On "Evil, Sin, and the Fall": Foucault's Critique of the "Christian" Problematization of the Flesh

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> *I know some muddle-headed Christians have talked as if Christianity thought that sex, or the body, or pleasure were bad in themselves. But they were wrong. Christianity is almost the only one of the great religions which thoroughly approves the body—which believes that matter is good, that God Himself once took on a human body…*
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> C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*

The aim of this paper is to lay emphasis on at least two modes of problematization concerning the body described by Michel Foucault (1926-84) in his work *The Use of Pleasure*. This is possible only through an exposition of his comparative treatment of two types of moral life: one is generated by our immersion into the programmatic and calculative thinking of our day, a moral life that, for Foucault, is characterized by an obsession for discipline and strict adherence to external codes, one that sways Christianity into embracing unreflective and uncritical moral predispositions—among them, the notion that the human body is born of "evil, sin, the fall, and death"[1]; the other is the ethical practice of mastering one's bodily pleasures and positive energies,

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[1] "Christianity associated [sexual activity] with evil, sin, the fall, and death" (Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 2: The Use of Pleasure*, trans. Robert Hurley [New York: Vintage Books, 1990], 14).

understood by Foucault as the ethics of the concern of the self rooted in Greek antiquity.

We do not intend to show that the Christian account of sin or sinfulness is outright mistaken, however, part of our task is to seek out what conditions made it possible for Christian teachers to revitalize the thought that the human body is corrupt or that the flesh was born of sin (contrary to the teaching that the body, although liable to sin, was actually created out of goodness), a notion that a number of scholars associate with some Lutheran protestants in the sixteenth century. Doubts may be raised, and rightly so, on the claim that this principle, "body equates to sin," originates from Christianity itself, if it is not already a corruption of the biblical account of the body. However, like a malignancy that escaped early detection, this faulty precept was able to creep into some of the major areas of religious ministry and education. Its debilitating effects on the moral perception of a number of believers today are quite obvious; it manifests as hatred of oneself, despise towards life and the world, not to mention hostility towards the body and all its pleasures. These are the very characteristics of an extreme and self-destructive form of "asceticism" that the philosopher Nietzsche warned us about.[2] So in the face of this rather infirm and gloomy moral disposition, we seek in line with Foucault whatever means and possibilities are there that would enable us to learn once again how to become accountable to our own selves and perhaps rescue us from this kind of hostility brought to bear down on the body and its pleasures. In so doing we open once again an avenue where it becomes sensible to ask, is not man already a work in progress? In this undertaking, we are compelled by Foucault to go and revisit various forms of ethical practices in history and among these is a Greek tradition that was quite preoccupied with the art of governing the self and the pleasures of the body.

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[2]"Even in your folly and contempt, you despisers of the body, you serve your self. I say unto you: your self itself wants to die and turns away from life. It is no longer capable of what it would do above all else: to create beyond self" (Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Walter Kaufmann [New York: The Modern Library, 1995], 35). The despisers of the body are killing all forms of creative potential in the self.

But as a caveat, Foucault quickly says he is not espousing Greek ethical practice as the alternative to Christian or biblically based morality, but rather uses both styles, along with other moral practices in the past, as points of departure necessary for a more innovative task of thinking, that is, of rethinking ourselves.[3] He is, in fact, proceeding by way of critical interrogation of different moral practices in the hope that we might come up with other ways and means of stylizing our own lives. In other words, what Foucault hopes to pursue in *The Use of Pleasure* was the cultivation of a kind of aesthetic of existence that would encourage us to explore different ways of speaking and thinking about ourselves, which is also a form of engagement of oneself on oneself, a critical reflection, and dialogue with oneself. He wishes to rekindle philosophy the way it was done in the past in the mode of *ascesis*, characterized by him as the "exercise of oneself in the activity of thought."[4]

One can of course argue that this spirit of *ascesis* somehow already resonates in Greek thought if only to the extent that, for them, the ethical person engages his own desires in moments of struggle and resistance, not in order to fully extinguish these desires (because they are not in themselves evil) but to master them by means of certain strategies and techniques. But Foucault was aiming at something more than a mere repetition. We want to be at the frontiers of the traditions he was describing; we want to be experimental, or rather, we must under our present circumstances come up with new forms and techniques for self-formation. Of course there is much to learn from the ways of the old. What we must not lose sight of is the fact that in the Greek model and in many other models in antiquity, ethics was still "personal ethics," a relation with the self, a form of active thinking concerning oneself. In modern practice, however, such accountability over oneself was outmoded by a compulsion to "a unified coherent, authoritarian moral system" that practically insists sameness in thought and that

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[3]"They are the record of a long and tentative exercise that needed to be revised and corrected again and again…the object was to learn to what extent the effort to think one's own history can free thought from what it silently thinks, and so enable it to think differently" (Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 9).

