Michel Foucault and the *epimeleia heauton*

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As is well known, Michel Foucault, in the latter part of his writing career, became concerned with a set of practices that, in the period of the Roman Empire and the Hellenic monarchies, had allowed the individual a measure of autonomy in the context of a broader community — the *epimeleia heauton* or *cura sui*, or the operationalizing of the principle that one needs to attend to one’s self, or take care of one’s self, in order to promote an “art of living” (*techne tou biou*). Typically, observes Foucault, accounts of the care of the self in this period associate it with broad changes in the understanding and practice of civic activity and political responsibility brought about by the rise of centralized imperialism under the Empire and the concomitant decline of the city-states as autonomous entities. Among these changes was an emergent individualism which attributed “absolute value ... [to] the degree of independence conceded to [the individual] vis-à-vis the group to which he belong[ed] and the institutions to which he [was] answerable ... [that is, to] private life ... family relationships ... forms of domestic activity ... the domain of patriarchal interests” (CS, 42). Individuals, as a result, found themselves becoming “less firmly attached to the cities, more isolated from one another, and more reliant on themselves.” Understandably, they sought in philosophy rules of conduct that were not so much preparatory to a political life as they were “more personal” (CS, 41). The choice was clear: one either left politics or one took care of oneself.

Whereas, formerly, ethics implied a close connection between power over oneself and power over others, and therefore had to refer to an aesthetics of life that accorded with one’s status, the new rules of the political game made it more difficult to define the relations between what one was, what one could do, and what one was expected to accomplish. The formation of oneself as the ethical subject of one’s own actions became more problematic. (CS, 84)
Against the conventional accounts which connect to the onset of an imperial "universe become too vast" the emergence of forms of the "return to oneself" amounting to little more than "withdrawal behaviors" (CS, 86), Foucault argues, on the basis of his own careful review of the historical material, that specific forms of this "return to the self" were really new practices of politics, adjusted, of course, to the "[more] complex," "more flexible," "more differentiated," "less rigidly hierarchized" spaces of the new dispensation, "in which the centers of power were multiple; in which the activities, the tensions, the conflicts were numerous ... and in which the equilibria were obtained through a variety of transactions" (CS, 82-83). Local political activity, or "city life," asserts Foucault, "with its institutional rules, its interests at stake, its struggles, did not disappear as a result of the widening of the content in which it was inscribed." Quite the contrary, it was revitalized. How and in what ways? By means of the re-inscription of political activity in an ethic of the care of the self that accepted the challenge of the Delphic oracle to "know oneself," which, in the cultures of Greco-Roman antiquity, did not so much mean to "discover the secret of oneself," as to "occupy oneself with oneself" ¹ in such a way as to be able to re-define and re-map the conditions under which one could enter political life.² On this score, Foucault cites Plutarch, who stressed that preparatory to the individual's involvement in public life, he must "retreat within himself," "set his soul straight," "properly establish his own ethos" (CS, 91-92). This was the teaching as well of Epicurus and his followers, of the Cynics, and of the Stoics (Seneca, Rufus, Galen).³ "Setting into oneself," "taking up residence in oneself," "converting to one's self" (epistrophe eis heautou), was not simply an exercise that one performed at regular intervals, but consisted, rather, in an enduring attitude⁴ that one took toward oneself, towards one's mental and physical activities, towards one's


²This control also implied, of course, the possibility of refraining from participation in politics, but abstention was neither dictated by, nor was the logical outcome of, the care of the self (CS, 86).


⁴Michel Foucault, "The Hermeneutic of the Subject," EST, p. 96. See also (CS, 64)
soul and body, displaying moderation, balance, harmony, and joy.\(^5\) Foucault writes:

As for the definition of the work that must be carried out on oneself, it too undergoes, in the cultivation of the self, a certain modification: through the exercises of abstinence and control that constitute the required \textit{askesis}, the place allotted to self-knowledge becomes more important. The tasks of testing oneself, examining oneself, monitoring oneself in a series of clearly defined exercises, makes the question of truth — the truth concerning what one is, what one does, and what one is capable of doing — central to the formation of the ethical subject. Lastly, the end result of this elaboration is still and always, defined by the rule of the individual over himself. But this rule broadens into an experience in which the relation to self takes the form not only of a domination but also of an enjoyment without desire and without disturbance. (CS, 67-68)

With so much at stake, the care of the self had to be “both a duty and a technique, a basic obligation and a set of carefully worked-out procedures,”\(^6\) a “regulated occupation, a work with its methods and objectives.”\(^7\) To illustrate this point, Foucault lists a group of practices and exercises developed by Greek, and especially Roman, thinkers of the first two centuries, for “tak[ing] oneself as an object of knowledge and a field of action, so as to transform, correct, and purify oneself, and find salvation” (CS, 42). Seneca, for one, engaged in daily exercises in self-scrutiny, which enabled him to assess his progress (or the absence of it) in overcoming bad habits (CS, 61-62). Epictetus, for another, developed exercises for performing the “necessary labor of thought upon itself to form a steady screening of representations, examining them, monitoring them, sorting them out” (CS, 63), “accept[ing] in the relation to the self only that which can depend on his free and rational choice” (CS, 64).\(^8\) Foucault elaborates:

\(^5\)\textit{Ibid.} See also CS, 66. Socrates’ much-noted resistance of Alcibiades’ seductive beauty, for example, was a demonstration, not of the baseness of pleasure, but of the ancient ideal of self-mastery.

\(^6\)\textit{Ibid.}, p. 95.

\(^7\)\textit{Ibid.} See also, (CS, 50).

