

## Foucault on the Care of the Self as an Ethical Project and a Spiritual Goal

Richard White

Published online: 17 September 2014  
© Springer Science+Business Media Dordrecht 2014

**Abstract** In this paper, I examine Foucault's ideas concerning the care of the self. What exactly is this ideal that Foucault describes in his last two books? Do these books represent a break or a continuation with the earlier writings on knowledge and power? Most important, I consider whether the care of the self could ever be a significant ethical ideal given some of the objections that have been raised against Foucault's position. I also look at the care of the self as the focus of Foucault's own views on spiritual life. I argue that Foucault's later work offers the basis for a secular or non-theistic spirituality which is especially relevant today.

**Keywords** Foucault · care of the self · Ethics · Spirituality

Michel Foucault opens new perspectives on the practices of surveillance and normalization that increasingly organize our lives. By casting light on the operations of power/knowledge which are usually kept hidden, Foucault also liberates us from the ordinary narratives concerning reason and human progress which once held the status of established truths. In, *Madness and Civilization*, *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality: Volume One*, Foucault speaks out for the dispossessed of history—the mad, the criminal, and the deviant—and he elaborates the ways in which we are produced and organized as docile bodies, or responsible subjects, in the prison house of modern society. Foucault's writing is both powerful and subversive; and by making us aware of the *genealogy* of truth, he creates a space in which life is no longer encumbered by the meanings it had previously acquired.

At the same time, Foucault remains cautious about the possibility of human liberation. In *The History of Sexuality: Volume One*, for example, he seems to challenge the idea that human liberation—in this case sexual liberation—is even

---

R. White (✉)  
Department of Philosophy, Creighton University, Omaha, NE, USA  
e-mail: rwhite@creighton.edu

possible, if it is only a reversal of perspectives that remains within the orbit of what it seeks to escape from. Witness the case of “Walter,” the anonymous 19th century author who wrote a multi-volume account of his own sexual life, “My Secret Life,” listing all of his sexual conquests in great detail. Was he really liberated and free, or isn’t Foucault right to suspect that “Walter’s” sexual affirmation and his readiness to tell everything was the effect of a much deeper structure of domination and control (see Foucault 1990: 21–23)? In the West, since at least the time of Christianity, sex has functioned as our basic truth and the key to who we are; and repression and liberation, prudery and pornography, all belong to the same insistent regime. It is not clear how we should deal with this impasse, for if every response to power is always already circumscribed by it, then, as many commentators have pointed out, there is no real freedom and resistance is pointless (see for example: Taylor 1986; Habermas 1992). And the *spiritual* life—which involves turning away from ordinary material concerns to matters of ultimate concern—can only be viewed with suspicion as another form of imaginary liberation.

But this is not the end of the story, for in Foucault’s final published works—*The Use of Pleasure* and *The Care of the Self*—the discussion of power and knowledge is supplemented by “the care of the self” as the focus of concern. Looking at ancient Greece and the later Hellenistic/Roman period, Foucault shows how the discourse of sex is part of a larger formation that was centered on self-cultivation, or the care of the self, rather than adherence to strict moral codes. Even though Foucault talks about the possibility of freedom in this context, however, it is still a limited kind of freedom for it involves the intricacies of self-fashioning and creating oneself as a work of art, and on the face of it this is a pale substitute for social and political action. But as we will see, the “care of the self” is a significant ethical ideal which also forms the basis of Foucault’s understanding of spiritual life.

In this paper, I examine Foucault’s ideas concerning the care of the self. What exactly is this ideal that Foucault describes in his last two books? Do these books represent a break or a continuation with the earlier writings on knowledge and power? And most important, I consider whether the care of the self could ever be a significant ethical or spiritual value given some of the objections that have been raised against Foucault’s position. In brief, I want to ask whether the care of the self is an ancient ideal for modern times, or something we can simply forget. First, I review some relevant themes in *The Use of Pleasure* and *The Care of the Self* to illuminate the underlying context of Foucault’s ideas. Next, I look at three key objections to the care of the self as a significant ethical value. Finally, I look at the care of the self as the focus of Foucault’s views on spiritual life: I argue that Foucault’s later work offers the basis for a secular or non-theistic spirituality which is especially relevant today. This last point is important—most discussions of Foucault have failed to deal with the positive perspective on spirituality that is found in many of his later writings. This essay attempts to say more on this theme.

1. Foucault’s thinking on the care of the self is contained in numerous interviews that he gave, the transcripts of several courses he taught at the Collège de France, and the second and third volumes of his history of sexuality that were published just weeks before his death in 1984. We shall give priority to these books, although Foucault’s lectures and interviews will help to clarify his position.