[4]Ibid.

demanded a specific form of telling the truth about oneself.[5] And so we simply submit to rules, prescriptions, or external codes. To be "ethical" in our day is not so much a question of how to master one's own desires but rather a question of how to practice austerity on desire "through a long effort of learning, memorization, and assimilation of a systematic ensemble of precepts, and through regular checking of conduct aimed at measuring the exactness with which one is applying these rules."[6] Today's Christian instruction confines itself precisely to teaching programmatic and repetitive thinking. We will elaborate on this later.

After careful examination of Christian texts, as we shall see later, Foucault reveals that the ethics of the early Christians up to the seventeenth century still bears an unmistakable mark of the tradition of concern for the self, even if self-moderation was practiced within the context of a faithful attempting to rise above his fallen state into a more perfect state where he has reclaimed an original beauty or immortality in spirit. Back then, some Christians were still concerned with the personal struggle of minding one's own thoughts and actions, and this ethics coexisted with the aforementioned ritualistic and code-based form of Christian morality. The succeeding centuries favored the latter over the former. Our entrance into the age of discipline, roughly the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, necessitated the gradual transformation of Christian moral practice (including whatever element of *ascesis* that still lingers within) into a kind of morality that would fit the new political economics: disciplinarity as the task of fostering, maintaining and administering populations through the use of an array of strategies and techniques ranging from spatial organization, to regulation, to policing and surveillance. In our day, Foucault says, it is not surprising to see that sex became a major area of concern of institutions, even of the church,

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[5]Ibid., 21. Sex was to be "inscribed not only in an economy of pleasure but in an ordered system of knowledge…we demand that sex speak the truth… and we demand that it tell us our truth, or rather, the deeply buried truth about ourselves which we think we possess in our immediate consciousness" (Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley [New York: Vintage Books, 1990], 69). This is the way we constitute ourselves today as sexual subjects.

[6]Ibid., 27.

because by studying the biological potentials of the body, we can draw out techniques that will enable us to generate more mechanically efficient, docile and productive bodies.[7] Consequently, the church/pastoral ministry too felt the need for new forms of administering so that apart from laying down an external moral code and hearing confessions in order to seek out sexual sins residing in the deepest and remotest regions of an individual's soul, it must now partake in the further proliferation of discourses concerning sex and sin, in stirring up the most peculiar and probing ways of speaking about the flesh—some Christian teachers gave a new meaning to the notion "body/sex is sin" and decided to turn such notion into an indispensable ingredient for bible indoctrination.[8] This is the recourse of a church that is operating at the backdrop of a modern civilization that, to put it severely, was becoming obsessed not only with setting traps, arresting misbehavior, and punishing even the least of transgressions but also with harnessing, multiplying and enhancing our productive energies. And in line with these new social demands, schools came up with even more clever pedagogic devices, among these was discipline by way of implantation of the notion of guilt/sin into human consciousness through the pastoral use of fear; "sin" is forced into innocent young minds who have hardly any understanding of scripture in order to condition their thinking and to open up a field of

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[7]Foucault, *History of Sexuality Volume I: An Introduction*, 139, 141, 145-6.

[8]In Genesis, for instance, Adam and Eve's act of "eating the forbidden fruit," is interpreted by many as "engaging in sexual intercourse." Furthermore, some believe that when God clothed them with coat of skins, it would mean that after the fall their bodies became vile, unclean, and abominable their bodies, especially their sexual organs, must be kept covered (See Genesis 3:21). Despite their popularity, however, these notions were not left unchallenged. Among the authors who strongly opposed these views was C.S. Lewis who asserts that man's first sin, call it "the fall" in Christian language, has nothing to do with sex but has a lot to do with the human ambition to take the place of God himself, to be "like gods," or rather, to attempt to find happiness for oneself outside the spirit of love, community, and fellowship in the arms of God; only through this can we properly explain "all that we call human history—money, poverty, ambition, war, prostitution, classes, empires, slavery" (C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* [New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1952], 38-9). C.S. Lewis's view appears at least to be more faithful to the biblical text than the first two mentioned above.

intervention by the educator, the clergyman, the parent, even the school principal.[9] But how can this contribute precisely to the realization of modern objectives? Is it because the idea of sin makes indoctrination more efficient? Perhaps the model of the "immaculately clean" and the "spotless Christian" helps in generating more psychologically motivated and productive citizens? But let us take a bite into what Foucault has to say about the matter first.

How Disciplinarity Altered Christian Moral Practice

In this section let us take a glimpse of Foucault's elaboration of disciplinary society and how it shaped the moral character of our day. Our study will underscore the ways through which the Christian morality of our day diminished, rather unfortunately, into an unreflective mode of existence that simply confines itself to rituals and to an external code without cultivating an *ascesis.* It is our task to elucidate, proceeding as genealogists, the motivations behind the preference, or the compulsion, to fashion ourselves and our lives around disciplinarity.

