develop a moral theory that is not based upon the existence of God. However, Hunter argues,

despite what modern Kantians say, Kant's attack on the moral sufficiency of outward lawfulness and prudential ethics allows us to approach him as heir to the main line of German university metaphysics - including its constitutional hostility to civil philosophy - and hence as party to the ongoing attempt to resacralise the domain of civil governance.⁵²

Hunter has a long discussion in this chapter about the importance of contextualizing Kant's thought, and is able to conclude that,

despite the widespread view of Kant as a non-metaphysical philosopher who transcends the history of religious, political, and cultural conflict, we have prima facie grounds for approaching Kant's philosophy in a quite different manner: namely, from the viewpoint of its emergence in a

⁵² Ian Hunter, *Rival Enlightenments: Civil and Metaphysical Philosophy in Early Modern Germany* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 276.

university dedicated to preserving metaphysics as a comportment-education for religious intellectuals.⁵³

Therefore, he approaches Kant's moral anthropology, in the spirit of Foucault, as the program for a particular relationship of self and self-shaping. In this case they are particularly religious selves.

Hunter believes the main misinterpretation of Kantian scholarship can be found in the continuity between Kant's so-called 'pre-' and 'post-' critical phases. He argues that what becomes misunderstood is the ground of this continuity, which lies in Kant's unwavering life-long cultivation of the discipline of university metaphysics. He states, "Kant inherited a university metaphysics that made access to its object conditional on the transformation of its subject."⁵⁴ The need of the transformation of the individual in order to gain access to knowledge can and should be traced back to Antiquity. Foucault explains that the modern age began when knowledge itself and itself alone gives the subject access to truth. He argues the modern era,

... is when the philosopher (or the scientist, or simply someone who seeks the truth) can recognize the truth and have access to it in himself and solely through his activity of knowing, without anything else being demanded of him and without him having to change or alter his being as subject... This does not mean truth obtained without conditions... the conditions are internal/external to knowledge or act of knowledge, but do not concern the subject in his being; they only concern the subject in his concrete existence, and the structure of the subject as such.⁵⁵

Kant did not break this link between access to the truth and the requirement of the subjects' transformation of themselves. It is not the case that anyone could obey the moral law; you first had to understand yourself as a certain type of moral being. When Kant proclaimed the inaccessibility of the noumena to human understanding he was not

⁵³ Ibid., 278/9.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 280.

⁵⁵ Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the College De France, 1981-1982*, trans. Graham Burchell, ed. Frederic Gros; English series ed. Arnold I. Davidson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 17-19.

turning into an empiricist, rather, as Hunter argues "there is every reason to conclude that this proclamation, like its Albertian prototype, is a means of inducing and intensifying the desire for metaphysical knowledge."⁵⁶ Just as the Stoic may never become a sage, he will spend his life striving for that goal; the student of Kantian metaphysics will spend their lives striving for access to the noumena.

The most common example used when explaining the universalization of the moral law (the Categorical Imperative) is lying. The description goes, while it may be possible to will ourselves to lie out of self-interest, it is incoherent and self-defeating to will that everyone should lie, by making lying into a universal law then we show how lying is irrational. However, as Kant says, and Hunter explains, such examples are not intended as empirical justifications for the categorical imperative, whose grounding must never come from experience, but as external indications of the fact that all men do not have the imperative in their reason. 'Intellectual beings' will identically and this ensures that lying must fail it (the law) because it is contradictory for a being whose nature is predisposed to spiritual communio to dissemble⁵⁷. We are aware of moral impulses lying beyond our own sensible desires, says Kant, through our capacity to sacrifice our self-interested ends to the ends of other wills. Through this capacity (the ethical substance) we acquire insight into the fact that our higher will forms a unity with all other such wills, the spiritual community thus constituting a single general will whose rule (Regel) gives unity to morality: "As a result, we recognize that, in our most secret motives, we are dependent on the rule of the general will. It is this rule which

⁵⁶ Hunter., 282.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 306-7.

confers upon the world of all thinking beings its moral unity and invests it with a systematic constitution, drawn up in accordance with purely spiritual laws”

The principle of autonomy - the idea of man as a creature whose intellectual nature prescribes universal law to his sensible self - is thus not an idea that simply occurs to anyone. Rather, it is an idea which those undergoing the metaphysical *paideia* are induced to think; for this is how they learn to renounce their attachment to ‘external’ ends and interests, thereby constituting the autarkic intellect to which they aspire as the legislative source and ‘supreme principle’ of all duties.⁵⁸ Metaphysical knowledge of morality, we shall now see, is not a theory of man’s moral-worthiness. Rather, it is the goal or condition that man strives to become worthy of through theoretical activity, what we would call in Foucault’s terms the ‘ethical work’. This is in accordance with a hierarchy of forms of ethical life that is internal to university metaphysics as an institutional ethos. In constructing a moral plausibility for the doctrine of man as the internally divided inhabitant of the intelligible and sensible worlds, Kant was developing neither an objective moral cosmology nor a subjective moral theory. He was in fact improvising a new way for his students and readers to assent to the anthropology through which their desire for metaphysical knowledge would be induced and their practice of metaphysical speculation impelled.⁵⁹

Kantian ethics must be regarded not as an attempt to pursue the metaphysical foundations of human moral life, but as an attempt to instill the pursuit of metaphysical foundations as the highest form of moral life. Explicitly, if we applied Foucault’s ethical framework to Kantian moral philosophy it would tell us: first, the ‘ethical substance’ is

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 310.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 291.

that part of the subject's nature that belongs to the world of the pure intelligences and this is where the metaphysical moral law is grounded. The 'mode of subjection' is the subject's acknowledgment of themselves as a member in the community of rational beings. The 'ethical work' is the purifying activity of metaphysics and the following of immediate commands of a higher intelligence within the self. In other words, "[F]or the conversion of material maxims to formal universal laws requires the conversion of the sensuous subject of the maxims into the intelligible subject of the law governing a world of intelligences."⁶⁰ The 'telos' of the ethical subject in the Kantian case would be a mode of being where one always acts in accordance with the moral law.

In concentrating on moral rules suited to empirical human beings most contemporary moral philosophy fails to see that the Kantian moral law is not only a-priori but, it also consistently remains a metaphysical universal. In fact some teachers of moral philosophy can fail to understand that this moral law rules a community of rational beings existing outside space and time, while simultaneously being felt as an imperative by human beings in the empirical world. In order to combat the corrupting effects of empirical moral philosophy, then, Hunter believes it is necessary to pass from anthropology to metaphysics. Only if we do this will we completely understand Kant's moral philosophy.

To conclude, I hope this very brief explanation and explication of Foucault's ethical framework was able to show how it is possible for moral philosophy to expound a more accurate and complete view of the ethical subject. This does not have to occur only for our historical interpretations, but hopefully also for our contemporary understanding of what it means to be an ethical subject of our own actions.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 299.

THREE

Relations to Self

...there is no first or final point of resistance to political power other than in the relationship one has to oneself. -Michel Foucault⁶¹

Traditionally, and including Foucault's earlier works, philosophy has studied the human being through its relationship with an 'Other'. This 'Other' may be a person or an object in the world. Whichever it may be, our existence is defined and studied within this relationship. However, there is another way to study the human being, and that is through the relationship they have with themselves. This does not mean that the 'Other' disappears, or context in itself vanishes, but an important shift takes place in the role and conception of this relationship. To further ones understanding of what Foucault means by 'ethics' (one's relationship to oneself), we need to undertake an in-depth analysis of his work on the 'care of self' by its opposition of knowing oneself. This chapter is divided into three sections; the first will address Foucault's historical analysis of the 'care of self' and the separation of spirituality from philosophy. The second section will discuss the relationship of 'knowledge of self' and the place it occupies in philosophy today. The third section is a brief comment on how the 'care of self' has the potential to be a practice of freedom.