In *The Use of Pleasure*, Foucault focuses on sex in ancient Greece in the fourth century BCE, and he singles out three themes for particular attention: *regimen*, *household management*, and *the courting of young men*. According to Foucault these were problematic fields that provoked considerable anxiety as well as an immense amount of reflection and medical/philosophical advice. Writing about sexual regimen, for example, Foucault describes all the different strictures associated with the sexual act including climate, the seasons, time of day, food, and so on. But he notes:

The preoccupation with regimen was never focused on the form of the acts: nothing was said about the types of sexual relations, nothing about the “natural” position or about unseemly practices, nothing about masturbation, not anything about the questions—which would later become so important—of coitus interruptus or methods of contraception. The *aphrodisia* were considered in the aggregate, as an activity whose significance was not determined by the various forms it could take; one needed to ask oneself only whether the activity ought to take place, how frequently, and in what context. (1986: 114)

Foucault argues that even though sex was highly circumscribed within this society by medical and moral authorities, the intention was not to forbid certain practices, but to cultivate a harmonious relationship to sexual life through the proper care of the self: “The sexual act did not occasion anxiety because it was associated with evil but because it disturbed and threatened the individual’s relationship with himself and his integrity as an ethical subject in the making; if it was not properly measured and distributed, it carried the threat of a breaking forth of involuntary forces, a lessening of energy, and death without honorable descendants” (1986: 136). Hence, we could say that the attention paid to sex was part of the more inclusive care of the self whose goal was something like temperance or the achievement of self-control. And all of this was for the good of the community as well as the perfection of the individual self.

Foucault defines the care of the self in terms of “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” (1986: 10). Perhaps the significance of this ideal remains contestable from the modern point of view, but it is a value we recognize as soon as it is pointed out to us. In the *Apology*, for example, Socrates berates his fellow Athenians because they don’t take care of themselves: “Best of men,” he asks, “aren’t you ashamed of caring about acquiring the greatest possible amount of money, together with reputation and honours, while not caring about, even sparing a thought for, wisdom and truth, and making your soul as good as possible?” (Plato 2010: 48). The same idea is prevalent in later Hellenistic and Roman thought, where the imperative of caring for oneself became so widespread it was, according to Foucault, “a truly general cultural phenomenon” (2005: 9). In this respect, Foucault is drawn to discussion of different spiritual practices of the time, including: examining oneself at the beginning and the end of each day; using reason to overcome one’s own fear of death; or anticipating the death of loved ones in order to

undermine grief in advance. Early Christians also emphasized the necessity of self-cultivation through different spiritual exercises. As Foucault notes: “What is called Christian interiority is a particular mode of relationship with oneself, comprising precise forms of attention, concern, decipherment, verbalization, confession, self-accusation, struggle against temptation, renunciation, spiritual combat, and so on. And what is designated as the ‘exteriority’ of ancient reality also implies the principle of an elaboration of self, albeit in a very different form” (1986: 63). The difference here is between the ancient *askesis*, or spiritual discipline of the self, which aimed at self-cultivation and the achievement of a beautiful life, and related Christian practices which were ordered in terms of self-abnegation for the sake of personal salvation; but both are versions of the care of the self as Foucault understands it.

For Foucault, a more significant distinction concerns the difference between these early technologies of the self—Greek, Roman, or Christian—and the moral codes that have more narrowly structured personal existence especially since the beginning of the modern period. Ethics can be grasped in terms of moral laws, or it can focus on the virtuous behavior of individuals. As Foucault notes:

In certain moralities the main emphasis is placed on the code, on its systematicity, its richness, its capacity to adjust to every possible case and to embrace every area of behavior... the ethical subject refers his conduct to a law, or a set of laws, to which he must submit at the risk of committing offences that may make him liable to punishment... On the other hand, it is easy to conceive of moralities in which the strong and dynamic element is to be sought in the forms of subjectivation and the practices of the self. In this case, the system of codes may be rather rudimentary. Their exact observance may be relatively unimportant, at least compared with what is required of the individual in the relationship which he has to himself. (1986: 29f.)

Today, we are so accustomed to thinking about sex and morality in terms of rules and prohibitions that we often misapprehend the care of the self or we reject it as an *ethical* possibility since it is thought to be “purely aesthetic”. In this respect, Foucault’s final works recall Nietzsche’s *On the Genealogy of Morals*, for in each of these books the author seeks to recover a forgotten possibility of ethics—the account of “master morality” in Nietzsche’s case, or the care of the self in the case of Foucault—as a way of reorganizing our thinking concerning moral life (see Nietzsche 1969: 24–56). Thus, the care of the self offers a compelling way of thinking about morality and it avoids the abstract legislation of principles which reduces ethics to an impersonal theme. It is an ethics which focusses on character rather than rules, and in this respect, the return to the care of the self parallels the emergence of “virtue ethics” and the rejection of “morality as law” by many in the Anglo-American philosophical tradition (see for example: Anscombe 1997; MacIntyre 1984; Levy 2004). Like Nietzsche, Foucault focuses on a possibility of the past in order to inspire the present and even the future of humankind.

Foucault’s last book, *The Care of the Self*, looks more closely at the Hellenistic and Roman world of the second century A.D. Once again, the focus is on sexual life, and the need for self-mastery in this aspect of our being. But Foucault notes a shift

in the way that sexual issues and themes are now articulated. For the ancient Greeks, the love of boys was considered natural because any beautiful work of nature whether male or female was attractive and necessarily evoked desire. The problem was that highborn men were supposed to practice self-mastery, and to be a ruler over others presupposed that one was capable of practicing control over oneself. Likewise, the male was supposed to be active and masterful in all things, but if the boy yielded to his lover, his future standing as a ruler over others was compromised. In *The Care of the Self*, Foucault claims that by the second century, the problem concerning boys was no longer as significant or as pressing, and the most important issue, which Stoic philosophers addressed, concerned the proper relationship between husband and wife. For the early Greeks, such a relationship involved a simple division of labor in which each had their own appropriate role to play. But for the Romans, the goal was to establish a loving and harmonious union between the two parties who were viewed as partners in a significant ethical relation:

