TECHNOLOGIES OF THE SELF: TRUTH, ASCETICISM, AND AUTONOMY

Michel Foucault's later work concentrates on the constitution of the subject in ethics. His interest is not in a code-oriented morality, such as he believes Christianity to be, for then according to Foucault, subjectivation would occur in an almost juridical fashion, in which the subject would refer his conduct to a law or code of rules to which he would have to submit. The notion of morality as disobedience to a code of rules has, for Foucault, disappeared. Given this absence of morality, an "aesthetics of existence" is proposed, for which a return to the Greeks provides a paradigm in the search for the beautiful existence. If Foucault is, however, interested in Antiquity, it is not to propose the Greeks as an alternative to our present problem, but rather to see how Greco-Roman ethics can shed light on the problem of our present and of our present selves.

According to Foucault, Greek ethics is not essentially concerned with religious problems, nor is it related to any legal institutional system; for the Greeks ethics is, rather, linked to the will to live a beautiful life. And so, Foucault classifies the problem of our present as one in which the arts of individual existence have to be renewed. An ethics grounded in aesthetics seems to provide for Foucault an answer to the present absence of morality and to the very grounding of morality. In speaking of the present foundation, or lack of foundation, for ethics, Foucault says:

> I wonder if our problem nowadays is not, in a way, similar to this one, since most of us no longer believe that ethics is founded in religion, nor do we want a legal system to intervene in our moral, personal, private life. Recent liberation movements suffer from the fact that they cannot find any principle on which to base the elaboration of a new ethics. They need an ethics, but they cannot find any other ethics than an ethics founded on so-called scientific knowledge of what the self is, what desire is, what the unconscious is, and so on. I am struck by this similarity of problems.[1]

Now what I wish to show briefly in this paper is that Foucault's postmodern ethics is essentially an outgrowth of the Greeks' "care of the self," a reaction against Christianity, and a continuation of Descartes' sharp

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[1]Michel Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics," in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), p. 343.

distinction between the search for truth and the conduct of life.

Although Foucault's work has dealt in great part with technologies of domination and of power, whereby subjects have been objectified, his later work sketches the history of how an individual acts upon himself, in the technology of self. According to Foucault, "Technologies of the self . . .permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immorality."[2] In late antiquity, technologies of the self were aimed at care of the self, concern with the self, rather than at knowledge of oneself, for the latter was only to be achieved through the former. In Plato's *Apology*, Socrates exhorts men to concern themselves with themselves, that is, with "wisdom, truth, and the perfection of the soul."[3] But this care for the self is also oriented toward care of the city. Socrates' mission is useful for the city because in teaching people to occupy themselves with themselves, he likewise teaches them to occupy themselves with the city. Care of oneself is for Socrates and for later philosophy at the center of the "art of existence" which philosophy claimed to be.[4]

In order to know how to live and to live happily, cultivation of the soul is necessary; it is only thus that one can return to oneself and reunite with oneself. In Plato's *Alcibiades I*, it is evident that care of self is not essentially concerned with the body, for the self is not equated with clothing, tools, or possessions. Care of the self is rather care for the principle of activity which the soul is; for Plato, this care consists in the effort of the soul to know itself. To take care of oneself thus consists of knowing oneself. And the soul cannot know itself unless it looks at itself in a similar element, in a mirror; it must thus contemplate the divine. And it is through this divine contemplation that the soul will be able to discover rules for just behavior and political action. Thus, Alcibiades will be a good politician to the extent that he contemplates his soul in the divine

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[2]Foucault, "Technologies of the Self," in *Technologies of the Self*, ed. Luther H. Martin, *et al.* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1948), p. 18.

[3]*Ibid.*, p. 20.

[4]Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, vol. 3 of *The History of Sexuality*, tr. by Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), p. 20.

element.[5]

