

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

Some things to consider while thinking about 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

-- philosophers in first two centuries CE “urge individuals to be more [sexually] austere if they wish to lead a life different from that of the ‘throngs’; they do not try to determine which measures or punishments might constrain everyone in a uniform manner” (*Care of the Self* 40)

2. The emphasis was more on “forms of subjectivation and the practices of the self” than an exhaustive moral code (Intro to HS2, p. 30)

-- 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,” “asceticism”

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" (32) 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 with slaves (32)

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), with the relationship one has with oneself?

Discussion

Need to know yourself through dream interpretation, turn this into knowledge of the self

-- knowing yourself in terms of your own environment, social status. Knowing the self, working on the self is not something you can do w/o considering your social position and social relations to others

-- in chapter 4: medicine was a way to know oneself as well, knowing one’s body, how it relates to one’s circumstances; good to have some medical knowledge yourself and not just rely on physicians

Need to have knowledge of your particular circumstances to know how to heal the self, how to interpret dreams, etc.

Do we get any sense of any of the four elements of ethics from this text? (These are from Intro to HS2)

-- ethical substance (the part of the self that is the focus of ethical concern)

-- mode of subjection: what underlies one’s obligation to act in a certain way (e.g., because one is part of a group that adheres to these rules, because one wants to create oneself into a beautiful object)

-- ethical work/asceticism: exercises one does to form the self into an ethical subject

-- telos: the kind of person one is aiming to be (e.g., have mastery over the desires, be pure so as to achieve immortality after death)

Why Foucault may have started with Artemidorus

1. He says at the very beginning that this is the only systematic discussion of sexual acts

2. Sexual acts are in the background here, not the main focus, so we can sort of trust those more—won’t think discussion of them is just from the perspective of the author but more just general attitudes at the time.