With regard to wives and to the problematization of marriage, the modification mainly concerns the valorization of the conjugal bond and the dual relation that constitutes it; the husband's right conduct and the moderation he needs to enjoin on himself are not justified merely by considerations of status, but by the nature of the relationship, its universal form and the mutual obligations that derive from it. Finally, as regards boys, the need for abstinence is less and less perceived as a way of giving the highest spiritual values to the forms of love, and more and more as the sign of an imperfection that is specific to sexual activity. (1988a: 238)

Foucault's genealogy of sexual themes seems to underline the sense in which there is nothing "natural" here, only a shifting network of different ideas and anxieties that help to create the individuals who are shaped by these concerns. In classical antiquity, such themes were problematized in very different ways than they are today; and by showing this, Foucault's final works seem to repeat the main thrust of *On the Genealogy of Morals* by affirming the historical determination of all our moral ideals and concepts. In his lectures on Governmentality and subsequent lectures at the Collège de France, Foucault remains pessimistic about "states of domination," and the subtle technologies of subjectification which characterize modern life. But at the same time, he does see the spiritual possibilities of philosophy and other ways of life in terms of human *freedom*. As he notes in one of his final interviews: "In its critical aspect...philosophy is that which calls into question domination at every level and in every form in which it exists, whether political, economic, sexual, institutional, or what have you. To a certain extent, this critical function of philosophy derives from the Socratic injunction "[t]ake care of yourself," in other words, "[m]ake freedom your foundation, through the mastery of yourself" (1997b: 300f.).

In *The Care of the Self* and *The Use of Pleasure*, Foucault describes some of the exercises that Stoics and other philosophers used in order to shape the self and to maintain its equilibrium. He also notes that Christianity included a variety of spiritual practices, for: "*askesis* in its different forms (training, meditation, tests of thinking, examination of conscience, control of representations) eventually became

a subject matter for teaching and constituted one of the basic instruments used in the direction of souls” (1986: 74). Under Christianity, however, sex received a negative connotation as an evil that signified our fallen nature. Foucault suggests elsewhere that in the Middle Ages, sexual practices, desires, and pleasures were codified in much greater detail, in confessors’ manuals and other works. And he claims that these matters were gradually absorbed into a moral calculus that determined the rightness or wrongness of every action, as well as every desire and feeling (Foucault 1990: 18).<sup>1</sup> In the first volume of the *History of Sexuality*, Foucault argues that the Counter Reformation in particular inspired “meticulous rules of self-examination” which led to the increasing problematization of this aspect of our lives:

According to the new pastoral, sex must not be named imprudently, but its aspects, its correlations, and its effects must be pursued down to their slenderest ramifications: a shadow in a daydream, an image too slowly dispelled, a badly exorcised complicity between the body’s mechanics and the mind’s complacency: everything had to be told. A twofold evolution tended to make the flesh into the root of all evil, shifting the most important moment of transgression from the act itself to the stirrings—so difficult to perceive and formulate—of desire. (1990: 19)

Sex was also a point of concern and anxiety in classical antiquity, but Foucault insists that it was never regarded as an evil in itself. In fact, different forms of love, including the love of boys, were not considered wrong for as long as they did not lead to self-abandonment and the failure to maintain self-mastery in one’s life.

2. The care of the self is an ancient ideal, but to what extent can it continue to inspire modern life? In *The Use of Pleasure*, Foucault introduces a four-point framework for apprehending different ethical formations in terms of their *ethical substance*, *mode of subjection*, *ethical work*, and the *telos* of the subject (1986: 26–28). The ethical substance could include pleasures, desires, or actions; the mode of subjection—the reason for being moral—was the care of the self rather than God’s will or the necessity of the moral code; the ethical work involved spiritual practices such as writing, meditation, self-examination, and thought experiment, etc.; while the telos of all this was not salvation or fame, but living a life that was worthy of being honored and held in memory by others. Now this framework suggests that while the different moments of an ethical formation must influence and illuminate each other, they can also be separated from this total context to be considered by themselves. Hence, it can certainly be held that Foucault has no desire to return to the ancient world and he describes the gross inequality of this age, and especially the subordination of women as “quite disgusting” (1997a: 258). But there is *something* about the care of the self that he finds inspiring and perhaps even capable of enhancing our own lives in the present: today, the existence of God and the “fact” of the moral law are by no means accepted by everyone, and one of the problems with ethics in modern times—noted by Nietzsche, Anscombe, and others—is that it seems to diminish us instead of inspiring us. Morality is now the

<sup>1</sup> See also Foucault’s discussion of Gregory of Nyssa’s treatise “De Virginitate” and his interpretation of the parable of the drachma (1988: 21).

sense of duty that weighs us down, and something that is felt to be *outside* of us instead of an inner necessity. As Foucault explains:

Moving from Antiquity to Christianity, one passes from a morality that was essentially a quest for a personal ethic to a morality that was obedience to a system of rules. If I have taken such an interest in Antiquity, that is because, for a whole series of reasons, the idea of morality as obedience to a code of rules is now in the process of disappearing or has already disappeared. And this absence of morality calls for—must call for an aesthetic for existence (cited by Paul Veyne 2010: 125f.).