If in *Alcibiades I*, the soul has a mirror relation to itself, which refers to a process of memory and justifies dialogue as a method of discovering truth in the soul, this is not exclusively the case in the philosophical movement of Stoicism; in Plato, the themes of contemplation of the self and care of the self are related dialectically through dialogue, whereas in Stoicism we see the beginning of a culture of silence and the art of listening: the master/teacher speaks and does not ask questions and the disciple himself does not answer but must listen and keep silent.[6] For Plato, the truth is to be discovered within one, while for the Stoics, the truth is not found in oneself but rather in the *logoi*, in the teaching of the teachers. The discovery of truth in both Plato and in the Stoics requires care for the self or that self-forming activity which Foucault calls asceticism. In his seminar on "Technologies of the Self," in which Foucault speaks not only of Greco-Roman philosophy, but also of Christian spirituality, the fundamental question posed by the philosopher is the relation between truth and asceticism. This question is, as Foucault sees it, posed from the time of Plato to the Hellenistic age and also within Christian spirituality, in which throughout there is no access to truth without asceticism. In the philosophical tradition dominated by Stoicism, *askesis* means the progressive consideration of self, or the mastery over oneself, obtained through the acquisition and assimilation of truth. It has as its final goal access to the reality of this world, or preparation for this world. Through ascetical practices the truth that is acquired is transformed into a permanent principle of action. As Foucault puts it, "*Aletheia* becomes *ethos*. Asceticism for the Stoics is a process of becoming more subjective."[7] Truth is thus for the sake of action: if one cannot act, then one is not sufficiently master of oneself and one has therefore not assimilated the truth. For the Stoics, truth is acquired through the teaching of the teachers; what has been heard should be memorized, so that the statements heard be converted into rules of conduct. Truth is thus to be subjectivized. Stoic asceticism includes exercises in which the subject puts himself in a situation in which he can verify whether or not he can use the discourses which he has heard in his

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[5] "Technologies of the Self," p. 25.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 32.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 35.

confrontation with the given event. He is thus testing his preparation: only a truth totally assimilated can become ethics, only thus can the subject behave as he should when the event presents itself. The truth is thus of practical importance: the truth is to manifest itself in knowing how to live, in the art of existence, in the good life.

It is evident, therefore, that the art of living is made possible only through a cultivation of self which in Plato means looking to the self for the truth within, and in the Stoics becoming master of the self by listening to the teaching of the master, which teaching is assimilated and transformed into action. In both cases, we might say, the art of existence is made possible through a discovery of assimilation of the truth which has in turn been due to practices imposed on the self. Technologies of the self are thus meant to be technologies of life, of how to live. From Socrates to Seneca, as Foucault emphasizes, the problem was not the after-life or whether or not God exists, but rather the problem of which technology to use in order to live as well as one ought to live. In order to live the good life, the beautiful life, care of the self is essential. One's life then becomes an aesthetic object; as Foucault puts it:

> The idea of the *bios* as a material for an aesthetic piece of art is something which fascinates me. The idea also that ethics can be a very strong structure of existence, without any relation with the juridical per se, with an authoritarian system, with a disciplinary structure. All that is very interesting.[8]

According to Foucault, the language of Seneca, for example, is related not to juridical but rather to administrative practices: self-examination is presented as a taking stock of one's actions; faults are not judged against a law in order to reproach the self nor are they regarded as defects of moral character, but rather are evoked as lacks of success or errors in strategy, or simply as good intentions left undone. The rules are thus not for the sake of judging what has happened in the past, but rather the means of doing something correctly. The rules of conduct are reactivated so that one may be able to make adjustments between what one wanted to do and what one had in effect done.

Now if in the Stoic tradition, the consideration or examination of the self has as its final aim to prepare one for the reality of this world, according to Foucault, a similar goal or preparation does not characterize Christian spirituality. As he puts it,

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[8]"On the Genealogy of Ethics," p. 348.

> In Christianity asceticism always refers to a certain renunciation of the self and of reality because most of the time your self is a part of that reality you have to renounce in order to get access to another level of reality. This move to attain the renunciation of the self distinguishes Christian asceticism.[9]

The Christian is not only to abide by the truths of his faith, but must also seek self-knowledge in order to remove any obstacles within himself which may hinder his progress toward the truth. Christianity thus imposes obligations of truth, more so than does Stoicism; the Christian is obliged to believe certain things, to accept institutional authority regarding matters of truth, and when he examines himself, in pursuit of self-knowledge, to disclose his findings either to God or to his spiritual director. Knowledge of self thus brings about a purification of the soul. As Foucault sees it,

> Access to truth cannot be conceived of without purity of the soul. Purity of the soul is the consequence of self-knowledge and a condition for understanding the text; in Augustine: *Quis facit veritatem* (to make truth in oneself, to get access to the light).[10]

Here purification of the self is equated with self-renunciation and more specifically with a renunciation of the will through obedience. Self-examination thus appears in Christianity and in particular in the monastic Christianity which Foucault examines as something very different from the Stoic self-examination. Whereas for the Stoics the practice of self-examination has lead to autonomy and action, for the former the self was to be constituted through obedience and contemplation, and thus self-examination or self-revelation becomes in a sense self-destruction, that is, a sacrifice of the self, of one's own will.