Foucault begins his historical study with the question, "[W]hy does 'know yourself' have this privileged status for us, to the detriment of the care of oneself?"⁶²

⁶¹ Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the College De France, 1981-1982*, trans. Graham Burchell, ed. Frederic Gros; English series ed. Arnold I. Davidson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 251-252.

Foucault argues that throughout Antiquity, with the exception of Aristotle, the question of philosophy, 'how does one have access to truth?' And, the question of spirituality, 'what transformations in the being of the subject are necessary for access to the truth?' was never separate.⁶³ Therefore, we can point to a break in the history of philosophy which he argued would make Spinoza one of the last ancient philosophers and Leibniz one of the first modern ones. Through his genealogy of ethical subjectivity Foucault discovered a shift in the relations between the subject and truth that he summarizes as follows:

I) Under the model of spirituality:

1. the subject as he/she is, is not capable of truth.
2. but, as it is, the truth can transfigure and save the subject.

II) Under the model of modernity:

1. the subject as he/she is, is capable of truth
2. but, as it is, the truth cannot save the subject.

So, the connection between the subject's access to truth and the requirement of the transformation of self has been broken.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Ibid., 12.

⁶³ This does not mean that Ancient Greece was the sole bearer of this phenomenon. Foucault is careful to mention that, "the idea that one must put a technology of the self to work in order to have access to the truth is shown in Ancient Greece, and what's more in many, if not all, civilizations, by a number of practices."

⁶⁴ Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 19.

1. CARE OF SELF

The ancient Greeks called it 'epimeleia heautou' – care of oneself. It meant the act of attending to oneself, being concerned about oneself, and so on. Furthermore, it was "a very powerful word; it describes a sort of work, an activity; it implies attention, knowledge, technique."⁶⁵ The 'care of self' took on many different forms in the various ancient schools of philosophy, and over time various forms within the same school. For instance, Foucault talks extensively about the *Alcibiades*, but this particular book represents only the strictly Platonic form of caring for oneself and not a general history of the phenomenon. Also, the 'care of self' within the school of Stoicism changes from the earlier to the later Stoics - from a strict concern with complete mastery of the self to a concern for the self as subject of a global community. However, this does not mean that there is no correlation or similar defining characteristics of the care of oneself throughout ancient philosophy. For instance, Foucault explains,

... for all of ancient philosophy care of the self was a duty and a technique, a fundamental obligation and a set of carefully fashioned ways of behaving.⁶⁶

Therefore, the differences are important to know, but also keeping the similarities in mind is important as well. It is also significant to note at this particular point that Foucault selects the Greek, Hellenistic, and Roman world "more for reasons of convenience, of the visibility and legibility of the phenomenon, that I speak about this

⁶⁵ Michel Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics,"

⁶⁶ Ibid., 494.

period, without in any way to say that it represents an innovation."⁶⁷ His focus on this period is due to the fact that askēsis⁶⁸ was not a way of subjecting the subject to the law. It is a practice of truth and a way of binding the individual to that truth. Therefore, ancient ascesis is not a reductive enterprise, rather, it a process of equipping and providing. Foucault is undertaking a contrast between modern subjection and ancient self-constitution.

In the first lecture of, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, Foucault explains the three elements that constitute the notion 'care of self'. He says; first, there is an attitude towards the self, others, and the world. For instance, the Platonic attitude toward the self as a tri-partite divided soul. Secondly, a certain form of attention [which] implies a certain way of attending to what we think and what takes place in our thought. Foucault uses the Stoic reference of the 'money-changer' in many instances to describe one particular type of this attention. Lastly, it constantly designates a number of actions exercised on the self by the self, actions by which one takes responsibility for oneself and by which one changes, purifies, transforms, and transfigures oneself.⁶⁹ These practices, such as meditation, dream analysis, and so on, will vary as well, depending on the philosophic school. Studying the 'care of self' is important for the history of subjectivity because it offers insight into a relationship of self that is completely

⁶⁷ Ibid., 316.

⁶⁸ For ancient Greek and Roman philosophers the role and function of ascesis was "to establish the strongest possible link between the subject and truth that would enable the subject when he had attained his finished form, to have at his disposal the true discourse that he should have and keep ready to hand and which he could say to himself as an aid when needed... The ascesis constitutes, therefore, and its role is to constitute, the subject as subject of veridiction." (*Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 371)

⁶⁹ Michel Foucault. *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the College De France, 1981-1982*. ed. Frederic Gros, trans. Graham Burchell; English series ed, Arnold I. Davidson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005). p. 11.

different than the one we have today, especially in the sense that the ancient subject was an active subject, rather than a passive subject of true knowledge.

Foucault locates three models under which he explains, historically, the 'care of self.' They are as follows; the "Platonic" model, which gravitates around recollection, the "Hellenistic" model, which pivots around self-finalization, and the "Christian" model which turns on self-exegesis and self-renunciation. The 'care of self' changed extensively throughout Antiquity. From the Platonic to Hellenistic models we find great divergences. Foucault explains that after the Platonists, the 'care of self' no longer had a political purpose and was freed from its connection with pedagogy. Over time the 'care of self',

took the form of a general and unconditional principle. This means that "caring about the self" is no longer a requirement valid at a given moment of life and in the phase of life when the adolescent enters adult life...care of the self is not bound up with the acquisition of a particular status in society. It involves the entire being of the subject, who must be concerned with the self, and with the self as such, throughout his life. In short, we arrive at this notion that gives a new content to the old requirement to "care about the self," a new notion – that of conversion to oneself.⁷⁰

One finds even a more drastic change from the Hellenistic to the Christian practices.

Pierre Hadot explains that when philosophy became placed in the service of theology, it became a complete theoretical discourse. He says that in the seventeenth and especially eighteenth century modern philosophy limited itself mainly to the theoretical point of view, therefore making itself somewhat of a servant of theology.⁷¹

For Foucault, the goal of the 'care of self' is not the distancing of oneself from the world – as is the goal of Christian practices of self. Instead, it is a real and continuous practice and preparation of oneself for action and events in this world. He

⁷⁰ *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 247-8.

⁷¹ Pierre Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2002, 254-255.

explains three main differences between the Hellenistic and Roman ascesis (practices of the self) and that of Christianity. They are as follows; first, the goal of the Hellenistic practices was not self-renunciation. Secondly, Christian ascesis involves determining the order of sacrifices or renunciations you must make concerning this or that part of your being, whilst the Hellenistic practices are about equipping yourself with something that you do not have. It was a defensive program against possible events in your life. Lastly, in the Hellenistic ascesis you do not submit to a law, instead you consistently try to bind yourself to the truth. Foucault goes on to say that the fundamental aspect of philosophical ascesis for the Ancients was to bond with the truth and not to submit to the law.⁷²

In conclusion he says,

pagan ascesis, the philosophical ascesis of the practice of the self in the period I am talking about, involved rejoining oneself as the end and object of a technique of life, an art of living. It involves coming together with oneself, the essential moment of which is not the objectification of the self in a true discourse, but the subjectivation of a true discourse in a practice and exercise of oneself on oneself.⁷³

The ethical life that Foucault seems to be endorsing does not obey a rule, instead it submits to a form. He says, "[I]t is a style of life, a sort of form one give's to one's life."...In the mind of a Roman or a Greek, neither obedience to the rule nor obedience tout court can constitute a beautiful work. A beautiful work is one that conforms to the idea of a certain forma (a certain style, a certain form of life).⁷⁴ This does not mean that it was obtainable without conditions. There are four conditions of spiritual knowledge, and Foucault explains them as follows; first, the subject had to undergo a

⁷² Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 332-333.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 333.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 424.

change of position. Secondly, things had to be evaluated on the basis of their reality within the kosmos. Third, there had to be the possibility of the subject seeing himself. Lastly, the subject was transfigured through the effect of this knowledge. Foucault says that Faust was the last nostalgic expression of a knowledge of spirituality which disappeared with the Enlightenment, and all that was left was the sad greeting of the birth of intellectual knowledge.