By framing the opposition between the two perspectives in this way, Foucault seems to imply that the one is an antidote for the other. And so we ask, what is the special force of the care of the self within the contemporary world? And even though it is an ancient ideal, could it renew life by inspiring individual fulfillment within the present? Also, what is the *spiritual* significance of the care of the self?

We shall return to these questions later. But first, we will consider three significant objections to Foucault's account which can help to specify his position more clearly. These are objections that are frequently brought up by Foucault's interlocutors and critics, and it is important to respond to them here: (1) the ontological objection: the care of the self is a self-regarding ideal that emphasizes the fabrication of the self as something like a fixed work of art, but this is a fundamental misapprehension of the nature of selfhood. (2) The ethical objection: the whole orientation of the care of the self is narcissistic, and far from being an alternative ethical ideal, it appears to undermine the basis of ethics which is first and foremost the care of others. And (3) the historical objection: Foucault's final work is simply a misreading of ancient texts and ideas, and it is pointless to return to Greece and Rome to resolve contemporary problems.—By responding to these three objections, it will be possible to bring out the strength of Foucault's position and the significance of the care of the self as a "remedy" for modern life.

In describing the care of the self, Foucault uses phrases like "an aesthetics of existence," "being the artist of one's own life," or "living one's life as if it were a work of art". But is this anything more than self-cultivation, or "striking a pose," along the lines of Baudelaire or Oscar Wilde? Foucault himself is very much aware of the possibility of misinterpretation here and at the beginning of his lectures on *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, he warns us of the negative interpretation of the care of the self as a kind of escapism from life into the despair of total self-involvement:

All these injunctions to exalt oneself, to devote oneself to oneself, to turn in on oneself, to offer service to oneself, sound to our ears rather like—what? Like a sort of challenge and defiance, a desire for a radical ethical change, a sort of moral dandyism, the assertion-challenge of a fixed aesthetic and individual stage. Or else they sound to us like a somewhat melancholy and sad expression of the withdrawal of the individual who is unable to hold onto and keep firmly before his eyes, in his grasp and for himself, a collective morality (that of the city-state, for example), and who, faced with the disintegration of this

collective morality, has naught else to do but attend to himself. So, the immediate, initial connotations and overtones of all these expressions direct us away from thinking about these precepts in positive terms. (2005: 12f.)

Foucault is right to think that “the care of the self” suggests narcissism. But it also seems to imply that the self is a fixed object, like a house or a car that must be cared for; and this provokes the ontological objection. In one interview, for example, Foucault suggests that the self could be viewed as an “art object”: “But couldn’t everyone’s life become a work of art?” he wonders, “[w]hy should the lamp or the house be an art object but not our life?” (1997a: 261). Now talking about the care of *the* self certainly suggests that the self is a pre-existing thing, and at first glance this seems reasonable. For example, we talk about “being true to ourselves,” and this implies that the self—or the true self—is something deep inside of us that we tend to ignore. Indeed, we are at risk of being “inauthentic” if we don’t try to be ourselves. This line of thinking recalls the famous passage in the *Enneads* where Plotinus compares the care of the self to the sculptor who releases the beautiful form that is already present within the stone: philosophy is therapy, and the goal of philosophy according to Plotinus is to recover one’s true self:

How then can you see the sort of beauty a good soul has? Go back into yourself and look; and if you do not yet see yourself beautiful, then, just as someone making a statue which has to be beautiful cuts away here and polishes there and makes one part smooth and clears another till he has given his statue a beautiful face, so you too must cut away excess and straighten the crooked and clear the dark and make it bright, and never stop “working on your statue” till the divine glory of virtue shines out on you, till you see “self-mastery enthroned upon its holy seat” (1966: 13).

This is a powerful image. But in spite of Plotinus’s intention, the passage invites us to identify “ourselves” with the *activity* of the “sculptor self,” as well as the “statue self” that the sculptor creates. The truth is that we are both active and passive in relation to ourselves. In fact, the self *is* this self-relationship; and this means that self-cultivation has to be an ongoing process and “the self” is *not* a separate, self-contained thing. Foucault understands as much, and for him the care of the self is a continual movement of self-appropriation and self-fashioning; but not the recovery of a fixed self that already exists, at some level, as my own unique possibility of being.<sup>2</sup>

Here, the example of Buddhism is illuminating. Buddhism is a religion, but it is also a practical philosophy which involves the cultivation of positive feelings and emotions such as love, compassion and mindfulness, and the avoidance of negative feelings and emotions including anger or hatred. This is achieved through various spiritual exercises including meditation and self-examination, and setting intentions for oneself as in Stoicism or other schools of ancient philosophy. Buddhism encourages the continual care of the self and self-enhancement toward the good, but at the same time Buddhists deny the reality of a fixed self as an error of thinking.

<sup>2</sup> For further discussion of this, see McGushin (2011: 127–142); O’Leary (2002).



There is no self. “The self” is just a convenient fiction—from which it follows that the care of the self does not have to be understood in terms of self-discovery or acquiring an authentic self that would be our ultimate truth. On the contrary, as Foucault points out, living your life as if it were a work of art involves self-cultivation where “the self” must be a continual work in progress. There is no authentic or hidden self that we are supposed to uncover, and no determinate ideals of sovereignty that are bound to constrain our thinking in advance.