\(^8\)This contrasts sharply with the Christian interest in distinguishing between what comes from God and what comes from the devil, an objective requiring an increasingly advanced and subtle hermeneutic, as the idea which presents itself is examined with
In Epictetus there are two exercises: sophistic and ethical. The first borrowed from school: question-and-answer games ... The second are ambulatory exercises. In the morning you go for a walk and test your reactions to that walk. The purpose of both exercises is control of representations, not the deciphering of truth. They are reminders about conforming to the rules in the face of adversity ... For Epictetus, the control of representations means not deciphering but recalling principles of acting and thus seeing through self-examination, that they govern your life. It is a kind of permanent self-examination ...

[But in the end] You have to be your own censor.⁹

Such labor, Epictetus likens to the vigilant work of the "night watchman," and of the "money changer," who permit no one (and no thing) to go past them who has not been submitted to the strictest examination.

The Greek and Roman proponents of the care of the self spoke as well of setting aside time for the careful consideration (meditatio) of the "true discourses" (logoi), that is, the teachings of the masters on such an array of topics as "the passions as well as physical illness," "the distress of the body as well as the involuntary movement of the soul," the "disorder that upsets the balance of [the body's] humours or its qualities" as well as that "movement capable of carrying [the soul] away in spite of itself."¹⁰ The one who would care for oneself meditated upon the logoi and took them to heart, because truth was not "within one" (as it had been for Plato), but in the logoi. One needed to subjectivate this truth, assimilate it, acquire it, and transform it not only into guiding principles and useful aphorisms, but into "an abiding, always-active, inner principle of action."¹¹ They spoke, addition-

respect to its "deep origin," with respect to the "meaning hidden beneath the visible representation" (CS, 64).

⁹Michel Foucault, Technologies of the Self, p. 38

¹⁰"The Hermeneutic of the Subject, EST, 99. See also CS, 54. The logoi were variously characterized. The Epicureans associated them with the knowledge of the "principles that govern the world," the Stoics, with theoretical principles (dogmata) related to practical prescriptions, and others, with concrete rules of behavior (EST, 99-100). Plutarch called them a man's "friends, and "medicine" against the dizzying vicissitudes of human existence (EST, 100). Marcus Aurelius compared them to a surgeon's instrument kit, Epictetus, to a "physician's consulting room," a "dispensary to the soul" (CS, 55).

¹¹Michel Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics," EST, 232.
ally, of “thought-experiments” (*malete*), which consisted in conjuring up in one’s mind challenging hypothetical situations, improvising arguments and devising imaginative solutions for them, as well as of operating upon oneself various practical tests (*gymnasia*), such as sexual abstinence, physical privation, and other rituals of purification.¹² “For even if it is true that Greek philosophy founded rationality, it always held that a subject could not have access to the truth if he did not first operate upon himself a certain work that would make him susceptible to knowing the truth — a work of purification, conversion of the soul by contemplation of the soul itself” (CS, 278). Through the activities of *malete* and *gymnasia*, one improved one’s ability to handle, with moderation and grace, the appetites, passions, and whims, which proceeded from within, as well as events of whatever kind, which came from without.

Since it was a generally accepted principle that there were aspects of the care of the self that one could not attend to by oneself,¹³ one cultivated a relationship with a teacher. The “teacher” took various forms — strictly educational organizations (e.g., Epictetus’s school), private counselors (especially in Rome), family relations (Seneca writes a consolation to his mother on the occasion of his exile), relations of protection (the same Seneca looks after the career and education of the young Serenus), relations of friendship (Seneca and Lucilius),¹⁴ and even a master-student relationship based, not on question and answer, but on silent listening (the Stoics and Epicureans placed emphasis on silence and on the disciple’s duty to listen; Plutarch and Philo of Alexandria devised rules for proper listening, which covered such matters as the physical posture to take, how to direct one’s attention, the way to retain what has been said¹⁵). The care of the self went hand in hand with the cultivation of a relationship with a “teacher of self-concern.”¹⁶

¹²“The Hermeneutic of the Subject,” EST, 98-99. See also CS, 58.
¹³Ibid., p. 97. Galen, Foucault notes, advised anyone who wanted to take proper care of himself “to seek the aid of another” (CS, 53).
¹⁴Ibid., p. 98.
¹⁵Ibid., p. 101.
¹⁶Socrates had been such a teacher, admitting before his accusers and judges in the *Apology* that all his life he had accosted strangers and berated them for being concerned with wealth, reputation and honors, but not with their souls.
There was the matter, too, of the practices of writing. Foucault notes the cultivation, even among "the ancients," of a practice of writing for carrying on "a politics of themselves ... just as governments and those who manage enterprises administered by keeping registers." This practice continued well into the imperial epoch. Seneca, Marcus Aurelius, and Plutarch made recommendations about such matters as the conduct of conversations, the sort of reflection that one could bring to bear on what one hears or does, the art of drawing fruit from the exchange of letters with friends, the production of notes, recording one's thoughts about things read and ventures undertaken in diaries and journals (called *hupomnemata*). "One wrote down quotes in [the *hupomnemata*], extracts from books, examples and actions that one had witnessed or read about, reflections or meanings that one had heard or that had come to mind. They constituted a material record of things read, heard, or thought, thus offering them up as a kind of accumulated treasure for subsequent rereading and meditation." The *hupomnemata* served as "books of life" and "guides for conduct," "an important step ... towards the description of the self." By routinely meditating on one's experience, and exploring certain ideas in writing and then putting these ideas to the test in practice, a person fashioned a singular "script" for himself, one that enabled him to transform the truth into an *ethos* — a form of life that would meet both the claims of reason and the need for courage. Foucault writes:

[T]he meditation precedes the notes which enable the rereading which in turn re-initiates the meditation. In any case, whatever the cycle of exercise in which it takes place, writing constitutes an essential stage in the process to which the whole *askesis* leads: namely, the fashioning of accepted discourses, recognized as rule, into rational principles of action. As an element of self-training, writing has, to