Foucault's genealogical approach causes us to seek and expose the hidden schemes, events, confrontations and maneuverings that instigated our so-called modern civilization but which appear for some reason to have eluded the eyes of the historian. Foucault rejects precisely the tale we often hear from traditional historians: a story of our passage into a modern society that, for them, was bound to raise itself according to the ideal of humanization, a society that they deem to have been arranged in order for us to finally realize the dream of every human creature that is to live a dignified, valued and enlightened existence, an

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[9]Theology writer Dick Westley points out that implanting "sin" and the need to confess and do penance is one of the most ingenious inventions of Christian education. It became the religion teacher's "solution" to the problem of how to introduce "moral evil" to children who have scarcely any experience of such. It was done so despite the fact that the "moral evil" they imagined arises out of a rather rudimentary and crude approach to the book of Genesis. Hence, in order to justify the solution, they had to "give us the problem" (Dick Westley, *Morality and its Beyond* [Mystic, Connecticut: Twenty-third Publications, 1984], 53).

existence that is proper to man.[10] And so, rather than settling on this inaccurate depiction of history, Foucault breaks free from it, directing his readership towards the profound societal transformations starting from the penal reforms of the eighteenth century. Foucault reports in *Discipline and Punish* about a shift from one modality of power to another, that is, from a monarchical justice system that displays its authority through public executions to a new penal system that incarcerates an offender but also introduces techniques that reform and modify his behavior. He discovers that what motivated this shift was not the spirit of respect for the humanity of the condemned, but a need for a more finely tuned justice system designed to arrest even the most negligible forms of offenses.[11] Disciplinary techniques that were already in place in schools, military barracks, and workplaces found their way to the modern prison. The need for a more rigorous form of regulation demanded the invention of the *panopticon* whose very architecture ensures maximum surveillance and an automatic functioning of power in the prison system.[12] It was now possible to administer punitive measures within a mechanism of constant supervision and correction without resorting to costly public rituals. But what is most peculiar about this new arrangement is that it situates the body precisely in an economics of conditioned responses, rendering it docile, functional and exploitable as a means of production. Foucault writes,

> [T]he Panopticon was also a laboratory; it could be used as a machine to carry out experiments, to alter behavior, to train or correct individuals. To experiment with medicines and monitor their effects. To try out different punishment on prisoners, according to their crimes and character, and to seek the most effective ones…[but it also aims] to strengthen the social forces— to increase production, to develop the economy, spread

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[10]Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 74-76.

[11]Ibid.

[12]See Jeremy Bentham, *The Panopticon Writings*, ed. Miriam Bozovic (London: Verso, 1995).

education, raise the level of public morality; to increase and multiply.[13]

Hence, the panopticon benefitted the prison not only with the means to block and sanction offenders but also with the capability to discipline them, that is, to intensify and boost their productive energies, to make them more efficient in their tasks, to reconfigure their thinking in such a way that they can easily be trained and instructed. This is perhaps the biggest reason behind the continued existence of the prison in our day notwithstanding its letdowns; everybody knows that it has not been able to deter crime, and worse, it even encouraged recidivism. But nobody will object to its promise of productive disciplinarity. And so with much enthusiasm, the panoptic schema was introduced into institutions outside the prison, among its key functions was to micro-manage individuals in their spaces—patients, schoolchildren, factory workers, employees, even the mentally ill.

Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* underscores as well a number of disciplinary strategies that were typically used in disciplinary institutions of the eighteenth century. Understanding the art of distributions is one. Enclosures were common in environments that aim to minimize theft, interruption and violence. Partitioning as well became an effective strategy for mastering individuals in space; not only that it will eliminate the possibility of collective dispositions; but it will also facilitate the documentation of absences, misconduct, or acts that deserve merit. We can even achieve a lot more if this analytical arrangement of space is applied to the panoptic mechanism of hospitals, schools, and workplaces:

> It makes it possible to draw up differences: among patients, to observe the symptoms of each individual, without the proximity of beds…among school-children, it makes it possible to observe performances (without there being any imitation or copying), to map attitudes, to assess characters, to draw up rigorous classifications, and, in relation to normal development, to distinguish

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[13]Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 203, 208.

'laziness and stubbornness' from 'incurable imbecility'; among wor-kers, it makes it possible to note the aptitudes of each worker, compare the time he takes to perform a task, and if they are paid by the day, to calculate their wages.[14]

The classroom indeed became the perfect site for experiments on individualization and classification of human subjects through spatial distribution. One of the pioneers for this type of project was Jean-Baptiste de La Salle who envisioned a classroom arranged in such a way that in one sweeping gaze, an instructor is able to record, manage and organize each student's progress, character, cleanliness, orderliness, even a pupil's level of integrity resulting from a routine background check often involving the reputation of his parents.[15]

The application of body-activity correlation also became an indispensable disciplinary strategy. Even schoolchildren were taught a form of handwriting that resembles proper marching posture and rifle handling of the military: "the pupils must hold their body erect, somewhat turned and free on the left side, slightly inclined, with the elbow placed on the table…a distance of two fingers must be left between the body and the table…the right arm must be at a distance from the body of about three fingers and be about five fingers from the table."[16] The need to achieve maximum efficiency of workers necessitated modification of machine and tool handling using the same body-activity correlation principle.

