

***Michel Foucault's ascesis and the Christian  
epistemologization of the subject in Foucault's  
genealogical technique de soi***

Thesis Submitted by Jonathan Zeyl  
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Thesis abstract

In this thesis I examine Foucault's later writings in the 80s on the technology of the self and engage current scholarship that discusses the applicability of Foucault's use of this concept for understanding freedom in Christian theology. After a detailed examination of Foucault's writings on this subject matter I show that he sharply contrasts an "aesthetics of existence," a term referring to the self in ancient Greece, from a Christian technology of the self. This latter term I show is in fact precisely what Foucault exposes as a constrictive technology of the self which he credits as making an indefinite subject into a predicable, knowable and definite subject. Bringing this prevalent distinction into the greater scholarship on Foucault, I challenge some readings that support the view that a premodern Christian *ascesis* functioned as an inspirational source for Foucault's "critical ontology" of the modern subject.

## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter One: <i>Situating Foucault</i>.....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>.I Archeo-genealogical method in Foucault’s later period</b>	
<b>.II Foucault’s genealogy of the modern soul in <i>Discipline and Punish</i></b>	
<b>.III Foucault’s <i>technique de soi</i></b>	
<b>.IV Hadot’s “<i>exercice spirituel</i>”</b>	
<b>Chapter Two: <i>Foucault and the Christian <i>technique de soi</i></i>.....</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>I. Human beings and their doubles: Foucault and the modern subject</b>	
<b>II. The “aesthetics of existence” as a way of life</b>	
<b>III. The epistemologization of the subject Foucault’s <i>Christian technique de soi</i></b>	
<b>Chapter Three: <i>Foucault and theology: assessing the ongoing conversation</i>.....</b>	<b>77</b>
<b>I. J. Joyce Schuld and her neglect of situating Foucault’s presuppositions</b>	
<b>II. Jeremy Carrette and his indiscernible trace of religion</b>	
<b>III. James Bernauer and Foucault writings as a negative theology</b>	
<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>96</b>
<b>Bibliography.....</b>	<b>99</b>

## Introduction

The writings of the French philosopher Michel Foucault (1926-1984) display an impressive interaction with a wide range of periods in Western history. In addition his writings take on varied foci, looking at, for example, psychiatry, madness, prisons, sexuality, to more abstruse writings that attempt to clarify his philosophical/historical methodology. The concern that unites all of Foucault's writings, however, has been his interest in the individual human subject. Foucault states this interest in the following way: "...the goal of my work during the last twenty years... has not been to analyze the phenomena of power, nor to elaborate the foundations of such an analysis. My objective, instead, has been to create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects."<sup>1</sup> The genealogy of the modern subject is the phrase Foucault uses to describe his objective of studying how human beings are made subjects. This method, he claimed, moved away from the philosophy of the subject that arose in Europe and North America during the post-war years in such fields as philosophy, history, and anthropology.<sup>2</sup> His method attempted instead to understand how an anti-metaphysical subject came to an understanding of itself through discursive formation.

Foucault's work on how human beings are made subjects is best understood by its *ethos*. Foucault's genealogical *ethos* is concerned with formulating a critique of our historical and philosophical determinations. This *ethos* is nurtured by his hope of exposing the yet "undefined work of freedom."<sup>3</sup> Put differently, his investigation into

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," in *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, by Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 208.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* Trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Routledge Press, 2002). Hereafter referred to as *AK*.

<sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment," in *The Foucault Reader* ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon books, 1984), p. 46.

our determinate limits means for him that “we are always in the position of beginning again.”<sup>4</sup> His continual beginning again, his project of historicizing the subject, is, if you will, Foucault’s philosophical starting point, his arché.<sup>5</sup> It is where I begin to trace the trajectory of his genealogy of the modern subject.

The human person in Foucault’s work is affirmatively left undefined and open to new avenues of self-understanding. Foucault’s conception of philosophy and its relation to our self-formation is bound closely to promoting what he views as the best philosophical way of living. Indeed, in this light, his philosophical concern with self-formation echoes Socrates in Plato’s dialogues in which it is through rigorous attempts to define the philosophically examined life that Socrates uncovers what allures his dialogue partner to cultivate a life informed by the virtues.<sup>6</sup> The analogy of Socrates, however, can only take us so far in our understanding of Foucault’s thought. For, as we shall see, Foucault’s philosophy is informed by an ethic that cares little for the philosophically articulated virtuous life and the morals that are bound to such virtues and the life they enable. No self understanding can be articulated as true in Foucault’s writings.

In contrast to the Socratic project of making known the virtue of justice and in response to the calamities of WWII and the concomitant political narratives promising freedom in its Communist, Fascist, and Capitalist versions, Foucault puts forward what he claims is a non-normative expression of human freedom.<sup>7</sup> His understanding of

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 47.

<sup>5</sup> Foucault states his rejection of *a priori* theories of the subject and preference for analyzing the relations of power that constitute the subject in his interview titled, “The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom” in *Michel Foucault: Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth* ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: The New York Press, 1997), p. 290.

<sup>6</sup>On this point cf. Alexander Nehamas, *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Socrates to Foucault* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

<sup>7</sup> While Foucault is quite clear that his writings do not claim that one can escape relations of power, it is also true, I argue, that the impetus for his view of the subject as practicing a philosophical ethos is

freedom is allegedly subsumed within no repressive philosophical narrative or historical script. But such a claim leads to the question: what informs Foucault's understanding of freedom? Foucault's ascesis, that is, his understanding of philosophy as a discipline that shapes one's being, draws heavily upon his notion of an "aesthetic of existence," a term we will come to know in the following chapters. This notion, I will argue, is set up in his genealogy of the modern subject in contradistinction to any previously historical articulation of freedom. It is the subject's freedom as understood in its Greek practice that Foucault admires and wishes to use as a source of inspiration for a contemporary understanding of the subject.<sup>8</sup> Foucault's interest with the Greeks centers on how their ethics were informed by an "aesthetics of existence." He does not view the Greeks as paradigmatic. Instead, he sees them only as a historical episode that can be used to service the lack of a religious or secular foundation in contemporary ethics.

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supported by a normative view on the subject. Foucault's latter writings on practicing Enlightenment look to exposing the ontological limits of ourselves in hope of showing their contingency. In the *AK*, a method that investigates our historical limits, Foucault writes the following: It [archaeology] is trying to deploy a dispersion that can never be reduced to a single system of differences, a scattering that is not related to absolute axes of reference; it is trying to operate a decentering that leaves no privilege to any centre.... its task is to *make* differences: to constitute them as objects, to analyse them, and to define their concept. If philosophy is memory or a return of the origin, what I am doing cannot, in any way, be regarded as philosophy; and if the history of thought consists in giving life to half-effaced figures, what I am doing is not history either." Cf. pp. 226-27. Presupposed in this quote, and elsewhere, is a substantive claim on the subject as a subject that in fact desires to escape scientific knowability and prefers a freedom set within historical contingency.

<sup>8</sup> By a source of inspiration I mean that in Foucault's discussion on the relationship between politics and his genealogy of truth the early Greek's understanding of ascesis was one that was not subject to Christian norms and universal application. A Greek's ascesis, instead, developed regionally and in "scattered centers" throughout cities in ancient Greece. What this means for Foucault's genealogy of truth is that the truth of the self is not regulated by a universal politics. Cf. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: The Use of Pleasure* Trans. Robert Hurley (New York: A Division of Random House, Inc., 1985), p. 21. Undoubtedly, Foucault is critiquing, among other issues, liberalism's supposed neutrality wherein the state is understood as refraining from expressing any conception of the good. The state, instead, is understood as guaranteeing a package of equal and uniformly applicable individual rights. In contradiction to this uniformity Foucault looks favourably to an ancient period where the cultural *nomos* constitutes the authority concerning truth claims. While I do not further expand of Foucault as a political theorist it is difficult to read Foucault's interest in the subject as something separate from politics. To better understand Foucault's political "theory" one would do well to read the writings by Charles Taylor. Hereafter I will refer to the *Use of Pleasure* as *UP*.

This leads to a subsequent question: to what is Foucault's freedom reacting? Foucauldian freedom is also largely a reaction to Christianity. The freedom that I am principally concerned with throughout the thesis is the freedom that is generated in Christian discourse, a discourse that looms large in his works on sexuality. Foucault's freedom, along with the analytical framework that makes it possible and so desirable, is also a freedom that precludes seeing Foucault and the Christian religion as natural conversation partners. In fact they can only be brought into conversation by imposing a number of distinctions and qualifications upon the content of his writings. This claim, at any rate, structures the substance of this thesis.

More specifically, the central issue engaged in this thesis is Foucault's *technique de soi*.<sup>9</sup> One sees throughout Foucault's writings how this term denotes new meanings throughout the course of his genealogical project of the modern identity. According to Foucault the modern identity is fed by many tributary sources with Christianity being the most prominent. Consequently in this thesis I limit the scope of Foucault's *technique de soi* to its significance on the relationship between Foucault and Christianity, as this relationship is understood in Foucault's writings during the late 70s and early 80s. Thanks to a body of current Foucauldian scholarship there is a growing interest in Foucault's relationship to and characterization of Christianity, theology, and religion. Heretofore, as admitted by Jeremy Carrette in his book *Foucault and Religion*, this body

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<sup>9</sup> Another term Foucault uses to describe this building of the self is the "cultivation of the self." I use these two terms synonymously. The French word for this is "le technique de soi." Foucault's definition of this term is as follows: "It [le technique de soi] took the form of an attitude, a mode of behaviour; it became instilled in ways of living; it evolved into procedures, practices, and formulas that people reflected on, developed, perfected, and taught. It thus came to constitute a social practice, giving rise to relationships between individuals, to exchanges and communications, and at times even to institutions. And it gave rise, finally, to a certain mode of knowledge and to the elaboration of a science." The term denotes exercises or practices one engaged in so as to come to a deeper appreciation of themselves. Michel Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, Trans. Robert Hurley (New York: A Division of Random House, 1988), p. 45.

of literature has yet to engage theology and religious studies with Foucault's *technique de soi*.<sup>10</sup> I wish to redress this lacuna in the following thesis.

In doing so, this thesis argues, contrary to some Foucauldian scholars,<sup>11</sup> that when we examine Foucault's Christian *technique de soi* we are provided with a window into his work that complicate Foucault's intersection with religion. The Foucault I encounter is a Foucault who explicitly *contrasts* an "aesthetics of existence" with a Christian epistemologization of the subject.<sup>12</sup> In terms of Foucault's ethical project I read his notion of ascesis as pitted against a Christian *technique de soi*. To the best of my knowledge Foucauldian scholars who wish to engineer a dialogue between Foucault and Christianity do not take this claim seriously enough. When this claim *is* taken seriously we are presented with a Foucault whose contribution to the study of religion and particularly the history of Christian theology is a consistently destructive criticism of Christianity and its influences on the modern subject. This claim is supported by my exploration of Foucault's genealogical story of how human beings have been made subjects and how this story is structured by his desire for a freedom that is in large measure thought of as freedom *from* a Christian *technique de soi*.

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Jeremy Carrette, *Foucault and Religion: Spiritual Corporality and Political Spirituality* (London: Routledge Press, 2000), p. 150.

<sup>11</sup> More specifically: Jeremy Carrette, James Bernauer, and J. Joyce Schuld. Cf. chapter three.

<sup>12</sup> My preference for the term epistemologization stems partly from Foucault's use of the term in the *AK*. As will be made clear in chapter two the role of epistemologization in Foucault's archaeological method indicates the various thresholds in which discourse formation moves throughout history. These thresholds point to how and at what moments in history discursive formation epistemologized, that is, takes on the credibility of a science. Cf. Michel Foucault, *AK*, pp. 205-208. My intent with using the term epistemologization of the subject in Christian practices of the self is to make the case that Foucault's investigation into the ancient and early Christian sexual pathological typologies stems largely from his reading of the Christian self-examination. While it is true that Foucault does give considerable attention to the practices of the self in the Imperial period these writings will largely be unaddressed in this thesis. Examined is how the Christian self-examination in Foucault's writings, I argue, plays a large role in his understanding of the epistemologizing not only of the sexual aspect of the subject but also the modern subject. Cf. chapter two.

Part of Foucault's agenda in his work on ancient and early philosophy is to show how the Socratic dictum "Know Thyself" came to occupy a central place in *le technique de soi*. Foucault investigates the close relationship he claims once existed between the care of the self (*epimelia heautou*) and the Socratic question of Know Thyself (*gnōthi seauton*).<sup>13</sup> In his *Care of the Self* Foucault understands this relationship to have been largely unexamined by philosophers and historians. In his opinion, care of the self has been subsumed under the privileged philosophical introspection of "Know Thyself." Foucault, however, always suspicious of separating philosophy from its influence on the formation of the subject, again threads these two themes together.

He threads these two themes together by examining *theoria* and its relation to the body in three contexts. These contexts are: (a) dietary regimen, (b) discourse on the relationship between the physical body and the sexual act, and (c) writings that center on the self-examination found in daily journals, meditations, and the confessional literature of the literate. This thesis works exclusively with Foucault's *technique de soi* from the vantage point of the third of these contexts, self-examination. It *does not* take up Foucault's treatment of the relation of philosophy to dietary concerns or of the close relation between medical discourse and philosophy. The first two contexts are implicit within the third context given our constitutive embodiment. Therefore it is most efficient to deal with the third context only bringing in material from the other two contexts where necessary to understand the third.

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<sup>13</sup> In Foucault's understanding, care of the self is the codified social practices that can be evidenced within the quotidian experiences that subjects place upon themselves. They are, in other words, the means one imposes upon oneself so as to come to a genuine understanding of themselves, the world, and their relationship to others. In focusing his research on this question Foucault is to be read as studying how one's relationship to the body is shaped, informed, and directed by philosophical theory (*theoria*).

I divide the thesis into three chapters. Chapter one attempts to situate Foucault's overarching claim in his archeo-genealogical writings. To do so I first define Foucault's archeo-genealogical method. I am especially interested in Foucault's genealogy as it comes to the fore in his later writings from *Discipline and Punishment* to his untimely death in 1984. In my attempt to situate Foucault's genealogical *technique de soi* I argue that it proves helpful to read Foucault's turn to ancient and early Christian writings in relation to the work of his much admired colleague, Pierre Hadot. This comparison to Hadot, I continue, is by no means occasioned by similar methodologies but rather a similar conception of philosophy as *l'exercice spirituel*. On this point I argue that the distinctive methodological emphases in Foucault's works from the early 80s need to be read in light of Hadot's work. The chapter concludes with what I see as Foucault's genealogical story: an ascesis that has not yet burdened itself with an analytical grid that Foucault associates with a Christian *technique de soi*.

Chapter two further develops Foucault's treatment of ancient ascesis and the Christian *technique de soi* by turning to his works on the history of sexuality and to some of his other relevant articles and interviews from the 80s. Yet, I argue that before turning to Foucault's work on ascesis, it is important to read his notion of the self as defined in *The Order of Things*. What we read here about the self informs his later "histories," and, more importantly, his genealogical *technique de soi*.<sup>14</sup> I turn next to Foucault's development of the "aesthetics of existence" and subsequently to the contrasting Christian technology of the self and the epistemologization of the self that he associates with this term. Foucault, I argue, desires an anti-metaphysical subject that is

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<sup>14</sup> The title Foucault designated for his position at the Collège de France, "The History of Systems of Thought," is descriptive of his understanding of history. His "histories" examine the development of knowledge (*savoir*) in its social context.

unknowable. Foucault's disdain, I continue, for a Christian technology of the self is that Christianity makes this subject knowable.

Finally, after having situated Foucault and providing an in-depth analysis of his works on the "aesthetics of existence" in relation to the Christian technology of the self I turn to three Foucauldian scholars who wish to read Foucauldian theory as having a positive role to play in the study of religion and in particular the history of Christian theology. I engage the works of the following scholars: J. Joyce Schuld, Jeremy Carrette, and James Bernauer. I argue that in her engagement with Foucault and Augustine Schuld fails to assess correctly how Foucault's articulation of asceticism directly influences his conceptual tools. My examination of Carrette, who I see as the most careful of the three scholars, is limited to his argument that religion after Foucault needs to be completely re-evaluated. In his works, Carrette accepts Foucault's reduction of religion to what I want to call religion's socio-cultural aspect. Lastly, in an interaction with Bernauer I argue that his reading of Foucault's archaeology as a negative theology is misplaced and results from how he interprets Foucault's Christian *technique de soi*

Yet, before turning to the criticisms I raise against those arguing for a Foucauldian remapping of Christianity, it is necessary to provide my own working definition of religion and why I see the need for redefining the term religion in the dialogue between Foucault and Christian theology. While it is true, as is evident in chapter three, that much of my formulated criticisms against Schuld and Bernauer result from what I claim are their misreading of Foucault, it is also true that a more aptly defined concept of religion could possibly improve the way they engage Foucault with Christian theology. With this said, in need of justification is my argument that Carrette's

formulation of religion after Foucault is better described as a socio-cultural *aspect* of religion. If religion in a Foucauldian model describes only the socio-cultural aspect of religion, what, in turn, are the other unmentioned aspects of religion? More to the point, what is the center of religion from which one is justified to speak of multiple modal aspects?

The support for my critique of a Foucauldian religion is largely drawn from Reformational philosophy, a 20<sup>th</sup> century Protestant philosophical response to neo-Kantianism.<sup>15</sup> I only briefly address two basic themes in Reformational philosophy that help conceive the role I give to religion. The first theme that is pivotal to Reformational thought is that all thought, including theoretical thought, can never be understood as autonomous. The self-grounding autonomy of reason is largely a modern ideal which Reformational philosophy attempts to show is philosophically untenable. Religion, not just the non-theoretical, in Reformational philosophy, is understood as the condition of possibility for theoretical thought alongside of all the other modes of meaning of our experience. This is so because religion, it argues, points to the Absolute as prior to and the ground of our irreducibly differentiated character of the things of our temporal experience. Religion is a mysterious unity that is constituted by our relationship to the Absolute. Religion, as such, bears witness to the condition of possibility of all the modes of creaturely meaning such as discourse formation and power. Such meanings are

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<sup>15</sup> The two founding figures of Reformational philosophy are Herman Dooyeweerd (1894-1977) and his brother-in-law, D.H. Th Vollenhoven (1892-1978). For an explanation of Reformational thought cf. Herman Dooyeweerd, *In the Twilight of Western Thought: Studies in the Pretended Autonomy of Philosophical Thought* (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1960) and Herman Dooyeweerd, *Roots of Western Culture: Pagan, Secular, and Christian Options* Trans. John Kraay (Toronto: Wedge Publishing Foundation, 1979). As is the case for most intellectual movements it is hardly true to say that all thinkers within the Reformational tradition are in agreement with each other. What follows in this brief description of Reformational thought are two fundamental points that most, if not all, would support.

recognizable modes of creaturely meaning and hence only a *part of*, not the very *grounding of*, our experience of religion. A Reformational view of religion is possible by its desire to show how all life bears religious convictions. A Reformational view of religion can help to clarify how and in what way a tradition (even the Christian tradition) absolutizes an aspect of creation, that is, makes one aspect in creation an absolute rather than a relative difference.

What does this mean for Foucault and the Foucauldian scholars that I examine? These scholars are sensitive to the historico-cultural aspects of religion. They, however, also ground religion to that *aspect* and to this degree reduce religion to one of its parts.<sup>16</sup> In their account of religion these scholars (more specifically: Carrette) tend to reduce all of the other aspects of human experience of creaturely meaning to the historico-cultural. This, I argue, is to absolutize historical power formation. What I mean by this is that this tendency is not only incoherent since historicity, understood in terms of discursively established power formation, but that it also becomes in their work an absolute ground or substructure for everything else. That is, their historicization of all aspects of human experience becomes itself a form of ahistorical absolutization. Religion understood in this model is then caught in the same reductive move as are other phenomena of our experiences. Foucault's historicization of the human subject, we are lead to believe, is itself exempt from the claim of his complete historicization. Historicization in this process is exempt from the flux, the difference, that is produced historically. Such a position, I argue, translates into an irresolvable problem with Foucault as well as how he

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<sup>16</sup> By "ground religion" I mean that Carrette definition of religion acknowledges that religion can only be defined by and set within Foucault's power/knowledge matrix. As will be read in chapter three, Carrette wishes to define religious discourse as something to be understood as solely within the dynamic of power/knowledge.

has been appropriated by those interested in thinking about Christian faith and theology (more specifically, the human person) from a Foucauldian perspective. A Reformational commitment to the multimodel diversity of creation exposes this Foucauldian incoherence and, in doing so, allows for one to conceptualize religion as something that could be seen as subject to some form or aspect of religion (power formation) within creation without reducing it to power formation. This is done by Reformational philosophy's insistence that historical formation is a relative difference, by which I mean that it cannot be thought of as substructure in which all thought is to be supported.