Foucault is sometimes criticized for limiting or reducing ancient spiritual exercises to ethical exercises alone. On the importance of this issue, Davidson states, "it is crucial not to limit or reduce spiritual exercises to ethical exercises. As I have said, spiritual exercises involved all aspects of one's behavior in accordance with a code of good conduct; they had, as Hadot says, not only a moral value, but an existential value."⁷⁵ These criticisms took place before *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* was published and I believe anyone who has read the work will agree that Foucault successfully maintains the existential link between learning, acting and being.

To conclude, in the previous chapter I mentioned a quote from Epictetus commenting on the ancient philosopher's concern with himself only, and any concern for others taking the form of a recommendation. This makes the individual a type of being whose sole purpose is not the aid of others. Foucault says,

[O]ne does not take care of the self in order to govern others properly, which was Alcibiades' question. One must live so as to establish the best possible relationship to oneself...one lives "for oneself," but obviously giving to this "for" a completely different meaning than is given in the traditional expression "living for oneself." One lives with the relationship to one's self as the fundamental project of existence, the ontological support which must justify, found, and command all the techniques of existence.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Arnold I. Davidson. "Introduction" in *Philosophy As a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson, trans. Michael Chase (New York: Blackwell, 1995). p.24.

⁷⁶ *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 448.

It is this approach to life that divided individuals in society, caring for oneself was an austere practice that could not be practiced by any person, especially not women or slaves. However, what is important in this self-concern is not its lack of universality but the fact that the individual becomes their own object and end. Furthermore, it would be impossible to care for others if you did not care for yourself first. There is nothing one can learn from you if you have not first learnt it yourself. Recall, you have not learnt something if you do not live in accordance with the principle. This is one ancient component of the 'care of self' that could certainly acquire a contemporary importance and meaning for us today.

2. KNOWLEDGE OF SELF

In the beginning of Foucault's work on ethics he talks extensively about the *Alcibiades*. He credits it as being one of the first works that explicitly addresses the 'care of self.' However, for Socrates, the 'care of self' was the justificatory framework, ground, and foundation for the more important imperative, "know yourself." In all of ancient thought there is this permanent relationship between knowledge of the self and care of self. However, you see drastic changes in the importance of either tenet from the Platonic schools to the Hellenistic schools. This is why Foucault is so careful to try and free the Hellenistic model from the Platonic model, because the relation between care and knowledge of the self is very different. He says, "[I]n taking the gnōthi seauton⁷⁷ as a guiding thread which can be followed continuously in the direction of either radicalization or extension – we allow an explicit or implicit, but anyway undeveloped theory of the subject to run behind it all."⁷⁸ Knowledge of self and knowledge of nature were linked in the Hellenistic schools, for Seneca explicitly. So, when you gaze upon yourself you are not excluding a knowledge of the world, you are not abandoning this

⁷⁷ 'know thyself'

⁷⁸ *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 461.

world, it is not the soul looking at itself but the mind's curiosity exploring the order of the world. Foucault argues that, "[P]latonism was the constant climate in which a movement of knowledge developed, a movement of pure knowledge without any condition of spirituality..."⁷⁹

The previous argument leads Foucault to question the 'Cartesian' moment as the moment when philosophy became completely disconnected from spirituality. For Descartes, the subject does not have to transform himself to gain knowledge. The subject only has to be what he is for him to have access in knowledge to the truth that is open to him through his own structure as subject.⁸⁰ Therefore, "'Certainty' would replace Platonic 'wisdom' in the meditational monologue Descartes proposed for any thinking being. Through a 'method' anyone could learn to separate his true from false ideas. The 'critical attitude' would consist, or at least start in this exercise in methodological doubt."⁸¹ John Rajchman explains, in agreement with Foucault, that the scientific discovery that Nature was external and amoral, a philosophical tradition "from Descartes to Husserl" tried to shift the critical concern for the self onto the "knowing" or epistemological subject.

We have already established in this work that Foucault believes a general feature of Antiquity, a fundamental principle, is that the subject as such, as they are given to themselves, are not capable of truth. And they are not capable of truth unless they carry out or perform a number of operations on themselves, a number of transformations and

⁷⁹ Ibid., 77.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 190.

⁸¹ John Rajchman, *Truth and Eros: Foucault, Lacan, and The Question of Ethics* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1991), 131.

modifications that will make them capable of truth. Most people will reply that Descartes epistemology is actually a *meditation*, which is a practice of the self and therefore is, in fact, carrying on in some way ancient practices of ascesis. Foucault responds to this remark, and says,

In Western culture up to the sixteenth century, asceticism and access to truth are always more or less obscurely linked. Descartes, I think, broke with this when he said "To accede to truth, it suffices that I be *any* subject which can see what is evident." Evidence is substituted for ascesis at the point where the relationship to the self intersects the relationship to others and the world. The relationship to the self no longer needs to be ascetic to get in a relation to the truth. It suffices that the relationship to the self reveals to me the obvious truth of what I see for me to apprehend that truth definitively. Thus, I can be immoral and know the truth. I believe that this is an idea which, more or less explicitly, was rejected by all previous culture. Before Descartes, one could not be impure, immoral, and know the truth. With Descartes, direct evidence is enough. After Descartes we have a nonascetic subject of knowledge. This change makes possible the institutionalization of modern science.⁸²

When you compare Descartes philosophy to ancient Greek philosophy, you see the correlation between belief and truth as obtained in a certain (mental) evidential experience for Descartes. In contrast, for the Greeks, the coincidence between belief and truth does not take place in a (mental) experience, but in a *verbal activity*, namely, *parrhesia*. Foucault concludes that *parrhesia*, in this Greek sense, can no longer occur in our modern epistemological framework. He concludes,

I should note that I never found any texts in ancient Greek culture where the *parrhesiastes* seems to have any *doubts* about his own possession of the truth. And indeed, that is the difference between the Cartesian problem and the parrhesiastic attitude. For before Descartes obtains indubitably clear and distinct evidence, he is not certain that what he believes is, in fact, true. In the Greek conception of *parrhesia*, however, there does not seem to be a problem about the acquisition of the truth since such truth-having is guaranteed by the possession of certain *moral* qualities: when someone has certain moral qualities, then that is the proof that he has access to truth – and vice versa. The "parrhesiastic game" presupposes that the *parrhesiastes* is someone who has the moral qualities which are required, first, to know the truth, and, secondly, to convey such truth to others."

⁸² Michel Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics," 279.

3. FREEDOM

How could ethics possibly be a practice of freedom? Foucault believed that the ancient cultural concern with taking care of yourself had at its heart the problem of freedom. This is most apparent with the Stoic relationship of self as one of mastery. He believes this culture had "an entire ethics revolving around the care of the self" this is what gives ancient ethics its particular form. I am not saying that ethics is synonymous with the care of oneself, but that, in antiquity, ethics as the conscious practice of freedom has revolved around this fundamental imperative: "Take care of yourself."⁸³ It is important to understand how Foucault defined his own concept freedom.

Foremost, freedom is not a state that is to be obtained. John Rajchman explains Foucault's conception, and does so in such a clear manner that it serves my purpose well to quote him at length:

– The existence of freedom (that we are not under the sign of a unique necessity) resides in the fact that no historical determination of our being is absolute, that any such determination is exposed to events that interrupt it, transform it, and reinterpret what it is. The experience of freedom is an experience of such an event that frees our relation to the practices and the thinking that have historically limited our experience. And the practices of freedom are what people try to make of themselves when they experience the existence of freedom in the history that has formed them. At the juncture of historical analysis and political critique would thus lie the task of "freeing" this experience in the history of our "subjections," asking what then might specifically be done to make ourselves anew.⁸⁴

Succinctly, freedom is not a state of *being*; it is a practice of the self.⁸⁵ And practices of the self are essentially what Foucault believes ethics to be. Therefore, if we do not

⁸³ Michel Foucault, "The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom," 285.

⁸⁴ John Rajchman, *Truth and Eros: Foucault, Lacan, and The Question of Ethics*. (New York, NY: Routledge, 1991), 111.