If we consider for a moment the Senecan relationship of the disciple with the master, it appears that this relationship is different from that which exists between the monk and his director, as described by Foucault. In Seneca, the good advice of the master was to lead the disciple to a happy and autonomous life. The relationship was merely a means to an end: when the disciple was sufficiently equipped to lead his own life, the relationship would end. The disciple is thus to become master of himself, belong to himself, as it were. In Greco-Roman philosophy, practices of the self are thus to lead to the *conversio ad se*,

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[9]"Technologies of the Self," p. 35.

[10]*Ibid.*, p. 40.

whereby the subject escapes all dependences and enslavements to ultimately rejoin himself; one becomes answerable only to oneself; one exercises over oneself an authority that nothing limits or threatens; one holds the *potestas sui*.[11] And what is more, "The individual who has finally succeeded in gaining access to himself is, for himself, an object of pleasure."[12] In becoming master of oneself, one is thus in touch with the self and this relation to self enables one to delight in oneself, as in a thing one both possesses and has before one's eyes, as in a thing, we might say, which has been constituted as an aesthetic object.

The conversion to self which is the result of many of the Greco-Roman technologies of the self is certainly very different from the goal of ascetical practices in Christian spirituality. According to Foucault, "Christianity substituted the idea of a self which one had to renounce, because clinging to the self was opposed to God's will, for the idea of a self which had to be created as a work of art."[13] In Foucault's analysis of monastic Christianity, "obedience is complete control of behavior by the master, not a final autonomous state. It is a sacrifice of the self, of the subject's own will. This is the new technology of the self."[14] With the appearance of Christianity, Foucault believes that the classical care of the self and its autonomy disappeared only to give way to a culture of the self put to work for the exercise of pastoral power, although he also notes that in the Renaissance there is a reaffirmation of the autonomy of the culture of the self with the rise of religious groups which resist pastoral power and claim the right to make their own statutes; there reappears in addition in the Renaissance the notion of the self as one's own work of art. It is clear, however, that for Foucault Christian asceticism requires obedience, that is, a renunciation of the self through a renunciation of one's own will. Only thus can the Christian purify himself and have access to the contemplation of God. Purification of the self makes possible the vision of God. Foucault notes that in Christianity, "the problem of an aesthetics of existence is covered over by the problem of purity,"[15] of virginity,

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[11] *The Care of the Self*, p. 65.

[12] *Ibid.*, p. 66.

[13] "On the Genealogy of Ethics," p. 362.

[14] "Technologies of the Self," p. 45.

[15] "On the Genealogy of Ethics," p. 365.

according to the model of feminine integrity, whereas in Greco-Roman asceticism, there is a virile model of self-domination. In Christianity, therefore, according to Foucault,

> Physical integrity rather than self-regulation became important. (. . .) The new Christian self had to be constantly examined because in this self were lodged concupiscence and desires of the flesh. From that moment on, the self was no longer something to be made but something to be renounced and deciphered. Consequently, between paganism and Christianity, the opposition is not between tolerance and austerity, but between a form of austerity which is linked to an aesthetics of existence and other forms of austerity which are linked to the necessity of renouncing the self and deciphering its truth.[16]

If in Greco-Roman practices of the self the final goal is autonomy and preparation for action in this life through a *conversio ad se* or through self-domination, in Christian asceticism, the goal is rather a *conversio ad Deum* through, as it were, an aversion of self. Purity is stressed because of the disorder or imbalance which sin has caused in man's nature and because, as Foucault rightfully notes, there is no access to the light in Christianity without making truth in oneself. What Foucault does not however understand is that what seems to him to be a denial of the subject's freedom because of what he perceives to be an imposition of authority from without, is in actuality for the true Christian a perfectioning of his freedom and of his personality. Purity is life according to the Spirit, not a denial of the flesh, but an ordering, an enhancement, of the flesh. Purity's goal is to see as God sees, so that in order to have access to the light one must see oneself in the light of the Model who is the Truth. The greater the conformity to the Model, the more one attains to the light, the more one is free and the more perfected is one's personality. In a very real sense, Christianity does, despite Foucault's opinion to the contrary, present us with an aesthetics of existence, in the sense that the light is already given; it does not have to be constructed by man. But to affirm this would be to recognize man's dependence on the light, and Foucault's insistence on man's autonomy without its being grounded cannot understand the paradoxical situation in which the Christian is called to live.

For Foucault, then, modernity is, as it were, a reaction against Christianity. If self-examination or self-disclosure in Christianity is linked to renunciation of self, in the modern world this is not the case.

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[16] *Ibid.*, p. 366.