The second pivotal characteristic of Reformational philosophy in need of explanation is its emphasis on a non-reductionistic model of the aspects of creation. Concerning the human person, for example, it is true that the sciences only describe a particular viewpoint or aspect of the human person. The disciplines of physics, biology, psychology, history, or sociology, and so forth, only describe an aspect of temporal existence of the human person. Like Foucault's disdain for the modern subject, Reformational philosophy is also sceptical of language that is reductionistic in tone. However, herein lays a central difference between Foucault's distrust of the modern subject and Reformational philosophy's emphases on the non-reductionism of the human person that this thesis exposes. Both perspectives answer quite differently what the human person *is* in his or her central unity of existence. It is very difficult to see similarities between Foucault and Reformational philosophy as to their respective approaches to the human person. In Reformational philosophy's attempt to describe the "essence" of the human person as something which is other than the temporal modal aspects of the human person –such as, number, space, motion, organic functions of life,

functions of emotional feeling, logical functions of thought, functions of historical development, social, lingual, economic, aesthetic, jural, moral, and faith functions –it exposes what it claims to be a scriptural view of soul and body. Dooyeweerd writes:

If one continually studies the temporal diversity of the functions corresponding to the different aspects of reality investigated by the special sciences, one never arrives at true self-knowledge. One's gaze remains dispersed in the diversity. We can obtain genuine self-knowledge only by way of religious concentration, when we draw together the totality of our existence, which diverges within time in a multiplicity of functions, and focus it upon our authentic, fundamental relationship to God, who is the absolute and single origin and creator of all that is.<sup>17</sup>

Self-knowledge, we read, is completely dependent on knowledge of God. This very relationship determines the most, yet not the only, constitutive feature of the human person. That Christianity is in practice a confessional religion makes it very difficult to sustain a position that attempts to reposition religion according to a Foucauldian model, since such a model, if true to Foucault, insists that we have unfortunately been made confessional animals in large part because of Christianity.

The importance placed on the confessional self-surrender of the religious subject is *the* motivating reason for my insistence on questioning whether Foucault's thought can easily compliment the history of Christian theology. Foucault's critique of religion as a heteronomous form of power is itself an Enlightenment understanding of religion, and, as such, is sustained by what needs to be seen as his lingering autonomous subject. The very plausibility of the subject's resistance to the knowability of the human sciences still holds onto an autonomous being that is capable of resistance to forms of heteronomy. That element in the human person that is capable of resisting forms of heteronomy, his

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<sup>17</sup> Herman Dooyeweerd, *Roots of Western Culture*, p. 33. For literature by Dooyeweerd on the relationship of the human person read his chapter titled, "What is Man?" in *The Twilight of Western Thought*, pp. 173-195.

anti-metaphysical substance, should be seen as an impossibility if Foucault is to fully acknowledge his own terms on the historicizing subject. Foucault's alternative to transcendental autonomy, the Kantian position, is not an acceptance of heteronomy but rather the embrace of a fully historicized notion of autonomy. But, one might ask, is such a historicization possible? Isn't autonomy, in the contrast between autonomy and heteronomy, always transcendental and hence also *structural* and *ahistorical*? What does this contradiction mean for this thesis? Here Reformational philosophy offers a helpful contrast to a post-Kantian autonomy. Contrary to Foucault's lingering autonomous subject, Dooyeweerd, following a very Augustinian move, claims that "[v]eritable religion is absolute *self-surrender*."<sup>18</sup> Drawing on writers who emphasise a more relational approach in Dooyeweerd's understanding of the human heart,<sup>19</sup> where the self as a relational, social, and ethical being is stressed instead of an epistemological self, it is important to see that the concentric direction of the self plays a pivotal role in any attempt to understand an appropriate Christian notion of the human person. My preference not to concede to a Foucauldian theology will be made clear in the last chapter and the conclusion of this thesis.

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. Herman Dooyeweerd, *A New Critique of Theoretical Thought vol. I* Trans. David H. Freeman and William S. Young (Philadelphia: the Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1953), p. 58.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Jim Olthuis, "Of Webs and Whirlwinds; Me, Myself and I: Reformational Anthropology at the Dawn of the Second Millennium," in *Contemporary Reflections on the Philosophy of Herman Dooyeweerd: A Supplement to the Collected Works of Herman Dooyeweerd* (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellon Press, 2000) and Gerrit Glas, "Ego, Self, and the Body: An Assessment of Dooyeweerd's Philosophical Anthropology," in *Christian Philosophy at the Close of the Twentieth Century: Assessment and Perspective* Ed. Sander Griffioen and Bert M. Balk (Kampen: Uitgeverij Kok, 1995), pp. 67-78.

## Chapter one: *Situating Foucault*

“Good Sir, you are an Athenian, a citizen of the greatest city with the reputation for wisdom and power; are you not ashamed of your eagerness to possess as much wealth, reputation and honors as possible, while you do not care for nor give thought to wisdom or truth, or the best possible state of your soul?”  
Socrates, *Apology*, 29e.

Foucault’s philosophical/historical writings show how human beings turn themselves into subjects. By subjects Foucault means people who are being governed, controlled, or defined by a power-knowledge matrix.<sup>20</sup> Since Foucault’s anti-metaphysical framework holds that no substance or essence can succeed in identifying an invariant and constitutive feature of a human being, this means that any prior definitive or determined understanding of a subject needs to be understood as contingent upon how discourse defines the content of a subject.<sup>21</sup> Foucault’s philosophy, as such, can be labelled an immanent philosophy by which I mean his philosophical starting point, his historicizing of the malleable subject, is limited to the temporal horizon. His interest in subjects examines a matrix in which thought is contained. Continuing, subjectivity for Foucault can be defined as a limiting and classifying of the subject in terms of its discursive identity. Following Foucault’s description of his method, Paul Rabinow, in his introduction to *The Foucault Reader*, clearly identifies three Foucauldian modes of

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. Michel Foucault, “Truth and Power,” in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings, 1972-1977* Ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), pp. 109-133. Power-knowledge is contained within and surrounded by a matrix in which knowledge is given credibility through the operation of relations of power.

<sup>21</sup> Foucault’s definition of the subject is best read in an interview with H. Becker et al. Here he writes: “I had to reject a priori theories of the subject in order to analyze the relationships that may exist between the constitution of the subject or different forms of the subject and games of truth, practices and power, and so on. [...] [The subject] is not a substance. It is a form, and this form is not primarily or always identical to itself.” Cf. Michel Foucault, “The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom,” in *Michel Foucault: Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, p. 290.

objectification<sup>22</sup> by means of which we develop our subjectivity.<sup>23</sup> A brief discussion of these modes provides an outline to the different emphases in Foucault's methodology. This outline helps to better situate Foucault's thought.

Rabinow labels the first mode of objectification, "dividing practices." This term defines a substantial part of Foucault's *Madness and Civilization*, *The Birth of the Clinic*, and, to some extent, his later works *Discipline and Punish* and *History of Sexuality: An Introduction*.<sup>24</sup> Subjects in this process of classification are divided and labelled into discursively produced social and personal identities. Foucault's genealogy of the modern subject examines how discursive identities are produced by divisions made possible through the growth of medical technology, psychiatric institutions, or disciplinary regimes. With a growth and a specialization of knowledge on the body comes the need for a more sophisticated organizational taxonomy. This taxonomy requires an increase of divisions. According to Rabinow, this process raises three issues to the fore: (a) the objectification of individuals from an undifferentiated mass, (b) the interconnections of dividing practices in the social sciences, and (c) the containment or control of groups through a humanitarian rhetoric of reform and progress.<sup>25</sup> Arguably, Foucault is most well known in the academic community for dealing with these issues. Foucault's methodology as described here is heavily informed by a Marxist-inspired distrust for class organization when that organization is accompanied by a top-down control of

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<sup>22</sup> By "objectification" I mean the process in which the subject is defined in and through strands of discourse and practices. Objectification is to be read as how the subject is defined as determinate in discourse.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Paul Rabinow, *The Foucault Reader*, pp. 3-29. Foucault describes his work through these modes of inquiry in an interview titled, "The Subject and Power" in *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*.

<sup>24</sup> The French title, *La Volonté de savoir*, better describes the book's methodology for it gets at Foucault's point on the historical production of knowledge. I use the French title from here on.

<sup>25</sup> Rabinow, p. 8.

society by an oppressive bourgeois elite or monarchy. This methodological focus, however, cannot be recognized as clearly in Foucault's later writings.

The second mode of objectification focuses on "scientific classification." This focus defines books like *The Order of Things* and *The Archaeology of Knowledge* where Foucault articulates how pseudo-sciences establish for themselves the status of an objective science. Foucault here looks more at the topic of discourse itself rather than studying the role of discourse and the development of discursive practices in historical societies. While a definition of discourse and discourse formation is needed I will forego this discussion until the next section. At present I only wish to underline that in these two modes of objectification Foucault's focus is directed towards the study of how the subject is made the object of a specified scientific classification. In *OT* Foucault investigates the object of scientific classification through examining what he calls *epistemes*. That is, he looks at the manifestation of the modalities of the "existence of order" and order's dependence on the "historical *a priori*."<sup>26</sup> In this approach the conditions of possibility (the historical *a priori*) are examined. This is why Foucault eventually uses the term archaeology to describe his method. Archaeology examines and sifts through the many layers of what makes possible our thought patterns. In doing so, archaeology unearths that something which is supposedly discursively unconditional. Foucault's aim with the "scientific classification" is to understand how and by what means order changes in the context of a changed episteme.

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<sup>26</sup> Cf. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London and New York: Routledge Press, 2002), pp. xvi-xxvi. Hereafter referred to as *OT*.

Rabinow's third category of objectification, "subjectification," describes a new and significant emphasis in Foucault's thought.<sup>27</sup> This category, unlike the previous two categories, describes most explicitly the way human beings actively turn themselves into subjects. To be sure, Foucault's emphasis in this category still works with the same subject. In this category however his examination grants more agency to the subject who in the previous two categories should be read as a subject that is operated upon, subsumed within, and defined by a power formation over which it is given little control. What is privileged in the third mode of objectification is the process of active self-formation. Important in this methodology is how and by what means one comes to an understanding of oneself and what it means to know oneself. Rabinow states that these operations of self-formation, "characteristically entail a process of self-understanding but one which is mediated by an external authority figure, be he confessor or psychoanalyst."<sup>28</sup> In his works on the Greek and Imperial periods this active self-formation, this taking care of oneself, was done in service of gaining mastery over oneself. However, with the rise of Christianity and its paradoxical focus on mastery through humble submission and dependency on grace, this movement to self-mastery became more a matter of learning how to shape one's own inner character. This active examination of one's consciousness that started with the early Greeks led to the shaping of inner character in Christian circles by confessing sinful thoughts to one's abbot, priest, and God. Developed, however, in the Christian self-examination are new forms for understanding subjectivity.

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<sup>27</sup> Rabinow, p. 11.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

These three aspects of Foucault's methodology are not to be understood as clearly distinct from each other. These distinctions instead serve as a heuristic tool that help to organize Foucault's thought and highlight the main concerns in his writings. This thesis is primarily concerned with the last category, "subjectification." It is particularly important to note, vis-à-vis his method from the early 70s to the end of his writing career, how his growing interest in subjectification goes hand in hand with his assumption of the genealogical method of inquiry. This philosophical method stems from the German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche.<sup>29</sup> However, as with most of Foucault's sources, Nietzschean genealogy takes on a new meaning in Foucault's thought. One of the new meanings that Foucault addresses via genealogy is his investigation into the epistemologizing of discourse on the self evidenced in the development of a new system of thought.

### ***Archeo-genealogical method in Foucault's later period***

Foucauldian scholars highlight different thinkers who they argue exercised a greater impact on Foucault's thought. For example, Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow emphasize the importance of reading Heidegger in Foucault's decision to move beyond hermeneutics.<sup>30</sup> By contrast, Michael Mahon emphasises reading Foucault in light of Nietzsche's genealogical method.<sup>31</sup> These are only two examples. Each book is convincing on its own terms. Together their two works form the basis of my understanding of the meaning of Foucault's archeo-genealogy. A definition of genealogy

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<sup>29</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Trans. Walter Kaufman. (New York: A Division of Random House, Inc., 1989). In particular, cf. chapter three, pp. 97-163. This chapter is of particular interest to Foucault's genealogy of the modern subject for in it Nietzsche attempts to expose how an investigation into history shows a strong bond between ascetic ideals and philosophical inquiry.

<sup>30</sup> Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*.

<sup>31</sup> Michael Mahon, *Foucault's Nietzschean Genealogy: Truth, Power, and the Subject* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1992).

as a method helps clarify Foucault's purpose and intention in writing about the technology of the self. Thus, after a brief description of Foucault's archaeological method I turn to Dreyfus and Rabinow's claim that the method stood in need of revision. This discussion leads in turn to the question and importance of the genealogy as a supplementary methodology. On this point I turn to Mahon's insightful book. Only after a discussion of Foucault's methodological experiments can we understand the method to his "le technique de soi."

### *Archaeology*

To understand the intent of Foucault's archaeological method it is helpful to describe what it attempts to study. Foucault states in the introduction to *AK* that his method does not attempt to study its sources as if they were documents but rather as if they were monuments. What Foucault means by this is that archaeology does not look to a source to see what it is really pointing towards. Archaeology is not to be thought of as an interpretive method. Foucault does not believe, in other words, that there is another something that one's sources point to. Instead, Foucault's method looks to sources as if they were monuments since there is no access to an intrinsic or hidden description of archaeological monuments. The cause of monuments is unknown. All that can be studied then are a monument's effects: that is, what "we" say they mean. Now, if we relate his analogy of monument and document to his concern with the philosophy of the subject we are in a better position to understand Foucault's following comment:

Continuous history is the indispensable correlative of the founding function of the subject: the guarantee that everything that has eluded him may be restored to him; the certainty that time will disperse nothing without restoring it in a reconstituted unity; the promise that one day the subject – in the form of historical consciousness – will once again be able to appropriate, to bring back under his sway, all those things that are kept at a distance by difference, and find in them

what might be called his abode. Making historical analysis the discourse of the continuous and making human consciousness the original subject of all historical development and all action are the two sides of the same system of thought.<sup>32</sup>

Like monuments, the subject in Foucault's archaeology can only be studied through its effects. Since there is no original subject to which we can return, archaeology is interested in what "we" historically have said about the subject. Foucault is interested in discursive effects and is not interested in restoring a lost unity. His thought is centred on the establishment of truth games as immanently constructed in and through socio-political institutions, textbooks, and other discursive formations. This is his matrix. His philosophy of the subject, like his archaeological investigation into monuments, looks favourably upon the de-centering and fragmentation of the subject.

Putting Foucault's analogy into his larger discussion on knowledge and science, we get a clearer picture of what he aims to study thereby. He examines the *episteme* of knowledge and science, which, in his analogy, are associated with monuments. For Foucault, just as monuments remain intrinsically unknowable to their observers so too the historical episteme remains unknowable. What is said, the statement (*énoncé*), is analysed within its discursive field of use. Foucault's archaeology examines the immanent field wherein statements are to be studied as embedded within a discourse formation. As such, what is known about the episteme is how it is articulated discursively and how through this articulation, pseudo-sciences, such as psychiatry for instance, gain the status of a credible science.

As stated previously, the episteme is the condition of possibility for a science. According to Foucault, there are three epistemes that one locates in Western history: the

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<sup>32</sup> Michel Foucault, *AK*, p. 13.

Renaissance, the Classical Age, and Modernity. Foucault defines the episteme as follows:

By *episteme*, we mean, in fact, the total set of relations that unite, at a given period, the discursive practices that give rise to epistemological figures, sciences, and possibly formalized systems; the way in which, in each of these discursive formations, the transitions to epistemologization, scientificity, and formalization are situated and operate; the distribution of these thresholds, which may coincide, be subordinated to one another, or be separated by shifts in time; the lateral relations that may exist between epistemological figures or sciences in so far as they belong to neighbouring, but distinct, discursive practices. The episteme is not a form of knowledge (*connaissance*) or type of rationality which, crossing the boundaries of the most varied sciences, manifests the sovereign unity of a subject, a spirit, or a period; it is the totality of relations that can be discovered, for a given period, between the sciences when one analyses them at the level of discursive regularities.<sup>33</sup>

Discursive formation is ruled by the character of each episteme. It moves, writes Foucault, through four thresholds: (1) the threshold of positivity, (2) the threshold of epistemologization, (3) the threshold of scientificity, and, finally, (4) the threshold of formalization.<sup>34</sup> Archaeology explores at what period in history and by what means knowledge and science pass through these four thresholds. While a complete definition of these terms pushes us away from the main topic of this section, it is important to note how a science gains more reputation and authority as it moves from a positivity to a formalization.

Foucault's classification of the Christian *technique de soi* and its association with an epistemologization of the subject recalls the thresholds of discursive formation on the possibility of science described in *AK*. As I understand Foucault, his work with the early Christian literature on self-knowledge functions as a *proto-* scientific formation that makes modern identity possible. His classification of a Christian *technique de soi* acts as

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<sup>33</sup> Michel Foucault, *AK*, p. 211.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, cf. p. 206.

a pivotal moment in his genealogy of the modern subject whereby the subject is understood through a new threshold. This new threshold is part of a new system of thought. While Foucault's concern with a scientific formation within discourse is absent from his later works on the ancient and early patristic authors, he is still quite interested in revealing the epistemologizing of sexual discourse in Christian literature. This epistemological process of sexual and confessional discourse in Christian literature, already incipient in Roman Imperial literature,<sup>35</sup> comes about with an increased concern to describe and promote the elimination of pathological forms. In his later period Foucault's archaeological interest focuses on the increased attention paid to how sexual ailments, along with other sin-ridden ailments, develop discursively. Yet, before looking at the application of Foucault's method in his later writings, it first proves helpful to discuss Dreyfus and Rabinow's book alongside of Mahon's book.

In their account of Foucault's methodology Dreyfus and Rabinow state that Foucault's archaeology is in need of revision. They point to the inability of archaeology to appeal to the meaning and the causal power of discursive rules. Before explaining their critique it helps first to cite a passage from *AK* that Dreyfus and Rabinow also cite as key. It provides us our context. Foucault writes:

My aim was to analyse this history [history freed from its subjection to transcendence], in the discontinuity that no teleology would reduce in advance; to map it in a dispersion that no pre-established horizon would embrace; to allow it to be deployed in an anonymity on which no transcendental constitution would impose the form of the subject; to open it up to a temporality that would not promise the return of any dawn.<sup>36</sup>

Given Foucault's aim, the authors ask Foucault how an archaeologist's study of discursive practices can view discourse with a "modest empiricism." Foucault's intention

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<sup>35</sup> Cf. Michel Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, pp. 133-144.

<sup>36</sup> Michel Foucault, *AK* pp. 223-224.

in writing about discursive practices implies that discursive practices govern speakers and their statements. Do not discursive practices, they ask, also govern the archaeologist? That is, can the archaeologist really be an ahistorical thinker with an “intellectual privilege”? Consequently, can Foucault’s system really just be a pure description? Dreyfus and Rabinow think otherwise. They state that Foucault’s archaeology, “claims that the regularities that describe the corpus of serious discourse also regulate its production.”<sup>37</sup> Foucault’s archaeology, in other words, is not to be understood as just pure description.

If Foucault understands archaeology to be an end in itself, that is, a description of events, this necessarily precludes any possibility of bringing his critical analysis to bear upon his social concerns. If this statement is true, Foucault’s method can not be read as awakening readers from their “anthropological sleep.” Foucault’s archaeology does not appeal to meaning. In archaeology’s intent to understand the history of human beings from the outside, it ultimately lacks the ability to allow for causal power, influence, or the trace of power/knowledge of discursive statements upon the human being. This inability to explain causal power is remedied, they continue, with Foucault’s turn to genealogy.

Of the many imprecise definitions Foucault gives to explain genealogy, I think the following citation is one of his clearest and most helpful. “Its task [genealogy]” writes Foucault, “is to expose a body totally imprinted by history and the process of history’s destruction of the body.”<sup>38</sup> The need for genealogy stems from a philosophical stance both Nietzsche and Foucault take against the Kantian project. This shared stance insists that human persons examine themselves empirically as to the factors that make us finite,

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<sup>37</sup> Dreyfus and Rabinow, p. 90.