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17 "Self Writing," EST, 272.
18 Even Epictetus, who provided an exclusively oral teaching, emphasized writing as a "personal exercise," a form of "meditation, with that exercise of thought on itself that reactivates what it knows, calls to mind a principle, a rule, an example, reflects on them, assimilates them, and in this manner prepares itself to face reality" ("Self-Writing," EST, 208-209).
use an expression that one finds in Plutarch, an ethopoietic function: it is an agent of the transformation of truth into ethos.\textsuperscript{20} The hupomnemata supported, as such, a “truth production,” through the possibilities opened up by them for the compilation of the raw material of experience into more systematic treatises, into techniques and reasoned arguments for mastering personal flaws such as anger, envy, flattery, as well as “for overcoming some deficient circumstance (a grief, an exile, ruin, disgrace).”\textsuperscript{21} Other functions of writing included the fortification of oneself against stultitia, a form of mental agitation or distraction involving constant and frequent changes of opinion, and weakness in the face of events, because the mind is prevented from providing a fixed point for itself in the possession of an acquired truth.\textsuperscript{22} Writing provided “a means of establishing a relationship of oneself with one-self.”\textsuperscript{23} Additionally, it palliated the dangers of solitude “by offering what one had done or thought, to a possible gaze.”

“What others are to the ascetic in a community, the notebook is to the recluse ... [T]he constraint that the presence of others exerts in the domain of conduct, writing will exert in the domain of inner impulses of the soul.”\textsuperscript{24}

As individualistic as all of this may sound, the practices of the care of the self adopted in the Greco-Roman world were not “a means to escape from all possible rules,”\textsuperscript{25} but formed the basis for the “intensification of social relations.” They were “not an exercise in solitude, but a true social practice” (CS, 53).\textsuperscript{26} Indeed, as Foucault points out, “the dominion of oneself over oneself was increasingly manifested in the practices of obligations with regard to others” (CS, 149). In the

\textsuperscript{21}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{22}Ibid., p. 212.
\textsuperscript{23}Ibid., p. 211.
\textsuperscript{24}Ibid, p. 207-208.
\textsuperscript{25}Technologies of the Self, p. 22.
\textsuperscript{26}Etymologically, the word, epimeleia, or the care of the self, implied a care for others. Xenophon used it to designate the work of a master of the household who supervises its farming, Dio of Prusa associated it with the activity of the sovereign who looks after his people and leads the city-state (CS, 50; EST, 95).
interaction between friends, for instance, one might now ask for advice and the other gladly give it to the one asking, but since each one might at different times seek and give advice to the other, such roles were interchangeable (CS 52-53). By means of this mutuality of interaction, a "politics" could be established, consisting of a "round of exchanges with the other" with the objective of developing "a system of reciprocal obligations" (CS, 54) in decision-making, in the interpretation and application of rules, gambits, risks, in determining when to act and when to hold back, when to attack and when to defend. Central to this politics was the resolve of each member of the community not to be a slave to another — the obverse side of his concern for liberty — and not to establish over others some kind of a domination. To be sure, just because relations of power were techniques for the exercise of control, the practices of the self were particularly susceptible to the abuse of power — by tyrants, by powerful and wealthy men, who deployed power and wealth to impose upon others their whims, appetites, and desires. "The good ruler," in contradistinction to them, "exercised his power correctly, i.e., by exercising at the same time his power on himself. And it is the power over self which will regulate the power over others." For "if you care for yourself correctly, i.e., if you know ontologically what you are ... then you cannot abuse your power over others." That is, if you intensify your concern for yourself, you improve your ability to value the other.

One who cared for himself correctly found himself by that very fact, in a measure to behave correctly in relationship to others and for others. A city in which everyone would be correctly concerned for self would be a city that would be doing well, and it would find therein the ethical principle of its stability." There is a temporal and logical order, however: "One must not have the care for others

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27 Foucault argues that ethical work "was political in the measure that non-slavery with respect to others was a condition [for it]. A slave has no ethics. Liberty is itself political ... [B]eing free means not being a slave to one's self and to one's appetites, which supposes that one establishes over one's self a certain relation of domination, of mastery, which was called arche — power, authority" ("The Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom: An Interview," J. D. Gauthier, trans., in James Bernauer and David Rasmussen, eds., The Final Foucault, (Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1991), p. 6).

precede the care for self. The care for the self takes moral precedence in the measure that the relationship to self takes ontological precedence.29

Foucault notes that this mutually obligatory mode of the cultivation of the self was particularly evident in the case of marriage, where “the relationship one established with oneself and the rapport one formed with the other ... far from contradicting each other, were instead mutually reinforcing.” “The art of conjugalcy was an integral part of the cultivation of the self” (CS, 163).

Evidently, then, the practices of the care of the self in the Greco-Roman world did not so much prefigure the modern escape from a perceived immoral or alienating order, as establish an ethics and an aesthetics of participation in political life. One could perform socially, without losing oneself in the increasingly complex political scene brought about by the emergence of empire. This came about, in Foucault’s view, as the realization grew that the conduct of oneself in politics had now “to be integrated into a far more extensive and complex field of power relations” typical of empire, if the individual was to succeed in forming himself “as the ethical subject of his actions ... which could enable him to submit to rules and give purpose to his existence” (CS, 95). How the subject constituted himself as an ethical subject of his actions, or, if you will, “how an experience is formed where the relationship to self and to others is linked,”30 Foucault, as we noted in the foregoing discussion, accounts for in terms of the work that one does on oneself in order to bring about a spiritual “conversion to self” (epistrophe eis heautou). There is, however, an additional account of the “conversion to the self” which Foucault offers, and this concerns the practice of a specific form of truth-telling (parrhèsia).