But that is not all. We have also discovered that work efficiency, regularity of movement, and continuous productivity can be achieved by means of mental habituation, of conditioning behavior to the linear, repetitive and progressive nature of disciplinary time. One effective technique used in eighteenth century schools and is still evident today

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[14]Ibid., 203.

[15]Jean-Baptiste de la Salle, *Conduite Des Écoles Chrétiennes*, B.N. MS. 11759, 248-9 in Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 147.

[16]Jean-Baptiste de la Salle, *Conduite Des Écoles Chrétiennes*, 63-4 in Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 152.

is the arranging of time into successive segments, so that each segment specifies a number specific tasks and activities that students must perform, and the end of each segment will culminate into a major activity, usually an examination.[17] These segments will be arranged in a row from the one with the simplest assigned lessons to the one that holds the most complex, so that the level of difficulty increases in the course of a school year. Strict monitoring and reporting of individual progress become the means to differentiate and hierarchize subjects in relation to one another. More importantly, from this arrangement will emerge what is to become the standard of various institutions: a new kind of reward/penalty system that makes use of temporality, one that is highly "calculative," one that guarantees awards and merit as well as sanctions ranging from minor physical or psychological injury/humiliation to debit, deduction of points or wage, even removal from office, depending on how subjects behave.

> The workshop, the school, the army were subject to a whole micro-penalty of time (latenesses, absences, interruptions of tasks), of activity (inattention, negligence, lack of zeal), of behavior (impoliteness, disobedience), of speech (idle chatter, insolence), of the body ('incorrect' attitudes, irregular gestures, lack of cleanliness), of sexuality (impurity, indecency)…It was a question both of making the slightest departures from correct behaviour subject to punishment, and of giving a punitive function to the apparently indifferent elements of the disciplinary apparatus: so that, if necessary, everything might serve to punish the slightest thing.[18]

This creates in the subject the impression that he is caught up in a punitive mechanism that is universal in scope and that arrests all forms of transgressions from the most negligible to the most scandalous. In other words, the subject sees himself being chased by a "punishing

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[17]Foucault, *Discipline and Punish,* 156-62. Foucault maintains that this was the case in the Gobelins School conceived sometime in 1667.

[18]Ibid., 178.

universality" that constantly reminds him to measure up to the rules.[19] This requires, of course, that the subject internalizes the code, its boundaries, and the forms of punishable behavior it defines. The subject becomes accustomed, therefore, to programmed response, to automatic compliance, to repetition. No wonder our education system today prefers endless memorizations to other instructional procedures. Not only does it provide a means to measure and evaluate; it engenders sameness and uniformity of thought and puts an end to diversity.

In early Christian education, we will find a deployment of the same disciplinary strategies supplemented by various forms of pedagogical tools. Pupils are required to master church catechism by means of memorization and repetition. Non-conformity will be subject to a procedure that is also repetitive but at the same time corrective: "when a pupil has not retained the catechism from the previous day, he must be forced to learn it, without making any mistake, and repeat it the following day; either he will be forced to hear it standing or kneeling, his hands joined, or he will be given some other penance."[20] But Christian schools have also learned to exploit the element of fear to facilitate learning. This point was brought up in Dick Westley's book *Morality and its Beyond* in which he expressed his misgivings about the "pastoral use of fear":

> From a pastoral point of view, one must ask whether it is useful to preach hell in our day, and human wisdom tends to respond, no. True traditional wisdom has thought otherwise. Certainly, it is always better to come to Jesus because of love, but fear is capable of leading to love, even fear of hell. It is necessary to temper that fear with love, but it is also necessary to engender love of God through fear of His chastisements, and to avoid sin by the thought of the divine sanction, i.e. hell. Now

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[19]Ibid.

[20]Ibid., 179.

that fear is just as necessary today as it was of old, because human nature is always basically the same.[21]

Let us consider for the moment the far-reaching consequences of the use of fear to moral theology. Our more composed theologians are aware, of course, of the dangers of this approach. For sure, obedience is fostered through fear of God, but at a price; since we are repetitively infusing and giving the right of way to the image of a "terrifying God" in the minds of imaginative young learners, the image of a merciful God is overshadowed. The "God of mercy," an important theological concept, suddenly fades out of the picture, notwithstanding its appearance in the Exodus account of God and in the narrative of the coming of Christ. Following Westley's account, the image of a God of mercy/love comes way too late in the process of indoctrination, resulting into an outright misinterpretation of who God is—we end up with a fearsome and tyrannical God who is "of quick temper and short fuse."[22] (A rather immature and childish notion, that is to say the least, of which many of us fail to outgrow!). In this manner of proceeding, one finds himself compelled into believing that he is being condemned by God to live in fear, that he is caught up between God's eternal vigilance on sin and the devil's wicked machinations, that "this life is not what is really worthwhile," that it is nothing but "war, struggle, a vale of tears, and a time of perilous dangers," and so there is no comfort for us all except "the life that we have to live after the war."[23] This collection of negative thoughts, therefore, develops into a kind of hatred and hostility towards earthly existence, towards life, towards the body that struggles with sin, until one longs only for the afterlife. There is little doubt now that the old notion that the body is "born of sin," that the body was brought into existence as already immersed in sin, that is, "body=sin," is given a new life in a misguided theology. What emerges is a brand of withering asceticism that deliberately degrades and devalues the body and its pleasures and at the same time dismisses all possible human potential.