<sup>38</sup> Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, and History,” in *The Foucault Reader*, p. 83.

such as space and time, while simultaneously recognizing that these factors also create the condition of possibility for knowledge. While space and time are a priori transcendental conditions for Kant, Foucault's interest in these factors is limited to showing how the body is to be studied as something that is informed by the categories of space and time, categories that are themselves understood in his writings as operative discursive forces. The body in Foucault's writings is imprinted only by the relations of power that are evident throughout history. The body's destruction is, among other things, brought about by the epistemologization of the subject throughout the unfolding of history.

According to Mahon's book, genealogy serves two purposes. First, it constitutes a form of critique that works to "reveal concrete, practical, and historical conditions of existence." This critique, Mahon continues, "is not a matter of seeking the limits of reason..." for it is, instead, "a historical investigation which unveils reason's falsifications and reveals the moral will that undergirds it."<sup>39</sup> Again, Foucault's critique of power's influence in the shaping of knowledge is clearly evidenced in his genealogy. Genealogical inquiry investigates the effects (not causes) of power and knowledge. In doing so it exposes the play of wills in the formation of truth claims in discourse. The will in a Foucauldian framework acts as the "glue" that holds the fragmentary discursive effects together. His critique, which examines the play of the relations of power, looks only to the relations of power in other further historical moments: his critique is a thorough historicism. As an anti-metaphysical method, by which I mean that the genealogy does not presuppose the existence of a substratum of substance, thing-in-itself,

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<sup>39</sup> Michel Mahon, p. 8.

or subject, what remains for genealogy to document is “effective history.”<sup>40</sup> Foucault’s effective history presupposes a world of discontinuity wherein continuities that exist between events or persons need to be understood via rupture and the exercise of will.<sup>41</sup> At its most basic level what we know about the world is nothing other than a “will to knowledge” and what we know about the truth or falsity of a statement or ourselves is nothing other than a “will to truth.” Thus, what we think we know about ourselves needs to be understood as a knowing that is conditioned and shaped by, and that is confined to history.

Continuing with Mahon, we can move to his second stated purpose of the genealogical method. In its study of the concrete historical conditions of existence, the discursive and non-discursive conditions internal to our discourse, Foucault wants his genealogy to show how his critique serves the “enhancement of life.”<sup>42</sup> By showing us how we have been shaped by our historical and cultural reality, Foucault wants to enable us to recreate for ourselves new ways of understanding ourselves. This archaeo-genealogical method hopes to rescue those who have succumbed to the thrall of reason by opening up new avenues for thought and self-understanding in its very showing of their impermanence. While this might seem too favourable a reading of Foucault given his stress on the all-embracing reach of power I do not think these two issues, power and freedom, can be set apart dichotomously in Foucault’s thought. I think those who read Foucauldian power as simply an imposition from top-down largely misunderstand the

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<sup>40</sup> For an historical perspective on Foucault’s use of history and genealogy with the view propounded in Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life* Trans. Peter Preuss (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 1980).

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, and History” in *Foucault Reader*.

<sup>42</sup> Michel Mahon, p. 8.

role of productive power. Foucault's search is ultimately a search for freedom wherein power is available to each one in one's acts of cultural production.

Foucault's continual search for the experience of freedom in the 70s and 80s oriented him to move beyond the apparatus of political boundaries and judicial law as this is understood in both its political and ecclesiastical context. One way in which Foucault comes to articulate this moving beyond the judicial law is read in his essay titled, "Truth and Power." In it Foucault puts forward a few suggestions on how to rethink the term truth. Truth, he writes, "is to be understood as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation, and operation of statements."<sup>43</sup> With this suggestion about how to understand truth, Foucault comments on how best to understand the relationship of truth to power. "It's not a matter of emancipating truth from every system of power... but of detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic, and cultural, within which it operates at the present time."<sup>44</sup> By "the power of truth" Foucault is to be read as meaning the power to define the subject as one that is determinate and knowable. Instead of accepting the claim that truth *should* be defined by our political economy, Foucault, is, instead, asking his reader to look for a new politics of truth. While not explaining in a precise fashion what he means by a new politics of truth, it can be certain that a constitutive feature of this new politics of truth is recognition of the very contingency and historicizing of the subject's knowability. We can also be certain that a new politics of truth does not look to Christianity as a legitimate source. For, according to Foucault, Christianity epistemologization of the subject is nothing but a "will to truth."

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<sup>43</sup> Cf. Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power," pp. 75.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, pp. 74-75.

Another complimentary way in which Foucault develops his notion of freedom is read in one of his last published articles, *What is Enlightenment?*. This article speaks of the hope that runs explicitly throughout his later writings. In reference to Kant's question and answer to what is enlightenment, Foucault, following Kant's format, has this to say:

The critical ontology of ourselves has to be considered not, certainly, as a theory, a doctrine, nor even as a permanent body of knowledge that is accumulating; it has to be conceived as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them.<sup>45</sup>

This critical ontology of ourselves, this documentation of our historical limits, entails a faith and a hope in liberty that is still to come. This experiment of going beyond ourselves is how Foucault understands our freedom. What this liberty consists in, how it is defined, or how one knows one has reached it remains yet unexamined. Yet, certainly the historicizing of the subject is part and parcel of his understanding of liberty.

For our present purposes, when we look at how some Foucauldian scholars working with this concept of freedom compare it to that of a Christian's concept of freedom, we see that they do not recognize, regardless how liberal or inclusive that framework may be, that it expresses an operative normative claim that is set in contradiction to Christianity. The operative claim in a Foucauldian conception of freedom concerns the way in which the historicizing of the subject prevents a determinate knowability of the subject. According to the anti-reductionistic model that I give in the Introduction,<sup>46</sup> it can be said that the human person cannot be reducible to one of its many modal aspects. There is presupposed in the model I espouse the understanding that the subject is not reduced to an historically contingent form. However, the operative

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<sup>45</sup> Michel Foucault, "What Is Enlightenment?" in Paul Rabinow ed., *The Foucault Reader*, p. 50.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. pp. 8-13.

normative claim for Foucault's subject holds that confession and obedience, both constitutive features of a Christian technology of the self, need to be unmasked as an operative will to power. The only conclusion drawn from his writings on freedom is that his hope of a "new politics of the self" that comes after the exposure of the modern identity is very much informed by his research into the stylization of life in ancient philosophy. It has, as such, little or no relation to a Christian renunciation of the self that is evident in a Christian technology of the self.

Thus far I have briefly outlined Foucault's methodology. I have not meant my outline of Foucault's thought to be exhaustive. Such a project would take far too much space and move beyond the argument of this thesis. It is however important to discuss how the archaeo-genealogical method shapes the contours of Foucault's *technique de soi*. Heretofore, commentators on Foucauldian theories of the formation of the self and the practice of sexuality, both constitutive elements comprising *le technique de soi*, have overlooked the extent to which the writings of his fellow colleague at the University of Paris, Pierre Hadot, had an impact on Foucault's understanding of the role of philosophy for the ancient Greeks and early Christians. Foucault's methodological emphasis in the late 80s on how subjects actively turn themselves into subjects is in large part a result of his reading of ascesis in ancient philosophy. It is important to read Foucault's later works on *le technique de soi* in the light of ascesis because this term carefully describes the historical limits imposed on a subject as it actively coming to terms with how it is to know itself as a subject.

### *Foucault's genealogy of the modern soul in Discipline and Punish*

Underlying Foucault's work subsequent to *AK* is his intent to show how the soul is the prison of the body (*l'âme, prison du corps*). This intent, the complete reversal of a "Platonic" metaphysics that supposedly holds the body to be the prison of the soul, is part of how his philosophical agenda points to the need for recreating the self. The soul is the prison of the body because the social sciences used to study human behaviour (sexuality, criminology, madness) all postulate a definable and knowable human essence on the basis of which one easily speaks of deviant and marginalized types. For Foucault this supposed intelligibility translates into a prison from which we need to be released.<sup>47</sup> While cautious about over-simplifying Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* one sees in it gestures toward the genealogical development of individuality in the modern soul. This development begins with the historical transformation of how state punishment operates. That is, according to Foucault, the representation of monarchical power and order by the display of public torture gave way in the modern era to a new and more humane means of representing power such as prisons, prison reform, disciplinary control of space, time and productivity. Along with this change in punishment developed a scientific concern to define the criminal character and disposition. This shift in the representation of power, what Foucault calls the "new economy" and "new technology of power," developed in the 18<sup>th</sup> century as the result of a new belief in a shared common humanity in need of

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<sup>47</sup> The modern soul, writes Foucault, is born out of the modern methods of punishment, supervision and constraint. The soul, he continues, has been built by scientific techniques and discourses, along with the moral claims of humanism. "But let there be no misunderstanding: it is not that a real man, the object of knowledge, philosophical reflection or technical intervention, has been substituted for the soul, the illusion of the theologian. The man described for us, whom we are invited to free, is already in himself the effect of a subjection much more profound than himself. A 'soul' inhabits him and brings him to existence, which is itself a factor in the mastery that power exercises over the body. The soul is the effect and instrument of a political anatomy; the soul is the prison of the body." Cf. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: A Division of Random House, Inc., 1995), pp. 29-30. Hereafter referred to as *DP*.

protection. “The right to punish,” Foucault writes, “shifted from the vengeance of the sovereign to the defence of society.”<sup>48</sup> The incarcerated needed to be punished because of their aberration from society. Since any offender was now to be thought to offend against the common nature of humankind, not just the governing rule of the monarch, it became important to define, label, and bracket off the deficiencies and abnormalities that could mar this shared common nature.<sup>49</sup> Operative in this interpretation of the unfolding of history is Foucault’s “scientific classifications.” Foucault’s point in *DP* is not to state a mere truism that what was once a crime, say, blasphemy, is no longer taken up by the state as a serious crime or a punishable offence. Rather, the point is that with this “new economy” the modern subject, encased by a historically produced scientific label, no longer practices true freedom, for the soul in the “new economy” can be thought in its entirety; it is theoretically known and hence determined all the way down.

This is one narrative describing the genealogy of the modern subject. Foucault narrates another genealogical story on the knowability of the modern subject in his *Volonté de savoir*. Here Foucault describes how the Christian practice of confession, arising in the early 13<sup>th</sup> century, produced a historically confessing and obedient subject who could be understood, analysed, and brought to an understanding of themselves through the mediation of a trained priest. This confession, and the obedience associated with it, again is a heuristic tool in Foucault’s overarching genealogy of the obedient and knowable subject. Medieval confession and Christianity’s desire to know fully the thoughts and sinful acts of her subjects, is to be read as a precursor to the trained psychologist wishing to discover his or her client’s hidden thoughts. Yet, how does

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<sup>48</sup> Michel Foucault, *DP*, p. 90.

<sup>49</sup> This shared common nature, associated with humanism, is interchangeable with Foucault’s definition, the soul.

Foucault's description of the genealogy of the modern subject characterize the pre-modern subject? As noted in the beginning of this chapter, Foucault's emphasis in the 70s shifts from "dividing practices," the study of how historical limits are placed upon subjects in an attempt to define the essence of human nature through "the sciences of man," and works more in line with a "subjectification" of the self. It is precisely in this change in methodological emphasis that we are introduced to *le technique de soi*.

### ***Foucault's technique de soi***

In what follows I will define what is included in the term, *le technique de soi*. Then, I will relate it to the archaeo-genealogical method. Lastly, I show how this methodological change in emphasis is, in part, derived from Hadot's work on *l'exercice spirituel*. This comparison proves helpful in understanding Foucault's genealogy by revealing how his genealogy and its search for freedom draw on Hadot's work on ancient asceticism.

The definition of *le technique de soi* depends upon the definition of certain terms. A brief discussion of these entangled terms follows, culminating in a descriptive chart making the associations between terms clear. It is important to remember that while Foucault is trying to allure his reader to take seriously his genealogical claim he is not doing so through clear and distinct definitions. He is not an analytical philosopher and to be so would have entailed for him a self-performative incoherence.<sup>50</sup> With that said, the best place to clarify Foucault's *le technique de soi* is to start with Foucault's seminar at

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<sup>50</sup> Cf. Roy Clouser, *The Myth of Religious Neutrality: An Essay on the Hidden Role of Religious Belief in Theories* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991). Cf. chapter 4.

the University of Vermont in 1982 titled, “Technologies of the self.”<sup>51</sup> “Technologies of the self,” Foucault writes,

permit individuals to effect by their own means, or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.<sup>52</sup>

What, more specifically, does Foucault mean by a certain number of “operations” on the body and soul? Here the passage of Plato’s *Apology* cited as epithet at the beginning of this chapter provides us with a starting point. These operations or practices are informed by the most basic Greek precept: care of the self (*epimeleia sautou*). This precept, Foucault claims, is more basic and more prominent than the well-known Delphic precept “Know Thyself” (*gnōthi seauton*). Foucault writes, “one had to occupy oneself with oneself before the Delphic principle was brought into action.”<sup>53</sup> This conversion to the self, this relationship of oneself to oneself, has a precise meaning. It meant that one is to take oneself as an object of knowledge and to practice a certain self-reflexivity on oneself as a lived body. The aim of taking oneself up as an object is to transform oneself, correct, and purify oneself. This process is termed ascesis. When one takes these exercises upon oneself one will be aware of a desire, a love, to live in the healthiest and most elevated state possible for a living soul. This state of being for Socrates and many others is discovered through the philosophical investigation of the interrelationship between the nature of existence, the nature of the human self, and the nature of the world. Again, to bring us back to the example of Socrates’ speech while on trial in Athens, this means that persons should not spend their lives accumulating wealth and honour.

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<sup>51</sup> Cf. Michel Foucault, “Technologies of the Self,” in *Michel Foucault, Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth. Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*, pp. 223-251.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 225.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 226.

Instead, according to Socrates, true happiness remains to be discovered in the cultivation of *eros* and the philosophically examined life.

The question that examination of the self begs is crucial. What is the normative standard by which, from which, and to which one evaluates, judges, and reforms oneself? What, in other words, informs this taking up of oneself and this conversion towards that desired *other* self? An angle from which this question can be answered is that of Foucault's understanding of ethics and freedom. "Freedom," Foucault writes, "is the ontological condition of ethics."<sup>54</sup> One's understanding of the constitutive features of freedom organizes and animates one's philosophical articulations. Freedom for Foucault's genealogy is the yardstick that predetermines how his narrative script is told. Ethics, understood here is not simply a branch of philosophy, but a way of life. With this in mind, Foucault's coursework on the practices of the care of the self, covering the thousand year period (4<sup>th</sup> century B.C to the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D.), sets out to show how the practice of cultivating oneself from the Greeks to the Imperial Romans and early Christians "gave rise to a fashioning of the self as a possible object of knowledge."<sup>55</sup> This fashioning of the self as a possible object of knowledge, continues Foucault, is not found in Platonism nor in Hellenistic Athens. One reason he gives for the change in the care of the self results from a universalizing of the practices of the self. These practices of the self increasingly became organized in a discursive domain that looks to filter out practices of the self that constituted normal behaviour and behaviour for the attainment of salvation. Such an emphasis, in turn, gave rise to a framework in which one filtered out

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<sup>54</sup> Michel Foucault, "The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom," in *Michel Foucault: Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth: Essential works of Foucault 1954-1984*, p. 284.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981-1982* Ed. Frédéric Gros. Tran. Graham Burchell. (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), p. 121.

the abnormal and the pathological practices from the normal practices. Unlike Alcibiades' practices of the self that aim at concerning himself with justice so as to be able to govern the city and his own soul, these later practices of the self gradually "emerge as a self-sufficient end."<sup>56</sup> What this emergence of the self as a possible object of knowledge means for Foucault's understanding of freedom is that coupled with this gradual shift from the Greeks to the early Christians comes a new discursive formation connecting the truth of the self to the hegemony of social, economic, and cultural forms of power. The subject, in turn, through this incipient discursive formation, is subsumed within a regime of truth that it needs to acknowledge if it is to achieve freedom. Formed in this new system of thought are new analytical relationships.

It proves helpful to pay closer attention to how one occupied oneself with oneself before the Delphic dictum was brought into action. One had to know oneself, examine oneself, before one could involve oneself in city life. This very philosophical exercise in preparation for city life, the care of the self (*epimeleia heautou*), was termed ascesis. Ascesis named the training needed to become virtuous. Much as the body was seen to need exercise if it was to function effectively, so too the soul needed training. This training was the task of philosophy. It was via the lack of an agreed upon exercise that new schools developed in the philosophical tradition. These schools promoted new exercises and patterns of exercise which claimed a new and a more effective direction of souls. A directional shift in the understanding of freedom brought about a new ontological condition of ethics. I will let Foucault speak of this transformation in his own words:

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid, p. 177.

In a word, we can say that the theme of an *ascesis*, as a practical training that was indispensable in order for an individual to form himself as a moral subject, was important – emphasized even – in classical Greek thought, especially in the tradition issuing from Socrates. And yet, this “ascetics” was not organized or conceived as a corpus of separate practices that would constitute a kind of specific art of the soul, with its technique, procedures, and prescriptions. It was not distinct from the practice of virtue itself; it was the rehearsal that anticipated that practice.... It would not be long before this ascetics would begin to have an independent status, or at least a partial and relative autonomy.... The time would come when the art of the self would assume its own shape, distinct from the ethical conduct that was its objective.<sup>57</sup>

With the separation of an art of the self from an understanding of *ascesis* as a preparatory model for the virtuous life came the development of a new *technique de soi*. This new *technique de soi* would take on a new form of living that produced a different form of subjectivity. It is not difficult to detect the direction that Foucault’s genealogy takes: emerging in this new technology is the trace of the knowability of the human subject.

Ethics, for Foucault, is derived from how freedom is conceptualized and categorized in discourse. Freedom for Foucault, as we have already seen, should never be directed towards a utopian vision of the Christian Heavenly Jerusalem, a Marxist’s classless society, or a Freudian freedom from religion’s illusions through science, and so on. These visions presuppose a true understanding of the world and the self that Foucault sees as simply masks of power. There is always a radical shift in Foucault’s historical ontology. He explains his genealogical study of the historical conditions of freedom as follows:

Three domains of genealogy are possible. First, a historical ontology of ourselves in relation to truth through which we constitute ourselves as subjects of knowledge; second, a historical ontology of ourselves in relation to a field of power through which we constitute ourselves as subjects acting on others; third, a historical ontology in relation to ethics through which we constitute ourselves as moral agents.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Michel Foucault, *UP*, p. 77.

<sup>58</sup> Michel Foucault, “On the Genealogy of Ethics,” p. 262.

While this is his interpretative structure through which we are to understand the self in relation to freedom I still have not defined the standard by which one evaluates oneself. We are now in a position to turn to this question.

Foucault's history of morals, that is, his history of sexuality, investigates the meaning of acts and the behaviour of individuals as they are understood in relation to a moral code. A moral code for Foucault is always "imposed upon the people."<sup>59</sup> Foucauldian ethics are concerned with this relationship between act and code. The moral code dictates the value of one's act whether that association is positive or negative, and it determines how one is to take oneself up as an object of study. It defines how one is to constitute him or herself as a moral agent. To give an example, the code of sexual ethics from the Greeks to the early Christians did not radically change. Contrary to popular perception both societies closely monitored sexual desire and had quite austere conditional stipulations on the sexual act. Yet, while the code of sexual austerity remained the same for both societies the *value* attributed to one's act drastically changed.

This change in the value of one's relationship with oneself (*rapport à soi*) is broken again into four distinct subsections: (1) the ethical substance (*substance éthique*); (2) the mode of subjectification (*mode d'assujettissement*); (3) the self-forming activity or asceticism (*pratique de soi*); and, finally, (4) one's aspiration or teleological goal (*téléologie*). The relationship to oneself is what Foucault refers to with the term "ethics."<sup>60</sup> It should be remembered that Foucault postulates an anti-metaphysical subject that is only informed of its knowability through historical formation. With this in mind we can better appreciate the historical forms that Foucault assigns to the subject

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<sup>59</sup> Cf. Michel Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics," pp. 262-269.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. Michel Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics," pp. 263.

throughout the various periods. The (1) ethical substance is that aspect or material of ourselves that is in need of attention. Foucault’s analysis of the *aphrodisia* in *UP*, for example, argues that the ethical substance changed from the Greek’s acts linked to *pleasure* to a Christian’s change in value of acts as something linked to the *flesh*. The (2) mode of subjectification, writes Foucault, is “the way in which people are invited or incited to recognize their moral obligations.”<sup>61</sup> The way in which people are invited to recognize their obligations changes drastically from the invitation to live a beautiful existence to an interdiction by cosmological and divine law. The (3) self-forming activity examines the “means by which we can change ourselves in order to become ethical subjects.”<sup>62</sup> The last aspect (4), one’s teleological goal, is the state of being one desires to achieve. In Foucault’s assessment these practices of the self from the Greeks to the early Christians change from a practice of the self that encourages self-mastery to a practice of the self that encourages immortality.

