

**Foucault, *Care of the Self* pp. 189-210,235-240**  
**Foucault, “On the Genealogy of Ethics” (interview)**  
PHIL 449, Spring 2014

Aphrodisia: “acts, gestures and contacts that produce a certain form of pleasure” (*History of Sexuality* Vol. 2, p. 40)—Foucault is using this to focus on sexual pleasure

-- includes acts that produce pleasure, the pleasure itself, and the desire for such pleasure that leads one to the acts (HS2 42-43)

Eros and Aphrodite: both gods of love in Greek pantheon

-- in Plutarch (HS3 Part 6 Chpt. 1 on boys), Aphrodite is connected to sensual pleasure that, without Eros, can be “bought for a drachma” (202)

-- in Plutarch, Eros seems to be linked with friendship, love for the virtue in the other (203-204), but it needs Aphrodite too: “Eros without Aphrodite, when physical pleasure is lacking, is no less imperfect. A love without Aphrodite is ‘like drunkenness without wine, brought on by a brew of figs and barley’” (205, quoting Plutarch).

### **Love of women and boys, and difference from later Christian views**

1. In 5<sup>th</sup> & 4<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE, which Foucault studied in Vol. 2 of *The History of Sexuality*, some argued that the love of boys was better than that of women

a. the latter is just a matter of giving in to physical, natural appetites like animals do (200)

b. love for women involves pleasure (nature has arranged it this way for procreation)

-- but this means one can get a strong desire for pleasure that can carry one away: “a violent movement, with no internal regulation, which has ‘pleasure and enjoyment as its goal’” (200)

c. love for boys does not involve such sensual pleasures, but is about “a friendship this is indissociable from virtue” (201)

2. Plutarch’s dialogue praises love of women over love of boys

a. one can have Eros, the sort of love that involves friendship and appreciation of virtue with women too, not just with other men (203-204)

b. Eros without sensual pleasure, though, is imperfect (like drunkenness w/o wine, acc to quote above) (205)

-- and with women you can enjoy pleasure along with Eros

c. Eros keeps one’s desire for pleasure in check; it allows one to be moderate and self-controlled, calm, reserved, in a space of “mutual trust” (204)

d. can’t have sensual pleasure well with boys

(i). either the boy consents, in which case he becomes effeminate and an object of contempt, or he resists and one has to take pleasure by force (206)

(ii). the relationship lacks *charis*: “the gentleness of consent” (207) that “integrates sexual relations ... into reciprocal relations of kindness and to bring physical pleasure into friendship” (206-207)

-- physical, sexual activity can be a basis for friendship and reciprocal unity; but this can't happen in pederasty (209)

-- to get friendship in pederasty you need to leave out physical activity (which earlier Greeks did say one ought—see “On the Genealogy of Ethics” p. 345))

### **Conclusion to *Care of the Self***

1. Differences in beliefs and practices re: sex between 5<sup>th</sup> & 4<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE in Greece and 1<sup>st</sup> & 2<sup>nd</sup> CE in Greece and Rome (238-239)

-- increased apprehension about sex, increased sense that it is dangerous, a fragile area of life, something we must be more careful about because it can have unhealthy consequences (See “On the Genealogy of Ethics” p. 346)

-- greater valorization of marriage, an emphasis on more reciprocal relations between husbands and wives, more of a close bond forged between them

-- greater preoccupation with the self, shaping and forming the self through exercises and tests; in earlier periods this was considered important so one could rule over others well. Here it's valorized in itself as an important practice of living well. (See “On the Genealogy of Ethics” p. 348)

2. Differences re: Christianity

-- see last 6 lines or so of the long paragraph on p. 239

-- “On the Genealogy of Ethics” on Plutarch and boys: “If Plutarch finds problems in loving boys, it is not at all in the sense that loving boys was anti-natural or something like that. He says, ‘It's not possible that there could be any reciprocity in the physical relations between a boy and a man’” (345)

*The book ends with a list of the four elements of ethics and what they look like in Christianity, but he explains this much better in “On the Genealogy of Ethics.”*

### **“On the Genealogy of Ethics” interview**

Moral codes, rules, prohibitions didn't change much between ancient Greece and Rome and Christianity, and even today; what has changed is “in what I call the ‘ethics,’ which is the relation to oneself” (355).