How is this relevant to us? In his late essay, “What is Enlightenment,” Foucault quotes Baudelaire to the effect that “modernity does not liberate man in his own being,” in fact the opposite is the case: as Foucault has shown, in modern society the structures of power/knowledge create docile subjects whose freedom is narrowly regulated by contemporary norms. Through all the disciplinary procedures of modern life, in schools, prisons, factories, and offices—as well as through advertising, television and other media, etc.—we are trained to be ourselves, continually organized, conditioned, and corrected to be normal. In this context, more rules and more laws cannot help us; life is already weighed down by rules and spiritually diminished, and our only recourse is to refuse the identities that have been foisted upon us and create ourselves anew. Now in his essay, Foucault notes that: “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 a man in his own being’; it compels him to face the task of producing himself” (1997c: 312). This is the same ideal of self-fashioning that Foucault describes in his final works as “the care of the self,” and it suggests that we must reimagine and transform the present, including ourselves and our fixed ways of thinking; for the moral rules and regulations that we once lived by are no longer quite as applicable or binding. Hence, it is important to repeat that Foucault’s main concern is not to return us to the ancients—about whom he is quite ambivalent—but to shake us free from the subject-ivation of *modern* life which produces the individual as a limited being. And the final goal is simply to live a meaningful life, following the ancient philosophers who practiced self-cultivation not for the sake of salvation or earthly rewards, but just to achieve a beautiful existence. As Foucault notes in *The Use of Pleasure*:

Therefore in this form of morality, the individual did not make himself into an ethical subject by universalizing the principles that informed his action; on the contrary, he did so by means of an attitude and a quest that individualized his action, modulated it, and perhaps even gave him a special brilliance by virtue of the rational and deliberate structure his action manifested. (1986: 62)

Clearly, this is not to be understood in a narrow aesthetic sense, or in opposition to moral considerations; for it is a life that is unique, attractive, and compelling to others on a variety of different levels. None of this is formalized, however, and according to Foucault there is no blueprint or set of conditions for what it means to care for the self in any precise way. For Foucault, the care of the self is an empowering ideal that we may find ourselves compelled to respond to.

But there is another difficulty: for even if we accept that the care of the self offers an alternative way of thinking about morality—against codified ethics and the

morality of law—there is still the problem that the care of the self is all about oneself as opposed to others; and those others, it is said, should be the primary concern of morality. This is the ethical objection, and Foucault’s response is very clear: even though the care of the self is necessarily self-oriented, it is not a form of self-indulgence. For the ancient Greeks, the care of the self as *sophrosyne* was regarded as an indispensable condition of public life because it was understood that whoever could not control himself, like the tyrant in Plato’s *Republic*, could never legitimately rule over others. And the man whose passion for boys or women was unconstrained could never be the ruler of a family or a household. In the case of the later Romans, the care of the self involved knowing and fulfilling one’s duties toward others, including one’s spouse, children, slaves, and fellow citizens. As Foucault remarks in one of his final interviews:

But if you take proper care of yourself, that is, if you know ontologically what you are, if you know what you are capable of, if you know what it means for you to be a citizen of a city, to be the master of a household in an *oikos*, if you know what things you should and should not fear, if you know what you can reasonably hope for and, on the other hand, what things should not matter to you, if you know, finally that you should not be afraid of—if you know all this, you cannot abuse your power over others. Thus, there is no danger. (1997b: 288)

So it is not that the care of the self stands opposed to the care of others, for the one evokes and implies the other. Indeed, Foucault argues that the care of the self is ontologically prior to the concern for others. This does not mean that the self has a higher value than anything else—including one’s family, friends, fellow citizens, or even the state. It simply means that both logically and psychologically, the care of the self is a precondition for the care of other people. Foucault affirms that caring for others follows naturally from caring for oneself because one cares for oneself as a parent, citizen, friend, or member of the human community (in the case of Stoics). And in promoting our own individual virtues we are thereby enhancing our connection to the community and to others. This may seem problematic, especially when the moral priority of the other is frequently affirmed—and here we think of writers like Levinas who insist upon the primacy of “the other”. But there is another strand in western philosophy that challenges this perspective, and this is what Foucault affirms.

Kant, for example, recognizes the priority of individual sovereignty when he points out that autonomy is a precondition for ethics, and that our duties to ourselves are logically prior to our duties toward others. As he comments in his *Lectures on Ethics*: “The autocracy of the human mind, with all the powers of the human soul in so far as they have a bearing on morality, is the principle of our duties towards ourselves, and on that very account of all other duties” (1978: 142). As an example, he claims in the same work that telling the truth is primarily a duty that we owe to ourselves: “It follows that the prior condition of our duties to others is our duty to ourselves... a lie is more a violation of one’s duty to oneself than of one’s duty to others” (1978: 118). For Kant, the imperative of autonomy can be understood as the original calling which is supposed to summon each individual to the task of

sovereignty, for it commands us to take command of ourselves. In his own essay, “An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?” he insists: “Sapere Aude!” which means: dare to know, “have courage to use your understanding,” and make your existence your own (1983: 41). Indeed it can be said that it is only through the possibility of acting in one’s own name that the individual can ever emerge as a specific or a singular individual in any significant sense. In this respect, something like autonomy must be regarded as foundational for the establishment of ethics or any system of values which requires the accountability of the individual subject. Or as Foucault himself puts it: “Care for others should not be put before the care of oneself. The care of the self is ethically prior in that the relationship with oneself is ontologically prior” (1997b: 287).