The chart below clearly outlines the code of taking oneself up as an object and the various changes in relationship that come with oneself when acting upon the code as the meaning of the code varies in historical periods.<sup>63</sup>

<b>Society</b>	<b>Aspect of Morality</b> <i>substance éthique</i>	<b>Subjectification</b> <i>mode d’assujettissement</i>	<b>Practices of the Self</b> <i>pratique de soi</i>	<b>Teleology of Ethics</b> <i>téléology</i>
Classical Greeks,	Acts-pleasure-desire	Beautiful existence	Tekhne for your role	Self-Master in order to rule
Greeks Stoic	aphrodisia	Rationality Political	Exercises in restraint	Self-mastery to be Rational
Christians	Desire, Flesh, Body	Religious, juridical	Techniques of self for	Immortality,

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, p. 264.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, p. 265.

<sup>63</sup> The following online chart comes from Jeremy W. Crampton, *The Political mapping of Cyberspace*, Chicago, 2003. I have asked and received the author’s permission to change some of the descriptive terms that try to get at the essence of each square. Of course, I take all responsibility for any changes that could be seen as unfit or unnecessary.

	To be eradicated.	(Divine law)	Self-decipherment Confession	purity, obedience Cure of Souls
Present	Desire,	Juridicality Discipline	Confession Psychology	Liberation Utopia

Informing the *technique de soi* is the teleology of ethics. If freedom for the Classical Greeks is self-mastery, a choice Foucault claims the individual makes him or herself, then not evidenced in this *mode d'assujettissement* is a religious and juridical law. With juridical law comes the eradication of flesh and the body. That is to say with juridical law comes a change in the value to the sex act and not a change in the code. The invitation to change one's state of being changes throughout these practices of the self from one that is informed by an "aesthetics of existence" to one that is informed by religious interdiction. Ethics, in ancient Greece, is informed by an "aesthetics of existence." Ethics, in early Christian literature, is informed by an ecclesiastical interdiction. Needless to say, with this process of change in the value of acts comes a change in one's relationship to exercise of freedom as a freedom separated from a power that is closely aligned to a form of hegemonic power. One's relationship to acts becomes informed by the hegemonic interdiction.

The chart included above shows how the "aesthetic of existence" contrasts with more austere ethics. In particular it shows how the Greek rule of self-mastery developed in Christian literature to a rule that eventually led to a scientific self-examination through confession and self-decipherment. This proto-psychoanalytic model, in turn, led to the confessing subject and the possibility of a historically produced essence such as the determinate sadomasochist or homosexual subject. Here in the chart we get a glance at how Foucault's archeo-genealogical method looks to conditions that made possible the modern subject. The change in value is documented in the following citation:

Q. In the name of a beautiful life they [Greeks] were austere, and now in the name of psychological science we seek self-fulfillment.

M.F. Exactly. My idea is that it's not at all necessary to relate ethical problems to scientific knowledge. 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.

We don't have to choose between our world and the Greek world. But since we can see very well that some of the main principles of our ethics have been related at a certain moment to an aesthetics of existence, I think that this kind of historical analysis can be useful. For centuries we have been convinced that between our ethics, our personal ethics, our everyday life, and the great political and social and economic structures, there were analytical relations, and that we couldn't change anything, for instance, in our sex life or our family life, without ruining our economy, our democracy, and so on. I think we have to get ride of this idea of an analytical or necessary link between ethics and other social or economic or political structures.<sup>64</sup>

The art of living that Foucault so desires concentrates solely on living *per se* and not on the self in relation to socio-economic structures. The art of living does not necessarily need to reinforce a sense of law and code.<sup>65</sup> This connection and reinforcement between the art of living to a sense of law, claims Foucault, has been historically generated. He strives to unravel, as the above quote suggests, the historical grid that heretofore has subjectified and suppressed the human person within a determinate field of relationships. Herein lays Foucault's genealogical presupposition: if one exposes analytical relations as in fact historical and not analytical, we, the contemporary subject, can change them and their constructive effects, effects that, for Foucault, come in part with the epistemologization of the subject in Christian discourse. This is Foucault's principle

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid, p. 261.

<sup>65</sup> Foucault speaks of these relationships between the self and other structures in an interview titled, "Le souci de la vérité," in *Michel Foucault: Dits et Écrits* (Quarto Gallimard, 2001), pp. 1487-1497. He writes: "Les pratiques de soi prennent ainsi la forme d'un art de soi, relativement indépendant d'une législation morale. Le christianisme a très certainement renforcé dans la réflexion morale le principe de la loi et la structure du code...." Cf. p. 1491. Translation: "The practices of the self take in this way the form of an art of the self, relatively independent of a moral legislation. With Christianity there is a very certain shift in the moral reflection to the principle of the law and the structure of the code...."

concern in his genealogy of ethics.<sup>66</sup> Now let me turn rather briefly to Pierre Hadot who provides us with a clearer understanding of how Foucault's language and terminology on the ethical formation of the self in ancient philosophy, ascesis, follows closely Hadot's understanding of philosophy as a way of life.

### *Hadot's "l'exercice spirituel"*

In the introduction to *Philosophy as a Way of Life*,<sup>67</sup> Arnold Davidson speaks of Foucault's expressed "enthusiasm" for Hadot's work.<sup>68</sup> This should be unsurprising since Foucault himself mentions how he has greatly benefited from both reading and conversing with Pierre Hadot.<sup>69</sup> However, we legitimately ask what affinities exist besides the dropping of a name to bind Foucault's last two books in the history of sexuality to Hadot's work in ancient philosophical *l'exercice spirituel*? Certainly there are many writings with a focus on ancient ethics so how does one trace the influences of the one author (Hadot) upon the other (Foucault)? It is my claim that the best evidence for this influence is provided by Foucault's change in methodological investigation. More specifically, while Foucault's earlier work can be read as the attempt to read philosophy as an ascesis – "an exercise of oneself in the activity of thought"<sup>70</sup> – one would only ever arrive at such a perspective after reading the last two books in the history of sexuality.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Cf. Michel Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress," and "The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom."

<sup>67</sup> Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault* edited with an introduction by Arnold I. Davidson, Trans. Michael Chase (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1995).

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid*, p. 1.

<sup>69</sup> Michel Foucault, *UP*, p. 8. Hadot's work is also cited in the bibliography in the *Care of the Self*.

<sup>70</sup> Cf. Michel Foucault, *UP*, p. 9.

<sup>71</sup> By this I mean that Foucault's reading of the ethical subject's practice of ascesis would need to be read only as implicit in his early works while it is explicit in his later works. Foucault's interest in ethical formation, that is, the way in which one relates to oneself, examines the constitutive features of ascesis, i.e., examining oneself, training oneself, and cultivating the recommended virtues. These interests are absent in

Foucault's genealogy of the modern subject takes on a new methodological approach in the last two books where the category "subjectification," the active turning of oneself into an object, becomes most prominent. Yet, as we shall soon see, Hadot and Foucault's approach to the ancient exercises diverge in their account of the produced effect when one actively examines themselves. Foucault's categories and analytical grid formally makes for a different reading of the history or "genealogy" of the practices of the self than does Hadot's presentation of *l'exercice spirituel*, for all Foucault's dependence on Hadot.

If we look at Hadot's understanding of *l'exercice spirituel*, it is not insignificant to point out that the vast majority of Hadot's ancient sources come from Stoic and Epicurean texts. The Epicureans and Stoics attribute great value to investigation into ethical living. Indeed, philosophical investigation into logic and physics were used to further elucidate ethical doctrines. To be clear, this is not to say that there is no value in viewing Hellenic philosophy from the point of view of *l'exercice spirituel*. Rather one must admit that it is easier to see how the notion enriches our understanding of Stoic, Epicurean, or Cynic thought and their sense of the world, life, society and one's relationship to them. These practices that one undergoes to give oneself peace of mind and purification of the soul, a practice for Hadot which is grouped under the word *ascesis*, existed in the writings of the ancients who wanted to practice a way of living that best brought about human flourishing. What is the aim of these practices that we should associate them with the philosophical rigour of the ancients? On this point, Hadot writes the following:

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Foucault's earlier works where his examination of power relations often studies a docile subject that is shaped by the relations of power.

Their goal [spiritual exercises] is a kind of self-formation, or *paideia*, which is to teach us to live, not in conformity with human prejudices and social conventions – for social life is itself a product of the passions – but in conformity with the nature of man, which is none other than reason. Each in its own way, all schools believed in the freedom of the will, thanks to which man has the possibility to modify, improve, and realize himself. Underlying this conviction is the parallelism between physical and spiritual exercises: just as, by dint of repeated physical exercises, athletes give new form and strength to their bodies, so the philosopher develops his strength of soul, modifies his inner climate, transforms his vision of the world, and, finally, his entire being.<sup>72</sup>

Tangibly, these exercises took on the form of learning to live, learning to dialogue, learning to die, or learning to read. These exercises, Hadot stresses here and elsewhere, were practiced in service of reason and not simply a beautiful existence. What I mean by this is that for Hadot these exercises were meant to allow for one to accede to a universality of reason, be it within the confines of the physical creation or in the world of Forms (Plato).<sup>73</sup> If practiced correctly, each exercise ended with the edification or building up of a self that conformed to the life prescribed by the various pedagogies of the philosophical schools. For Hadot each of these pedagogies attempted to name a universalizing power.

With this working notion of Hadot's *l'exercice spirituel* we turn to how his notion differs from Foucault's. In the following chapter I give a rather extensive look at Foucault's formulation of an ancient and medieval *technique de soi* so I will leave the commentary on the similarity between their treatment of *l'exercice spirituel* until we examine Foucault's own writings. For now it suffices to comment on the divergences that Hadot himself saw between himself and Foucault.

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<sup>72</sup> Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, p. 102.

<sup>73</sup> Regardless of how the various philosophical schools defined beauty (*kalos*), I read Hadot's insistence on tying the examination of oneself to a participation in universal reason as a way of stating that the philosopher's desire for Wisdom takes into consideration that which is other than oneself. Aesthetics in ancient philosophy is not an autonomous branch of philosophy but is rather always connected to notions of goodness. What this means is that discussion of the fine/beautiful (*kalos*) is tied to questions of politics, ethics, or metaphysics.

Hadot's critique of Foucault centers upon Foucault's neglect of the ancient's appreciation of an active participation in a reason that is thought of as a structure prior to the framework of one's own experiences. Foucault's techniques of the self, he argues, focus "far too much on the concrete "self" and not enough on a "transcendent self."<sup>74</sup> This distinction between the two, that is, Foucault's exclusive focus on the self and Hadot's appeal to a universalizing reason, can be seen when we consider how they thought of their projects edifying the contemporary reader. Neither Foucault's "history" of sexuality nor Hadot's account of the ancient philosophical *l'exercice spirituel* can simply be limited to putting forth an interesting reading of the history of philosophy for historical or philosophical studies. To read them this way is to misread their intention. These narratives, in other words, are meant to address the contemporary fragmentation resulting from societal ills. They are meant to suggest how Western society is to live in the aftermath of the atrocities of WWII and the subsequent calamities following the corrosion of Western humanism and its effort to liberate humankind from societal oppression with the promise of political utopias.

What is the way of life that a Foucault or a Hadot offers contemporaries after acknowledging that a universal reason proposed by the likes of Kant is untenable? Hadot is eager to stress how Christianity developed its *l'exercice spirituel* from non-Christian sources.<sup>75</sup> I take this to mean that Hadot looks favourably upon the ancients and their articulations of how the entire individual – body, soul, intellect, spirit, etc. – "re-place[s] himself within the perspective of the whole" whereby the individual "raises himself up to

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<sup>74</sup> Pierre Hadot, p. 207.

<sup>75</sup> Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, ch. 4.

the life of the objective Spirit.”<sup>76</sup> What these exercises stress is the need to take seriously the ancient literature and its claim to the practice of transcending one’s own historical limits. If philosophy is to be therapeutic, and Hadot indeed invites the reader to consider therapy as the point of philosophical spiritual exercises, then the therapy given here in this thesis is to appreciate how this raising up of oneself is operative under various philosophical and religious traditions. As I read Hadot, he is trying to show that indeed some shared commonality or unity lies behind the various exercises. This is the universalizing of reason. This philosophical way of life that Hadot asks us to consider recalls the project Foucault ends up with but with a different focus. An examination of the different emphasis Foucault takes is better formulated only after a discussion of the Christian *technique de soi*.<sup>77</sup> In Hadot’s view Foucault ends up with an “aesthetics of existence” that looks solely at the constitution of the self. Hadot summarizes Foucault’s works on the culture of the self as “*too aesthetic*” by which he means that his reading of ancient philosophy might better be described as “a new form of Dandyism, late twentieth-century style.”<sup>78</sup> While ancient philosophy looked to the conversion toward the self by developing literature on interiorization it did so also with the aim of moving one more step, to a “higher psychic level,” which consists of becoming aware of a “portion of universal reason.”<sup>79</sup> The reasoning for the claim that Foucault is not interested in addressing this participation in a “portion of universal reason” will be given greater attention in the following chapter.

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid, p. 82.

<sup>77</sup> Cf. pp. 66-76

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, p. 211.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

In drawing a conclusion to this chapter I hope it is clear by now how I wish to read and situate Foucault's *technique de soi* both within the larger methodological framework and in particular his genealogical story. We now turn to an in-depth analysis of both in following chapter.

## Chapter Two: *Foucault's anthropology and the Christian technique de soi*

"Maybe the task nowadays is not to discover what we are, but to refuse what we are"  
Michel Foucault, *Subject and Power*

In order to contextualize Foucault's Christian *technique de soi* it helps to look first at his account of the human person as this is developed in *OT*. *OT* provides an outline of his anthropology from where we can observe how the philosophical position articulated there operates in his subsequent "histories." It addresses the modern investigation of self-reflective knowledge and the failure of this project. In response to this failure, Foucault begins to stake out his own philosophical position. Since it is easy to see that Foucault's work on the self in his later writings is very much informed by the position articulated in *OT*, it is necessary to understand this work.

This chapter begins by describing Foucault's historicism in *OT* and then moves on to develop his understanding of how Christianity as a productive power has shaped the identity of the modern self. It does so by examining his writings in the 80s on the Classical, Imperial, and Christian periods and how questions about the knowledge of the self develop in these periods. It looks at Foucault's "aesthetics of existence" and his Christian *technique de soi* separately. The structure of the chapter reflects the point it argues: Foucault's Christian *technique de soi* is to be understood as dichotomously opposed to an ancient "aesthetic of existence." The awareness of this dichotomy proves helpful when we look in the following chapter at the relationship between Foucault and Christianity.

### ***Human beings and their doubles: Foucault and the modern subject***

According to the Foucauldian scholar Gary Gutting, at the core of Foucault's anthropology is his understanding of finitude. Finitude, as understood in Foucault, is

described by the modern empirical sciences, whereby the human person is limited by the various forces (organic, economic, linguistic) operating on him/her. As Gutting writes, ‘this finitude is a philosophical problem because this same historically limited empirical being must also somehow be the source of their representations whereby we know the empirical world, including ourselves as empirical beings. I (my consciousness) must, as Kant put it, be both an empirical object of representation and the transcendental source of representations. Foucault’s view is that this dualism - being an object and the source of representation - is an impossibility, that is, historically realizable.’<sup>80</sup> In the *OT* Foucault terms the problem that arises from the analytic of finitude, a human’s “empirico-transcendental doublet.”<sup>81</sup> Motivating his argument is exposing the historical locality of the modern human sciences (the historical *a priori*). By revealing the historical locality of the human sciences, Foucault hopes to show that the form of sciences receives their validity claim from and upon the emergent foundation of Humanism. In historically pinpointing the foundations of Humanism, and the subsequent evaluative standards that work from this foundation, Foucault argues to a position that looks favourably on “the death of man.” This phrase for him, however, means a greater freedom to create and recreate how we as individuals come to an understanding of ourselves qua individuals. Our human substance, in other words, is not predicable.

Foucault’s “empirico-transcendental doublet” is divided into three subsections: (a) the empirical and the transcendental, (b) the cogito and the unthought, and (c) the retreat

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<sup>80</sup> Cf. Gary Gutting, *Michel Foucault* (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2003). Online: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/foucault/>

<sup>81</sup> Cf. Michel Foucault, *OT*, p. 347.

and return to the origin.<sup>82</sup> Foucault thinks there remains an antinomy in each of these three subsections. That this is so points to his understanding of the impossibility of grounding theoretical thought in pure reason.

The first subsection, the empirical and the transcendental, responds to the Kantian problematic of how it is possible for one to secure knowledge of the *a priori* by separating the pure form of knowing (transcendental) from the contingent (empirical) content side of knowledge. Foucault's opinion is that not only the content but also the form of empirical knowledge is subject to empirical influences.<sup>83</sup> Following in the footsteps of Nietzsche's genealogy, Foucault admits that what this antinomy translates into is that any form of empirical knowledge needs to be understood as derivative of a "will to power." In Foucault's terminology this will to power is further developed into a "will to knowledge" and a "will to truth." His archeo-genealogical method looks to examine the historical conditions that make possible knowledge and truth claims.

The second subsection, the cogito and the unthought, is, like the first section, a description pointing out the inability to fully know oneself (the unthought) via self-reflective knowledge. As Dreyfus and Rabinow write: "[I]f man is to be intelligible to himself, this unthought must be ultimately accessible to thought and dominated in action, yet insofar as this unthought in its obscurity is precisely the condition of possibility of thought and action it can never be fully absorbed into the cogito."<sup>84</sup> Since this unthought is ultimately unknowable to us, as knowing beings, we are, as Foucault sees it, left in the dark as to ourselves. Unlike the modern sciences that claim to describe the essence of

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid, pp. 330-374. It should be noted that what follows in this section is very much influenced by Dreyfus and Rabinow's work on this subject-matter in their book, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*. See pages 32-43.

<sup>83</sup> Cf. Dreyfus and Rabinow, pp. 32-33.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid, p. 35.

human nature in hope of reforming and refining society, we are, for Foucault, unknowable in essence. Again, this unknowability is thought of as a constitutive condition for freedom.

Lastly, in the third subsection, the retreat and return to the origin, Foucault examines the position that takes seriously language's lack of transparency. That is, he looks to the moment when it is realized that individuals can no longer transcend their history to look to the origin of language and oneself. We are simply left with an endless search for our origin for we are always embedded within language. That these three subsections result in antinomies speak quite explicitly of Foucault as an immanent critic. He is interested in the matrix of relations of power to the development of thought.

Foucault thinks that the search for self-knowledge escapes empirical (content) and transcendental (form) enquiry. Simply put, for Foucault, we do not know who we are.<sup>85</sup> Because we do not know who we really are it is all the more important to examine what Foucault means when he understands philosophy as ascesis and as ethos. In order to sustain the argument that Foucault's work can neither be read as a negative theology nor easily set up in dialogue with Christian theology, I need to successfully argue that his writings on the Greek practices in his history of sexuality can be *contrasted* with a modern identity of the human person which Foucault and many others critique. Indeed, I read Foucault contrasting both the Christian practices *and* the modern identity with an "aesthetics of existence," which, in my view, is pitted dichotomously against the former two. This is perhaps the central difference between Bernauer's reading of Foucault's

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<sup>85</sup> On this point, cf. John D. Caputo, "On Not Knowing Who We Are: Madness, Hermeneutics and the Night of Truth in Foucault," in *Michel Foucault and Theology: The Politics of Religious Experience* ed. James Bernauer and Jeremy Carrette (England: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2004), pp. 117-139. Contrary to Dreyfus and Rabinow and their reading of Foucault as moving "beyond hermeneutics," Caputo argues in this essay for a "radical" or a "hermeneutics of refusal."

thought as a negative theology and my reading of Foucault's thought. It is also reason for my resistance to his suggestion that Foucault's thought as he describes it has something positive to contribute to Christianity.<sup>86</sup>

Now, turning our sights to his later work we can start to see how the subject, unknowable in itself, takes up the art of learning to know itself. This inquiry brings us to Socrates and the Oracle at Delphi. The Delphic dictum to "Know Thyself" (*gnōthi seauton*) has, as noted before, long been given precedence over the important and now marginalized quest of care of the self (*epilmeleia heautou*). What this means is that for Foucault's investigation of the practices of the self he is looking to reconstruct the relationship between these two themes. One comes to know oneself by caring for oneself and vice versa. In his course lectures at the Collège de France titled "The Hermeneutics of the Subject,"<sup>87</sup> Foucault gives a very detailed account of how the history of the care of the self developed in Platonism (more specifically: in Plato's *Alcibiades*) and carried itself forward to the early Church Fathers. One reads in these lectures of the vast range of Foucault's scholarship on this period. In these lectures Foucault moves outside the realm of sexuality into the various different practices of the self, including the relationship of the self to reading or to politics. These lectures also document ancient texts dealing with anger, flattery, and truth-telling, and so forth. They still present us with Foucault's genealogical framework but we also find here a deeper, more appreciative treatment in these late work's of a period that, as Foucault's footnotes and citations reflect, is very well surveyed both as to its Greco-Roman and early Christian texts.