Differences in the 4 elements of ethics between ancient Greece & Rome and Christianity

**1. ethical substance:** the part of the self that is the object of ethical concern

a. for the Greeks and Romans, it was the *aphrodisia*: the links between act, pleasure and desire as noted above (OGE 353)

-- same ethical substance from the Greeks of the 5<sup>th</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE to Greeks & Romans of first 2 centuries CE

b. for Kant, e.g., it's intention that matters morally (OGE 352)

c. For Christianity, desire becomes the focus of attention (353); also “concupiscence, flesh” (358)

-- Ladelle McWhorter, *Bodies and Pleasures* (Indiana UP, 1999): “...after the Council of Trent [1545-1563] the issue for Christians was not so much intercourse itself, a bodily function, as the agitations of the soul that its performance ... might provoke. ... [W]hat was at issue now wasn't the bodily act ... but the desire for pleasure that might become a motivation for committing the act when commission wasn't physically necessary. ... What was problematized, therefore, was desire. The most important concern a good Christian had was how to master and eradicate his or her desire” (McWhorter 119-120).

-- Christians at this time could have sex but should not “allow the necessity of sexual performance to give rise to desire for it; one could have sex, but one couldn't enjoy, want, fantasize, or even think about it” (McWhorter 119)

-- “Bodily functions ... were not slated for eradication; they were viewed as, perhaps, unfortunately, inevitable. What was to be eradicated instead were the desires that one might feel in association with the performance or undergoing of those functions” (McWhorter 118).

**2. mode of subjection:** what underlies the obligation to act morally, why one should do so

a. for Greeks of 5<sup>th</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE, it's because one wants to make of the self a beautiful object: “it is an aesthetic mode,” a choice one makes if one wants to “have a beautiful existence,” a good reputation, etc. (OGE 356)

b. For later Greeks & Romans (in *Care of the Self*) there still a sense of an aesthetic practice, but also more emphasis on following certain ways of living as universal valid for all (CS 238).

-- less of a sense of personal choice, because one should act in certain ways that all rational beings should act in (OGE 356)

-- Still, these practices only undertaken by a few: “The ethics of marriage and the advice on conjugal life are at the same time universally valid principles and rules for those who wish to give their existence a noble and honorable form. It is the lawless universality of an aesthetics of existence that in any case is practiced only by a few” (CS 185; not in assigned reading)

c. In Christianity, the form of obligation was legal (OGE 356); it is “divine law” (OGE 358)

**3. exercises on the self, ascetics**

a. Greeks & Romans of first 2 centuries CE:

(i). Some exercises of the Roman Stoics: “you have to do some exercises like depriving yourself of eating for two or three days, in order to be sure that you can control yourself. ... And you have to do that for all the pleasures” (OGE 358).

— Epictetus’ walking exercise: “Each morning, while taking a walk in the city, one should try to determine with respect to each thing (a public official or an attractive woman), one’s motives, whether one is impressed by or drawn to it, or whether one has sufficient self-mastery so as to be indifferent” (OGE 368).

(ii). writing for oneself: quotations, arguments, examples of good or bad actions, reflections on one’s own thoughts and actions (OGE 364)

-- But this writing was not like later “confessions”: “The point is not to pursue the indescribable, not to reveal the hidden, not to say the unsaid but, on the contrary, to collect the already-said, to reassemble that which one could hear or read, and this to an end which is nothing less than the constitution of oneself” rather than the discovery of something hidden within oneself (OGE 365).

b. In Christianity, the exercises one engages in involve self-decipherment

(i). “This 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” (OGE 366)

(ii). One must engage in deep and comprehensive self-decipherment to root out any hidden desires that shouldn’t be there

-- Foucault, *Technologies of the Self*, Ed. Martin, Gutman, Hutton (U of Massachusetts Press, 1988): for John Cassian (4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> c CE), when examining thoughts “you must try to decipher if, at the root of the movement which brings you the representations, there is or is not concupiscence or desire—if your innocent thought has evil origins; if you have something underlying which is the great seducer, which is perhaps hidden ...” (38)

-- McWhorter book (cited above): “One must purify oneself of all sensual desires in order to satisfy the only desire a moral, finite, dependent, and essentially lacking being should have: the desire for God, who is Truth” (118)

4. **telos:** the kind of ethical being one is trying to become: “Which is the kind of being to which we aspire when we behave in a moral way?” (355)

a. Ancient Greece and Rome: mastery of the self, over actions, desires, passions

-- in 5<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE this was closely related to mastery over others: should be master of self to be master over others