Parrhèsia
Notwithstanding its multiple uses in changing contexts, parrhèsia was the ethical speech activity of “truth-telling,” by means of which a

person confronted others with potentially distasteful and unpleasant truths about themselves. It required the presence of an other, though not just of any other, but of one who was neither a "flatterer" nor a "coward," being "likewise a truth-teller," and tied to the parrhēsiast by the personal bond of teacher, lord, or friend. The parrhesiastic "contract" between the two parties was a function of the strength of this bond. As for parrhesiastic speech itself, it was not so much a practice of candid speech in a democratic forum, as it was a display of rhetorical impudence or boldness, of speech that showed little regard for conventional or traditional restrictions on what could be said, that showed "frankness instead of persuasion, truth instead of falsehood or silence."31 To be sure, by speaking out of place and out of turn, the parrhēsiast acquired a legitimacy which forced the other to listen to him, and possibly to accept the truth of his words, but he ran the risk as well of ruining an important relationship, and if the relationship involved a social superior, he even ran "the risk of death instead of life and security, criticism instead of flattery, and moral duty instead of self-interest and moral apathy."32

With so much at stake, the parrhēsiast's words could not be the equivalent of mere rhetorical speech, which could be adjusted to whatever audience it was addressed; nor could it be prophetic speech, which intimated the future, but in a manner which required interpretation, since it concealed even as it brought to light what lay hidden; nor could it be wisdom speech expressing generalities, since the sage did not so much wish to share wisdom as to retain his monopoly of it; nor could it be pedagogic or technical speech, which involved the transmission of truth-knowledge to an audience of receptive students or co-practitioners and, therefore, ran its speaker little or no personal risk. In contradistinction to all of that, parrhēsiastic speech had to be the expression of a deep concern to "ontologically and ethically manifest" one's "life-truth," one's "relation to truth .... in [one's] own life,"33 despite the danger of reprisals from violent men who perceived the threat to their own position of such a manifestation. If, despite the

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31Michel Foucault, "Discourse and Truth," Notes to the Seminar Given by Foucault at the University of California at Berkeley, 1983, p. 8. [Henceforth, DT].
32Ibid.
33Ibid., pp. 65, 28, 63.
real risk of violence to himself, the parrhesiast stayed his course — in the manner of Socrates, who “[took] nothing into account, neither death nor anything else, aside from what [was] shameful” (Apology, 28d8-10) — it was on account of his confidence in the fact that by what he said and by what he did, he was opening up to others the possibility of new moves and new freedoms. Foucault writes:

[P]arrhesia is a verbal activity in which a speaker expresses his personal relationship to truth, and risks his life because he recognizes truth-telling as a duty to improve or help other people (as well as himself).34

Socrates, for instance, by means of his parrhesiastic activity, had hoped to be able to instill in his auditors, not so much some species of knowledge which they lacked, but the realization that they knew nothing, and that to avoid the terrible personal consequences of this, they had to learn to “care for themselves” (cf. Apology, 31b4-5; cf36c5-7). In 127d of the Alcibiades, for instance, he chides Alcibiades over his obsession to take control of the city; how could he expect to successfully manage the affairs of an entire city when he had not yet learned manage his own affairs? He, therefore, admonishes Alcibiades first to learn to “take care of himself” (epimeleisthai saoutou) (CS, 44), to take the challenge of his personal formation seriously, and only subsequently to accumulate “the weapons and the courage that would enable him to fight all his life.”35

Not unlike Socrates, Diogenes of Sinope, nicknamed, “the dog” (hence, the application to his followers of the appellation, “Cynic”), aimed by means of his parrhesiastic activity, to demonstrate that “the manner in which a person lived was a touchstone of his relation to truth.”36 Parrhesia, for Diogenes, took the form of a “political somatics” for, in his view, even if ethics was about moral principles and moral judgment, it was also about being positioned by, and taking a position in relation to others in a social context of power, desire, and knowledge, and this required, at the very least, a non-thematic awareness of location, position, and place, the intrinsic reference point for

34 Ibid., p. 8.
35“The Hermeneutic of the Subject,” EST, 96-97.
which was one’s own body. Crucial to the development of this thinking was Diogenes’ own “outsider-status” viz-a-viz the space of civic participation in the Greek city-state which restricted the right of participation to free-born propertied males, whereas Diogenes himself owned no property and was an exile from his original home. His very propertylessness embodied for him an “outside,” that is, a position of exile and displacement in relation to a conventional “inside.” As an outsider operating on the fringes of his political culture rather than in its center, he had a motive for engendering a distinctive way of thinking, one that, quite unlike the hegemonic and conventional forms of thinking, was only minimally invested in the objects and places of social privilege and power, being focused instead on the “outside,” on that “other” place which the exile inhabited. The thinking he thus engendered was an oppositional thinking characterized by willfulness, exaggeration, overstatement, disruption, interruption. And so at the same time Diogenes’ outsider status brought him profound loss and dispossession, it empowered him to develop a form of intervention in the very spaces from which he was excluded. This form of intervention predicated ethics and politics upon the body’s relationship to a lived context. It predicated ethics and politics upon what a person did with his body.