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[21]"Hell," *Dictionnaire de Theologie Catholique,* 1913 edition, Vol. V, col. 118-119, in Dick Westley, *Morality and its Beyond* (Mystic, Connecticut: Twenty-third Publications, 1984), 128.

[22]Westley, *Morality and its Beyond*, 56-57.

[23]Ibid., 55, 58.

Because of their acquiescence to disciplinarity that assigns to them the task of fostering docile and obedient subjects, a number of religion teachers have overlooked the aforementioned drawbacks, the foolishness and the absurdity, of the use of fear and this childish notion of sin. As a matter of fact, the schools grant them authority to use these methods to their fullest extent, even if it means accommodating to error, confusion and misinformation. For what better way can we convince children that they really need to do penance, if not, as Westley puts it, to infuse the consciousness of sin: "The teacher [thought] that he had [the] solution—the sacrament—for a problem that we did not yet have. So the only thing to be done was to give us the problem!"[24] Most peculiarly, once this thought of sin however crude it might be is implanted in a child's consciousness, it will be difficult to break free and disengage from it. Many of us carry it even into adulthood. Hence, the doctrine of fear/sin has become an ingenious device, a pedagogical tool. It is an improvisation of the disciplinary technique; it gives new meaning to the disciplinary procedure, the formation and the compliance to a code as well as the internalization of every form of transgression that subjects will be made liable to.

These developments will only confirm Foucault's account of the Christian morality of late, a morality whose precepts tend to be "compulsory" and whose scope was thought to be "universal," a morality "organized" as a "unified, coherent, and authoritarian" system "that was imposed on everyone in the same manner."[25] It becomes a morality that yields to disciplinary productivity; the institution upholds it by dressing itself up precisely as a punishing universality. What we have been trying to show all along is that as long as it is guided by the rigors of this morality, the school system will do everything to intensify productivity even if it means resorting to methods, even to rash and faulty pedagogical devices, that aim to ensure calculated responses, docility through sameness of thought, rather than to enhance the quality of minds (they were not designed for humanization). This explains precisely why the system insists on teaching us "what to think" rather than teaching us "how to think." In more ways than one disciplinarity has influenced and

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[24]Ibid., 53.

[25]Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 21.

modified important fundamental attributes of Christian moral practice. All efforts now aim at prodigious production.

Society must maintain disciplinary productivity if it means to foster and administer its population. This is exactly the direction society took in the seventeenth century, manifesting itself as a "power over life" that "evolved in two basic forms" or "poles"—the first one centered on "disciplining" the body, on "the optimization of its capabilities, the extortion of its forces, the parallel increase of its usefulness and its docility," while the second focused on the "the species of the body, the body imbued with the mechanics of life and serving as the basis of biological processes: propagation, births and mortality, the level of health, life expectancy and longevity."[26] Foucault maintains that this power to foster life, or biopower as he calls it, is indispensable to capitalist society.[27] In fact, all that transpired in modern history from the penal reforms to the panopticon to the installation of disciplinary techniques in institutions were driven by bourgeois impulses: "the adjustment of the accumulation of men to that of the capital, the joining and growth of human groups to the expansion of productive forces and the different allocations of profit."[28] Fueled by the same motives, the prison, the workplace, the school, the hospital, and other institutions now constitute the very foundations of disciplinary society.

The Ethics of the Concern of the Self in the Greek and Christian Traditions

It is in *The Use of Pleasure* that we will find Foucault's masterfully exhaustive elaboration of the ethical practice that can be properly attributed to the ancient Greeks, particularly their ethics of the concern for the self characterized by mastery of the self, the body, the pleasures of the body by way of techniques of moderation, resistance, and temperance. This ethics is embedded already in the writings of Plato and Aristotle, the former building around the Socratic understanding of virtue—the practice of virtue, as Socrates suggests in the opening book

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[26] Foucault, *History of Sexuality Volume I: An Introduction*, 139.

[27] Ibid., 140-41.

[28] Ibid., 141.

of the *Republic*, is a practice of pursuing excellence of the soul which is necessary for good governance of the *polis*, of one's community, even of one's household. We draw a line between this kind of ethical practice and the morality of our age that is based on one's relation to a punishing universality, precisely because the ancient Greeks were much more preoccupied with engendering excellence in their lives, in their craft, even in the performance of civic duties internally, and this demanded special care and attention to one's own desires. This entails self-motivation rather than simply addressing pressure from outside oneself.