⁸⁵ For a brief comment on liberty as a practice see "Space, Knowledge, and Power," in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 245.

understand ethics in this way, our possibilities for exercising freedom are extremely limited.

For Foucault, there simply is no definitive answer to the question '[W]hen will I/we be free?' Timothy O'Leary explains Foucault's ideas about freedom as such,

it is a condition of our striving. Freedom is not a substance. It is as relational as power, as historically pliable as subjectivity. It is neither an ideal state towards which one strives by overcoming the finitude and limitations of one's individual existence, nor is it an essential feature of a transcendently grounded human nature. Rather, like power (which exists only in a relation between forces), freedom exists only in the concrete capacity of individuals to refuse, to say 'No'.⁸⁶

It is then the task of ethical practice to enable one to exercise freedom. Our conception of freedom needs to be entirely rethought if we agree that the self has no essence. It is the individual's self-formation where the struggle for freedom will take place, and it will always take place within historical constraints. In summary,

[A] "modern practical philosophy" is therefore one which, instead of attempting to determine what we should do on the basis of what we essentially are, attempts, by analyzing who we have been constituted to be, to ask what we might become... Its principle is freedom, but a freedom which does not follow from any postulation of our nature or essence.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Timothy O'Leary, *Foucault: The Art of Ethics* (New York, NY: Continuum, 2002), 159.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 166-167.

FOUR

Care of Self and Contemporary 'Self-Help'

The critical ontology of ourselves must be considered not... as a theory, a doctrine, nor even as a permanent body of knowledge that is accumulating; it must be conceived as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them. – Michel Foucault⁸⁸

The purpose of the last section of my work is to explicate the differences between the notion 'concern for self' and what we recognize today as 'self-help'. Taking one of the ascetic⁸⁹ practices discussed by Foucault and describing how it has been transformed and utilized in the present will accomplish this. The chapter consists of three parts; first, a brief explanation of the differences between the moral subjectivity involved in what Foucault terms 'ethics' and that of the modern day 'self-help' confessional. Second, I will explain Foucault's problematization of the confession in order for us to understand how it has become such a pervasive practice in our society.

⁸⁸ Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment," in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth, Essential Works of Foucault: 1954-1984, Volume One*, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Robert Hurley and others (New York, NY: New Press, 1997), 319.

⁸⁹ It is important to recall that ascesis is not the effect of obedience to the law. For Foucault, in the case of confession it is a practice of truth...it is a way of binding the subject to the truth. Also, on the difference between Christian conceptions of asceticism, current ones, and Foucault's interest in the concept, John Rajchman explains; "[A]sceticism tried to determine what we must sacrifice of ourselves to know what is good or right; it had sought to define the "legitimate" violence, the pain and the pleasures, of turning ourselves into beings of the right sort, virtuous or dutiful. Foucault would start instead with a different sort of violence--the violence of our own historical self-constitution. Our freedom would lie in our recognition that this violence is not a necessary one, that it is subject to reversal and transformation; it is a violence we can identify, we can cease to accept, and in whose workings we can refuse to participate. To recognize it, to seek to reverse it, is also a violence of sorts. But this violence in our capacities for critical reflection and action is not in itself ascetic: it does not suppose that we know in advance who we should be; it does not follow from it that we must renounce ourselves. It instigates another kind of critical reflection about ourselves and our possibilities, that asks whether we are still willing to *tolerate* the violence we do to ourselves, to know, to govern, and to make ourselves." *Truth and Eros*, 12.

Lastly, I will continue and complete my argument that we need Foucault's ethical framework in order to understand the relationship we have with ourselves when we speak the truth about ourselves today. My hope is that we may transform this practice; therefore transforming the relationship we have with ourselves, and consequently our relationships with others.

The interesting thing about our culture is that we are able to witness everyone else being 'concerned for themselves'. At almost any moment of any day we can turn on the television and watch people try to become better individuals. For instance, the other day I turned on the television and Dr. Phil is interviewing, "Real-Life Desperate Housewives". What all of the women on the show have in common is they are all cheating on their husbands. They have come on the show to confess to their husbands that they have been participating in immoral behavior. The women hope that Dr. Phil will be able to assist them in saving their marriages from impending disaster (divorce). This has become a regular occurrence on talk show television, this divulgence of people's secrets or secret lives in front of an eagerly listening audience. This, of course, is due solely from the public's want and demand to hear other people tell us their secrets. What is usually forgotten about is the impact this confession has on the individual themselves.

1. SUBJECTIVITY

In, *The Use of Pleasure: The History of Sexuality Volume Two*, Foucault uses infidelity as an example to elucidate the four elements that he believes constitute an ethics. We will recall them from Chapter Two: the determination of the ethical

substance, the mode of subjection, the ethical work, and the telos of the ethical subject.⁹⁰ It is worth going through all four in detail again to highlight how different the confessing subject's experience can be depending on what type of ethical framework they are operating within.

For Foucault, the 'ethical substance' or prime material of moral practice in this case would be the inner struggle the wife experiences with her soul and desires. It is not the acts themselves that are the ethical substance but the watchfulness and strain of her 'will' to try and do the right thing. However, in confessing the acts to Dr. Phil and focusing completely on the acts themselves the ethical substance is completely overlooked and has no way of finding resolve.

The 'mode of subjection' in this case would be the way in which the women established a relationship to the rule of fidelity. In all of their cases they believed they broke the rule because they saw themselves as members of a community that basically accept fidelity as a norm and want to be in the business of preserving it as a custom. However, as Foucault reminds us, there are other ways to relate to the rule. You may find yourself practicing fidelity because you are trying to uphold a spiritual tradition that you inherited from your family, or you want to be an example for those around you, or you may want to give your life a certain 'style' or form that upholds standards of perfection. They must be aware of this so they are clear about why they have feelings of guilt for what they have done.

The main focus of the episode and of most self-help projects is what Foucault has termed, 'ethical work'. This, of course, is the activity that is undertaken by an

⁹⁰ The entire discussion to follow will take place in reference to the chapter, "Morality and Practice of the Self" in *The History of Sexuality, Volume Two: The Use of Pleasure*. Trans, Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1985), 26-28.

individual on themselves in the hopes of becoming "the ethical subject of one's behavior". However, in self-help culture this work is usually not an individual project. The work you do on yourself is never really focused completely on yourself because it is always focused on your relationship with an 'Other'. Also, it is almost always done under the guidance of a piece of material, a person/professional, or your partner. Recall that, for Foucault, the 'ethical work' has endless forms. Foucault's conception of 'ethical work' is exclusively work done on oneself for oneself, not necessarily by oneself, but always for oneself.

What seems to me the most important aspect of Foucault's conception of ethics is the 'telos of the ethical subject.' This feature of ethics is what incorporates all of our activities into a style of existence. So, moral actions are not seen as single actions in reference to one particular event, they are parts of a 'pattern of conduct'. The moral action always has as its goal a certain mode of being. For the "Real-Life Desperate Housewives" their moral goal is either to be good wives or in 'successful' marriages. Foucault is careful to mention some of the many other moral goals one could have when practicing the ritual of fidelity. Again, the *telos* is a striving of the self for the self not a strict observance of what others would want. This particular element of ethics would need to be paid careful attention in the case of the cheating wife, as she may be confused as to what her *telos* is. Is she confessing to Dr.Phil because she wants to be a person who practices fidelity or is she doing what she thinks others would want her to do?

The reason that I have gone through, again, the basic framework of Foucault's ethics is because it elucidates the complex relationship we have with ourselves when faced with certain moral issues. The difference can even be explained historically, he

tells us, "[e]ven in the most detailed texts on the life of the couple, such as those of Plutarch, what is proposed is not a regulation that would draw a division between permitted and forbidden acts. It is instead a mode of being, a style of relations."⁹¹ The relationship that one has with oneself does not have to be one that consists only of self-awareness. The confession alone does not even have to be a subjective modifier. For example, in his lectures on Antiquity Foucault says, the elements of confession in Antiquity are instrumental, they are not effective modifiers that bring about a change by themselves. As such they do not have a spiritual value...he himself must be able to say the truth and he must be able to say it to himself. In no way is it necessary or indispensable that he tell the truth about himself.⁹² It is not simply recognizing that the individual is a cheater, as Dr.Phil would have us do. Rather, the relationship we have with ourselves can be one of patient self-formation, and in that particular understanding, greater freedom lies.