-- later it became something one should do as a rational being, and other rational beings are also masters over themselves (OGE 357-358)

b. Christianity: “immortality, purity, and so on” (OGE 358)

-- “the reason why you have to take control of yourself is to keep yourself pure” (OGE 365)

(i). but also, renunciation of the self

-- McWhorter book: “As a Christian, one constitutes oneself as a desiring subject only to forfeit oneself so constituted. The desiring subject is transient; the self as a deathly bundle of longing is identified in order to be overcome” (McWhorter 120)

-- Technologies of the Self book: practices of penance in early Christianity involved engaging in a rupture with your past life—one showed forth one’s sins in public, did penance for them, renounced one’s former self, and was taken back into the church (*Technologies of the Self* 43)

(ii). in addition, one renounces the self in the sense of becoming fully obedient to someone outside the self—church authorities, but ultimately God: monks had total obedience to their masters, even asking permission to die (*Technologies of the Self*)

-- how does one tell if one’s thoughts are pure, or if there is some desire, some evil hidden within? Tell all thoughts to master and be obedient to him in all things (*Technologies of the Self* 47)

-- “in permanently verbalizing your thoughts and permanently obeying the master, you are renouncing your will and yourself” (*Technologies of the Self* 48)

(iii). contrast with Hellenistic relationship to another you are talking with to help the self

-- may have a kind of philosophical master, but (for Seneca) “it was an instrumental and professional” relationship. “It was founded on the capacity of the master to lead the disciple to a happy and autonomous life through good advice. The relationship would end when the disciple got access to that life” (44).

## **Creating the self as a work of art**

Quotes from “On the Genealogy of Ethics”

— “The idea of the *bios* as a material for an aesthetic piece of art is something which fascinates me.” (348)

— “What strikes me is the fact that in our society, art has become something which is related only to objects and not to individuals, or to life. ... But couldn’t everyone’s life become a work of art?” (350)

— “From the idea that the self is not given to us, I think that there is only one practical consequence: we have to create ourselves as a work of art” (351).

Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* Aphorism 290: [http://nietzsche.holtof.com/reader/friedrich-nietzsche/the-gay-science/aphorism-290-quote\\_04784e1de.html](http://nietzsche.holtof.com/reader/friedrich-nietzsche/the-gay-science/aphorism-290-quote_04784e1de.html)

Todd May, *The Philosophy of Foucault* (optional book)

1. In “Hellenistic thought, the care of the self involves a lifelong commitment to self-creation, to getting free of who one is so that one can become something else” (May 101)

-- “To take care of oneself .... Requires a vigilant attention to who one is being made to be by the society around one, and an often renewed commitment to become otherwise,” through engaging in exercises on the self (May 101)

2. but this is not a matter of just creating oneself out of nothing; can’t escape entirely the ways we have been and continue to be shaped

-- Foucault “nowhere claims that the care of the self is free from the constraints of the practices and norms of the time” (122); “we cannot step outside ourselves, leap from our own historical skin to choose our lives from some vantage point beyond the vagaries of our history and context. To stray afield of oneself is not to recreate oneself out of whole cloth” (124)

-- Foucault, “Ethics of the Concern for Self” interview (*Foucault Live*, 1996): “...if I am now interested in how the subject constitutes itself in an active fashion through practices of the self, these practices are nevertheless not something invented by the individual himself. They are models that he finds in his culture and that are proposed, suggested, imposed upon him by his culture, his society and his social group” (440-441)

3. Creating the self is not just an individual endeavour: how we are shaped into who we are is through collective activity; it is also through collective activity that changes can be made: “It is difficult, although perhaps not impossible, to imagine that a single person can succeed in straying afield of themselves when the rest of the social field in which they are immersed remains unchanged” (May 125)

-- To experiment requires that there are others who are willing to experiment, that there is a *we* willing to jettison the intolerable for something that is perhaps better” (May 125)

4. The Hellenistic philosophers (studied in *Care of the Self*) styled themselves according to universal rules they thought should apply to all

-- Foucault, “Truth, Power, Self: An Interview” (in *Technologies of the Self*): “All my analyses are against the idea of universal necessities in human existence. They show the arbitrariness of institutions and show which space of freedom we can still enjoy and how many changes can still be made” (*Technologies of Self* 11)