As we have seen, the care of the self suggests a return to virtue ethics, in which the cultivation of specific virtues—including courage, justice, temperance, and wisdom—is a form of self-fashioning that helps to orient our basic attitudes toward other people. This is “self-regarding” but not necessarily *selfish*, since it is the necessary condition for remaining open and available to others. Significantly, for Foucault the care of the self as self-formation is also a space of freedom in which we gather ourselves to live and act according to our own will. Foucault is not saying that we are free to choose anything we want to, and he has nothing but scorn for existentialism which emphasizes the burden of our absolute metaphysical freedom. We are not “condemned to be free,” as Sartre would have it, since freedom is, more realistically, something that we must cultivate through the attentive care of the self.<sup>3</sup> It is also a kind of “concrete liberty” which reacts against the context of the moment by affirming it or rejecting it—like the soldier who chooses to obey or disobey orders, or the believer who chooses the explanation of faith over other possibilities. In this sense, Foucault points out that the individual must shape himself in terms of “the models that he finds in his culture and are proposed, suggested, imposed upon him by his culture, his society, and his social group” (1997b: 291). But this is the point at which we *also* affirm our freedom as we constitute ourselves in response to all that is fixed and given.

Finally, the historical objection: some classical scholars have rejected Foucault’s discussion of the ancient world as misleading or inaccurate, although others have been more sympathetic to Foucault’s position.<sup>4</sup> Foucault admits that he is not a classicist but he has tried to make sense out of a huge amount of classical material, and he offers an interpretation that highlights some aspects that are not usually given prominence. Once again, the most obvious parallel is with Nietzsche. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche infuriated classical scholars by proposing a new account of Greek tragedy structured in terms of the “Dionysian” and the “Apollonian” as explanatory categories that help to illuminate the Greek world. But his ultimate aim was to inspire his readers toward a different kind of future than the one entailed by the “wretched contentment” or mediocrity that seemed to prevail in his own time. By looking back to the past, Nietzsche sought to recover the possibility of a higher kind of future. As he comments in his own *Untimely Meditation* on history: “When

<sup>3</sup> On the complex relationship between Foucault and existentialism, see Seitz (2012).

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, the discussion of this point in two recent review essays: Boyle (2012); Karras (2000).

the past speaks it always speaks as an oracle, only if you are an architect of the future and know the present will you understand it” (1983: 94). Foucault’s recovery of significant themes in Greek and Roman life has a similar kind of goal—the unsettling of established ways of thinking, and the emergence of a new perspective that casts doubt on the legality of the code or the morality of law as the only *ethical* possibility. This new perspective offers a compelling account of the past and it elaborates another way of thinking about moral life; and in this way it allows us to move beyond our present self-understanding to affirm the possibility of human freedom and a spiritual life.

For some commentators, Foucault’s reading of ancient texts is compatible with his original discussion of power/knowledge and it provides an account of what was missing in his earlier work—namely, the subject as co-creator of her own life, and the possibility of personal transformation. In different interviews, Foucault himself points out that after his early attempts to understand knowledge, discursive formations, and the functioning of power, the individual subject remained undertheorized in his work; and it is this that he turns to in his final published writings—*The Use of Pleasure* and *The Care of the Self*. Hence it can be argued that these books do not represent a betrayal of his fundamental insight (on power/knowledge) but the completion of a framework of understanding that allows us to grasp the standpoint of modern life. At the same time, I think we may want to go further and say that Foucault’s later works involve a development—if not a reversal—that goes beyond the apparent dead end of his earlier works. In *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality: Volume One*, the individual subject is posited as a fixed determination and a product of the forces that create it. Personal identity is itself a constraint and a form of subject-ion—and hence the doubt concerning “Walter,” the author of *My Secret Life*. But in his final books, essays, and interviews, Foucault elaborates a space of personal freedom—through the care of the self—which allows us to some extent to challenge the identities that are foisted upon us, and to re-invent ourselves. For when the subject becomes aware of the power relations that surround and threaten her, she also becomes aware of her own possibilities of action and response. And this inspires the possibility of self-transformation and spiritual renewal as a movement out of the “cave” of received ideas and goals. Freedom is not absolute, and there is no necessity of social or political progress. But as the Greeks and Romans understood, we are free within certain parameters—according to the Stoics, some things are up to us while other things are not up to us—and by reconnecting with the care of the self we can recover the possibilities of “autarchy,” “autonomy,” or “self-mastery,” which are the conditions of freedom as much as its fulfillment. This is also the opening of spiritual life as the quest for a more purposeful existence that affirms a sense of belonging, as opposed to separation and death.