In *The History of Sexuality: Volume One*, Foucault makes the claim that "we have become a singularly confessing society."⁹³ I would argue this statement is more apparent now than at the time when Foucault was writing his work on sexuality. In fact, the confession has become more of an obsession for us today and on a much grander scale than anytime before. This situation has greatly impacted the society in which we live. It has not only impacted the way in which we live, but, and more importantly, it has impacted the ways in which we have come to know ourselves and the relationships

⁹¹ Michel Foucault, *The Care of The Self: The History of Sexuality Volume Three*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, Inc., 1986), 184.

⁹² Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 365.

⁹³ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume One: An Introduction*. Trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1980), 26.

we have with ourselves and with others. By constantly being expected and enticed to confess, we are constantly put in a situation of having to tell the "truth" about ourselves, which in turn creates and structures our identity.

2. PROBLEMATIZATION

It is integral to know what Foucault means by the act of 'problematization,' as this process is at the heart of all his theoretical work. He tells us that simply put, 'problematization' means how and why certain things (behavior, phenomena, processes) became a *problem*.⁹⁴ He states further, and in more detail that it is,

always a kind of creation; but a creation in the sense that, given a certain situation, you cannot infer that this kind of problematization will follow. Given a certain problematization, you can only understand why this kind of answer appears as a reply to some concrete and specific aspect of the world. There is a relation of thought and reality in the process of problematization. And that is the reason why I think that it is possible to give an analysis of a specific problematization as the history of an answer—the original, specific, and singular answer of thought—to a certain situation.⁹⁵

The history of the answer is found through a genealogy.

Foucault's genealogical approach always stems from a question that is posed in the present. Concerning the topic of confession his questions were, "[H]ow did it come about that all of Western culture began to revolve around this obligation of truth...and why must the care of the self occur only through the concern for truth?"⁹⁶ Foucault begins his analysis of the confession by investigating its historical transition from pagan to Christian culture. He does this in order to interpret the experience of confession in

⁹⁴ Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, ed. Joseph Pearson (Los Angeles: Semiotext), 171.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 172-173.

⁹⁶ Michel Foucault, "The Ethics of the Concern for the Self as a Practice of Freedom". in *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984 Volume I: Ethics*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: The New Press, 1997), 295.

the particular historical field that shaped it. He states a few reasons for the reliance on the confession for the production of truth which amount to a change or shift in the procedures that the royal administration wanted to use to develop guilt, which placed confession in a very important role in the order of civil power. I would like to focus more on the technique of confession in Christianity because it imposed obligations of truth on its practitioners by calling on them to bear witness against themselves, which makes it a 'technique of the self' rather than an administrative practice that we find in the civil realm.

Foucault describes the confession in Christian practices as a "spiral of truth formulation and reality renouncement"⁹⁷. He explains this in the following way, "the more we discover the truth about ourselves, the more we must renounce ourselves; and the more we want to renounce ourselves, the more we need to bring to light the reality of ourselves."⁹⁸ What is important about this "spiral" is that there is no way out of it, one end feeds the other end constantly and we are forever stuck in this situation, in this never-ending confession and renouncement of who we are. One of the main features of the Christian confession was also that it was meant to be a process of discovery; your true self would be found if you unburdened your soul of its sins. However,

Foucault argues that Christianity did not *discover* the sources of morality within us. It invented internalizing procedures of self-identification through which such inner sources were *constituted*. In analyzing this constitution, Foucault shares with Wittgenstein the skeptical or therapeutic aim of removing what is assumed to be inner from ontology or nature and bringing it down to the earth of changing human practices.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ Michel Foucault, "Sexuality and Solitude," in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth, Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984 Volume I*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: The New Press, 1997), 178.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 178.

⁹⁹ John Rajchman "Ethics after Foucault." *Social Text* 13/14 (Winter-Spring, 1986), 168.

In postulating the spiral, Foucault can conclude that there is a direct correlation between the verbal disclosure of the self and the creation of self-renouncement.

The form of disclosing the self is what Foucault says is referred to in Christian spiritual literature as "exagoreusis," which is "an analytical and continual verbalization of thoughts carried on in the relation of complete obedience to someone else."¹⁰⁰ The practices main element is the renunciation of the self, once we have examined all of our thoughts and confessed them to the listener; we have discovered the reality of what is going on inside of us. In contrast to this Christian practice, in Ancient ethics (particularly Seneca and Plutarch),

[T]he point is not to discover the truth of oneself, but of knowing with what true principles one is equipped, to what extent one is in a position to have them available when necessary... it is a matter of transforming true discourse into a permanent and active principle... 'true discourses'... are not in any way a decipherment of our thoughts, representations, and desires... In such a practice we do not find, through recollection, a hidden truth deep within us; we internalize accepted truths through an increasingly thorough appropriation.¹⁰¹

The role of the master of truth changes dramatically historically from Plato to Antiquity and continues to change today.

Foucault explains that as time has passed there has been a break with the renouncement of the self. He argues, "From the eighteenth century to the present, the techniques of verbalization have been reinserted in a different context by the so-called human sciences in order to use them without renunciation of the self but to constitute, positively, a new self."¹⁰² Therefore, we have taken out of Christianity the practice of confession and placed it at the heart of producing knowledge of ourselves. What was

¹⁰⁰ Michel Foucault, "Technologies of the Self," in *Ethics*, 249.

¹⁰¹ Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the College De France, 1981-1982*, trans. Graham Burchell, ed. Frederic Gros; English series ed. Arnold I. Davidson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 499-529.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 249.

once a religious practice at a particular time serving a particular function in a particular society over the course of time was transformed and transported into a more general practice and more specific practices for current understandings of ourselves.

It seems that as our society has become more and more in favor of autonomy, the confession has become more and more one of our society's most valued procedures for the production of truth. Under the liberal rhetoric of individual liberty and autonomous agency we have focused less on our relation to others and more on our relation to ourselves. Furthermore, we have contributed a vast amount of time on the project of uncovering the truth and, therefore, knowledge of ourselves. We can find an explanation of this in Foucault's discussion of pastoral or individualizing power. He states,

pastorship implies a peculiar type of knowledge between the pastor and each of his sheep. This knowledge is particular. It individualizes. It isn't enough to know the state of the flock. That of each sheep must also be known.¹⁰³

What seems to have been one of the most important topics for the Christian was their sexuality, not only because it was the hardest thing to say, but also because it lay supposedly in the heart of their most secret nature. It was also something that obviously needed to be controlled for the welfare of the state and the maintenance of the public's hygiene.

The Christian pastoral made it a duty for all of their followers to pass everything having to do with their sexuality through a never-ending process of verbalization. By transforming sex into discourse the pastoral was able to produce certain effects on the individual's desire. By turning sex into a sinful, lustful temptation that needed constant

¹⁰³ Michel Foucault, "Politics and Reason," in *Michel Foucault: Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings 1977-1984*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman (New York: Routledge, 1988), p. 69.

control and therefore confession, it was able to make people feel detached from their sexuality, making them feel that sexuality was not desirable but rather a desire that needed to be mastered and controlled. The more you could master it the closer to God you would become. Foucault states, "this technique might have remained tied to the destiny of Christian spirituality if it had not been supported and relayed by other mechanisms."¹⁰⁴ Foucault states that sometime in the sixteenth century the confession started to leave the realm of penance and emigrated into the disciplines. The discourse of sex became essential through a political, economic, and technical incitement to talk about it and therefore became a matter requiring regulation. Foucault believes this occurred at the same time that "population" emerged as an economic and political problem.