This involved, in Diogenes’ case, “going public” with his private body, to express his rejection of community standards of decorum. Indeed, Diogenes is credited with routinely and shamelessly resorting to “scandalous behavior,” with breaking laws, flouting customs, ignoring taboos, and, in general, turning his personal conduct into a source of public controversy (e.g. bathing, defecating, having sex in the streets). By such means, he sought to disrupt the practice of maintaining the private and public spheres as disjunct spaces which, for as long as they remained disjunct, concealed from the public view the realities of an unequal polis — one in which woman, the slave, and the freemale-citizen had unequal access to freedom and justice.37 He was disturbed by the fact that, starting with the King, the city appeared to have come under the spell of the false gods of nation, material excess, and social convention. Against the King’s immoderation

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37This recalls to mind Seyla Benhabib’s assertion that “the struggle to make something public is the struggle for justice” (Situating the Self, p. 94).
and hubristic style of governance, he counterpoised the picture of a modest and self-sufficient way of life. Against the people’s blind and lethargic theoretical constructions of truth, he counterpoised the “continuous exercise” of measuring truth against one’s own life (askesis) (UP, 73), resulting in a “permanent negative and critical attitude towards any kind of political institution, and towards any kind of nomos.” Whatever else the true life was, it could not be handed down in the form of a commandment, a prohibition, or a law. It could be handed down only in the form of a truth that was a living example, visible to the public, estranged, as such, from a “specialist philosophy.” In this way Diogenes democratized the “good life.” He brought the advantages of a philosophy of action (as opposed to one of discussion or introspection), to those outside the enclaves of the classical philosophical schools. This more inclusive practice of philosophy would be sustained by forms of speaking and acting capable of engaging the nearest, everyday things. The life Diogenes offered was one that was linked, neither to obedience to a uniform rule, nor to dependence on a categorical imperative, but to the courage of being “able to show that there [was] a relation between the rational discourse, the logos, [one was] able to use, and the way that one live[d].”

Wrong Turning

If Foucault returned to an examination of ancient Greco-Roman cultures, it was not because he admired the Cynics, the Stoics, the Epicureans of the first and second centuries, and was anxious to provide examples of behavior taken from their lives for us to copy today. Rather, it was because he believed there is much we can learn from individuals who, notwithstanding the fact that they grappled with

38Of the Cynics, Diogenes’ spiritual descendants, Epictetus writes: “Other men have the protection of their walls and their houses, and darkness, when they do anything of the sort, and they have many things to hide them ... But the Cynic, instead of all these defenses, has to make his self-respect his protection; if he does not, he will be disgracing himself naked and out of doors. His self-respect is his house, his door, his guards. He has no need of something to conceal him” (Laertius, n.d. 135-37).

40Ibid., p. 61.
41“There is no exemplary value in a period which is not our period” (BSH, 234)
issues that in many respects are similar to the ones we face in our own time — such as the relation of the individual to a sometimes alienating social context (the deteriorating Roman Empire of the second century) — found ways to deal with them which involved problematizations, patterns of interaction, moral stances that, quite unlike our own, were grounded, neither in the rationality of the subject, nor in a universal morality, but in an aesthetics of existence, where the relationship with the self was the dominant factor, and other sorts of relationships, if indispensable, were secondary.

[T]he will to be a moral subject and the search for an ethics of existence were, in Antiquity, mainly an attempt to affirm one’s liberty and to give to one’s own life a certain form in which one could recognize oneself, be recognized by others, and which even posterity might take as an example. This elaboration of one’s own life as a personal work of art, even if it obeyed certain collective canons, was at the center of moral experience, of the will to morality in Antiquity.\footnote{L.D. Kritzman, ed., Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977-1984, p. 49. [Henceforth, PPC].}

With Christianity, however, there occurred a slow, gradual shift, from a morality that entailed the search for a personal ethics, to one that exacted from the individual his or her obedience to a code of rules, as modalities of the relation to self emerged that defined the ethical substance in terms of finitude, the Fall, and evil, and made ethical fulfillment depend on the renunciation of the very self that, since ancient times, had been associated with the care of the self and the arts of living (CS, 239-240). In Christian culture, each person’s “inner hidden thought” came to be equated with “inner impurity,” with egoism, with individual interest, with self-love. Each person, as such, was under obligation to know what was happening inside of himself, to acknowledge faults, to recognize temptations, to know who he was. Different apparatuses were developed for the discovery and decipherment of this truth about the suspect self — there were, for instance, practices pertaining to what was termed exomologesis, or the obligation to recognize oneself as a sinner and penitent, to “rub out the sin and yet reveal the sinner”\footnote{“Technologies of the Self,” EST, 244}; and practices pertaining to
what was called *exagoreusis*, a method of self-examination that, in addition to being “reminiscent of the verbalizing exercises in relation to the teacher-master of the pagan philosophical schools,”[^44] prefigured the Christian sacrament of penance and the confession of sins, along with its requirements of obedience and spirituality (EST, 243). Whereas ancient *askesis* or “ascetics” had meant something else altogether than “abnegation” (denoting practices of freedom and free will in the elaboration, problematization, and actualization, especially in the fields of dietetics, economics, and erotics, of concrete modes of being), Christian “ascetics” assumed the character, especially with regard to sexuality, of a purging hermeneutics of desire, and a morality of self-privation (which eventually took on the form of the law, becoming binding for all) for the attainment of “spiritual salvation.” For the truth of the self, for self-knowledge, the price that one paid was reckoned in terms, no longer of “ascesis,” but of the renunciation, of the surrender of the very self that, since Antiquity, had been associated with a set of voluntary self-forming activities (EST, 279). “[A]n inversion” had come about “in the hierarchy of the principles of antiquity, ‘Take care of yourself,’ and ‘Know thyself’” (TS, 22). With Descartes, the link between the care of the self and the knowledge of the self is decisively broken, as “a subject as founder of practices of knowledge” is substituted by him for “a subject constituted through practices of the self (CS, 278-279). The relationship with the self no longer needs to be ascetic for one to get into relationship with the truth. A person can be immoral and still know the truth (EST, 279). It is “as access to a knowing subject,” that is, a subject whose “mode of being is entirely determined by knowledge,” that from this point on philosophy would define itself.[^45] Not even Kant, notwithstanding his reintroduction of ethics as an applied form of procedural rationality after Descartes had cut reason loose from ethics, was interested in reintegrating knowledge of the self with the care of the self. He announced instead the epiphany of a universal subject whose ethical attitude would consist in the recognition of oneself as a universal subject by virtue of the exercise of a private reason impelling conformity to universal rules (EST, 279-280). For such a subject, it is