3. We have now looked at some objections to Foucault’s account of the care of the self. We have evaluated these objections, and I think we will conclude that the care of the self is to be seriously considered as a moral ideal which remains relevant to contemporary life. But as well as being an ethical project, the care of the self is also a *spiritual* goal and it is this that we must now discuss. In his last two books, Foucault treats the care of the self as an ethical concept, but in various interviews

and essays, he refers increasingly to the care of the self as a spiritual undertaking and a key to spiritual life. And this makes sense: ethics can be considered as one part of human life involving our duties and responsibilities to self and others. But spirituality affirms the wholeness of each human existence—not just our ethical behavior, but the commitment of our whole being to a higher reality or truth; and this is what drives Foucault’s account of the care of the self. Of course, much depends on how we determine the nature of spirituality, but as a provisional guide I suggest that a spiritual life will include at least three different aspects.<sup>5</sup> First, a spiritual life involves a movement away from the ordinary goals and preoccupations of everyday life, such as wealth, power, and status, and openness to higher values and truths that make life more fulfilling. This is not avoiding life, but rejecting all those received ideas that are inherently life-denying. Second, a spiritual life involves some kind of quest or journey toward the truth and “ultimate” meaning, and like every important quest, this may be quite challenging since it calls one’s self into question. Third, a spiritual life is an integrated life that involves our whole self; it is not a hobby or a secondary interest apart from the rest of our existence. And the individual who is spiritually committed is devoted to the higher values that he or she feels compelled to follow and sometimes even die for.—We can now gauge to what extent Foucault’s account of the care of the self follows a spiritual trajectory, using these three determinations as our guide.

First, the questioning of received ideas and everyday values. Following Pierre Hadot, Foucault argues that ancient philosophy is all about living one’s life in the right way, and it is certainly not limited to intellectual speculation. In *The Use of Pleasure* and *The Care of the Self*, Foucault offers sustained discussions of several ancient philosophers, including Socrates, Marcus Aurelius, and Epictetus who devoted themselves to living wisely and well. He also makes it clear that thinkers like Socrates rejected the everyday values of the cave because they considered the care of the self or soul as the most important value of all—more important than fame, money, and even personal safety or death. In his later work, especially, Foucault tends to conflate the “ethical” and the “spiritual” and the care of the self becomes the point at which both of these emerge. As he comments in one interview: “By spirituality I mean—but I’m not sure this definition can hold for very long—the subject’s attainment of a certain mode of being and the transformation that subject must carry out on itself to attain this mode of being. I believe that spirituality and philosophy were identical or nearly identical in ancient spirituality” (1997b: 294). Foucault’s concern with spirituality in his final courses at the Collège de France gives rise to some very powerful analyses of *parrhesia* or “fearless speech” as an ideal in Cynic, Socratic, and Stoic philosophy. Today we would talk about “speaking truth to power,” but this involves the same kind of courage that allowed Socrates to speak his mind to the authorities; or Diogenes, refusing to be in awe of any human being, who asked Alexander to *move out of the sun*. As Kant reminds us, telling the truth is an ethical requirement; but at the same time, devoting oneself to the truth involves accepting truth as a *spiritual* value, or something that is greater

---

<sup>5</sup> For further discussion of the nature of spirituality along these lines, see Sheldrake (2012), White (2013), and Gottlieb (2013).

than we are and that we belong to. Being ready to die for the truth is to affirm a spiritual perspective on human existence, and it implies that a spiritual life is possible. It is not an “illusory” form of liberation, which we might have expected from Foucault’s earlier work.

Second, the individual quest for higher truths and values: as we have seen, philosophers like Socrates were prepared to die for their values, and they made their own personal safety a secondary consideration in affirming the truth, however inconvenient, to others. The Stoics and Epicureans offered compelling philosophies to live by, but as Hadot points out, each of the ancient philosophical schools had its own ideal, and individuals were supposed to overcome personal desires for the sake of an impersonal goal that was the same for everyone (see for example, Hadot 1995). Of course, this does not fit with Foucault’s account of self-cultivation, for as soon as we insist on fixed goals and *rules* for self-formation we move closer to the universal morality of law that he wanted to escape from. In the end, Foucault says that all of this work must remain an *experiment*, to determine what is still possible in modern life, and to push the limits of our understanding of it. And such an experiment may or may not be successful. But he also insists that the goal of “truth-seekers” is not just to know more things. It is to recover the openness of the world and a sense of belonging to *the truth*, which can effect a personal transformation. “After all,” he asks, in a passage that is frequently cited,

What would be the value of the passion and knowledge if it resulted only in a certain amount of knowledgeable-ness and not, in one way or another, and to the extent possible, in the knower’s straying afield of himself? There are times in life when the question of knowing if one can think differently than one thinks, and perceive differently than one sees, is absolutely necessary if one is to go on looking and reflecting at all. (1986: 8)

Foucault was critical of the ancients; but he was more critical of the moral codes that undermine individual sovereignty and organize our reflections in advance; and he was profoundly concerned with the anomie of modern life: we have become habituated to ourselves. We have become like the products that we happily consume, and in this respect we are losing our freedom and any possibility of what he refers to as our “spiritual life”. But in this respect, the *renewal* of the care of the self is a return to the original goal of philosophy, which is to cultivate a way of life through questioning, reflection, and various spiritual exercises. And this is an “experimental” life, which is inspired by a basic trust in existence, and it is certainly worth living.

Third, the spiritual life is an integrated life, which means that it involves the ongoing goal of personal transformation as the focus of our existence. This would include the intellectual, but also the emotional, physical, and other aspects of the self that must be cultivated and trained from one day to the next as our own life’s work. On this point, Foucault comments suggestively in one of his final interviews: “Among the cultural inventions of mankind there is a treasury of devices, techniques, ideas, procedures, and so on, that cannot exactly be reactivated but at least constitute, or help to constitute, a certain point of view which can be very useful as a tool for analyzing what’s going on now—and to change it” (1997a: 261).