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<sup>86</sup> I will provide textual evidence in chapter three on how Bernauer and some other contemporary scholars misread Foucault.

<sup>87</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981-1982*.

There are a number of overarching themes to be read in these lectures that help clarify his work on the development of a “practice of the self.” Some of the shifts that Foucault documents are the movements of the care of the self away *from* a concern with self-knowledge that only politicians and the elite of society practiced *to* one that everyone, regardless of social status, practiced. This shift historically takes place between the Hellenic age of the ancient Greek world and their Near Eastern kingdoms to the period of dominance of Imperial Rome. In addition, the goal of such practices can be seen to have moved in the Imperial Age *away* from a learning about oneself as a means to justice that is manifest in the Platonic dialogues - like *Alcibiades* and the *Republic*, i.e., works in which one takes oneself up so as to learn how to govern others - toward a taking up of oneself that directed one to the care of oneself as to an end.<sup>88</sup> It is also in the Imperial Age that practices of the self no longer stand as they did with *Alcibiades* as a “complement to” or as an “element indispensable to” or as a “substitute for” pedagogy. Rather, these practices of the self are now integrated “with a whole network of different social relations” along with its intertwinement with pedagogy.<sup>89</sup> In other words, the analytical relations between the self and his or her socio-economic environment become more developed and complex as we move away from the Greeks. Lastly, what these practices of the self inaugurated was the integration of conversion (*metanoia*) into the domain of the political field. Developing in this shift from the Hellenic age to the period of Roman dominance is an incipient discursive formation, a new system of thought, about what it means for one to care for oneself.

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid, p. 83.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid, p. 206-7.

Conversion certainly did not, in Foucault's reading of these practices, begin with the Imperial Age and then slowly develop further in the writings of the Christian Fathers. Instead, as he writes, there came about a different and discontinuous form of conversion.

First, Christian conversion involves a sudden change. When I say sudden, I do not mean that it may not have been, or even did not have to be prepared by a whole development over a long period of time. Nevertheless – whether or not there is preparation, development, effort, asceticism – conversion anyways requires a single, sudden, both historical and metahistorical event which drastically changes and transforms the subject's mode of being at a single stroke. Second, in this conversion, this Christian *metanoia*, this sudden, dramatic, historical-metahistorical upheaval of the subject, there is a transition: a transition from one type of being to another, from death to life, from mortality to immortality, from darkness to light, from the reign of the devil to that of God, etcetera. And finally, third, in this Christian conversion there is an element that is a consequence of the other two or which is found at their point of intersection, and this is that there can only be conversion inasmuch as a break takes place in the subject. A fundamental element of Christian conversion is renunciation of oneself, dying to oneself, and being reborn in a different self and a new form which, as it were, no longer has anything to do with the earlier self in its being, its mode of being, in its habits or its *ēthos*.<sup>90</sup>

This radical rupture and break within oneself distinguishes the Christian practice of the self from the Imperial practice of the self. Characteristic of an Imperial conversion to oneself is the evaluative principle of identifying what must remain continuous.

Examined in such a conversion is the study of that which depends on us and that which must be shucked off insofar as it does not depend on us. There is no sudden break or entire transformation into a mode of being that is informed by a new ethos.

In this lecture one detects again the very influential link between Hadot and Foucault, this time by Foucault's own admittance.<sup>91</sup> This acknowledgment proves to be very helpful in our understanding of how Foucault contrasts an "aesthetics of existence" to that of a Christian hermeneutic of the self. As such, the passage is worthy of mention.

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid, p. 211.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid, p. 216.

One of the analytical grids that Foucault works with when he interprets the development of these technologies of the self is organized by a contrast between the two following forms of conversion: *epistrophē*, a term characterizing a Platonic conversion and secondly, *metanoia*, a term characterizing a Christian conversion. This grid, he continues, came to his attention via a paper given by Hadot in a 1953 at a philosophical conference.<sup>92</sup> While Foucault's classification of the Christian *metanoia* has already been discussed it will also prove helpful to let him speak at length on how he understands the form of conversion he calls *epistrophē*. On this point, he writes:

*Epistrophē*, he says, is a notion, an experience of conversion, which implies the soul's return to its source, the movement by which it reverts to the perfection of being and places itself back once again within the eternal movement of being. The model for *epistrophē* is awakening, so to speak, and *anamnēsis* (recollection) is the fundamental mode of this awakening. One opens one's eyes, one discovers the light and reverts to the very source of the light, which is at the same time the source of being. This is the *epistrophē*.<sup>93</sup>

While this analysis of a Platonic and Christian conversion is nothing new, it is important to see how Foucault attaches great value to these forms of conversion and the radical break in the conversion to the self that he associates with a Christian hermeneutics of the self. The point that is in need of proof is the work assigned to the art of living described in these two forms of conversion in his writings. While the writers who use Foucault in the study of Christianity are not of the opinion that Foucault himself was religious (although, perhaps he could be thought to have practiced a form of worldly mysticism), what they fail to acknowledge is how his reading of the Christian formation of the self precludes a mutually positive cross-fertilization between his philosophy of religion and Christianity. That is, Foucault's thought is difficult to square with a notion of a Christian

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<sup>92</sup> The reference here is P. Hadot, "Epistrophē and metanoia" in *Actes du XI congrès international de Philosophie, Bruxelles, 20-26 août 1953* (Louvain-Amsterdam: Nauwelaerts, 1953), vol. XII, pp. 31-36.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid, p. 216.

religious discourse for such discourse does not fit favourably within his philosophical framework. His analytical framework is meant to show how Christianity, both in its institutional and personal forms, constitutes a grid of new relations of power that need to be exposed as detrimental to the desired practice of freedom. This claim, at any rate, hopefully becomes clear as we continue with Foucault's writings.

### ***The "aesthetics of existence" as a philosophical model***

Fundamental in Foucault's *UP* is the description of a Greek ethical criterion, an ethical code, wherein free citizens exercised self-mastery through an imposed restraint in their everyday acts of pleasure. The governing of such pleasures, Foucault writes, "was not because the Greeks hoped to preserve or regain an original innocence," but rather because "they wanted to be free and to be able to remain so."<sup>94</sup> It hardly needs to be argued that the language of regaining an original lost innocence is in reference to a Christian's desire for a prelapsarian state of being and its possibility through the mediation of the gift given by Christ's sacrifice. To be free for a Greek had no such narrative. Foucault adds that "to be free in relation to pleasures was to be free of their authority; it was not to be their slave."<sup>95</sup> These words such as "freedom," "original innocence," "authority," and "slave" are not to go unnoticed. Foucault describes the Classical Age's way of life:

Putting it schematically, we could say that classical antiquity's moral reflection concerning the pleasures was not directed toward a codification of acts, nor toward a hermeneutics of the subject, but toward a stylization of attitudes and an aesthetics of existence. A stylization, because the rarefaction of sexual activity presented itself as a sort of open-ended requirement.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Michel Foucault, *UP*, p. 78.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid*, p. 79

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid*, p. 92.

Foucault's analytical grid is set up such that the psychological knowledge of the self and its many connected relationships is non-existent in Greek life. Rather, these relationships develop with the advent of Christianity. Classical antiquity's literature on the pleasures serviced more the question of how to gain mastery over them. "To their way of thinking," writes Foucault, "what made it possible to desire a man or a woman was simply the appetite that nature had implanted in man's heart for "beautiful" human beings, whatever their sex might be."<sup>97</sup> The stylization of attitudes that were practiced was such that the primary concern for the Greeks was the mastery of the passions and desires. The question of "tolerance" and "intolerance" concerning sexual pleasures simply was not a categorical framework in which the Greeks systematized sexuality. This framework, again, developed with a Christian's codification of acts.

For Foucault, one's relation to the truth constituted an essential element of moderation. Using the example of the *Phaedrus* in his *UP* he states how the relation to the truth took on the form of the need to control desires. Like the example in the *Phaedrus*, the nobler and well-reasoned soul will only look at beauty with a revered awe rather than fall into the temptation of acting on sensual desire. He does so by practicing the ethical exercise of *anamnēsis*. The nobler soul has a better memory of the Eternal beauty that exists on the outer rim of heaven and dwells in the recollection of eternal beauty rather than mistaking the whole (Eternal beauty) for the part (a catamite).<sup>98</sup> It is important to keep in mind how Foucault conceptualizes this Platonic recollection. Recollection functions as an imposed control whereby the very act of memory directs one

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid, p. 188.

<sup>98</sup> Cf. Foucault, p. 86-87. See also the *Phaedrus* 245c-257c.

to living a moderate and healthy life. Foucault continues throughout this section of *UP*<sup>99</sup> to contrast this aesthetic living with one of a certain mode of being that takes root in a Christian discursive environment. There is a very important contrast germinating here in *UP*. It is a contrast that Foucault makes a great deal of in his later writings when addressing a Christian hermeneutic of the self.

But it is important to note that this relation to truth never took the form of a decipherment of the self by the self, never that of a hermeneutics of desire. It was a factor constituting the mode of being of the moderate subject; it was not equivalent to an obligation for the subject to speak truthfully concerning himself; it never opened up the soul as a domain of potential knowledge where barely discernable traces of desire needed to be read and interpreted.... *It was not an epistemological condition enabling the individual to recognize himself in his singularity as a desiring subject and to purify himself of the desire that was thus brought to light.*<sup>100</sup>

This is a very important quote outlining part of Foucault's project in the *UP*. The field of "ethics," that is, the study of the relation of oneself to oneself, for the early Greeks is not to be understood as an inquiry into the fabric of the human identity. Rather what Foucault goes on to argue in his book is that early "ethics" is based on "formal principles in the use of pleasures."<sup>101</sup> This moderation takes on the form of an ontological order instead of an epistemological order. Ontological order, as I read of it in the *UP*, means the ordering of the tripartite soul – reason, spirit, appetite – into a well-balanced and orderly mode of beauty.<sup>102</sup> An epistemological condition of the subject, again, as I understand it, does not enter as a concern for Foucault in Classical Greece. Sexual discourse becomes epistemologized when Christian literature codifies sexual acts. This comes about through a change in value. A discourse on these acts becomes more and

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<sup>99</sup> See previous quote.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid, p. 89. My italics.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> This is read most clearly in his chapter titled, "Freedom and Truth," in the *UP*.

more specific and, as such, requires an analytical grid that posits the true original self that is lost in the ailments of sinful manifestations. This codification of pleasures begins in the Imperial Age.<sup>103</sup> Prior to this period, the formal principles of sexual moderation understood as an exercise of freedom in the form of self-mastery meant that with the early Greeks there was no self-restraint imposed because of a cultural shame, obedience, or some external law. The limitation of sexual desire through a sexual moderation guided by an exercise of freedom allows for the practice of moral character that aims at satisfying a healthy relationship to the pleasures.<sup>104</sup>

More needs to be said about Foucault's use of an ontological conditioning that is freed from a Christian epistemologization of the subject. We can briefly turn to Foucault's appreciation of one's relation to the pleasures (*aphrodisia*) that does not include a Christian suspicion of the flesh.<sup>105</sup> Instead of a suspicion of the flesh with the early Greeks there is instead a relation to the pleasures that is categorized in terms of a healthy moderation of the flesh. In moderation of what it may be asked? On this point, Foucault writes,

..., it is recommended to be wary of sounds, images, and scents; but this is not because attachment to them would be only the masked form of a desire whose

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<sup>103</sup> This claim can be read in an interview titled, "Le retour de la morale," in *Foucault: Dits et écrits*, pp. 1515-1526. He writes: "Je crois en effet que la question du style est centrale dans l'expérience antique: stylization du rapport à soi-même, style de conduite, stylisation du rapport aux autres. L'Antiquité n'a pas cessé de poser la question de savoir s'il était possible de définir un style commun à ces différents domaines de conduite. Effectivement, la découverte de ce style aurait sans doute permis de parvenir à une définition du sujet. L'unité d'une "morale de style" n'a commence à être pensée que sous l'Empire romain, aux II, III siècles, et immédiatement en termes de code et de vérité." Cf. p. 1517. Translation: "I believe, in effect, that the question of style is central in the Antique experience: stylization of relations to oneself, style of conduct, stylization of relations to others. Antiquity does not cease to ask whether one can determine a common style with respect to these different spheres of conduct. In effect, the discovery of such a style would have doubtlessly allowed one to achieve a definition of the subject. The unity of a 'moral style' does not commence to be thought under the Roman Empire, in the second and third centuries, and immediately in terms of code and truth."

<sup>104</sup> Foucault's insistence on reading the Greek's classification of the pleasures through the category of stylizing makes this claim. Part two of *UP* documents this quite clearly.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid*, p. 41.

essence is sexual: it is because there are musical forms capable of weakening the soul with their rhythms, and because there are sights capable of affecting the soul like a venom, and because a particular scent, a particular image, is apt to call up the “memory of the thing desired.” And when philosophers are laughed at for claiming to love only the beautiful souls of boys, they are not suspected of harbouring murky feelings of which they may not be conscious, but simply of waiting for the *tête-à-tête* in order to slip their hand under the tunic of their heart’s desire.<sup>106</sup>

Foucault makes a point of noting that ancient Greeks spoke little about the *form* of the different sexual acts but rather about the *activity* itself. That is, they had no rigorous classification. Their “dynamics,” writes Foucault, is considerably more important than their “morphology.” The interpretive grid that operated in the moral judging of pleasure was not informed by the *nature* of the act and its possible variations but by the *activity* and its quantitative gradations. Again, Foucault writes:

The ontology to which this ethics of sexual behaviour referred was not, at least not in its general form, an ontology of deficiency and desire; it was not that of a nature setting the standard for acts; it was an ontology of a force that linked together acts, pleasures, and desires. It was this dynamic relationship that constituted what might be called the texture of the ethical experience of *aphrodisia*.<sup>107</sup>

For the early Greeks mastery of desire was done in service of moderation and healthy living that was not informed by a universalized principle but by a matter of circumstance and personal position. The guiding principle was a *techne*. The human person did not turn him or herself into an ethical subject by universalizing principles that informed action but by an attitude 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.”<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid, p. 41.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid, p. 43.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid, p. 62.

What, more precisely, is the reason why Foucault's ethical project focuses on an aesthetics that is not bound by any civil or ecclesiastical law? I turn to two helpful sources, Timothy O'Leary and Wolfgang Detel, who both write on the surrounding context of Foucault's aesthetic of existence and its relationship to ethics. Each argues why the aesthetics of existence is in need of revision and of further clarification.

If Foucault's model of ethics based on the ontological stylization is too aesthetic, a claim that Timothy O'Leary makes,<sup>109</sup> then one needs to reconsider Foucault's claims about a Christian hermeneutic of the self. If it is successfully shown that there is indeed a bifurcation between (a) those who uphold an art of living formulated on a certain stylization and (b) those subject to an epistemologization emerging through a hermeneutic of the self, then this has ramifications for those scholars who support a reading of Foucault that sees his thought as opening up new and positive ways of conceptualizing Christianity. Timothy O'Leary asks two questions of Foucault. The first question asks what is "aesthetic" about Foucault's aesthetic of existence. The second question asks how an aesthetic ethics fills the contemporary need for a non-normative morality.<sup>110</sup> His work critically appraises Foucault's work and wishes to hold onto the idea of the aesthetic as a category that can "deal with the contemporary ethical lacunae."<sup>111</sup> For the present I am interested in O'Leary's description on Foucault's aesthetic.

The Greeks in Foucault's history of sexuality were less concerned with the sexual acts themselves, as if such acts took on the form of a definable essence. They were more interested in the attitude adopted to the sexual act. Commenting on Foucault's classification of the Greeks, O'Leary identifies two crucial elements that reflect his

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<sup>109</sup> Timothy O'Leary, *Foucault and the Art of Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2002).

<sup>110</sup> Cf. pp. 6-9.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid*, p. 8.

aestheticizing of a Greek stylization and “art of life”: one, the mode of subjection where personal choice is stressed and separated from a prescribed universal code; and two, the *telos* or aim of self-constitution where the goal of the self is to see itself as beauty, harmony, and perfection.<sup>112</sup> As for this first point, a comment also made by Hadot, the mode of subjection is not concerned with the universal salvation of all but simply with a concern for the beautiful existence for some. Concerning the sex act, if a person is interested in discovering the right use and appropriate time of coitus he went to “to learn the general principles which must govern the right ‘use’ (*chresis*) of the *aphrodisia*,”<sup>113</sup> instead of going to those with acquired skill relating to health and sexuality such as a dietician or physician. Concerning the second point, O’Leary argues that we can see an isomorphism here of mastery over oneself and mastery over others. I see this as a fundamental flaw in Foucault’s ethics, whereas O’Leary is willing to critically sift through this isomorphism in service of an ethics founded on an aesthetic freedom. In a passive/active division where a man is typified as a man because of his virility, being a “man” required a man not to exhibit effeminate characteristics, for such characteristics represented feminine passivity.<sup>114</sup> Moderation is given a masculine structure while non-moderation is given a feminine structure. As Foucault writes on this point, “the man of pleasures and desires, the man of nonmastery (*akrasia*) or self-indulgence (*akolasia*) was a man who could be called feminine, but more essentially with respect to himself than with respect to others.”<sup>115</sup> Again, I see this flaw as fundamentally putting into question Foucault’s appeal to an ethics founded upon an “aesthetics,” because in the realm of

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<sup>112</sup> Timothy O’Leary, p. 42.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Cf. Michel Foucault, *UP*, p. 84-86.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid. p. 85.

freedom, freedom here understood as relational and as operating within power-regimes, it becomes very difficult to separate power from domination. Not expressed here is how an alterity (*altera*) creates a space for the other wherein there is an element of agency given to a partner. Instead, we have and can only have domination. Indeed, Foucault recognizes this flaw, for, as O’Leary writes, “despite the fact that he does recognize this ‘isomorphism’ between mastery of self and others in Classical Greece, Foucault in fact tends in the vast majority of cases to privilege, as we have seen, a surprisingly apolitical aesthetic account of this telos.”<sup>116</sup> In a society that looks to an ethical field that is governed by the following categories, active/passive, dominator/dominated, and penetrator/penetrated, it seems highly dubious that an “aesthetics” that is ruled by the category of freedom can be read as separate and isolated from these categories.

To clarify this inseparability of domination and freedom we can continue to follow O’Leary’s work where he asks whether Foucault’s work in Classical Greece is shaped more by the modern figure of Oscar Wilde than it is by the texts themselves. The comparison to Oscar Wilde, the 19<sup>th</sup> century avant-garde British playwright and novelist is, of course, meant to draw the analogy to a post-Kantian realm of aesthetics where there is a separation of morality from aesthetics. As reflected in the clever chapter title, “Alcibiades Goes Wilde,” O’Leary claims that Foucault’s reading of the aesthetic fails to connect with Alcibiades’ political drive to power. His portrait of Alcibiades, O’Leary writes, “conjures images of a Baudelairean *dandysme* which is very much *avant la lettre*.”<sup>117</sup> A more “accurate” portrait, he continues, would be to speak of Alcibiades as characterized more by the figure of Machiavelli than Wilde. What this comparison

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<sup>116</sup> O’Leary, p. 44.

<sup>117</sup> O’Leary, p. 39.

amounts to is a refiguring of the “aesthetic” in the phrase the “aesthetics of existence.” On this point, O’Leary does not fully develop Foucault’s engagement with Alcibiades. He is a central figure representing a care of the self that is not informed in any way by a universalized rule. I believe he is also, conversely, a figure who expresses the need for the “imposing” of a universal rule capable of curving his inability to live the virtuous life. I return to this important point after engaging Detel’s reading of Foucault and ancient philosophy.