external law, not self-constitution, that forms the basis for morality (TS, 22). “[T]he self,” for such a subject, “is one [we] can reject” (TS, 22). “Knowledge of oneself [now] constituted the fundamental principle” (TS, 22). Philosophy, as a consequence, underwent a transformation, from a field of experimentation involving richly varied and surprising ways of life, to abstract theoretical activities locked within disciplines. “Codes of behavior became emphasized at the expense of forms of subjectivation.” 46 With these codes of behavior arose a disciplinary, scientific, technological, homogenizing, totalizing, normalizing power, called “bio-power,” along with the forms of culture which it engendered. What was characteristic about these forms of culture was their notorious lack of toleration for difference or diversity, their determined suppression of prospective spaces of ungovernability, and their subjection of human beings to increasingly rigorous forms of surveillance and control.

**Techne Tou Biou**

It is Foucault’s view that the aforementioned development was one of our biggest “wrong turnings” (EST, xxv). In a late piece entitled, “What Is Enlightenment?” he complains about the fact that we are not yet “mature” (WIE, 49). Immaturity, for Kant, had consisted in lost opportunities to use the reason present in man to order human life and societies, because men had been relying instead on external authorities such as teachers, generals, kings, priests. Immaturity, for Foucault, consists in our inability to shape our own subjectivities in the face of the silent and invisible work of the disciplines that would shape us in one way or another. Departing from Kant, Foucault argues that instead of trying to establish those unchanging and universal human features that give rational thought dominion over tutelage, tradition, and superstition, we must ask the question, “[i]n what is given to us as universal, necessary, obligatory, what place is occupied by whatever is singular, contingent, and the product of arbitrary constraints?” 47 — which is the domain, precisely, of the ethic of the care of

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the self. So while Foucault did not judge it desirable to reinstate Greek ethics in our own time,²⁸ he did discover in the array of “self-disciplines” which comprised it, a beauty and a relevance capable of offering to contemporary man a model of the “mature” life.

What I want to show is that the general Greek problem was not the *techne* of the self, it was the *techne* of life, the *techne tou biou*, how to live. It’s quite clear from Socrates to Seneca or Pliny, for instance, that they didn’t worry about the afterlife, what happened after death, or whether God exists or not. That was not really a great problem for them; the problem was which *techne* do I have to use in order to live as well as I ought to live.²⁹

So how, in Foucault’s view, ought a person to live?

Drawn, much as Diogenes had been, to the crafted integrity of life, the freedom of resistance, the inverted, the fragmented, Foucault’s answer consists in his insistence on the importance of fashioning a life and an ethos worthy of remembrance, not because it conforms to an ideal, necessary order, but because, from a multiplicity of truths that have been personally confronted, it shapes a presence, a “style of life.” One’s “style of life” is the embodiment of the choice “to live a beautiful life — the positive side of the will not to be governed.”³⁰ It is one’s life, turned into a “work of art.”

One’s life, turned into a “work of art,” as Foucault understands it, is the outcome of facing human life directly, of taking its energies, processes, wanderings, differences, injuries, sufferings, dreams, lines of flight, and integrating them into “a coherent whole.”³¹ It is, as such, capable of displaying long-term patterns of character, action, and commitment, in a way that isolated philosophical examples or constructs cannot. But one’s life, turned into a “work of art,” is the work, as well, that one performs upon oneself to transform oneself, “to change [oneself] in [one’s] singular being” (UP, 10).³² It is the work that one

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³¹FL, 319.

³²Deleuze correctly notes, “Foucault does not use the word subject as a person or form of identity, but the words “subjectivation” as process and “Self” as relation to
performs on oneself to take possession of oneself differently — to think differently, to view the world differently, to conduct one's life differently, or to quote Foucault himself, to "invent — I don't mean discover — a way of being that is still improbable."\(^{53}\)

To be modern is not to accept oneself as one is in the flux of passing moments; it is to take oneself as object of a complex and difficult elaboration .... Modernity does not 'liberate man in his own being'; it compels him to face the task of producing himself.\(^{54}\)

In an early work, "What is an Author?," Foucault responded to Nietzsche's question, "Who speaks?," with the retort: "What does it matter who is speaking?"\(^{55}\) In one of the last interviews he ever gave, responding to a question concerning the diverse, often polemical readings of his works, he observed that the idea of the author frequently served as a distraction from, an obstacle to, the reading of his books. He reiterated his belief "that there is no sovereign, founding subject, a universal form of subject to be found everywhere."

I am very skeptical of this view of the subject and very hostile to it. I believe, on the contrary, that the subject is constituted through practices of subjection, or, in a more autonomous way, through practices of liberation, of liberty, as in Antiquity, on the basis, of course, of a number of rules, styles, inventions to be found in the cultural environment.\(^{56}\)

The self, in his view, was, a functional principle of discourse, not its privileged origin.

[W]hat is speaking is, in its solitude, in its fragile vibration, in its nothingness, the word itself — not the meaning of the word, but its enigmatic and precarious being ... Mallarmé was constantly effacing itself [relation à soi]. (Gilles Deleuze, Pourparlers, Éditions de Minuit, Paris, 1990, p. 127).