With the emergence of a "population" the state needed to worry themselves with things such as birth-rates, death rates, marriage practices, birth control, and so on. Every factor that could have an effect on the "population" and its control had to be managed by the state, and it just so happened that the main factor to be managed was the sexuality of the individual. Foucault states that, "between the state and the individual, sex became an issue, and a public issue no less; a whole web of discourses, special knowledges, analyses, and injunctions settled upon it."¹⁰⁵ The confession started to be provoked for different reasons and in a different way than when it was practiced under Christian authority.

Through medicine, psychiatry, criminal justice, and various social controls there was an intensification of people's awareness of sex as a constant danger, which in turn

¹⁰⁴ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*. p. 23.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 26.

created a further incentive to talk about it. Foucault argues, "what is peculiar to modern societies, in fact, is not that they consigned sex to a shadow existence, but that they dedicated themselves to speaking of it *ad infinitum*, while exploiting it as *the secret*."¹⁰⁶ Once this secret was exposed the individual could then be incorporated into a system of classification and intelligibility. The medical practices took on the project of making sure the physical and moral aspects of the social body were free from dysfunctional individuals. Its goal was to eliminate defective individuals, and degenerate populations.¹⁰⁷ In doing so, contemporary culture has made the act of confession one of the main rituals that we rely on for the production of truth. The main reason that we believe this ritual can produce truth is due to the many ways in which it has tied itself to science.

In the adaptation of the confession to the rules of scientific discourse there emerges a theoretical and methodological paradox of a science based on testimony. Foucault explains that the disciplines (mainly psychiatry and medicine) had to adapt the confession in five main ways in order for it to be understood as 'science' proper. In brief, the five ways are: first, a clinical codification of the inducement to speak, secondly the postulate of a general and diffuse causality, third the principle of latency intrinsic to sexuality, fourth the method of interpretation, and lastly the medicalization of the effects of confession.¹⁰⁸ Under this system what you say enters a field of rationality where it can be tested, tried, and judged under what counts or qualifies in the realm of science as 'truth'. You are not simply telling, reporting, or conveying what you

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 35.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 54.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 65-67.

think is the truth but the "master of truth" (the scientist) allows or refuses to allow the truth of what you say to establish itself. Why this is found to be interesting is because it has been the project, for many years, of some feminist epistemologists, to get testimony to be taken as a serious form of knowledge acquisition.

Foucault argues in, *Fearless Speech*, that the problematization of truth in the West has two different aspects. The first, is the root of tradition in Western philosophy, the "analytics of truth", which is defined as being "concerned with ensuring that the process of reasoning is correct in determining whether a statement is true."¹⁰⁹ The second, aspect is concerned with the importance attached to one's telling, knowing, possessing, and recognizing possessors of the truth, the roots of the "critical" tradition in the West. I believe feminist epistemologies, have been concerned with the second part of what Foucault terms the 'problematization of truth', and therefore may not be having the same conversation as traditional epistemologists at all.

Lorraine Code has written many books and articles on the topic of taking subjectivity into account and allowing what people say to be taken seriously and considered as something we would take to be "justified true belief". She says, "testimony's *situatedness*, its inescapable positioning as *someone's* speech act, locates it closer to opinion, to hearsay rather than to sanitized...sources of knowledge."¹¹⁰ Traditional empiricists argue what is really important in knowledge acquisition is that we have no other way to know if a person's testimony is credible or not, independent of empirical evidence for thinking that they are credible. In other words, we could assign

¹⁰⁹ Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech*. ed. Joseph Pearson (Los Angeles: Semiotext), 170.

¹¹⁰ Lorraine Code, "The Perversion of Autonomy and the Subjection of Women," in *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self*, ed. Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 186.

some level of credibility to them on some other ground, but it will be extremely limited if there is no empirical evidence available to test their credibility. Therefore, disciplines such as psychology have married themselves to science in such a way that they can include testimony into their system of knowledge as long as it has gone through a process of "sanitization" or scientization in which what is said gets reinscribed into a field of scientifically acceptable observations and meanings.

Another important element of the confession being incorporated into the scientific field is the objective and value neutral position that was claimed by the person who was confessed to (i.e. the doctor). This is the complete opposite position of the one who speaks the truth in Antiquity. In Antiquity,

[T]here can be no teaching of the truth without the person who speaks the truth being the example of this truth...I tell the truth, I tell you the truth. What authenticates the fact that I tell you the truth is that as subject of my conduct I really am, absolutely, integrally and totally identical to the subject of enunciation I am when I tell you what I tell you... This truth I tell you, you see it in me.¹¹¹

The modern speaker of truth is able to occupy this position of objectivity only because of their ties to the field of science. Foucault believes that this apparent neutrality is significant because psychology actually became "a science made up of evasions since, given its inability or refusal to speak of sex itself, it concerned itself primarily with aberrations, perversions, exceptional oddities, pathological abatements, and morbid aggravations."¹¹² It had a specific project that it would not admit to and developed the sexual domain as a natural domain that was susceptible to pathological processes, therefore necessarily requiring therapeutic and normalizing interventions. In other

¹¹¹ Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the College De France, 1981-1982*, trans. Graham Burchell, ed. Frederic Gros; English series ed. Arnold I. Davidson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 406-409.

¹¹² Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume One*, 53.

words, disciplines such as psychiatry were able to establish themselves as the only fields capable in dealing with certain cases, which were cases that they invented to begin with.

Foucault gives a great example of this in his work, "About the Concept of the "Dangerous Individual" in Nineteenth-Century Legal Psychiatry." In his description of the psychiatrization of criminal danger he explains how psychiatry was able to invent pathologies in which only it, exclusively, could treat. An example of this is the homicidal maniac, which was a "notion, which made it possible to transform a criminal into a madman whose only illness was to commit crimes."¹¹³ He is referring here to those crimes that had no reason, the crimes where people brutally murdered people they knew for no apparent reason at all. Of course this could not be the case, there had to be a reason, punishment demanded a reason, so psychiatry invented the reason which ended up being the killers temporary insanity because they were not crazy before or after the moment of the crime. The truth about these criminals was not discovered but rather it was very openly created and invented.

An interesting shift occurs in the discourse of the psychiatrization of crime, where the person is no longer an individual who commits a murder, but rather they are a murderer. The difference here is not simply semantic but importantly individualizing and identifying. The same can be said of many instances of identity, for example, under the gaze of psychology we no longer have an individual who engages in a gay lifestyle but rather we have someone who is a homosexual. The alcoholic also is not an individual with a drinking problem, but rather is an alcoholic always and forever. These acts become the basis for a person's identity, in all of their relationships they are these

¹¹³ Michel Foucault, "About the Concept of the "Dangerous Individual" in Nineteenth-Century Legal Psychiatry," in *Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, Volume 3*, ed. James D. Faubion (New York: The New Press, 2000), 186.

things, these characters that are developed for them. Foucault believes people accept this because;

the confession is a tool of control and power. It uses what people say, feel, and hope for. 'You have a sexuality; this sexuality is both frustrated and mute; hypocritical prohibitions are repressing it. So come to us, tell us, show us all that, confide in us your unhappy secrets. This type of discourse exploits the individuals temptation to believe that to be happy it is enough to cross the threshold of discourse and to remove a few prohibitions. But in fact it ends up repressing and dispersing movements of revolt and liberation.'¹¹⁴

This is a very interesting process that Foucault uncovers in his work, this relationship of examination and interpretation that we have with ourselves. It demystifies the ways in which we are enticed to always examine and then identify ourselves as normal, productive individuals.

When we begin to focus on the confession as not being universal in nature it highlights the interesting fact that we no longer see the confession, or the obligation to confess as a constraint. It has become so deeply engrained in our very being that we actually have come to believe the truth about ourselves can be found in some secret nature that we all possess. We all take things like sexuality to be something real, something real about our alleged natural state of being. However, for Foucault this is a mirage, a construction, a mystification and quite the opposite of what is really going on, which is normalization.