> From the eighteenth-century to the present, the techniques of verbalization, of self-disclosure, 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. To use these techniques without renouncing oneself constitutes a decisive break.[17]

The modern mind thus calls for a creation of the self, without reliance on an external authority and acceptance of another's legislation. Obedience or renunciation of the will is here replaced by the will not to be governed, by a reaction against governmentality. In "On the Genealogy of Ethics," Foucault recognizes that according to Christianity, there is "no access to truth without ascesis;"[18] the modern man will, however, proclaim his autonomy by substituting evidence for asceticism, in other words, by the Cartesian ideal: "To accede to the truth, it suffices that I be; what is needed is *any* subject which can see what is evidence."[19] If asceticism is no longer necessary, precisely that which brings about the purification of the self, then Foucault concludes "I can be immoral and know the truth."[20]

According to Foucault,

> Descartes. . .succeeded in substituting a subject as founder of practices of knowledge, for a subject constituted through practices of the self. (. . .) The relationship to the self no longer needs to be ascetic to get into 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 the truth definitively. (. . .) 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.[21]

And yet the notion of asceticism is not completely discarded from Foucault's way of thinking. Although Foucault is interested in the subject's

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[17]"Technologies of the Self," p. 49.

[18]"On the Genealogy of Ethics," p. 371.

[19]*Ibid.*

[20]*Ibid.*, p. 372.

[21]*Ibid.*, pp. 371-72.

reaching "mature adulthood"--to borrow a phrase from Kant's essay "What is Enlightenment?," which Foucault analyzes,--and with this maturity, autonomy, his attitude to the Kantian notion of *Mundigkeit* is not completely Kantian. Foucault refers to Baudelairean modernity in order to return to the idea of a self that is to be created as a work of art. Foucault says:

> The deliberate attitude of modernity is tied to an indispensable asceticism. To be modern is not to accept oneself as one is in the flux of the passing moments; it is to take oneself as object of a complex and difficult elaboration. (. . .) Modern man, for Baudelaire, is not the man who goes off to discover himself, his secrets and his hidden truth; he is the man who tries to invent himself. This modernity does not 'liberate man in his own being'; it compels him to face the task of producing himself.[22]

Man's autonomy is thus represented as aesthetic self-invention, with the elimination of Kantian universalization, that is, the rational will expressed in laws binding on all agents alike. As we have seen, according to Foucault, there are code-oriented moralities, such as Christianity, in which a quasi-juridical subject refers his conduct to a set of laws; in order to substitute for these, he proposes ethics-oriented moralities, in which rules of behavior are less developed and less important than individual self-formation.

There is no doubt that for Foucault compulsory precepts and universal codes present themselves in terms of domination and therefore not in promotion of man's freedom. Foucault notes:

> The search for styles of existence as different from each other as possible seems to me to be one of the points on which particular groups in the past may have inaugurated searches we are engaged in today. The search for a form of morality acceptable to everybody, in the sense that everybody should submit to it, strikes me as catastrophic.[23]

It would seem that for Foucault the search for a personal ethics is opposed to a universalistic morality, for which reason his aesthetics of existence is

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[22]"What is Enlightenment?" in *The Foucault Reader*, pp. 41-42.

[23]"The Concern for Truth," quoted in "The Critique of Impure Reason" by Thomas McCarthy, in *Political Theory*, vol. 18, no. 3, August 1990, p. 460.

presented in resistance to a so-called "science of life."[24] For Foucault, the self is not scientifically knowable and consequently one does not know who one is *meant* to be. His ethics or self-constitution is therefore non-teleological. The conduct of life requires, for Foucault, a breaking down of idols and of fixed patterns, so that something radically new will emerge.

Established patterns are to be challenged or transgressed in order to determine what is no longer indispensable for the constitution of the self as an autonomous agent. Just as the artist's work cannot be confined to the copying of a model due to his artistic inventiveness and chance, Foucault allows for a greater role to be played by contingency rather than by necessity in the constitution of the self; his work "is not seeking to make possible a metaphysics that has finally become a science, it is seeking to give new impetus, as far and wide as possible to the undefined work of freedom."[25] However, because Foucault's ethics has no apparent grounding and is non-teleological, one might finally be tempted to ask why then propose at all an aesthetics of existence? Perhaps simply because of the pleasure or delight which the beautiful engenders and which affects the self. Or perhaps because having lost the light to which St. Augustine refers, man has to create his own light, at any cost. It is this latter reason which seems to me to be related to Foucault's question toward the end of his life: Who can tell the truth? Who is the truth-sayer? If the very ground for truth is not accepted, if there is no commitment to the truth, is it evidence alone which will make me capable of telling the truth? Foucault poses interesting questions, but the framework in which he works does not, I believe, provide for adequate answers.

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[24]James W. Bernauer, *Michel Foucault's Force of Flight: Toward an Ethics for Thought.* (Humanities Press International, Inc., 1990), p. 182.

[25]"What is Enlightenment?", p. 45-46.