In his book *Foucault and Classical Antiquity*,<sup>118</sup> Wolfgang Detel is more critical than O’Leary of Foucault’s use of ancient sources. Detel claims that Foucault’s work on the ethical creation of the self fails because in his analysis of the self Foucault separates his ethical work from its archaeological and genealogical dimensions. As a result of this failure, he writes, Foucault neglects to see what the ancient sources have to say about epistemology and the analysis of power. Looking at ancient ethics, Detel argues that Foucault does not account for the comprehensive role *eudaimonia* (human flourishing) had on Greek ethics. Much like O’Leary’s criticisms, Detel argues that Foucault has a “restricted perspective of the early ethics programme that allows him to trim the ancient teleology into an aesthetics of existence....”<sup>119</sup> Yet, using Foucault’s analytical tools, Detel attempts to expound on his theoretical premises and apply them by drawing on the illustration of Aristotelian ethics. What Detel highlights in his work on ethics is how Foucault neglects to account for how authors such as Aristotle embedded matters concerned with sexual activity systematically into their works on metaphysics and ethics.

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<sup>118</sup> Wolfgang Detel, *Foucault and Classical Antiquity: Power, Ethics, and Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

He then continues to elaborate upon how Aristotle proves his claim.<sup>120</sup> To sum up his argument Detel argues that any “stylization” of living that Foucault speaks of in his appeal to ancient ethics needs to look more closely at how ethics for the Greeks was part and parcel of the inculcation of habits through education (*paideia*) that was later manifested in the pupil’s subsequent political life. It would have been better for Foucault, argues Detel, to extend and carry out his category of power as productive.

These two interpretations and criticisms of Foucault’s ethics do not, in my judgement, take sufficient account of Foucault’s ironic jest at including Alcibaidēs, the unlearned Socratic student, into the dialogue on an “aesthetics of existence.” This is not a mute point for Foucault. It is evident through his frequent citations of Plato’s dialogues that Foucault is familiar with the whole Platonic corpus. He is not as interested in Aristotle’s work on ethics, despite their fundamental contribution to Greek thought, because Foucault’s genealogy is largely anti-Platonic. Why, then, does Foucault give such attention to Alcibiades, the figure who is troublesome for Socrates? The soul, it should be remembered for Foucault in *DP*, is the prison of the body. Foucault engages Alcibiades more prominently in his course lectures than in his books on sexuality.<sup>121</sup> If we are to read Foucault as a genealogist who narrates a story of an ascesis that is not yet subject to a Christian *technique de soi* nor the universalization of a care of the self evidenced in the Imperial Age, we see that Foucault’s engagement with Alcibiades is not incidental. He is a central figure for Foucault who exhibits a stylization *par excellence* an ethics that is informed by Foucault’s aesthetics.

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid. pp. 61-74.

<sup>121</sup> Alcibiades is by far the most referenced figure in Foucault’s course notes. While references to Alcibiades are scattered throughout the lectures, a detailed lecture in which Foucault gives a detailed analysis of Alcibiades in his 6 January 1982 Second Hour lecture. See pp. 25-41.

Alcibiades, the Athenian statesman, was once the beautiful boy that was a part of Socrates' inner circle. His name is mentioned many times throughout Plato's works. He is first presented to us in the *Protagoras* as a young, beautiful boy. He is also the main interlocutor in the (spurious) dialogue *Alcibiades*, and is last heard of in Plato at the very end of the *Symposium*. He is well known for his uncultivated philosophical life and his unruly character that has not been shaped by the philosophical art of Socratic self-examination. That this is so is hardly a coincidence for Foucault. In the *Symposium* Alcibiades likens Socrates' philosophical speech to the painful bite of a snake – the analogy here is that his soul is being bitten by philosophy where, like the effect of a snake bite, those who succumb to philosophical training, are made to do “the most amazing things” (218a). However, as we read elsewhere, Alcibiades refuses to listen to the Socratic art: “He always traps me, you see, and he makes me admit that my political career is a waste of time, while all that matters is just what I most neglect: my personal shortcomings, which cry out for the closest attention. So I refuse to listen to him; I stop my ears and tear myself away from him, for, like the Sirens, he could make me stay by his side till I die.” (216a). While conceding that a Foucauldian ethic founded on freedom and informed by an “aesthetics of existence” is contrived, I do not think Foucault is very much interested in refining his overtly aesthetic and teleologically limited ascesis. Foucault is far too erudite and clever a scholar not to see this oversight. His work in ancient philosophy is only to show how the historicizing subject once understood itself in a period not yet formed by a universalizing care of the self. Set only within the understanding that Foucault's genealogy is meant to show how it is again possible to create for ourselves an ethic that is informed by an “aesthetic of existence,” is it possible

to see how Alcibiades care of self services as a template, a guide, for our contemporary ethic. Again, Alcibiades non-universalized care of the self is not to be read as paradigmatic, but is to be seen as a way in which we can once again practice a form of subjectivity. It is not the figure of Alcibiades that catches Foucault's interest as much as it is the stylization (a.k.a. lack of normalization) he exhibits. Foucault is interested in showing how Alcibiades exhibits a certain stylization and not a way of living that sees it as necessary to link the practices of the self to a universal code. Given that this is Foucault's concern, how desirable would a state be if it sought a stylization that Alcibiades exhibits? How worthwhile is it to look at Alcibiades stylization of life as a way in which it is possible to compensate for the lack of a foundation for our modern ethics in our defective pedagogy? Since Foucault looks to the Greeks not as paradigmatic, but as an historical episode where our ethics were once related to an "aesthetics of existence," how might Alcibiades stylization be seen to function in Foucault's still-to-be-experienced state of freedom?

These questions expose a lack of accountability as a structural feature of a taking up of oneself that is not universalized or practiced by all. It is doubtful that Foucault or Foucauldian scholars would agree with my criticism of this lack of "standardization" or "normalizing." A close association between the truth of the self to the analytical grid associated with Christianity would perhaps be seen as a "hegemonic" politics. It is difficult on this score to see how Foucault's writings on the "aesthetics of existence" as a desirable *ethos* fits with O'Leary's attempt to paint them in a light that helps see how they assist the demise of modern morality. Let us turn now to a new chapter in Foucault's genealogical story, the Christian *technique de soi*.

### **The epistemologization of the subject in the Christian “technique de soi”**

Again, it is important to clarify the argument that I defend in my reading of Foucault’s anthropology. To the best of my knowledge no scholar has claimed that Foucault himself embraced religious faith. The claim being made, instead, is that a Foucauldian study of religion is capable of “disrupting” the whole Christian theological tradition. Bernauer and Carrette each point to reading Foucault’s works on religion as a negative theology, and as one supportive example they point to Foucault’s anti-humanism and the Christians tradition’s strategy of self-renunciation as compatible historical examples of how a modern identity is to be prevented. What is needed in order to posit this view however is a reading of Foucault that does not sharply contrast the “aesthetic of existence” to a Christian hermeneutic of the self. Bernauer’s understanding of the *via negativa* as a flight to transcendence via the denial of ourselves and our identity is only one aspect of a Christian hermeneutic of the self. Foucault also clearly articulates that with the rise of Christianity comes an epistemologization of individuals qua individuals. The incomparable worth of each individual who exemplifies the image of God translates into a new system of thought that claims each individual needs to be wholly known. This revelation of the self is, in part, brought about through the confessional technologies that Foucault vividly writes about in his first book on the history of sexuality. It is this epistemologization that can never be forgotten nor transcended and, because of this, any reading of Foucault that would understand his thought as in continuity with the “mystical tradition of Christianity”<sup>122</sup> cannot be supported without seriously misconstruing Foucault’s own writings. One would have to then, following the lead of Caputo, “...push

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<sup>122</sup> James Bernauer, “Michel Foucault’s Philosophy of Religion: an Introduction to the Non-Fascist Life,” in *Michel Foucault and the Politics of Experience*, pp. 77-97.

out beyond Foucault, to a Foucault without Foucault....”<sup>123</sup> What follows in the remaining section of this chapter is an account of how Foucault articulates a Christian hermeneutics of self with careful attention paid to how this hermeneutic of the self leads to the individualization of knowledge (*savoir*) and the epistemologization of the self.

If the Hellenistic exercises can be broadly characterized as set up to remind oneself to recover a forgotten truth about oneself, then the Christian exercises or technologies can be characterized as discovering a truth about oneself that, prior to any act of the intellect, truly exists in a morally encoded universe. The role or purpose of a technology of the self in such a world is likewise intended to purify oneself of the accumulated sins entrenched and acquired in a wayward lifestyle in hope of re-establishing who one truly is as an image bearer of God:

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 the practitioners. [...] For instance, 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 obligations. 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.<sup>124</sup>

Since Christianity posits an original pure self in contradistinction to an impure self that is subject to the effects of the Fall, the Christian practitioner has the duty to interpret sensations, images, and thoughts with the understanding that the sinful self that wills independent of and against God is in need of being renounced. The hermeneutic of the

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<sup>123</sup> John D. Caputo, “On Not Knowing Who We Are: Madness, Hermeneutics and the Night of Truth in Foucault,” p. 117.

<sup>124</sup> Michel Foucault, “Sexuality and Solitude,” in *Michel Foucault: Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, pp. 178.

subject, then, in Christian discourse operates on the opposition between purity and impurity. Once the human person was pure and now is impure because of sin.

In the practices of the self the ethical subject enters a new system of thought. The subject epistemologizes when it is to interpret itself through the category of purity and impurity. The problem of ethics as an “aesthetics of existence” writes Foucault is covered over by the Christian’s problem of purification.<sup>125</sup>

This new Christian self had to be constantly examined because in this self were lodged concupiscence and desires of the flesh. From that moment on, the self was no longer something to be made but something to be renounced and deciphered. Consequently, between paganism and Christianity, the opposition is not between tolerance and austerity but between a form of austerity linked to an aesthetics of existence and others forms of austerity linked to the necessity of renouncing the self and deciphering its truth.<sup>126</sup>

With this transformation of austerity from paganism (his words) to Christianity comes a contemplation of the self that is not purely ontological but also psychological.<sup>127</sup> Instead of learning about the ontological being of one’s own soul, a statement that Foucault associates with Plato, there emerges an increased attention paid to the subject’s relation to purity and impurity. Necessary questions that are asked in a psychological interpretation of the self are what one is thinking or what images and representations entered into the mind.<sup>128</sup> Interest in the practices of the self shift with the Christian *technique de soi* to the examination of one’s self-impurities.

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<sup>125</sup> Cf. Michel Foucault, “On the Genealogy of Ethics,” p. 274.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid, p. 275.

<sup>128</sup> This reading of Foucault’s classification of Christianity as introducing a proto-psychological subject is read in Michel Senellart, “La Pratique de la Direction de Conscience,” in *Foucault et la Philosophie Antique* (Paris, Éditions Kimé, 2001). This essay was part of an international colloquium on Foucault that focused largely on his works on ancient philosophy. Senellart’s essay also suggests reading Foucault’s later writings on ancient philosophy in light of Paul Rabbow and Pierre Hadot. In writing about the direction of consciousness, particularly in its Christian form, Senellart writes the following: “Ce moment – qui, bien sûr, rappelle Foucault, “n’est pas un moment précis et particulier, [mais] tout un processus complexe avec ses scansions, ses conflits, ses évolutions lentes, ses précipitations, etc.” – correspond à la

What can be seen in the Christian interpretation of the phrase “image of God” is a desire to stress the individuality or unique irreproducibility of each particular person. In his first book on sexuality, Foucault turns to the Lateran Council of 1215 to make a historical suggestion that one sees the singularity of knowledge (*savoir*) emerge in the form of the confessing subject. Concerning the Christian technology of the self, Foucault writes that one begins to see an “epistemological condition” as an element added to a Greek ontological condition.<sup>129</sup> What precisely is this epistemological condition? As I understand Foucault this epistemological condition arises with a Christian decipherment of desire, a hermeneutic of the self that remains ever so cautious of traces of the cosmic forces of good and evil operating in the images of mind.<sup>130</sup> Attention to any possible latent feelings of sexual impulses, such as a latent homosexuality, requires the discipline of a trained interpreter who can sift through all human impulses and emotions. This recognition of one’s singularity functions for Foucault as an important part in a Christian hermeneutics. Under what categorical term does this hermeneutic develop and how is it best characterized? Foucault, I believe, provides us with such an organizational term with his understanding of governmentality. Governmentality and the connotations associated with this term are used such that it is descriptive of a way of life that rests in

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fin du IV<sup>e</sup> siècle, et trouve son expression la plus vigoureuse dans l’oeuvre de Cassien (365-435). Il représente ce tournant capital dans l’histoire de la subjectivité en Occident, à partir duquel “l’obligation de dire-vrai sur soi-même” s’est inscrite, comme condition du salut, dans la procédure psychagogique: moment donc de l’émergence de l’aveu Chrétien qui, faisant du sujet dirigé l’objet de sa propre parole vraie, a place la production de soi sous le signe de la dépendance à l’autre.” Translation: “This moment – Foucault reminds us, “this is not a precise and particular moment, but all a complex process with scissions, conflicts, slow evolutions, precipitations, etc.” – correspond to the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century, and finds vigorous expression in the works of Cassian (365-435). He represents the capital turning in the history of subjectivity in the Occident, a departure whose “obligation to speak the true of oneself” is inscribed, as a condition of salvation, in the psychological procedure: a moment therefore emerges in the Christian, the subject directs the object of its proper true speech, a place of production of the self under the sign of dependence upon the other.”

<sup>129</sup> Cf. footnote 101.

<sup>130</sup> This is quite clearly read in Michel Foucault, “The Battle for Chastity,” in *Michel Foucault: Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth*, pp. 185-197.

opposition to the “aesthetic of existence.” Governmentality is a term that classifies a new way of living in the development of a Christian system of thought. Foucault, to be sure, defines power not as a substance but as a type of relationship that exists between people or between people and objects. A characteristic form of power that Foucault uses to describe the Christian *technique de soi* is pastoral power. This term, as I have come to understand it, is synonymous with his understanding of governmentality.<sup>131</sup>

A key text titled, “Pastoral power and political reason,” provides us with an interesting image of the analytical forging of relationships between the subject and government in its Christian form. The relationship between pastoral power and political reason is that of pastoral power functioning as the religious *exemplar* of, not the *contrast* from which, the modern state organizes its citizens. Drawing inspiration from Nietzsche’s *Genealogy of Morals*, Foucault compares and contrasts societal structures prior and posterior to a Christian formation of society. The outcome of his analysis is similar to that of Nietzsche’s, albeit with an emphasis on the formation of knowledge (*savoir*). According to Foucault, there are four distinctions that develop with a Christian formation of society: (1) responsibility, (2) obedience, (3) the particularization of knowledge, and (4) mortification and renunciation of the world.<sup>132</sup> It is the last two subjects that are of interest at present. Any reader already familiar with Nietzsche’s writings can assume a sufficient grasp of the first two topics, responsibility and

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<sup>131</sup> Cf. Michel Foucault, “Pastoral power and political reason,” (1979) in Jeremy R. Carrette, *Religion and Culture: Michel Foucault*, pp. 135-152. The Latin in the original title, “Omnes et singulatim: towards a criticism of political reason,” means “Everyone together and each individually.” This phrase is certainly suggestive of the epistemological individualizing that gives way to produce an historical ontology of sexual essences. Here Foucault argues how a “pastoral technology” disrupted the political structures of ancient society.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid*, p. 142-143.

obedience, both of which are characterized for the first time in Western history as Judeo-Christian virtues in *The Genealogy of Morals*.

Christian pastoral power introduces an entirely new web of interrelated associations. Foucault states that with the rise of the shepherd image in history come four themes listed as follows. First, “the shepherd wields power over a flock rather than over a land.”<sup>133</sup> This means that the ruler’s interests now extend into the homes and private lives of the ruled. The ruler’s concern is not only that of the allocation and jurisdiction of land or stately affairs but also its citizen’s wellbeing. Secondly, the shepherd gathers together dispersed individuals and his “immediate presence and direct action cause the flock to exist.”<sup>134</sup> Rather than building laws that can mitigate a city’s conflict, it is the actual presence of a person that is needed to halt any internal conflict. Thirdly, “the shepherd’s role is to ensure the salvation of his flock.”<sup>135</sup> This does not simply mean protection from immediate danger but a “constant kindness” whereby the searching for the one last sheep conjures up images of individualised care. Last, the shepherd keeps watch over his flock. The point conjures up images not only of care and concern but also the need for attention to one’s own actions for there is the ever lurking and immediate presence of authority.

Knowledge that a Christian pastor has of “his sheep” is characterized as a particular knowledge. Such knowledge, for Foucault, “individualizes.” The reference to individualizing here means that the shepherd must “know what goes on in the soul of each one [sheep], that is, his secret sins, his progress on the road to sainthood.”<sup>136</sup> Not

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid, p. 137.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid, p. 143.

surprisingly, the step by which this knowledge comes to be understood is through the ancient means of self-examination and guidance of conscience. Attention to images, representations, and control of the passions are expressed. However, what is evidenced in these Christian usages of self-examination and guidance of conscience is “the organization of a link between total obedience, knowledge of oneself and confession to someone else.”<sup>137</sup> This is a vital link that is characteristic not only of a medieval hermeneutic of the self but also the conditions of possibility for the confession of the modern subject upon which the modern sciences are built. Knowledge of the self and confession are conjoined. As Foucault writes in *HSI*: “... it is in the confession that truth and sex are joined, through the obligatory and exhaustive expression of an individual secret.”<sup>138</sup> The game of truth that the subject now enters in a Christian *technique de soi* is one very closely paired with the psychoanalytical framework Foucault detests.

The second aspect in Foucault’s model, renunciation of the world, describes the experience of an everyday death. This experience is constitutive of the Christian self-identity.<sup>139</sup> While he does not give much discussion to this self-renunciation in this lecture, another lecture titled “Technologies of the Self,” provides us with a very detailed account of this developing Christian technology. Here, and elsewhere,<sup>140</sup> we are provided with literature that helps to solidify the link between the Christian disclosure of the self to the modern identity.

The vital link between these two developments, a Christian *technique de soi* and the modern identity, concerns the verbalization of thoughts in a Christian technology.

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Michel Foucault, *HSI*, p. 61.

<sup>139</sup> Foucault, “Pastoral Power and political reason,” p. 143.

<sup>140</sup> Michel Foucault, “About the beginning of the hermeneutics of the self” in *Religion and Culture: Michel Foucault*, pp. 158-181.

The Christian self-renunciation is, in Foucault's framework, linked closely to the verbalization of thoughts. He writes:

Throughout Christianity there is a correlation between disclosure of the self, dramatic or verbalized, and the renunciation of self. My hypothesis from looking at these two techniques is that it's the second one, verbalization, which becomes the more important. From the eighteenth century to the present, [the modern identity] the techniques of verbalization have been reinserted in a different context by the so-called human sciences in order to use them without renunciation of the self but to constitute, positively, a new self. To use these techniques without renouncing oneself constitutes a decisive break.<sup>141</sup>

The renunciation of the self gives way to the verbalization of thoughts via the Christian's emphasis on disclosure through confession. Again, it is important to contrast the differences between the ontological and epistemological order that is operative in Foucault's analysis of these practices of the self. We can see quite explicitly in his reading of Christianity how the epistemological order increasingly becomes a decisive component of a Christian hermeneutic. Every Christian has the duty to know who they are. This is a knowledge that includes all the temptations, faults, virtues etc. The Christian, writes Foucault, "is always supposed to be supported by the light of faith if he wants to explore himself, and, conversely, access to the truth of the faith cannot be conceived of without the purification of the soul."<sup>142</sup> To know oneself and to discover the truth about oneself is only ever made possible by the light of God. For Foucault there is an obligation imposed on every Christian to confess the truth about him or herself.

This very act of confession and conversion is institutionalized in the transformation of this monastic principle into the social body by means of the Lateran Council (1215) which stipulated mandatory confession. Senellart, in his essay on the

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<sup>141</sup> Michel Foucault, "Technologies of the Self," in *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault* ed. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, & Patrick H. Hutton (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), pp. 48-9.

