

**Foucault, *The Care of the Self* (HS3), pp. 17-36**  
PHIL 449, Spring 2014

**Some things to look for while reading this text**—what sets Greek and Roman sexual ethics apart from later, Christian ones

1. In Christianity, moral precepts around sex were universal and compulsory;
  - in ancient Greece and Rome there were some compulsory rules, but also numerous practices of sexual austerity that were supplementary, ways of living that one could choose beyond what was required (Intro to HS2, p. 21)
  - these practices of sexual austerity were not for everyone; only free men
2. The emphasis was more on modes of subjectivation than an exhaustive moral code (Intro to HS2, p. 30-31)
  - most concerned about how one makes oneself into an ethical subject, including the exercises one does to shape the self: “arts of existence,” “techniques of the self,” “ascesis”
3. Telos of the ethical subject: mostly related to mastery of the self, mastery of appetites and pleasures, achieving tranquility of the soul thereby (Intro to HS2, p. 31)
  - Foucault also sometimes describes the goal as having an aesthetic quality: to create the self as a beautiful object

**What can we see of these ideas in the first part of *The Care of the Self*?**

1. Dream interpretation was one of the exercises one does on the self: “the analysis of dreams was one of the techniques of existence” (5; optional reading)
  - Artemidorus’ book was “meant to be a manual for use in daily practice” (4)
  - being able to interpret dreams that foretold the future allowed you to be able to prepare for that
2. Artemidorus’ book was addressed mainly to men, to ordinary men: to the man who has “a family, possessions, quite often a trade ... [h]e is apt to have servants and slaves .... And, besides his health, his chief anxieties concern the life and death of his entourage, his enrichment, his impoverishment, the marriage of his children, the functions he may be called upon to exercise in the city” (7)
3. Artemidorus’ text doesn’t emphasize a clear and comprehensive moral code around sex
  - “We should not assume a rigorous classification that would assign every possible sexual act to the domain of the lawful, the unlawful, or the unnatural” (17).
  - there are some elements of a code in the text, “But it must be admitted that they are both few in number and rather nebulous” (35)

4. Artemidorus' book focuses more on the social status of the actor in dreams about sex, and his relationships to others

- Evaluates sexual acts “not with a view to the act and its regular or irregular form, but with a view to the actor, his way of being, his particular situation, his relation to others, and the position he occupies with respect to them” (35).
- The main concern is with “what might be called the subject’s ‘style of activity’ and ... the relation he establishes between sexual activity and the other aspects of his familial, social, and economic existence” (35)

**Main points Foucault emphasizes in Artemidorus' book on dream interpretation (focused on sexual dreams)**

1. look at the social status of the dreamer and that of those with whom he is having sex in the dream

- partners in dreams “figure as little more than social profiles,” such as wives, prostitutes, slaves, old people, young people, family members, etc. (29)

2. need to have isomorphism between sexual role of dreamer and their social role in waking life (31-32)

- a. “Artemidorus sees the sexual act first and foremost as a game of superiority and inferiority” because he focuses on penetration: “penetration places the two partners in a relationship of domination and submission” (30).

- if these power relations are inverted in the dream as compared to how they should be in waking life, that portends bad things will happen

b. examples

- *dreaming of sex with slaves*: pay attention to whether one is active or passive in the act: “To place oneself ‘beneath’ one’s servant in a dream, thus overturning the social hierarchy, is ominous; it is a sign that one will suffer harm from this inferior or incur his contempt” (19)

- *dreaming of sex with one’s son*: if the son is the active one, “the order of hierarchies, the poles of domination and activity, are overturned” (22); this portends coming conflict

- *dreaming of sex with one’s wife* is good b/c she “is in a relationship of natural analogy to the dreamer’s craft or profession. As with the latter, one engages with her in a recognized and legitimate activity; one benefits from her as from a prosperous occupation” (18)

3. Artemidorus also sees sex as an “economic game” of expenditure and profit (30): profit in the sense of pleasure, expenditure in the sense of losing “seed,” fatigue afterwards

- a. there should be “economic adequation” as well as social isomorphism (above): balance the cost and benefit of the activity

b. examples:

-- *dreaming of sex with prostitutes*: useless expenditure of semen, a “waste, without the benefit of the offspring the woman can provide” (19)

-- *dreaming of sex with unmarried daughter*: one gives her seed that will eventually go to another man; this “portends a substantial loss of money” (22)

-- *dreaming of sex with slaves*: this is good, because one gets more back than one expends, in the sense that one profits from a partner in the dream that one also profits from in waking life

**How does Foucault’s discussion of Artemidorus on dreams show us that the main concern here is with the subject’s “style of activity” (35)?**

What is strange about Foucault starting with this text is that it’s not about sexual acts themselves, or how people might do exercises on themselves to shape themselves to act in particular ways re: sex.

-- It’s about *dreaming about* sex, not about how one should shape oneself and one’s life in regard to sex.

What can Artemidorus’ text tell us about the ethical substance, mode of subjection, exercises to transform the self (asceticism), and the telos of the ethical subject in regard to sexual activity?