Accordingly, the way this Greek ethical practice anticipates the problem concerning the body, sex, and its pleasures is quite different from how we moderns problematize them. In the first place, the ancient Greeks did not speak about "sin," or sins of the flesh, and they have no interest in scandalizing or branding people who commit sexual misconduct (the way some of us do today) while still reminding citizens about the undesirable effects of immoderation and misuse of pleasures. Not one among them intended to degrade the body as a piece of matter that is wretched and vile; none of them spoke as if sex and the pleasures of the body were evil in themselves. They will teach instead about excess/vice, about lack of moderation, even about a certain cowardice born of one's refusal to resist certain pleasures whenever necessary.

Even for Socrates, virtuous life already requires that one cultivates excellence or *arête* in oneself, an excellence that could manifest when a person becomes mindful over his thoughts, actions and desires, that he might be able to take into account of what is most advantageous not only for himself but for others as well. The *arête* of a man of virtue, Socrates of the *Republic* suggests, is not to make anyone worse of, but rather to make anyone, this be a friend or an enemy, better of.[29] Plato does a remarkable job in further illuminating the Socratic "pursuit of excellence" by way of underscoring the role of reason in the maintenance of composure, level-headedness, and self-control. In his dialogue, Plato, through the voice of Socrates, envisaged a city that is composed of three classes, each representing a particular form of virtue: the guardians or rulers representing wisdom, the soldiers representing courage, and the

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[29]Plato, *Republic*, I 335d.

artisans representing temperance. Justice, he says, rests in the harmony of the three classes; in emphasizing the differences between them Plato asks whether or not harmony can be achieved through distribution of activities specific to each class so that they will not interfere with each other's affairs.[30] With this, Plato works his way into his analogy between the city and the soul of man. He suggests that the soul, not unlike the city, is composed of three elements, as implicit in the question Socrates throws to Glaucon, "Do we learn with one part of ourselves, get angry with another, and with some third part desire the pleasures of food and procreation and other things closely akin to them?"[31] In other words, the soul is construed as having reason, will, and the appetites. Reason is responsible for knowledge, intelligence and right belief, the will is that which drives man to seek for honor and dignity (but also compels him towards anger when frustrated), and the appetites is associated with bodily pleasures.

Foucault stresses that Plato was among the Greek thinkers who taught that *enkrateia* or mastery of the self can be achieved by way of moderating and, at times, silencing the will and the appetites through the exercise of reason.[32]*Enkrateia* is tantamount to having composure as opposed to having no shame. *Enkrateia* is also the resilience, the audacity to overcome weaknesses that may lead to enslavement to pleasures. Plato often contrasts this to cowardice or defeat, as mastery of the self also necessitates that one's soul must be fit to take on and subdue the "hordes of pleasures and lusts that entice towards shamelessness and wrongdoing."[33] The victory that ensues can only be the outcome of hard work, of an agonistic relation to oneself, or as Foucault puts it, [*Enkrateia* is] a term for designating this form of relationship with oneself, this "attitude" which was necessary to the ethics of pleasures and which was manifested through the proper use one made of them… [it] is located on the axis of struggle, resistance and combat; it is self-

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[30]Ibid., IV 441c-442d.

[31]Ibid., IV 436b.

[32]Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure,* 63-70.

[33]Plato, *Laws*, I 647d.

control, tension, "continence"; *enkrateia* rules over pleasures and desires, but has to struggle to maintain control.[34]

"Continence" in *enkrateia* requires not so much that one's desires be completely extinguished, which is next to impossible, but that he no longer allows himself to be defeated by them by any means. In other words, a continent one is able to master his own desires, and through rational means, even with regard to timeliness and right quantity, he is able take charge of them, to use them, deploy them appropriately. One important skill to learn is to learn the art of delaying one's gratification. Foucault calls to mind the same idea of the continent man resonating in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*:

> [I]n Aristotle's analysis, *enkrateia*, defined as mastery and victory, presupposes the presence of desires, and is all the more valuable as it manages to control those that are violent. *Sophrosyne* itself, although defined by Aristotle as a state of virtue, did not imply the suppression of desires but rather their control: Aristotle places it in an intermediary position between a self-indulgence (*akolasia*) in which one gladly abandons oneself to one's pleasures, and an insensitivity (*anaisthesia*)—extremely rare, it should be added—in which one feels no pleasure, the moderate individual is not one who has no desires but one who desires "only to a moderate degree, not more than he should, nor when he should not."[35]

This *enkrateia* as a form of *ascesis* was perhaps the most important undertaking of an Athenian who is being groomed to become a guardian of the *polis*, though ideally it is applicable to everyone. *Enkrateia* might have given style, form and materiality to what Socrates envisioned as the practice of virtue which is excellence on the level of the soul. Foucault is quick to say, however, that the mastery of oneself (one's

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[34] Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure,* 63, 65.