The confession is normalizing in the sense that what you say is classified as being with or against the current norms of society. Society has engrained in us the need to be normal; if you are engaging in behaviour that is against the norm then you need to figure out straight away why it is that you are acting in such a way. What is even better is if you can get a whole bunch of people to confess to the same behaviour and then

¹¹⁴ Michel Foucault, "Power and Sex," *Michel Foucault: Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings 1977-1984*, ed. in Lawrence D. Kritzman (New York: Routledge, 1988), 114.

maybe society can normalize it to the point of toleration. A good example of this engagement in normalization is what goes on when people are guests on a talk show.

Here is an example; Oprah Winfrey decides to do a show on “swingers” - couples that go to parties and have sex with other couples. This is abnormal behaviour because the accepted sexual behaviour for our society is between a man and a woman, preferably married, in the bedroom or privacy of their home. Now everyone in the audience is just shocked at the behaviour of these people, these 'swingers', it just cannot be right, how could a marriage possibly operate this way? Oprah is going to make every one feel a bit better about it by having the guests on her show be a couple who is so normal in appearance that you just could not imagine that they were sexual deviants. They are a white, educated, and middle to upper class, regular looking couple. Right away everyone can relate to them because they look exactly like all of the people in the audience. They are on the show to try and explain to people that their sexual lifestyle is not perverted or disgusting but that it actually makes their marriage better. They want to normalize their sexual behaviour; they want to make their lifestyle acceptable to others.

Oprah gives them the seal of approval by saying that “maybe marriage is changing” and maybe we should not be so quick to think that this type of lifestyle is unacceptable. These people have been married for fifteen years and swinging for four, and seem to be happy. So, now we can all wait for the upcoming swinger porn, the books titled “10 rules for a healthy swinging lifestyle”, maybe a book by Dr. Phil about what to do if your parents are swingers. Society will take this act that was once a perversion, regularize the behaviour and then try and make large amounts of money off of its normalization. There will be all sorts of controls that will be injected into the

swinging lifestyle from our society that would not have been there if it had stayed hidden from the media and the masses. This is why it is really not in our society's best interest to repress sexuality or repress abnormal behaviour, because it is much more profitable to control and produce it. The confession has placed sexuality at the heart of our existence, and again this type of discourse is a formidable tool of control and power.

We really do believe that the secret nature or hidden part of ourselves must surface if we really want to understand ourselves. For instance, the homosexual that "comes out of the closet" really feels that they have done themselves a great service by telling everyone the truth about themselves. However, what Foucault wants to express to us that what really goes on is the constitution of this person as a gay subject the moment they confess it, which is not really freeing in all of the ways that one may think. Foucault states that the "homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology. Nothing that went into his composition was unaffected by his sexuality."¹¹⁵ Their sexuality is now a way that they are categorized and defined and this affects the relationship they have with themselves.

Foucault does not want to say that it does not do a person any good to confess, but rather he wants to show us that it is not liberation that is occurring in these acts of discourse. For example, the need to confess one's homosexuality has had detrimental effects on the gay community. It has established those that choose not to "come out" as traitors to the gay community, as people who are ashamed of who they are. However, it could be the case that it is not shame that is holding them back, but rather that maybe there is nothing that is trying to get out. Foucault highlights that the freedom we seek is

¹¹⁵ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume One*, 43.

inherent in the very notion of truth for us. We all feel an intrinsic liberation when we express the “truth” of who we are, but for Foucault to

speak out against the powers that be, to utter truths and promise bliss, to link together enlightenment, liberation, and manifold pleasures; to pronounce a discourse that combines the fervor of knowledge, the determination to change the laws, and the longing for the garden of earthly delights,¹¹⁶

is merely truth operating under the ruse of repression in our capitalist society. Rather what happens in this incitement to discourse is that language becomes a particularly privileged way of gaining access to the individual and social bodies.

We all feel that getting things off of our chests in some way actually relieves us of unnecessary weights. But this is not the case rather the forced production of truth is thoroughly imbued with relations of power, and it is only through our traditional notion of power that we could think the confession is an expression of freedom. There is a criticism of Foucault’s formulation of freedom and truth that I would like to call attention to at this point in the paper. Charles Taylor states,

[F]oucault refuses to affirm the goods of freedom and truth. The very concept of power, even in Foucault’s reformulation, does not make sense unless there is an implicit appeal to liberation from dominating forms of power and requires an appeal to “truth” because the imposition of control “proceeds by foistering illusion upon us; it proceeds by disguises and masks”. So his power requires truth and liberation and the standard link between them which makes truth the condition for liberation.¹¹⁷

However, Foucault’s idea of liberation is not the same as the one we all commonly share. For Foucault freedom is a type of detachment or suspension of judgment that opens up new possibilities for thought and action.¹¹⁸ There is no freedom in the sense that we could exist without limitations that would be utopian, what is important for

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 7.

¹¹⁷ Richard Bernstein, "Foucault: Critique as a Philosophical Ethos," in *Critique and Power: Recasting the Foucault/Habermas Debate*, ed. Michael Kelly (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), 211-241.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 238.

Foucault is that we can change within the limits, and that the possibility for change is always present.

We are all thought to believe in order to have access to our own intelligibility and our own identity that we must engage in these acts of confession. Foucault argues that we think we are liberating ourselves by confessing but it is more constraining and coercive under the guise of liberation than it may appear. When Bidy Martin is discussing Foucault and the confession, she makes this point quite clear. She says,

what we have believed to be the secret of ourselves and have felt compelled to tell in our search for redemption or liberation, or at the very least health, amounts to our possible subjection to surveillance, to the intervention of experts in our lives, to discipline. ...to insist on...a greater freedom to speak is to isolate sexuality and ourselves, to misunderstand "sexuality" in ways that allow for a systematization and regulation of desire toward particular social and political ends.¹¹⁹

Therefore, liberation is not occurring rather, what is going on is subjection. We are constituting ourselves as subjects of a certain kind, not freeing the subject that supposedly lies within us. Foucault argues that we have multiple roles and multiple identities depending on the relationships we are in, and who we are in them with. There is not one foundational component that overlaps into every role or identity.

The way that we care for ourselves or the ethics of self that we adopt is extremely important because, as Foucault tells us,

we may have to suspect that we find it impossible today to constitute an ethic of the self, even though it may be an urgent, fundamental and politically indispensable task, if it is true after all that there is no first or final point of resistance to political power other than in the relationship one has to oneself.¹²⁰

What we have come to call 'self-help' or the 'self-help' industry relies in many ways on people's need to confess. All of the examples that I have given in this paper are really at the heart of the 'self-help' industry. The fact that the confession has become such a

¹¹⁹ Bidy Martin, "Feminism, Criticism, and Foucault," in *Feminism and Foucault: Reflections on Resistance*, ed. Diamond, Irene and Quinby, Lee (Northeastern University Press, 1988), 8-9.

¹²⁰ Michel Foucault, in class handout, L'hermeneutique du sujet pp.241-242, 17 February 1982.

popular act is not a bad thing in itself. The danger is more in the current form it has taken on and the promises that it makes. The idea that people are wanting to take care of themselves, and are wanting to concern themselves with themselves shows potential for change in this area of our lives. However, it is still based on a knowledge of the self and not on a care of the self, which is the focus of Foucault's ethics.

It is also troubling in the sense that the mass media has made 'self help' into an industry rather than a personal endeavour. For example, at 'selfhelp.com' you find an explanation and advertisement such as this;

"Self Help" information and concepts that, if consistently applied, **will assist anyone seeking to achieve more (with less effort) in any situation.**

It is precisely this type of TRULY USEFUL information that we've focused on carrying at SelfHelp.com. Choose a program, apply what the author has to say and if you don't find it useful, take advantage of our 6-week money back guarantee. All of the programs to your left are highly recommended and some (like Lead The Field) have a proven track record that is decades long. **Your initial investment** will range from \$189.00 and 20 hours of your time.¹²¹

Caring for yourself reads more like a really bad advertisement than a genuine desire for people to concern themselves with themselves.