<sup>142</sup> Michel Foucault, "About the beginning of the hermeneutics of the self" p. 170.

practices of the direction of consciousness, makes a similar connection in writing about these Christian practices of the self via Foucault's understanding of the Council of Trent. While Senellart himself refers to a different example of Foucault's interest in the Christian direction of consciousness, his observations on Foucault's engagement also apply to the institutionalization of confession in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Interestingly, concerning the Christian direction of consciousness, he comments on how Foucault's literature on the development of ascesis takes a turn in a uniquely Foucauldian manner. He writes:

Le problème qui intéresse Foucault, alors, est celui de l'investissement du corps, porteur de désir et de plaisir, par le gouvernement des âmes. Le concile de Trente, dans son programme de christisation de la société, n'a pas seulement renforcé l'économie sacramentaire de la pénitence établie au Moyen âge. Il a également suscité le deployment de tout un appareil de direction spirituelle qui a fait apparaître la chair comme l'objet d'un discours exhaustif – obligation de tout dire – et exclusif – ne le dire qu'à son confesseur. C'est cette corrélation pénitence/direction de conscience qui explique sans doute que Foucault, contrairement à Rabbow, n'accorde pas une place éminente aux *Exercices* d'Ignace de Loyola, antérieurs au concile de Trente, dont à ma connaissance il ne parle jamais, en dépit de leur rôle essentiel dans le développement de la pratique spirituelle en Occident.<sup>143</sup>

Senellart's observation about the correlation between penance and the direction of conscience is quite perceptive. It is this close association between ascesis and the verbalization of truth that I think Foucault hopes to disconnect and disrupt via interest in ancient ascesis. Ascesis as it develops in Foucault's depiction of the

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<sup>143</sup> Cf. Michel Senellart, "La Pratique de la Direction de Conscience, p. 157. Translation: "The problem that interests Foucault, then, is his clothing of the body, the carrier of the desires and pleasures, by the government of the soul. The Council of Trent, in its program of Christianizing of society, does not only reinforce the economy of the sacrament of penance established in the Middle Ages. It equally created the deployment of all in the device of spiritual direction that produced the appearance of the flesh as the object of exhaustive discourse – obligation to speak of everything – and exclusively – to speak only to his confessor. It is this correlation penitence/direction of conscience that explains without doubt that Foucault contrary to Rabbow, does not accord an eminent place for the *Exercises* of Ignatius of Loyola, before the Council of Trent, of which to my knowledge he does not speak, nor depict its essential role in the development of spiritual practices in the Occident."

Christianization of society reveals how the self becomes increasingly exposed to new analytical grids. It shows how Christian confession plays a part in the institutionalization of a new mode of subjectivity (*mode d'assujettissement*). This new subjectivity was made possible by the discursive practices surrounding and enabling the truthful confession and its procedures in the individualization of power.<sup>144</sup>

In *HSI* Foucault gives a number of suggestions that support a reading of how medieval confession furthered the production of a confessing subject and how this production led in turn to a new development in the subject's relation to itself. We read in the following quote how this new development in the subject's relation to itself continues into modern identity:

... the confession became one of the West's most highly valued techniques for producing truth. We have since become a singularly confessing society. The confession has spread its effects far and wide. It plays a part in justice, medicine, education, family relationships, and love relations, in the most ordinary affairs of everyday life, and in the most solemn rites; one confesses one's crimes, one's sins, one's thoughts and desires, one's illnesses and troubles; one goes about telling, with the greatest precision, whatever is most difficult to tell. One confesses in public and in private, to one's parents, one's educators, one's doctor, to those one loves; one admits to oneself, in pleasure and in pain, things it would be impossible to tell to anyone else, the things people write books about. One confesses – or is forced to confess. ... Western man has become a confessing animal.<sup>145</sup>

Again, from the *HSI*, Foucault has this to say about the lasting impression of confession on modern subject:

The obligation to confess is now relayed through so many different points, is so deeply ingrained in us, that we no longer perceive it as the effect of a power that constrains us; on the contrary, it seems to us that truth, lodged in our most secret nature, "demands" only to surface; that if it fails to do so, this is because a constraint holds it in place, the violence of a power weighs it down, and it can finally be articulated only at the price of a kind of liberation. Confession frees, but power reduces one to silence; truth does not belong to the order of power, but

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<sup>144</sup> Cf. Michel Foucault, *HSI*, p. 58.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid*, p. 59.

shares an original affinity with freedom: traditional themes in philosophy, which a “political history of truth” would have to overturn by showing that truth is not by nature free- nor error servile- but that its production is thoroughly imbued with relations of power. The confession is an example of this.<sup>146</sup>

Confession in the Christian framework is guided by the principle that the self is already given. What the confessor in fact confesses are the impurities of the self.

As I understand Foucault, these compulsory and universal practices of taking oneself up as an activity of thought become ever less the shaping and stylization of living that he associated with an ascesis once seen in Greek life as a “supplement” and “luxury.”<sup>147</sup> Foucault’s genealogy, to be sure, is not as interested in acknowledging how Plato sees beauty as a normative notion as it is in showing how in these texts there is a lack of a “necessary” logical validity concerning the self that Foucault finds in Christian texts. That is, lost in this transformation from the ancient Greek to the Christian technology of the self is the loss of an ability to take oneself up freely in the activity of thought. New analytical links between the self as posed within a new governmentality, an oppressive game of truth, are causes for a new way of fashioning the self. The way in which one undergoes changes according to Foucault does not have to be informed by this game of truth. The subject can enter into a new game of truth, a new “politics of the self,” that looks to the form of beauty as its model. That the self in Foucault’s estimation is not to look favourably upon the renunciation of the self and the verbalization of one’s inner thoughts as a source from which we can draw inspiration is quite clear. This very distinction proves helpful to note in the following chapter.

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid, p. 60.

<sup>147</sup> Cf. Michel Foucault, *UP*, p. 21.

### Chapter Three: *Foucault and theology: assessing the ongoing conversation*

*“Historically, what exists is the church. Faith, what is that? Religion is a political force.”*  
Michel Foucault, *On Religion*, 1978.

#### **Introduction:**

James Bernauer and Jeremy Carrette, two prominent scholars spearheading the movement to use Foucault’s thought in their study of religion, have published and edited a great deal of literature on the topic.<sup>148</sup> In their writings they argue that there is located in Foucault’s work an important theological and religious sub-text which has as yet remained unexamined and neglected by current Foucauldian scholars. These authors have very much set up the dialogue in which other Foucauldian scholars participate. Each scholar supports a Foucauldian re-mapping of religious ideas that re-positions religion and theology within the very fabric of the secular. Each acknowledges that the term secular can only be supported by an Enlightenment view of religion where religion is supposedly bracketed to the private sphere as opposed to a neutral public sphere. They acknowledge that this view of the secular is untenable. All thought, as they claim using the support of Foucault, is subject to other more fundamental convictions. Yet, as I have argued, given Foucault’s account of a Christian hermeneutic of the self and the epistemologization associated with this term<sup>149</sup> this positive re-mapping of religion and religiosity into the secular seems to be tenuous. This is so because of Foucault’s

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<sup>148</sup> Cf. James Bernauer, *Michel Foucault’s Force of Flight: Towards an Ethics for Thought* (Humanities Press, 1990); co-edited *Michel Foucault and Theology: The Politics of Religious Experience* (Hampshire, UK: Ashgate, 2004); “Cry of Spirit” foreword to *Religion and Culture: Michel Foucault* ed. Jeremy Carrette (New York: Routledge, 1999), xi-xvii; “The Prisons of Man: An Introduction to Foucault’s Negative Theology,” in *International Philosophical Quarterly*, XXVII, 4 (Dec. 1987), 365-80). This is only a few of the scholarly articles on this subject matter. For a list of Jeremy Carrette’s publications cf. *Religion and Culture: Michel Foucault* ed. Jeremy Carrette (Manchester University Press & Routledge, 1999); *Foucault and Religion: Spiritual Corporality and Political Spirituality* (London & New York: Routledge, 2000); co-edited, *Michel Foucault and Theology: The Politics of Religious Experience* (Hampshire, UK: Ashgate, 2004).

<sup>149</sup> Cf. chapter two.

classification of Christian theology as well as how his historicization of all aspects of human experience is itself, conversely, a form of ahistorical absolutization. Foucault's sub-text points instead, as I have argued, to his desire to show how theology is an instrument by which deeper historical formations (discourses of power) affect the subjectivity of Christian subjects.

To begin, it is to their credit that these writers do not uphold a dualistic secular/profane split. All that is secular is, they argue, infused with religious principles. This dichotomy, if we take the "post-modern" suspicions of the autonomy of reason seriously, cannot and is not maintained by these writers.<sup>150</sup> Yet the pressing question still remains: what, if any, substantive notion of a Foucauldian "spirituality" do these author's uphold? Or, in other words, how does a Foucauldian interaction with religious themes "disrupt" the Christian theological tradition without challenging the very possibility of doing Christian theology? Theology as a discourse, to be sure, is not prior to power and its formation and formulation. Foucault is interested in Christian discourse only in that dimension of the deployment of power. He is interested in the Christian's moment of capitulation. Yet, as I have insisted earlier, this deployment of power, this moment of capitulation, is only one aspect or dimension among many that point to the dimension of religion.

Continuing, how does one *bring* this theology – both theology as an academic science and theology as a way of living out the gospel message - into the critical spaces opened by Foucault's thought? Can one do this maintaining a Foucauldian perspective on Christian discourse and its focus on the epistemologization of the self? Finally, and herein lies my challenge, does not Foucault's work on religion and his own analytical

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<sup>150</sup> On this point the current theological movement in England, Radical Orthodoxy, has much to contribute.

privileging of freedom characterized as an “aesthetics of existence” in contradiction to a Christian epistemologization of the self preclude the possibility of a positive dialogue between Christianity and Foucault’s thought?

The fundamental flaw that I see evidenced throughout recent scholarly interest in Foucault on religion is a reduction of the term religion to its socio-cultural dimension. Moreover, these authors fail to take seriously how Foucault’s own philosophical claims on the discursive formation of the subject shape his conceptual analysis. This later point is addressed in section one, where I engage an essay from an upcoming scholar on Foucault and religion, J. Joyce Schuld.<sup>151</sup> The following two sections provide textual support for what I have thus far associated with Carrette and Bernauer. In section two I interact with Carrette’s definition of religion and how he sustains his position that Foucault’s “engagement with theological themes radically transforms and destabilizes the field of religious understanding.”<sup>152</sup> While I heartily agree with Carrette’s desire to bring religion into the “body politic” and the “heart of culture,” I argue that in doing so he puts into question his intention to read “Foucault in the spirit of Foucault.”<sup>153</sup> In section three I address how Bernauer’s reading of Foucault as a negative theology is a misreading of Foucault’s works. Support for his positive appraisal of Foucault’s thought for Christianity is structured on a reading of the Christian renunciation of the self that is misplaced.

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<sup>151</sup> She received her doctoral degree from Yale. She is the author of *Foucault and Augustine: Reconsidering Power and Love* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2003).

<sup>152</sup> Jeremy Carrette, *Foucault and Religion*, xi.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid*, xii.

## **J. Joyce Schuld and her neglect of situating presuppositions**

J. Joyce Schuld is currently adding to her work on Foucault and religion with the forthcoming publication of another book that introduces Foucault to theologians.<sup>154</sup> Her main area of focus heretofore compares and contrasts the works of Foucault to that of St. Augustine's understanding of imperial rhetoric and power in *The City of God*. A concise account of her theological reading of Foucault is quite nicely developed in an essay she wrote published in an edited book by Bernauer and Carrette titled *Michel Foucault and Theology: The Politics of Religious Experience*.<sup>155</sup> The essay, titled, "Augustine, Foucault and the Politics of Imperfection," outlines the potential problems a Christian might face in entering a dialogue with Foucault. Schuld is of the opinion that Foucault's philosophy is not a threat to social ethics, and, more positively, that there is still a large amount of unused resources that one can take from Foucault's writings.

In her engagement with the literature on Foucault's thought, Schuld observes that how one addresses and evaluates the merit of his research depends largely on one's answer to two common critiques raised against Foucault. The first criticism addressed against Foucault states that since his investigation into truth, reason, and knowledge show how these terms are historically generated and socially malleable constructions, he is to be read as relativizing the underpinnings of modern progress. Foucault understood in this light is classified as a nihilist. The second criticism addressed against Foucault centers on his logical consistency or its lack. Foucault claims that his "histories" only provide social descriptions and not, as some scholars charge, prescriptive, societal, evaluative standards and recommendations. Schuld defends Foucault against these criticisms. An

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<sup>154</sup> *Michel Foucault: An Introduction for Theologians* for Cambridge University Press.

<sup>155</sup> Cf. footnote 149.

investigation into her reasons both outlines the already fairly common criticisms laid against Foucault, and brings out what I think Schuld fails to critically scrutinize in her defense of Foucault: that is, that Foucault's appeal to an "aesthetic of existence" precludes a notion of religion or religiosity consistent with a Christian religiosity. Undeniably, Foucault does touch upon themes of hope and freedom that share resemblances to Christian eschatology. It is quite another claim altogether to say, as Schuld does, that Foucault's conceptual tools make such an association between Foucault and Christian theology readily possible.

In her answer to the second critique, Schuld enforces the point that we need to make a clear distinction between "ad hoc" tools and their normative uses. Making this distinction allows her to use Foucault's conceptual tools while, at the same time, bracketing off any normative claims that these tools lay claim to or presuppose. This distinction allows her to say two things: "[1] Foucault's research offers analytical instruments that are beneficial to an evaluative critique of culture, and [2] these critical tools by themselves are insufficient for making necessary and corresponding normative determinations and judgments."<sup>156</sup> If we are to speak of a normative judgment when using such interpretative tools, she continues, "we must employ them within a particular evaluative context and in conjunction with at least a tentative set of shared criteria."<sup>157</sup> This is a rather interesting distinction Schuld wishes to maintain between use and tool for it does not raise the question, or rather self-consciously brackets the question, of how Foucault's ad hoc tools themselves might be subject to normative determinations. Schuld

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<sup>156</sup> J. Joyce Schuld, p. 59.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

maintains that these ad hoc tools remain solely focused on the particular and the local level. She elaborates on this point in the following quote:

One may strongly disagree both with Foucault's focus on particularity and circumstance and with his choosing not to voice his own normative presuppositions, but one cannot say that he is logically inconsistent if he intends to provide only limited ad hoc tools in order to allow those directly on the scene to formulate assessments, criteria and tactics within their own (and not his) evaluative context.<sup>158</sup>

While I have serious objections to the claim that Foucault does not voice his own normative presuppositions in and through his analytical tools, a point I have tried to make in chapter one by addressing his presuppositions, I delay my critique of Schuld on this point until we can further understand what she sees in Foucault's critique of knowledge and truth as these are understood in their general context.

Dialogue can take place between the Christian scholar and Foucault, notes Schuld, if the Christian scholar sees Foucault as "offering useful but limited social descriptions and conceptual tools rather than as presenting a self-contained systematic theory."<sup>159</sup> Indeed, that Foucault remains unsystematic and does not offer "an all-encompassing theory" helps to lessen any differences between Augustine and Foucault. On this point, Schuld writes, "[B]y refusing to tether his conceptual tools and historical methods to his own philosophical values and beliefs, Foucault enables individuals and communities he likely never imagined benefiting to use his work."<sup>160</sup> This reading of Foucault as a refusal to tether conceptual tools to philosophical values helps Schuld justify her supporting Foucault against the first objection, according to which his problematizing of truth and reason undermines the underpinnings of modern progress.

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid, p. 60.

In defense of Foucault's refusal to analyze reason or truth in the abstract, Schuld claims that Foucault's historical investigations explore rather narrowly circumscribed and contextualized problematics. She writes:

The primary aim of his research is to discover within such social patterns how particular fields of knowledge and truth claims have been used to bring about distinctly political ends while appearing to be scrupulously neutral, objective and apolitical. Hence it is not impartially regulative moral principles that Foucault addresses and deconstructs, but functioning mechanisms of power that have become gradually entrenched in cultural practices.<sup>161</sup>

It is puzzling how Schuld does not see the functioning mechanisms of power as a practice that is part and parcel *of* the underlying cultural understanding of truth and reason. Put more sharply, Foucault's notion of episteme puts into question and addresses the impartially regulative moral principles in his critique and study of the discursive formation of truth and reason, for they too on his theory would be the product of the episteme. That is, speaking of truth and reason in the abstract does not make sense in a Foucauldian framework because nothing intelligible remains outside of discursive formation. So while it is true that Foucault works at local and particular levels where he examines the practices of confession, prisons, psychiatry, and so on, local focus does not preclude also putting into question "impartial regulative principles." Indeed, the charge Foucault gives to local and particular interests has a deleterious effect on the very idea of regulative moral principles. These two contrasted poles, local and global, in fact can not be thought of as separate in Foucault's writings.

One asks at what point Schuld thinks Foucault's normative claims might enter into his ad hoc tools? Is it even logically permissible to state that Foucault can even provide only ad hoc tools so that those working in the field can use and apply their own

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid, p. 61.

subjective understanding of power? Foucault's presuppositions about power, will, knowledge, and sexuality, to name but a few, preclude any neutral, apolitical, or objective starting point from which a non-privileged dialogue between Foucault and Augustine or Foucault and theology can begin. That is to say, what Foucault terms subjectivity and exposes as the roots of the modern discursivity of sexuality discourse, the medieval confession and the epistemologization of the self, is in Catholic circles a term with completely different meanings. If Schuld is to read Foucault's descriptive terms as something that can be useful in the service of theology and religion, and, to be sure, I do think that there is a legitimate case to be made for such dialogue, then she needs first to make clear how and in what way such terms in the writings of Foucault unmask and expose theology and Christianity as a will that has shaped and continues to shape the modern identity. That she fails to do so makes her appeal to a dialogue between Foucault and Christianity premature. With Schuld's lack of exposing the dissimilarities between Augustine and Foucault's view of power she makes it quite difficult to see how a dialogue between these two authors merits the attention she gives to reading them together in context.

### ***Jeremy Carrette and the indiscernible trace of religion***

Jeremy Carrette, currently teaching religious studies at Kent University in England, is by far the most prolific scholar who works at the intersection of Foucault and religion. While he does maintain that Foucault was an atheist and that his work does not "sustain a traditional theological worldview,"<sup>162</sup> the stressed word in this phrase is traditional. Traditional, as Carrette understands the term, ignores the body, sexuality, and queer politics. This neglect on the part of a traditional Christian worldview translates

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<sup>162</sup> Jeremy Carrette, *Foucault and Religion*, xi.

into a theology that all too “neatly package[s] religious knowledge into comfortable academic straitjackets, suppressing emotional uncertainties and interpersonal insecurities in intellectual and institutional structures which deny the political and erotic nature of religious discourse and practice.”<sup>163</sup> Granted that this perspective on the traditional theological worldview is not an oversimplified pigeonholing of the Christian tradition, what remains to be seen is what exactly is *religious* about religious discourse and practice in Foucault’s writings. Regrettably, the term remains undefined in, for example, his *Foucault and Religion*.<sup>164</sup> Carrette argues that while Foucault’s “forgotten fragments” do not sustain a traditional theological worldview, they do uncover and speak of his “religious sub-text.” That is, Foucault’s marginal reflections on religion radically challenge religious thinking. Carrette’s primary interest in Foucault’s reading of religion and theology is not to judge the validity of his engagement with these terms but rather to examine how Foucault “‘problematise[s]’ religious thinking in a philosophical critique of religious ontology.”<sup>165</sup> While using terms such as “religion” and “theology” Carrette points out that the traditional meanings associated with these terms need to be suspended. Instead, contrary to the tradition, he, following Foucault, positions religion in “the space of the body and the politics of the subject.”<sup>166</sup> On this point he writes:

Religion, theology and spirituality are in consequence detached and dislocated from a transcendent order and [instead] become strategies which shape, control and dictate the patterns of human experience. The “truth” of religious discourse is in effect taken out of the binary opposition between spirit and matter and rewritten in terms of the dynamic of power-knowledge and embodiment.<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid., xii.

<sup>164</sup> On this point cf. my review of Carrette’s book in *Foucault Studies* vol. 3 (Nov 2005), pp. 150-3.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid, p. 3.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid, p. 6.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

Carrette redefines Foucault's religious subtext. He organizes Foucault's religious subtext into two categories: (a) political corporality, which describes Foucault's work up until 1976, and (b) political spirituality, which describes his works from that date till his death in 1984. Thus, while Carrette wants to maintain that Foucault by no means puts forth a traditional theological vision, he still maintains the use of religious language, albeit via a radical transformation of meaning. What Carrette must still show is why Foucauldian "political corporality" and "political spirituality" merit such a sustained discussion with respect to religion, if Foucault himself does not hold onto any form of religion. Carrette, in my opinion, argues for a religion that is contentless and one that is informed by nothing other than a Foucauldian power-knowledge matrix.