[35] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VII, 2, 1146a and III, 11, 1119a in Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 69.

soul) is analogous to the mastery of others, insofar as "one was expected to govern oneself in the same manner as one governed one's household and played one's role in the city."[36] There is continuity, therefore, in these three forms of life—care for the self, care for one's estate, and care of the *polis*. Socrates's politics of the soul becomes the very basis of external politics. This isomorphism, or continuity, indeed was the central theme of Xenophon's *Oeconomicus*, as Foucault recapitulates

> The young Critobulus declares that he is now capable of ruling himself, that he will no longer allow himself to be dominated by his desires and pleasures (Socrates reminds him that the latter are like servants who are best kept under supervision); therefore it is time for him to marry and with the help of his wife to administer his household; and, as Xenophon points out several times, this domestic government—understood as the management of a household and the cultivation of a domain, the maintenance or development of an estate—constituted, when given the right amount of dedication, a remarkable physical and moral training for anyone who aimed to fulfill his civic obligations, establish his public authority, and assume leadership functions.[37]

The aforementioned continuity elucidates precisely the essentials of a special concept borrowed by Foucault from the Greeks: *epimeleia heautou*, or care for the self. This care of the self already presupposes *enkrateia* as its precondition; *enkrateia* under-stood in this manner becomes the prerequisite to both domestic and public governance, so that before one becomes qualified to attend to others one must already have mastered himself, one must have already attended to oneself or have become mindful of his own comings and goings.

An emphasis was given by Foucault on the distinction between ancient philosophy (a way of thinking that is deeply immersed in

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[36]Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 75.

[37]Ibid., 76.

epimeleia heautou) and modern philosophy (characterized by Cartesian rationalism) in terms of how the knower relates to "truth"—Foucault's usage highly suggests the "truth" we constitute about ourselves, about who we are. In antiquity, as suggested by the famous Socratic principle, "virtue is knowledge and vice is ignorance," one cannot accede to truth without first taking on the ethical; knowledge for the ancients necessitates *ascesis*. Modern thought in the tradition of Descartes, however, heeds not to *ascesis*; it is simply forgotten if not entirely lost, so that we can to accede to truth, apparently, by way of evidence. Foucault explains,

> Even if it is true that Greek philosophy founded rationality, it always held that a subject could not have access to truth if he did not first operate upon himself a certain work that would make him susceptible to knowing the truth…Descartes, I think, broke with this when he said, "To accede to truth, it suffices that I be *any* subject that can see what is evident." Evidence is substituted for [*ascesis*] at the point where the relationship to the self intersects the relationship to others and the world…It suffices that the relationship to the self reveals to me an obvious truth of what I see for me to apprehend the truth definitively. Thus I can be immoral and know the truth. I believe this is an idea that, more or less explicitly, was rejected by all previous culture. Before Descartes, one could not be impure, immoral, and know the truth. With Descartes, direct evidence is enough. This change makes possible the insti-tutionalization of modern science.[38]

What we have today, then, is the acquiescence to the procedural and the undermining of the ethical, even if this will be understood as our scientific manner of proceeding. It is a condition of capitulation to a collection of rules, prescriptions, codes, of society, of scientific or religious authority—precisely the very sources for evidence concerning ourselves ordained by self-grounding reason. Our relation to truth in our

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[38]Michel Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics," in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: The New Press, 1997), 279.

day is not so much determined by our striving towards it; it appears that our excessive confidence has obscured the old ethical theme of man as a work in progress, one who constantly modifies and reorders himself in relation to what he can know. Reason or rationality no longer reminds us that we can only do as much, that indeed "we are not gods," the way it did for the ancients.[39]

And so Foucault draws a line between two types of truth obligations: one involving techniques of domination, or discipline, and the other involving techniques of the self (*ascesis*). Now, Christianity is a curious case; Foucault's genealogy shows its involvement in both ensembles of obligation:

> Now what about truth as a duty in our Christian societies? As everybody knows, Christianity is a confession. This means that Christianity belongs to a very special type of religion—those which impose obligations of truth on its practitioners. Such obligations in Christianity are numerous. For in-stance, there is the obligation to hold as truth a set of propositions that constitute dogma, the obligation to hold certain books as a permanent source of truth, and obligations to accept the decisions of certain authorities in matters of truth. But Christianity requires another form of truth obligation. Everyone in Christianity has the duty to explore who he is, what is happening within himself, the faults he may have committed the temptations to which he is exposed. Moreover, everyone is obliged to tell these things to other people, and thus to bear witness against himself…[t]hese two ensembles of obligation—those regarding the faith, the book, the dogma, and those regarding the self, the soul and the heart—are linked together.[40]

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[39]Foucault, "Technologies of the Self," in Ibid., 226.

[40]Foucault, "Sexuality and Solitude," in Ibid., 178.