\(^{53}\)FL, 27.
\(^{54}\)"What Is Enlightenment," EST, 312.
\(^{55}\)FR, 101.
\(^{56}\)"An Aesthetics of Existence," PPC, 50-51
himself from his own language, to the point of not wishing to figure in it except as an executant in a pure ceremony of the Book in which the discourse would compose itself.\textsuperscript{57}

What is more, by turning one’s life into “a work of art,” that is, by conceiving life aesthetically, one reduces reason’s exorbitant demands upon one’s life and keeps its pretensions to authority over one’s self at bay. For at the center of such a life, instead of the race for formal structures or philosophical doctrines, there is a concrete and practical, non-centralized kind of theoretical production, depending for its validity, not upon the approval of the established regimes of thought, but upon the concrete evidence of one’s experience of the “order of things.” By conceiving life aesthetically, one transforms one’s very relation to “truth.” Instead of relating to secular conceptions of “truth” as correspondence, coherence, rational consensus, pragmatic success, condition of solidification, redemptive moral ideal, practice of identity, judgment of normality, system of punishment, one relates to fugitive experiences that drive home the point that things at bottom are mobile rather than fixed, and that “truth” itself is nothing other than the pains, pleasures, surplus, flux, disturbances, surprises that circulate through every solid formation, and create possibilities for new becomings. One generates such experiences standing, not at some conceptual archimedean point outside experience, but in actual, if complex, struggles, debates, dialogical situations.

Truth changes its place as well as its meaning in anyone’s thought. Life is not merely a matter of discovering “the truth” but of determining the problems to which and the perspectives within which one seeks true — or satisfying — answers. This does not mean that the truths one is after are merely illusions, or that those answers are a product of some alleged unconscious drives or conflicts. What is at issue here is not the answers one seeks but the life that seeks them.\textsuperscript{58}

\textsuperscript{57}Michel Foucault, \textit{The Order of Things} (New York: Random House, 1970), pp. 305-306.

\textsuperscript{58}“The Ethic of Care for the Self,” p. 6.
In this connection, Foucault brings up the figure of the specific intellectual, who in contrast to the "universal consciousness" or the generalist, produces "lateral connections across different forms of knowledge and from one focus of politicization to another."\(^{59}\) To be sure, the specific intellectual remains susceptible to "the danger of remaining at the level of conjunctural struggles, pressing demands restricted to particular sectors," and "of being unable to develop these struggles for lack of a global strategy or outside support; the risk, too, of not being followed, or only by very limited groups,"\(^ {60}\) as the holder of a "specific position," and in relation to his local form of power (which pertains primarily to the realm of thought\(^ {61}\)). Nevertheless, he has a unique opportunity to bring focus to bear upon "subjugated knowledges" — that is, naive knowledges operating low down on the hierarchy of formal knowledge, below an acceptable level of cognition or scientificity. By means of these knowledges the specific intellectual will be able to "link together as tightly as possible the historical and theoretical analysis of power relations, institutions, and knowledge, to the movements, critiques, and experiences that call them into question in reality." And "out of these conflicts, these confrontations, a new power must emerge, whose first, temporary expression will be a reform."\(^ {62}\) In this way, the specific intellectual is directly useful to the public. And when he takes the cruelties and exclusions of hegemonic doctrines into account, and, moreover, takes as his own project, as his care for his own self, the development of a voice that others might be able to appropriate on their own terms, use for their own purposes, in ways that their particular circumstances, and the care for their own selves, require. he is of particular use to excluded, oppressed groups that so far have not been able to speak in their own voice. Foucault writes:

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\(^{60}\)Ibid., p. 130.

\(^{61}\)Apropos to this, Foucault writes: "If at the base there has not been the work of thought upon itself and if, in fact, modes of thought, that is to say modes of action, have not been altered, whatever the project for reform, we know that it will be swamped, digested by modes of behavior and institutions that will always be the same" ("The Eye of Power," P/K, 156).

\(^{62}\)P/K, 156.
A delinquent puts his life into the balance against absurd punishments; a madman can no longer accept confinement and the forfeiture of his rights; a people refuses the regime which oppresses it. This does not make the rebel in the first case innocent, nor does it cure in the second, and it does not assure the third rebel of the promised tomorrow. One does not have to be in solidarity with them. One does not have to maintain that these confused voices sound better than the others and express the ultimate truth. For there to be a sense in listening to them and in searching for what they want to say, it is sufficient that they exist and that they have against them so much which is set up to silence them. A question of morality? Perhaps. A question of reality? Certainly. All the disenfranchisements of history amount to nothing; it is due to such voices that the time of men does not have the form of an evolution, but precisely that of a history.63

Finally, by turning one’s life into a “work of art,” one frees oneself from a certain kind of bondage to the moral — from the obligation to say what the law is under which one (and all) falls, what the goal is to which one (and all) ought to aspire, what that essence is which it is one’s task (and everyone else’s) to realize. When one does not have to state what is good for each and all, and to state where and how to find it, one can then begin to take one’s life as an object to be constructed, rather than as a cog in a machine whose function is already given.64

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64 Take psychological culture. In his “genealogy” of the rise of psychological services in France from the mid-eighteenth to late nineteenth century, from what he calls “discipline,” Foucault demonstrates that the emergence of psychological therapy has as much, if not more, to do with techniques of social control as with discoveries about the human mind and its functioning. He demonstrates in particular how in order to bring about the alignment between psychological therapy and social control, psychological practice exaggerated its focus on “abnormality,” regardless of its minimal, consequential effects upon others. This brought about its abjection, its stigmatization as a serious problem to be addressed, not merely a fact to be noted. The pressure on one not to be abnormal, that is, to be “normal” produced or reinforced conformism, or a non-critical attitude toward one’s society. In this manner, psychotherapeutic practices came to be ubiquitous, not only in the courts or with groups traditionally regarded as “abnormal,” but with the population at large. Indeed, “psychiatric labels are often thin disguises for difficulties in adjusting to specific social, family, or scholastic situations rather than descriptions of clear-cut pathologies.” Some authors note that “manipulative psychological techniques have come into their own along with a particular political
The Social Setting of the Care of the Self

For all the talk about the work that the self must operate upon the self in order to transform one's self into a "work of art," the aesthetics of living is not a purely individual matter, but takes into account the broader social and cultural setting in which one lives. Foucault writes:

If now I am interested ... in the way in which the subject constitutes himself in an active fashion, by the practices of the self, these practices are nevertheless not something that the individual invents by himself. They are patterns that he finds in his culture and which are imposed on him by his culture, his society and his social group.\footnote{The Ethic of Care for the Self, p. 11.\textsuperscript{65}}

But if the social context is identified by Foucault as the locus for the creation of practices, individuals, and truths, it is on the assumption that, to a considerable degree, it is already pluralistic, and capable of responding critically to new pressures to pluralize. To be sure, while relationships of power are infinitely reversible, in certain relations, power becomes fixed in relations of "perpetual asymmetry." Foucault cites the example of the traditional conjugal relation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

We cannot say that there was only male power; the woman herself could do a lot of things: be unfaithful to him, extract money from him, refuse him sexually. She was, however, subject to a state of domination, in the measure where all that was finally no more than a certain number of tricks which never brought about a reversal of the situation.\footnote{Ibid., p. 12.\textsuperscript{66}}

In the above example, instead of being pliable and allowing different partners a strategy that alters them, the relations of power are firmly set and concealed. "When an individual or social group manages to block the field of relations of power ... to prevent all reversibility of movement ... we are facing what can be called a state of domina-
tion."67 One's response to such a state of domination, although initially extremely confined and limited, will be to construct "a political model" comprised of practices in and through one will be able to display the fact that one "[is not] a slave to oneself and to one's appetites," that one has succeeded in "establish[ing] over one's self a certain relation of domination, of mastery, which [in ancient Greece] was called arche — power, authority."68 To the extent that these practices develop autarkeia or self-sufficiency — that is, a form of internal freedom "located in the faculty of judgment, not in some psychologically thick form of introspection," and which is expressed through the deployment of managerial strategies such as the interpretation and application of rules, gambits, risks, deciding when to act and when to hold back, and, if necessary, what sort of an attack to mount, and what sort of a defense — they clear out a space for freedom. For in learning how to govern oneself an individual can also learn how not to be governed. Foucault, therefore, disputes the view, "more or less derived from Hegel," that "the liberty of the individual would have no importance when faced with the noble totality of the city."69 "Liberty is the ontological condition of ethics. But ethics is the deliberate form assumed by liberty."70

In sum, then, to turn one's life into a "work of art" is to make of one's life neither the arbitrary or whimsical expression of personal preferences, nor the point of escape from a tedious or hopeless reality, but (and this, consistently with the ancient Greek usage of the word, "style," which, as Paul Veyne explains, denotes, not distinction, but "an artist who first of all was an artisan, a work of art that was first of all a work"), the locus of the concrete work of transforming the present, not by denying, or denigrating, or destroying it, but by "grasp[ing] it in what it is," while at the same time "imagin[ing] it ... otherwise than it is."71 It is to confront the truth of what is real with exercises of freedom, so that real world structures can be transformed, not simply one's ideas of them.

67Ibid., p. 3.
68Ibid., p. 6.
69Ibid., p. 5.
70Ibid., p. 4.
71"What Is Enlightenment?," EST, p. 311.
A transformation that remains within the same mode of thought, a transformation that is only a way of adjusting the same thought more closely to the reality of things can merely be a superficial transformation ... as soon as one can no longer think things as one formerly thought them, transformation becomes both very urgent and quite possible.\footnote{Michel Foucault, "Practicing Criticism," in PPC, 155.}

Although one finds in these exercises of freedom expressions of self-ownership that resemble the claims of the liberal "juridical model of possession" (e.g. "one belongs to himself, is his own master, is answerable to oneself, is sui juris; exercises over oneself an authority that nothing limits or threatens, holds the potestas sui" (CS, 65)), the similarity is superficial, because in turning one's life into "a work of art," one operates over a lifetime, not formally and abstractly, but substantively, taking oneself as an object to be developed and cultivated.

All in all, Foucault saw in the exercises for turning a human life into "a work of art, the opportunity not only to undermine the omnipotence of large institutions through an individual who, unimpressed by them, is beginning to act on his own, but also, and more importantly, to tap into the rich abundance, the protean diversity, of life.

Maybe the problem of the self is not to discover what it is in its positivity [that is, in its relation to juridical institutions, medical and psychiatric practices, political and philosophical theory] .... Maybe our problem is now to discover that the self is nothing else than the historical correlation of the technology built in out history. Maybe the problem is to change those technologies. And in this case, one of the main political problems would be nowadays, in the strict sense of the word, the politics of ourselves.\footnote{Michel Foucault, "About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self," in Jeremy Carrette, ed., Religion and Culture by Michel Foucault (New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 181.}

What better way to operationalize Foucault's impious reverence for the play of difference in cultural life, his alertness to the fragility of an ethics that is not grounded in something solid, fixed, or frozen, his
conviction that we can find our way to communities of justice without being driven by a transcendental imperative, and without being commanded by a god, than through a “politics of ourselves.” A politics that deploys genealogy, deconstruction, political disturbance, to cultivate responsiveness to movements of difference. A politics that resists the hegemony of a scientific rationality that insists on turning everyone and everything into fodder for regulative and normalizing disciplines. A politics that grows out of a sense of gratitude for a protean world, and the concomitant desire to care for it, that is “religious” without necessarily being theistic. A politics that, in his “Introduction to the Non-Fascist Life,” Foucault describes in terms of:

Withdraw[ing] allegiance from the old categories of the Negative.... which Western thought has so long held sacred as a form of power and access to reality.

Prefer[ing] what is positive and multiple: difference over uniformity, flows over unities, mobile arrangements over systems.

Believ[ing] that what is productive is not sedentary but nomadic.\textsuperscript{74}

\textsuperscript{74}Michel Foucault, “Introduction to the Non-Fascist Life,” “Preface” in \textit{Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia}, p. xiii.