The rewriting of religion through the lens of power-knowledge and embodiment language are the constitutive elements of Foucault's "sub-text" that Carrette thinks a Foucauldian model contributes to the academic study of religion. Religion needs to be located, he writes, in the "very fabric of the 'secular' – in the absence." On this point of the "secular" and "absence" Carrette has the following to say:

Foucault's 'religious question' finally rests on an 'absence', not only the 'absence' of his voice and the 'absence' of the fourth volume of *The History of Sexuality*, but the 'absence' of a transcendent and normative religious ideal. In this 'absence' we are left with questions of how to create new forms of embodied subjectivity through a 'spiritual corporality' and a 'political spirituality'. From this 'absence' a new 'religious space' will emerge in its disappearance – it will perhaps no longer be recognizable – 'like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea.'<sup>168</sup>

In what I have read from Carrette this is one of the clearest descriptions pointing to the reason motivating his academic engagement with Foucault's writings. He, like Schuld, stresses the absence of a normative voice. This absence helps Carrette's reading of

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<sup>168</sup> Ibid, p. 152.

Foucault's work as one that disrupts the Christian tradition by creating an "absence" of a transcendent and normative religious ideal. This absence is supported by Foucault's attention to the historical and social location of discourse, a discourse that shapes our being, our rules of inclusion and exclusion, our thought processes, and our doctrines. Again, it is not difficult to see how this definition of religion flows from a constructivist sensibility: a religious discourse, in other words, is formed within the confines of a historical power-knowledge matrix. It is religion's "spiritual corporality" and "political spirituality" that define our subjectivity. As such religion for Carrette only details the historical limits of our experiences whereas religion, as I wish to understand it, needs to be understood as something more than a political and embodied force. Religion cannot be limited to historical relations of power. Indeed, Carrette, who wishes to rethink theology along the lines of practice rather than belief, is critical of Foucault's later works that do not fully see the potential of belief in a non-binary and non-transcendent understanding of religion: "belief 'is' the social positioning... [and] the "body is the receptacle of theology."<sup>169</sup> If, however, there are no ideals or shared criteria that Carrette refers to in his push for a new "religious space" then there is no reason for him to hold onto the signifier "religion" and "religious" when referring to Foucault's discourse. Religion, both in practice and belief, is not simply a force or power relation. Carrette would be better off in making the distinction that Foucault's works not only disrupt the traditional theological worldview but challenge the very possibility of a Christian worldview entirely. That is to say Foucault's writings claim that Christianity, both in its institutional and personal forms, is nothing other than a mask to be exposed as a will to power. If Foucault is to be brought into dialogue with religion (and there is a sense in

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid, p. 113.

which this can be accomplished) then it would be necessary to commit oneself to the opinion that Foucault opens new spaces for the social-cultural *aspect* or *dimension* of religion and not the entirety of religion. In fact, Carrette would be better suited to make this claim instead of claiming the possibility of a Foucauldian theology. When this distinction is not made then we are left with Carrette's very un-Foucauldian *presuppositionless* and unrecognizable spirituality. Foucault, the skillful scholar who studies the rules of immanence and power formation, barely finds a space in his framework to support an historical space defined by "absence" that is stripped of normative claims.

Continuing with Carrette's non-binary framework, it is interesting to note that in his engagement with a Foucauldian religious ontology he has very little to say on the relationship between ontology and epistemology as this relationship, as I have tried to argue, is defined in Foucault's work on the development of the modern subject. If Carrette were to look at this relationship he would see how Foucault's "aesthetics of existence" challenges the very possibility of a *religious* "sub-text" wherein Foucault's "sub-text" is seen to be characterized as an embodiment of transcendence within immanence where for example the focus is on an immanent phenomenon such as the religious government of the self. Religious ontology in Foucault shares little with Christianity whether in a traditional or radical form. This is seen in his genealogical preference for an "aesthetic of existence" that is stripped of any Christian claim to freedom. In accordance with his reading of Foucault's non-binary religious ontology, Carrette writes the following:

We might also consider that if the operations of the soul in penal practice apply 'in a more general way' and the basis of discipline is created from monastic

structures, then the ‘soul’ of Christianity must have been created on the same power-knowledge forces as Foucault’s modern soul. If this were not the case, then the structures of monasticism would cease to be a valid paradigm. In fact the only distinctions Foucault makes between the Christian soul and the modern soul relate to the differing forces (i.e. sin and theological punishment) and the question of substance (a metaphysical entity). If we take the (theological) soul out of the illusory metaphysics, which postulates a ‘beyond’, then his understanding of the (penal) soul could apply equally to Christianity. He could then be seen to be working out a post-Nietzschean conception of the soul. Christianity could be seen to have a value as a non-illusory metaphysical event.<sup>170</sup>

A few lines later he adds:

By following the idea of a non-illusory metaphysics, we can liberate the religious discourse of the soul from its ‘fictitious’ constraints. This creates a whole new possibility for understanding and interpreting religion. Religious ideas become ways of expressing the body which can be both a technology of domination and a more positive technology of self, a religious aesthetic which animates matter. If the soul is ‘around’, within’ and ‘on’ the body, then the implications of a religion on the surface of the body creates a completely new understanding of religious discourse. The body is valorized and theological dualism is eliminated in the creation of a ‘spiritual corporality.’ The spirit becomes ‘a question of the body.’<sup>171</sup>

It is clear from these passages how Carrette limits religion (Christianity) to the influence and trace of power and its ability to form the soul. The soul, in turn, is stripped of its “traditional” theological significance by the disruption of the meaning attributed to the word soul. Now, in Carrette’s framework, the soul is the body and the body is the soul. Complicating this non-illusory metaphysical event and non-binary religious ontology is Foucault’s own analysis of the Christian *technique de soi*. Foucault’s describes the Christian *technique de soi* as an epistemologization of the subject. What Carrette fails to acknowledge is the distinction Foucault makes between (a) the Christian and modern soul from (b) the soul that is informed by an “aesthetics of existence.” Operative in the first

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<sup>170</sup> Ibid, p. 126.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

category is the pivotal role of epistemological discourse that is not a constitutive feature in the early Greek's practice of the self.

With the emergence of the Christian confession comes the relating of ethical problems, in particular sexuality, to scientific knowledge. The pastoral care for the individual qua individual, as we have read, is to be understood as a precursor to the making of the modern identity. It is this link and analytical relationship between the individual and society, itself a link that comes out of Christianity, that Carrette misvalues in terms of his reading of Foucault's "religious question." A religious (Christian) non-dualistic body/soul relationship in Foucauldian terms is still always subject to and framed within Foucault's larger genealogical suspicion of a perduring Christian subjectivity.

That Carrette does not give a precise definition of religion is hardly surprising given his desire to equate religion with the unconscious, the Other, as well as the symbolic.<sup>172</sup> Given Foucault's own relationship to psychoanalysis one wonders how faithful this equating of religion to the unconscious is in a Foucauldian model. However, this neglect allows for great slippage when we consider how Foucault brings his understanding of religion into culture and the public sphere. In a prologue to an edited volume on Foucault and culture, Carrette writes the following:

Religion is a part, a central part, of the cultural conditions of knowledge. In this sense it is very difficult to separate religion and culture; they are interconnected parts of each other. . . . Foucault's work can therefore be seen to move within a discursive space of 'religion and culture' – where one mutually informs the other. As Foucault's work demonstrates, a culture cannot understand itself without first understanding its implicit connection and development within the constructs of religious belief and practice. Contemporary culture is born out of religious traditions and the conditions of our knowledge are therefore embedded in religious discourse. The so-called secular space is itself a hybrid of past religious

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<sup>172</sup> Jeremy Carrette, "Prologue to a Confession of the Flesh," in *Religion and Culture: Michel Foucault*, p. 4.

traditions, and in order to understand contemporary culture Foucault recognized (and was fascinated by) the religious influences upon thought and practice.<sup>173</sup>

The slippage begins when it is asked how exactly religion informs culture and how religious beliefs inform religious practices. Carrette maintains a substantive definition of religion as separate and distinct from culture. Yet, as we have read elsewhere, Carrette maintains that religion, as Foucault's works allows us to understand the term, is located, in the absence of a transcendent and normative ideal. Even if we read Foucault's more peripheral articles on religion and theological themes, a claim and goal that Carrette's work invites, this still does not negate the underlying claim that is so prominent in Foucault's genealogical study of the modern identity. These peripheral articles in a rather matter-of-fact way only reaffirm Foucault's own bias towards an ethics that is in no way, shape, or form tied to religion and its overarching worldviews. Foucault's interest in religious influences upon thought and practice was meant to "liberate" the modern person from the constraints of a Christian subjectivity.<sup>174</sup> That this is the case makes it very difficult to see, as we move into our last section, how Bernauer sustains a position where Foucault's work is best read as a negative theology.

### ***James Bernauer and Foucault's negative theology***

*The site of Foucauldian mysticism is a politically inspired social antagonism which allows that which is beyond and within humanity to find the hope of transfiguration and resurrection. It interrogates the limits of the human imagination and opens a vision for the possibility of developing new models for human engagement with each other, the*

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid, p. 33.

<sup>174</sup> This claim is supported by my reading of Foucault's view of Christianity a hegemonic power where it is able to set forth an imposing truth claims on the human person. Foucault, in turn, in his genealogical investigation into severing the close relationship in Western culture of hegemonic power from the games of truth examines how this relationship started. This incipient relationship for Foucault, as I have argued, formed with Christianity. This is most clearly read in his in his essays titled, "On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress," and "The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom" in *Michel Foucault: Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*.

*world and the divine, a divine present and absent in the fragile and all-too-human theology*<sup>175</sup>

James Bernauer, professor of philosophy at Boston College, was once Foucault's student at the Collège de France during the late 70s and early 80s. His influential book, *Michel Foucault's Force of Flight*,<sup>176</sup> is to the best of my knowledge the first published work that suggests a reading of Foucault's thought as one that is analogous to a "worldly mysticism." Since this book, he has published around the theme of Foucault and religion.<sup>177</sup> A prominent theme in Bernauer's reading of Foucault is the claim that Foucault's philosophy of religion is comparable to and best classified as a negative theology.<sup>178</sup> This analogy merits some attention. The comparison of Foucault to negative theology, I argue, trades on an equivocal senses of the term "negative theology." What this critique amounts to is a reminder that in any equivocation differences of meaning overwhelm any sameness.

Bernaer first introduces the term negative theology in an essay titled, "The Prisons of Man: An Introduction to Foucault's Negative Theology."<sup>179</sup> The rationale for employing the term "negative theology" with respect to Foucault's work is meant, Bernauer writes, to "indicate its [Foucault's works] relevance for a religious reflection which wishes to free itself from anthropological frameworks."<sup>180</sup> As stated in the article his target audiences are those who already work in a religious and theological tradition.

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<sup>175</sup> James Bernauer and Jeremy Carrette, "Introduction: The Enduring Problem: Foucault, Theology and Culture," in *Michel Foucault and Theology: The Politics of Religious Experience*, p. 9.

<sup>176</sup> James W. Bernauer, *Michel Foucault's Force of Flight: Towards an Ethics for Thought* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1990).

<sup>177</sup> Cf. footnote 149.

<sup>178</sup> For textual evidence cf. pp 158-184 of *Michel Foucault's Force of Flight* as well as his essay titled "Michel Foucault's Philosophy of Religion: an Introduction to the Non-Fascist Life" pp. 77-99.

<sup>179</sup> Cf. James Bernauer, S.J., "The Prisons of Man: An Introduction to Foucault's Negative Theology," pp. 365-380.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid*, p. 366.

Indeed, it is not a small point to address that the journal itself, the *International Philosophical Quarterly*, is an admittedly theistic journal and that Bernauer himself is a Jesuit. Bernauer is a Christian largely writing for a Christian audience.

In order to understand Bernauer and the importance he sees in a Christian scholarly engagement of Foucault, we need to understand his affirmative judgment of Foucault's anti-anthropological framework. Herein lies a genuine insight that Bernauer picks up in the course of his reading Foucault. It is an insight that indeed merits praise. Foucault, Bernauer rightly documents, recognizes that modern humanism represents an "extraordinary falsification and diminishment of the human being."<sup>181</sup> Modern humanism all too quickly defines the human being as a knowable and governable reality. In reality, continues Bernauer, this knowability is not entirely the case. There is something more that is constitutive of the human person. Foucault's declaration of the death of man - that is, the death to modern anthropological claims and the humanist assumptions that help it define and classify an essential human nature - is to be seen as analogous to a negative theology's apophasis by which it denies any likeness (likeness here referring to a mode of likeness that travels under the name identity or sameness) of creature to Creator. "Foucault's thought," writes Bernauer, "is best captured by considering it a contemporary form of negative theology, his effort to overcome that figure of man whom modernity fashioned as a substitute for the Absolute, and whose divinization entailed a flight from humanity."<sup>182</sup>

Continuing with Bernauer he writes that Foucault, borrowing from Kant, moves to an archeological investigation. This investigation, as we have already seen, is meant to

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<sup>181</sup> Ibid, p. 367.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid, p. 368.

study the conditions that make possible a certain formed pattern of thought and cultural assumption. Bernauer correctly notes that Foucault's archeological investigation has been directed at one recurrent theme: "man and his prisons."<sup>183</sup> Foucault has articulated how the human person has become a creature of knowledge-power and a creature of knowledge. However, what remains unclear is how a Foucauldian ethics and understanding of freedom, the principle underlining his archeological (and genealogical) works, is to be read in harmony with a negative theology. While it is true, as Bernauer writes, that "Parallel to the death of God was a divinization of man,"<sup>184</sup> it is wrong to conflate this anti-anthropological work with a Foucauldian religious sentiment, if religious sentiment is to be understood as a sentiment that allows for a positive description of Christianity. Foucault's freedom is a freedom from a historically entrenched Christian confession and a freedom from the pattern of submission of one's inner thoughts to others in service of salvation.

I am not entirely convinced, as Bernauer claims, that negative theology is a better descriptive word than negative anthropology. It is important to note the reasoning for this hesitation. The larger question at hand is the how his reading of Foucault's study of Christianity supports this analogy.

As a result of his study of Christian monastic practice, Foucault came to grasp a crucial moment in the religious formation of the self, a moment which sharply differentiated it from the modern. The aim of modern knowledges and practices is to foster the emergence of a positive self in which one recognizes and binds himself to the self-knowledge defined through the categories of the anthropological sciences. Modern self-appropriation is the discovery of and attachment to that truth, as the firm basis for encounter with the world. *Foucault contrasted the modern vision with that of Christian practices which invited a renunciation of the self who was articulated as true.* In his view, the key to the Christian's experience of self-discovery and subjectivity was located in the model

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<sup>183</sup> Ibid, p. 369.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid, p. 376.

of martyrdom. One shows who one is by the preference for physical death over spiritual death. The struggle for self-knowledge entails a continual mortification, an “everyday death” which is a kind of “relation from oneself to oneself,” a relation which becomes a “constitutive part of the Christian self-identity.” *This strategy of renunciation enabled Christian experience to avoid the danger of the spiritual death of modern positivist self identity.* For the Christian, the truths of the self were always precarious, for they always related to the soul’s continual conflict with the evil within itself. There could be no firm allegiance to a positive self, for there was no truth about the self that could not be utilized by the Evil One as a device for ensnaring the soul. *The effect of this continuing self-renunciation was to open the subject’s existence to a field of indefinite interpretation, relativizing any particular anthropology.*<sup>185</sup>

A new taste for the self and understanding the self as a “permanent provocation” does not come from Foucault’s examination of ancient *and* Christian texts at all. What this amounts to saying is that Foucault’s negative theology does not possess any theological significance if the significance sought after is that “man’s prison is also a celebration of the human being’s transcendence.”<sup>186</sup> Contrary to Bernauer, Foucault does not use the Christian texts as an exemplary means to show how contemporary thinkers can escape the modern identity.

Instead, Foucault, as I have tried to argue, quite vividly contrasts the “aesthetics of existence” with a Christian technology of the self. He structures his reading of Christianity in his works of the 80s such that it too is a form of living that needs to be exposed as a totalitarian power and overcome. That this is so for Foucault means that the significance of Foucault’s works for theology starts from statements that preclude a positive cross-fertilization. In order to read Foucault’s relation to Christian theology as a positive appraisal of Christianity one needs to then take Foucault out of Foucault’s own writings.

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<sup>185</sup> Ibid, p. 379. Italics mine.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid.

## Conclusion:

*En premier lieu, je pense effectivement qu'il n'y a pas un sujet souverain, fondateur, une forme universelle de sujet qu'on pourrait retrouver partout. Je suis très sceptique et très hostile envers cette conception du sujet. Je pense au contraire que le sujet se constitue à travers des pratiques d'assujettissement, ou, d'une façon plus autonome, à travers des pratiques de libération, de liberté, comme, dans l'Antiquité, à partir, bien entendu, d'un certain nombre de règles, conventions, qu'on retrouve dans le milieu culturel.*<sup>187</sup>

As read in the above quote, the subject in Foucault's version of antiquity practices a subjectification that constitutes itself in and through certain practices of liberation. The ancient Greek's *pratiques d'assujettissement*, as I have argued throughout this thesis, function as an inspiration for Foucault's understanding of how contemporary subjects are invited to practice a contemporary form of liberty where ethics is set in service of an "aesthetics of existence." This inspiration is not to be read as Foucault using the Greeks as paradigmatic but as an inspiration that informs a similarity to our contemporary situation, where in Foucault's understanding, our ethics are once again closely tied to an "aesthetics of existence." These practices show how it *was* once possible to live the philosophical life in a Western world that has in Foucault's view since then succumbed to the truth of a discursive effect that states the human person as a determinate and knowable subject. Foucault's works offer an invitation to once again find appropriate *pratiques d'assujettissement* for an informed ethical living in today's society and culture.

As I have tried to argue, Foucault's practice of freedom needs to be set within his overall genealogical reading of subjectivity as this term develops in his conceptualization

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<sup>187</sup> Cf. Michel Foucault, "Une esthétique de l'existence," pp. 1552. Translation: "In the first place, I believe in effect that there is not a sovereign subject, a founder, a universal form of the subject that one would be able to recognize everywhere. I am very sceptical and very hostile against this conception of the subject. I think on the contrary that the subject is constituted across the practices of subjectification, or, in an autonomous manner, across the practices of liberation, of liberty, as, in Antiquity, starting from, a certain number of rules, conventions, that one recognizes in the culture milieu."

of the subject throughout the history of philosophy (Chapter One). This freedom, the freedom to practice a certain form of *pratiques d'assujettissement* is set in contradistinction to what he classifies as a Christian *technique de soi*. With the Christianizing of the subject comes an incipient discursive formation, a new system of thought, that attempts to make the subject into an object of knowledge (Chapter Two). When taking this reading of the subject in Foucault's writings into an ongoing dialogue between Foucault and the Christian religion as a social practice, it becomes clear that Foucault's classification of a Christian *technique de soi* makes it difficult to sustain a position where the Christian *technique de soi* in his work is contrasted to the modern identity (Chapter 3). Instead, as I have shown, he contrasts his aesthetics of existence with the Christian *technique de soi* and the modern identity.

Foucault's writings are put in service of showing how contemporary subjects can practice a yet to be realized freedom. In doing so, his understanding of freedom, which entails the support of his unknowable and indefinable anti-metaphysical subject, looks *prima facie* like a Christian's desire for practicing and enforcing humble respect and tolerable equality for all groups. It remains doubtful, however, upon further examination, that this philosophical articulation is attainable. Foucault's anti-metaphysical subject and his "aesthetics of existence" offers a particular practice of freedom that is very suspect of Christian living, again, whether in its institutional form or, most importantly, in the call to take up of one's cross.

What this means for Foucauldian scholars working in the field of Christian theology is that they need to acknowledge that Foucault's normative claims do in fact shape his understanding of freedom. Any argument that claims the absence of Foucault's

voice simply cannot be sustained. Furthermore, it is only with a misreading of Foucault's genealogical intent that one begins to see remarkable similarities between a possible Christian practice of freedom and a Foucauldian freedom. If one is to be *true* to Foucault's work they *cannot* claim that a Christian, being ever so faithful to Foucault's genealogy, can find legitimate support for Foucault's thought as a negative theology. This does not mean, however, that his writings cannot be successfully appropriated and used in service of Christian theology. There is a very important distinction here, however. To use Foucault's writings in service of a Christian theology is still to appropriate his writings from a perspective that is not shared by Foucault. To do so does not amount to writing a Foucauldian theology but to write a theology with a sympathetic eye to Foucault's social concerns. It is to cast Foucault within a different narrative. When we fully acknowledge Foucault's presuppositions we see how this term, Foucauldian theology, is, in fact, a contradiction of terms. If one is to maintain any semblance of the term Christian theology in an engagement with Foucault it is necessary to claim that in their appropriation of Foucault's works they are in fact extrapolating and redefining Foucault's framework in a manner that is not attempting to be faithful to Foucault's voice.

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