We will not be surprised, then, if we stumble upon specific practices of the self that involve *askesis* but that properly belong to the history of Christianity. And this is where Foucault's research deserves much credit. Foucault tells us that eight centuries after Socrates taught his fellow citizens to "take care of themselves," as we recall it in the *Apology*, the spirit of *epimeleia heautou* was revitalized in the work Gregory of Nyssa, this time using the irony of "self-renunciation," which is, for him, not a form of self-annihilation but a striving, a path to rebirth:

> [O]ne finds [*epimeleia heautou*] in Gregory of Nyssa's treatise, *On Virginity*, but with an entirely different meaning. Gregory did not mean the movement by which one takes care of oneself and the city; he meant the movement by which one renounces the world and marriage as well as detaches oneself from the flesh and, with virginity of heart and body, recovers the immortality of which one has been deprived. In commenting on the parable of the drachma (Luke 15:8-10), Gregory exhorts man to light his lamp and turn the house over and search, until gleaming in the shadow he sees the drachma within.[41]

This so called "detachment from the flesh" differs from self-nihilism and deserves further interpretation. This "asceticism" of Gregory requires not that one should burn or kill the body but rather it encourages one to reinvigorate the soul, and consequently to set the body free from its old bondages, in order recover its original efficacy that, for him, was granted by God. On occasion, we commit mistakes that obscure this efficacy, so the task of the Christian was to revive it. This requires that one must turn the house over, that is, one must search every corner of the soul to recover this treasure[42]—this already requires a personal striving that requires not a "method" but constant practice.

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[41]Foucault, "Technologies of the Self," in Ibid., 227. Foucault cites as reference Gregory of Nyssa, *Treatise on Virginity*, trans. V.W. Callahan, in *Saint Gregory of Nyssa: Ascetical Works* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1966).

[42]Ibid.

This is a lifelong process, and if one was to take care of the self, one must pick himself up every time he stumbles; one must have the courage to endure.

And Gregory of Nyssa's is not the only religious text that takes on the theme of *epimeleia heautou*. Foucault calls attention to the work of Philo of Alexandria entitled *On Contemplative Life*. In this book, Philo highlights a special religious group deriving from Hellenistic and Hebraic culture called the *Therapeutae*, whose seemingly commonplace practices—reading, meditation, prayer, spiritual feasts—become the means for them to secure the health of the soul in a lifetime of endeavor and striving.[43] We know, of course, about the profound transformations introduced by Philo's thought on ensuing generations of Christians. Foucault has made the claim that Christianity and ancient Greek philosophy have been, at a specific period of history, placed under the same sign—the care of the self.[44] They have been singing the same tune, so to speak, but before we knew it, the original voice of Christianity that sang the *epimeleia* was subdued and silenced.

CONCLUSION

We have learned that the *epimeleia heautou* for the ancient Greeks serves as a constant reminder for men, young and old alike, who are to become rulers of the *polis*; Socrates in *Alcibiades* and even Xenophon in the *Memorabilia* will greet them, "If you want to become a politician, to care for the city and to care for others, you must have already taken care of yourself," and this reminder suggests that *epimeleia* for them was a pedagogical, ethical, even an ontological condition for the development of good rulers.[45] Moral practice in our day defined by discipline, despite its initiative for productivity, is deficient of this *epimeleia heautou*, and we might even say that it does not aim to promote ethics in the first

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[43]Ibid.

[44]Ibid.

[45]Foucault, "The Ethics of the Concern for the Self as a Practice of Freedom," in *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth*, 293.

place. And from the secular, disciplinarity extends all the way into the religious sphere so that it must affect Christian moral practice. The lack of initiative for *ascesis*, for self-reflection and active thought has led to undesirable consequences, among them, the faulty consignment of the body to futility, the very problematization of it as "born of evil," or at least the lack of interest in exploring the defects of the old notion, body equates to sin.

Foucault, when asked whether he offers Greek philosophy as a solution to modern problems, says, "No! I am not looking for an alternative; you can't find the solution of a problem in the solution of another problem raised at another moment by other people…I would like to do the genealogy of problems…My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad. If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do."[46] Foucault is not offering the Greek model as the solution itself, but we might as well learn from it. Athens was not exactly a perfect society. But from the Greek model, we can identify a number of techniques for the self we need in order to constitute ourselves as ethical individuals. However, the world has changed so much that we need to discover our own techniques for self-formation. Gregory of Nyssa and the like have offered other situations, even in the confines of Christianity, where concern for the self will find its use; through him we learn as well that Christianity need not be nihilistic if it should make profound spiritual transformations in a person. Nothing stops us from discovering our own techniques of the self. And all the more, in the name of philosophy, nothing stops us from intervening into culture whenever we see fit; in line with Foucault, we must defend society from mental stagnation. Borrowing Nietzsche's words, "To be physicians here, to be inexorable here, to wield the knife here—that pertains to us that is our kind of philanthropy, with that we are philosophers."[47] Ethics is activity, not passivity. As philosophers, we must become physicians of an ailing culture.

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[46]Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics," in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, 256.

[47]Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth: Penguin Press, 1968), 129.

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