

Foucault, Intro to *History of Sexuality Volume 2: The Use of Pleasure*
Davidson, “Ethics as Ascetics”
PHIL 449, Spring 2014

Change of direction after first volume of *History of Sexuality*

1. Decided needed to do a genealogy of the kind of subjectivity we have now, in relation to sex
 - needed to “analyze the practices by which individuals were led to focus their attention on themselves, to decipher, recognize, and acknowledge themselves as subjects of desire, bringing into play between themselves and themselves a certain relationship that allows them to discover, in desire, the truth of their being In short, with this genealogy the idea was to investigate how individuals were led to practice, on themselves and on others, a hermeneutics of desire ...” (Foucault 5)
 - hermeneutics: process of interpretation, decipherment, uncovering hidden meanings
2. More generally, started focusing on the ways in which we operate on ourselves to establish ourselves as subjects, not just the way we are affected by power relations outside of us
 - a. Foucault says he undertook a shift to “analyze what is termed ‘the subject.’ It seemed appropriate to look for the forms and modalities of the relation to self by which the individual constitutes and recognizes himself *qua* subject” (6).
 - he focuses on “self-formation as an ‘ethical subject,’ a process in which the individual delimits that part of himself that will form the object of his moral practice, defines his position relative to the precept he will follow, and decides on a certain mode of being that will serve as his moral goal. And this requires him to act upon himself, to monitor, test, improve, and transform himself” (Foucault 28)
 - b. *Davidson article*: in his later works Foucault studies the “technologies of the self,” or “the ways in which we relate ourselves to ourselves” (127).
 - c. “I felt obliged to study the games of truth in the relationship of self with self and the forming of oneself as a subject ...” (Foucault 6).
 - *what might “games of truth” refer to?*

Interview: "Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom," in *Foucault Live*, 2nd ed. Ed. Sylvère Lotringer. NY: Semiotext(e), 1996.

-- "... when I say 'game,' I mean a set of rules by which truth is produced. It is not a game in the sense of an amusement; it is a set of procedures that lead to a certain result, which, on the basis of its principles and rules of procedure, may be considered valid or invalid, winning or losing" (445).

3. Another motivation for these new studies: getting "free of oneself," "straying afield" of oneself, coming to "think differently than one thinks, and perceive differently than one sees" (Foucault 8).

a. this is how he sees the purpose of philosophy itself

-- "what is philosophy today—philosophical activity, I mean—if it is not the critical work that thought brings to bear on itself? In what does it consist, if not in the endeavor to know how and to what extent it might be possible to think differently, instead of legitimating what is already known?" (Foucault 9)

-- philosophy shouldn't dictate to others what the truth is, "But it is entitled to explore what might be changed, in its own thought, through the practice of a knowledge that is foreign to it" (Foucault 9)

b. changing his and others' thought about sex and subjectivity through a knowledge foreign to it—that's what he's doing in last two volumes of *History of Sexuality*

-- Todd May, *The Philosophy of Foucault* (optional reading): "Bringing into focus different ways of being allows us not only to *see* the contingency of our own historically given ways of being; it allows us to *feel* it" (98).

-- "Being brought into the presence of another way of living, getting a sense of its themes, its parameters, its concerns, allows us to understand more viscerally that there are, indeed, other ways to live than our own" (98).

-- But it's **not** the case that Foucault is suggesting we just take up the Greek view of sex and subjectivity as is—this is clear in an interview called "On the Genealogy of Ethics" (reading for next week)

c. Davidson article:

-- "For Foucault philosophy was a spiritual exercise, an exercise of oneself in which one submitted oneself to modifications and tests, underwent changes, in order to learn to think differently" (131).

-- For the ancient Greeks and Romans, philosophy was a "way of life" more than a search just for truth (Davidson 131)

-- Pierre Hadot, from *Philosophy as a Way of Life*: for the ancients, “real wisdom does not merely cause us to know: it makes us ‘be’ in a different way” (265); philosophical theories are not what philosophy is—philosophy is the practice of living according to those

-- e.g., re: ethics: “We no longer theorize about moral action, but we act in a correct and just way” (Hadot 267)

Ancient technologies of the self and the “arts of existence”

1. “arts of existence”: “those intentional and voluntary actions by which men not only set themselves rules of conduct, but also seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being, and to make their life into an *oeuvre* that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria” (Foucault 10-11).

a. Elsewhere he talks about particular exercises of the self on the self that ancient philosophers suggested, which he calls “*ascesis*”

-- “*ascesis*”: “a mode of practice of the self on the self”; “exercises of self on self” (*Hermeneutics of the Subject*, lecture course at the Collège de France 1981-1982, p. 314)

-- e.g., repeating short aphorisms so they are ingrained and automatically affect action; meditating on our own mortality and that of those we care about; nightly review of one’s day and whether one acted correctly

-- these are to be done regularly, every day, to help create oneself in a particular way

b. related to the “ethical work” that one can perform on oneself (Foucault 27) to make oneself into an ethical subject

-- e.g., “sexual austerity can be practiced through a long effort of learning, memorization, and assimilation of a systematic ensemble of precepts, and through a regular checking of conduct aimed at measuring the exactness with which one is applying these rules” (Foucault 27)

c. in regard to sex, these practices in the ancient world were not a matter of adhering to rules that were “compulsory and whose scope was universal” (Foucault 21, optional reading)

-- rather, people chose to practice them as a kind of “supplement, a ‘luxury’ in relation to the commonly accepted morality” (Foucault 21)

-- different schools of philosophy suggested different styles of shaping oneself in regard to sex, different practices

-- this was an ethics only for men, and only for free men: “it was an elaboration of masculine conduct carried out from the viewpoint of men in order to give form to *their* behavior” (Foucault 22-23).

d. the point of these practices in regard to sex: “The accent was placed on the relationship with the self that enabled a person to keep from being carried away by the appetites and pleasures, to maintain a mastery and superiority over them, to keep his senses in a state of tranquility, to remain free from interior bondage to the passions, and to achieve a mode of being that could be defined by the full enjoyment of oneself, or the perfect supremacy of oneself over oneself” (Foucault 31)

2. using arts of existence to create oneself aesthetically

a. Foucault, *Hermeneutics of the Subject* lecture course: one chooses to make of one’s life a “beautiful work” (424)

-- this is not simply a matter of following rules, just as an architect giving a beautiful form cannot do so just by following rules (424)

b. Davidson article:

-- we might think of the notion of creating the self as a work of art less as an artistic practice as we’d conceive of it today, and more in the vein of an artisan crafting a product, whether “artistic” or not (quote by Paul Veyne on p. 127)

-- Hadot’s criticism of Foucault on the arts of existence: in the ancient world these practices were not conceived as a kind of artistic preoccupation with self, but a way to recognize one’s kinship with a larger cosmos (Davidson 137)

-- Davidson: the ancients did not practice the sort of “psychologization or estheticization that shrinks the world to the size of oneself” that one might get from Foucault’s texts (137)

3. The arts of existence and Nietzsche’s “demon” from *The Gay Science* 341 (Davidson 139-141)

-- Davidson suggests that this is a kind of meditation that can change the way one thinks, like the practice of meditating on death in some ancient schools of philosophy

-- How might this passage be read in this way?