Foucault argues that in the sense which concern for the self has been replaced or made invisible by the need for a knowledge of the self (which is the mantra of the self-help industry) we will always find ourselves reading disingenuous advice such as the one above. Foucault describes four reasons in his lecture on "The Culture of the Self" as to why we do not think 'taking care of ourselves' is important anymore. The four reasons are briefly as follows: first, the ethical paradox of Christian aesthetics that the major work we should do on our self is a sacrifice or renouncement of the self. Secondly, technologies of the self have become embedded in authoritarian structures, such as the mass media, which imposes their technologies of the self on people. Third,

¹²¹ www.selfhelp.com

the human sciences have made sure that the relationship we have with ourselves is always a relationship of knowledge. Lastly, there is the idea that the self is a reality that is hidden, and the reality of the self is something that we need to disclose, liberate, and excavate.¹²²

As we can see in my discussion of the confession, the confession plays a central role in all four of these reasons for society turning away from the care of the self. What Foucault is describing to us is the history of the care of self and the need for its acquirement of a contemporary meaning, so we no longer think of renouncing and discovering ourselves as an act of caring for ourselves. Furthermore, we need to distance ourselves from the idea that caring for ourselves always involves a knowledge of self. To realize that taking care of oneself is equipping oneself with truths rather than constantly trying to discover them could be the first step in this care.

In some ways we all believe that doctors, such as Dr. Phil, really want to help people, but if it were really about helping people they would not profit from what they do. They would take all, or at least the majority, of their money and donate it to the troubled and less fortunate souls of society. Dr. Phil cannot do this though because if he made anyone's life better, there would be no one for him to cure and he would be out of a job. This is obviously not the most important or damning criticism of popularized psychologists; what is important is that they are building a system of dependency upon which there may be no way out. When he had a show entitled "You Can't be Fat and Happy" he needed to convince all of the fat people in America (which is now the majority of the population) that they were miserable, so they could buy his book and

¹²² Michel Foucault, "The Culture of the Self" April 12, 1983. Berkeley Language Center.
<http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/MRC/audiofiles.html#foucault>

become happy. He could not simply explain the method or 'key' to weight loss on the show, so the information was free and available to all. Rather, if you could afford the twenty some odd dollar book then you may have a chance at happiness in your life. That there are certain steps for everyone to follow, without considering their circumstances, is problematic in itself, but in no way changes the stagnant culture itself in which we live.

Foucault does not want to give us an alternative to our current situation, or replace Dr. Phil with his own 'key' to a beautiful life, but rather, he will equip us with some theoretical tools that could be used to alter our present situation. This is not to say that we need an alternate way of life, rather, we need to modify our way of life so we can live it with as little domination as possible. What has happened under the rhetoric of the self-help industry is that people's attention has been turned away from inventing themselves, to solely trying to figure out how to live their "best" life. What has happened in this situation is that they have forgotten about the living part of the equation. People can become so focused and so taken in by the idea that their lives need to be the "best" lives possible that they only concentrate on or consider what is the "healthiest" marriage, what is the "perfectly" behaved child, how they can become debt free (heaven forbid you died owing taxes), how to be the "most successful" at your work, and so on, and so on. It is not the case that these are not admirable desires; however, they are also tools of control and normalization. Corporations depend on the individual's desire to be all of these things, these things are all things that they believe make people productive, consuming members of society. It is as Foucault said when critiquing Marxism, they became so focused on 'class' they forgot about the struggle.

In conclusion Foucault's philosophy of concern for the self is one of promise, promising because he shows us that we do not have to accept the way things are, or be complacent in our existence. He says,

So many things can be changed, fragile as they are, bound up more with circumstances than necessities, more arbitrary than self-evident, more a matter of complex, but temporary, historical circumstances than with inevitable anthropological constants... You know, to say that we are much more recent than we think isn't a way of taking the whole weight of history on our shoulders. It's rather to place at the disposal of the work that we can do on ourselves the greatest possible share of what is presented to us as inaccessible.¹²³

In doing so we then may be able to free ourselves from such dictatorships as the 'self-help' culture and start to practice the more individual and reflective project of caring for ourselves. Foucault leaves us with the positive goal of understanding the possibilities available to us in this life. He posits,

the relationships we have to have with ourselves are not ones of identity, rather, they must be relationships of differentiation, or creation or innovation. To be the same is really boring. We must not exclude identity if people find their pleasure through this identity, but we must not think of this identity as an ethical universal rule.¹²⁴

This sounds a lot more like the kind of society that we should be focused on creating then forever remaining the same in the one we have.

¹²³ Michel Foucault, "Practicing Criticism," in *Michel Foucault: Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings 1977-1984*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman (New York: Routledge, 1988), 155.

¹²⁴ Michel Foucault, "Friendship as a Way of Life," in *Ethics: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984 Volume I*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: The New Press, 1997), 166.

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Conclusion

There is no doubt that Foucault's thought undergoes drastic changes over the course of his academic and political career. The last years of his life certainly contest to this fact. Some find this facet of his work to be a great inconsistency, a philosophical crime of contradiction. However, it has always seemed to me that it is akin to the same kind of change a traveler finds when they are in a foreign country for the first time. One first feels surprise, shock, intrigue, and enormous curiosity. Then the traveler returns several years later to the exact same place only to find it quite different. Things have changed, maybe not everything, you are definitely in the same place, but for some reason the same feelings overcome you once again. It is the same thing Heidegger speaks of in "The Origin of the Work of Art." The work is always coming into being, it never stands still, it is always different to different beings at a different time. I believe Foucault thrived on those feelings, the ability to invoke immense curiosity in his reader, even an anxious uneasiness. Without these feelings one would never be incited to do anything about the world in which they live. Maybe this is why Foucault was fascinated by the 'revolutionary' figure? A person who could not sit still and watch the world proceed on some historically or scientifically determined course.

During what some refer to as, Foucault's structural phase, beings did not create meaning by themselves. All meaning was an effect of a predetermined "system." By the late seventies and into the early eighties Foucault's thought shifts and we no longer

have beings who *represent* something, but we rather have beings that simply *are*.¹²⁵

Foucault began to speak explicitly about the government of beings, especially their being governed by the “truth.” The consequence of this turn is the reinstatement of the possibility of freedom in our historical analyses of political and philosophical thought. Foucault believed it was time for us to really consider the experience that one has of oneself, of one’s being in the world.

In this work I tried to explain what Foucault meant by ethics, through a thorough explanation of his four-fold ethical framework. The first section of this work was a proposal to start to think ‘Ethics’ differently, to free it from the chains of traditional Anglo-American moral philosophy. One cannot do this by entrapping themselves in endless meta-ethical debates. But rather we have to invent and apply a certain method of investigation that will elucidate how, and why it is, we make ourselves into certain kinds of people. This is all Foucault has done in his work on ethics; he has highlighted once again the important mission of interrogating ourselves as thinking beings. We are more complicated and particular than most philosophy would have us believe, and our worldly existence is constantly in motion, therefore the universal should have no place in our ethical imagination.

The second chapter elucidated why Foucault became interested in the ‘care of self.’ He does this, and I continued in the same manner, through an opposition with its sister concept, ‘knowledge of self.’ It is important for one to gain a historical understanding of our present day relationships of self. If we do not know where we have come from, then we do not have the ability to see our contingency.

¹²⁵ Eric Paras, *Foucault 2.0: Beyond Power and Knowledge* (New York: Other Press, 2006), 88.

Lastly, I wanted to give a contemporary example of how Foucault's work on ethics is relevant for the present and future work of self-care. There are so many options for people today who are concerned with their spiritual existence; religions – such as zen Buddhism, or science based models – i.e., medical based programs, and the list could go on and on. However, what is important and the only way people will see results in the work they do on themselves is if they understand why they are doing it, the history of such practices, and the freedom that lies in creating their own future possibilities.

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