The treasury of devices that Foucault describes would certainly include many of the practices that are associated with Buddhism, Christianity, and ancient philosophical traditions such as Stoicism, Cynicism, Epicureanism, and the rest. And they would include meditation, self-examination, the anticipation of death, prayer, and other ways of setting purposeful intentions for oneself. It is certainly possible that such devices can be co-opted by the truth regime of power. But in his later writings and courses, Foucault is clearly inspired by their liberatory potential as spiritual practices that help to disengage the individual from the received ideas and models of existence that he or she is supposed to subscribe to.

Thus, Foucault elaborates the care of the self as an ethical project while at the same time he also comes to think of the care of the self as a significant spiritual goal. And insofar as his discussion conforms to the general account of spirituality that I have given, I think we are bound to view the care of the self as an important spiritual ideal. In recent years, spiritual concerns have become more prominent than before. Many people now enjoy a comfortable lifestyle with abundant material possessions, but they find that their lives are impoverished. They do not possess the meaning that they wish they had and so they search for spiritual meaning. But even though they search for a spiritual path, they are often less interested in traditional religions including Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, because these traditions have strict faith requirements and seem to offer less possibility for personal experiment and growth. Today, it is not unusual for people to describe themselves as “spiritual but not religious,” and this points towards the need for a non-theistic or secular spirituality; one that would have more appeal as traditional religions decline or adapt themselves to globalization. In his discussion of the care of the self, Foucault develops the outlines of a “philosophical spirituality” which could also become the basis of a more popular spiritual expression, especially since it encourages spiritual growth and transformation without insisting on fixed religious forms.

By opening new perspectives on the forms of our experience and understanding, and challenging us to think differently, Foucault’s work promotes a kind of joy, for it liberates us from received ideas and fixed determinations, and in this way it creates a space of freedom. Now at last, “all the daring of the lover of knowledge is permitted again,” as Foucault recovers the care of the self as the impulse behind philosophy and the origin of our spiritual life.

## References

- Anscombe, E. (1997). Modern moral philosophy. In Roger Crisp & Michael Slote (Eds.), *Virtue Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Boyle, B. (2012). “Foucault among the classicists, again”. *Foucault Studies*, no.13, 138–156.
- Foucault, M. (1986). *The use of pleasure*, (R. Hurley, Trans). New York: Vintage.
- Foucault, M. (1988a). *The care of the self*, (R. Hurley, Trans). New York: Vintage.
- Foucault, M. (1988b). “Technologies of the self”. In Hutton, P. H., Gutman, H., & Martin, L.H. (Eds.): *Technologies of the self: A seminar with Michel Foucault* (pp. 16–49). Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Foucault, M. (1990). *The History of sexuality, Vol.1: An introduction*, (R. Hurley, Trans). New York: Vintage.

- Foucault, M. (1997a). On the genealogy of ethics. In *Ethics, subjectivity and truth*. New York: The New Press.
- Foucault, M. (1997b). The ethics of concern for self as a practice of freedom. In *Ethics, subjectivity and truth*. New York: The New Press.
- Foucault, M. (1997c). What is Enlightenment. In *Ethics, subjectivity and truth*. New York: The New Press.
- Foucault, M. (2005). *The hermeneutics of the subject*, (G. Burchell, Trans). New York: Picador.
- Gottlieb, R. (2013). *Spirituality: What it is and why it matters*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Habermas, J. (1992). *The philosophical discourse of modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Hadot, P. (1995). *Philosophy as a way of life*. (A. Davidson, Trans.). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Kant. (1978). *Lectures on ethics*, (L. Infield, Trans.). Gloucester: Peter Smith.
- Kant. (1983). "An answer to the question: What is enlightenment?" in *Perpetual peace and other essays*, (T. Humphrey, Trans.). Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983.
- Karras, R. (2000). "Active/passive, acts/passions: Greek and Roman sexualities," *American Historical Review*, vol.105, no.4.
- Levy, N. (2004). "Foucault as virtue ethicist," *Foucault Studies* 1, December 2004.
- MacIntyre, A. (1984). *After virtue* 2nd edition. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.
- May, T. (2006). "Michel Foucault's guide to living," *Angelaki* vol.11, no.3, 173–184.
- McGushin, E. (2011). Foucault's theory and practice of subjectivity. In Dianna Taylor (Ed.), *Michel Foucault: Key concepts*. Durham: Acumen.
- Nietzsche. (1969). *On the genealogy of morals*, (W. Kaufmann, Trans.) New York: Vintage.
- Nietzsche. (1983). *Untimely meditations*, (R. Hollingdale, Trans.) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- O'Leary, T. (2002). *Foucault and the art of ethics*. London: Continuum.
- Plato. (2010). *The last days of Socrates*, (C. Rowe, Trans). London: Penguin.
- Plotinus, *Enneads*, (A. Armstrong, Trans.) Loeb: Cambridge, 1966.
- Seitz, B. (2012). Foucault and the subject of stoic existence. *Human Studies*, 35, 539–554.
- Sheldrake, P. (2012). *Spirituality: A very short introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Taylor, C. (1986). Foucault on freedom and truth. In David Hoy (Ed.), *Foucault: A critical reader*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Veayne, P. (2010). *Foucault: His thought, his character*, (J. Lloyd, Trans.).Cambridge: Polity.
- White, R. (2013). *The heart of wisdom: A philosophy of spiritual life*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield.