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SEXUAL ETHICS AND TECHNOLOGIES OF THE SELF
IN CLASSICAL GREECE

Review of Michel Foucault, *L'usage des plaisirs* = *Histoire de la sexualité* 2. Paris, Gallimard, 1984.

> The study of history makes one "happy, unlike the metaphysicians,
> to possess in oneself not an immortal soul but many mortal ones."
> — Foucault, quoting Nietzsche[1]

The second volume of Foucault's unfinished *History of Sexuality*, which is not so much about the history of sexual theories and practices as it is about the shifting conditions that determine the nature of one's relation to oneself as a sexual being, is the first installment of what may turn out to be the most important contribution to the history of Western morality since the publication, a hundred years ago, of Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Foucault himself invites the comparison to Nietzsche when he describes, in the preface to the present volume, the motive for his unforeseen and, as it happened, costly decision to interrupt work on the project announced in Volume One and to extend its scope backwards in time to include classical antiquity: in order to analyze the formation and development of the modern experience called "sexuality," he explains, it was necessary first of all to discover the provenance of the one theme common to the otherwise discontinuous experiences of "sexuality" and "carnality" (its Christian predecessor) — it was necessary, that is, to trace the "'genealogy'" of desire and of man as a desiring subject (p. 11). Desire, as it figures in contemporary experience, is not a natural given, Foucault realized, but a prominent element — though featured in different ways — of both traditional Christian and modern "scientific" discourse; research into the origins of "sexuality" therefore requires the historian to do for desire what Nietzsche had

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[1]Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca, NY 1977) 161; the quotation is from *The Wanderer and His Shadow* (Opinions and Mixed Statements) no. 17.

done for "good" and "evil." If Nietzsche's genealogical inquiry often comes to mind in the course of reading *L'usage des plaisirs*, it does so not because Foucault is directly indebted to it for individual interpretations (unlike Arthur W. H. Adkins, for example, whose discussion of Homeric values in *Merit and Responsibility* [1960] draws heavily, if silently, on Nietzsche's distinction between the kinds of valuation implicit in the vocabularies of good/bad and good/evil), but because Foucault is consciously and deliberately elaborating the "critical" tradition in modern philosophy that Nietzsche helped to found.[2] Distinctive to that tradition, among other things, is the practice of treating morality as an object of hermeneutic "suspicion" (to borrow Paul Ricoeur's term): both Nietzsche and Foucault, in other words, conceive morality not as a set of formal and explicit prescriptions whose content can be more or less accurately summarized but as a cultural discourse whose modes of signification reveal the conditions under which values are constituted as such.

Foucault's analysis, like Nietzsche's, is historical rather than functional, intuitive rather than systematic, selective rather than exhaustive. It is not designed to displace conventional scholarship. Despite the impression that one might receive from the show of territorial hostility with which his work has been greeted by members of the interested professions,[3] Foucault is not trying to beat classical philologists or ancient philosophers at their own games, nor does he propose to make historical exegesis irrelevant; rather, he is trying to do something that traditional scholars do not do — something that helps to arrange and place the insights culled from philology in a new and different light. His success, like Nietzsche's, reminds us that an interpreter's scholarship need not be above reproach in order to be adequate to the brilliant portrayal of a

[2]See Foucault's discussion of the differences between conventional history and "genealogy" in "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, 139-64, and "On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress," in Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, 2nd ed. (Chicago 1983) 229-52, esp. 237-43. For a commentary, see the lucid and masterly account by Thomas R. Flynn, "Truth and Subjectivation in the Later Foucault," *JPhilos* 82 (1985) 531-40, esp. 531-32: "Foucault's point, however, is not to uncover something more fundamental than truth as its precondition, such as Heidegger's *aletheia*, for example, but to reveal the sheer multiplicity of truths that 'truth' was intended to contain. The project is Nietzschean." See, generally, Dreyfus and Rabinow, 104-17.

[3]See the reviews by Martha C. Nussbaum, *New York Times Book Review* (10 November 1985) 13-14; Mary Lefkowitz, *Partisan Review* 52.4 (1985) 460-66.

historical phenomenon. Dante, after all, managed to seize upon the essence of the *Odyssey* without ever having read it. And *The Birth of Tragedy* continues, deservedly, to reach a wide and varied audience, most of whose members have never heard of Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff — or, if they have, know him not as Europe's supreme authority in the field of classical philology but only as that curious fellow who hounded Nietzsche out of the academic profession for having published his famous book.[4]

Foucault's classical scholarship, to be sure, is not nearly as good as Nietzsche's, but his portrait of the sexual morality of fifth- and fourth-century Greece (the subject of Volume Two) turns out to be in substantial accord with the results of the best recent work on the topic. Specialists will cavil, no doubt, at his slapdash use of ancient sources and at his seemingly uncritical willingness to assemble his portrait of Greek morals from the scattered testimony of highly unrepresentative authors. Foucault's reliance on philosophical and medical texts, in preference to those rich materials so successfully quarried for information by K. J. Dover in *Greek Popular Morality* (which, however, Foucault does not omit to cite), his relative neglect of his authors' social context or purpose in writing, and his greater attentiveness to what people say than to what they do are all causes for justifiable alarm; Foucault himself seems unsure at times *whose* morality, precisely, he is describing. (This focusing of attention on "scientific" texts can be explained in part by Foucault's interest in "the history of truth" [p. 12] and by his corresponding concern to show how sexual experience is constituted as a morally problematic domain by the ethical discourse of the various relevant "experts"; all the same, such a neglect of *praxis* is a strange failing, especially in Foucault, and it leads one to suspect him of reverting from Nietzschean genealogy to mere Hegelian phenomenology.)[5] The genius of his unprofessional approach, however, lies in its receptiveness to the general features of moral discourse in classical Greece; it enables Foucault to articulate a sort of moral grammar common to popular sentiment and élitist prescription alike and thereby to attack familiar problems from a genuinely fresh perspective. To his credit, Foucault is alive to the dangers of

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[4]*Pace* William M. Calder, III, ed., *Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff: Selected Correspondence, 1869–1931* = *Antiqua* 23 (Naples 1983) 13: "Today *Die Geburt der Tragödie* is read only by those interested in the intellectual biography of Nietzsche or the relation of Wagnerian opera to Greek tragedy. Wilamowitz' *Einleitung in die griechische Tragödie* remains the fundamental book in the field."

[5]Flynn (note 2 above) 532.

homogenizing the irreducible particularities of his various sources into a deceptively coherent system: he freely concedes that his portrait is "cavalier and very schematic," a mere "sketch" of "certain general traits" (pp. 105, 277).

But despite all these weaknesses, it is a most impressive achievement, and one that professional classicists might well envy (or begrudge, as the case may be). The eight years which elapsed between the publication of Volumes One and Two were evidently put to good use. Handicapped from the outset by what he acknowledges to be an irremediable lack of requisite familiarity with classical Greek texts—though not, apparently, by an insufficient (for his purposes, at least) grasp of the classical languages[6]—Foucault submitted himself to the rigors of basic research in the field of ancient social relations, under the tutelage of Paul Veyne, and he seems to have emerged from this scholarly apprenticeship chastened by the experience. Even his respect for historical and philological method appears to have grown over the interval. The difference in the intellectual climate of Volumes One and Two is correspondingly palpable. Volume One, for all its admittedly bright ideas, is dogmatic, tediously repetitious, full of hollow assertions, disdainful of historical documentation, and careless in its generalizations: it distributes over a period spanning from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries a gradual process of change well known to Foucault only in its later, mid-nineteenth-century manifestations. Volume Two, by contrast, is becomingly modest in its tone, cautious in its interpretations, conservative in its adherence to ancient literary sources, and tentative in its conclusions. Foucault hews closely to the lines of interpretation laid down by some of the soundest and most traditional British and American classicists, such as K. J. Dover and Helen North, and something of their scrupulousness appears to have rubbed off on him. Most touchingly of all, perhaps, he seems to have learned a good deal, in his turn, from those scholars on this side of the Atlantic (chiefly in California, where Foucault spent considerable time between Volumes One and Two) who had once learned so much from him, and who went on to contaminate his distinctive blend of phenomenology and structuralism[7]

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[6]Nussbaum (note 3 above) 14, plainly implies—without, however, stating outright—that Foucault "lacks . . . knowledge of Greek and Latin"; she apparently bases that insinuation on Foucault's use of Budé texts: see her reply to David Konstan, *New York Times Book Review* (22 December 1985) 4, 29.

[7]Foucault, however, has repeatedly claimed that his thought owes less to phenomenology, structuralism, and Marxism than it does to Nietzsche: see the original version of

with their native brand of cultural anthropology. Still, it would be a
mistake to suppose that Foucault simply abandoned his now-familiar
"archaeological" method in favor of "thick description" (which is not,
after all, a historical procedure). In Volume One he wrote, "Sexuality
must not be thought of as a kind of natural given which power tries to
hold in check, or as an obscure domain which knowledge tries gradually
to uncover. It is the name that can be given to a historical construct: not
a furtive reality that is difficult to grasp, but a great surface network in
which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasures, the in-
citement to discourse, the formation of special knowledges, the
strengthening of controls and resistances, are linked to one another, in
accordance with a few major strategies of knowledge and power."[8] Vol-
ume Two still finds him unrepentantly concerned with the history of
discursive formations, though no longer with "sexuality," which he has
persuasively shown to be a modern "production"; his purpose remains
that of investigating the constitution of sexual experience—or, as he
puts it, "the correlation, in a culture, between domains of knowledge,
types of normativity, and forms of subjectivity" (p. 10). What Foucault
calls "experience" is circumscribed by these three "axes";[9] it is the last of
them that pertains most particularly to sex, in his opinion.

Why is it, Foucault asks, that sexual behavior and the various ac-
tivities and pleasures associated with it comprise an object of moral pre-
occupation in our culture? How and in what terms did sex come to be
constituted as a specifically *moral* domain? The stance of radical inno-
cence implied by those questions—a stance far removed from the
merely naïve (by comparison) "objectivity" of the traditional historian
with his studious avoidance of "preconceptions" and "prejudices" (cf.
Nietzsche, *Genealogy* 3.12)[10]—enables Foucault to reconceptualize
morality in such a way as to bring it within the purview of an *histoire de
la pensée*, a history of thought *as thought inhabits experiences and sys-*

his preface to *L'usage des plaisirs*, transl. William Smock and published in Paul Ra-
binow, ed., *The Foucault Reader* (New York 1984) 333–39, esp. 336; also, Michel
Foucault and Richard Sennett, "Sexuality and Solitude," *London Review of Books* 3:9
(21 May–3 June 1981) 3, 5–7, esp. 3–5.

[8]Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*, trans.
Robert Hurley (New York 1978) 105–06.

[9]See Flynn (note 2 above) 532–33.

[10]Cf. also Foucault's remarks on historical objectivity in "Nietzsche, Genealogy,
History" (note 2 above) esp. 146–47, 152–53, 158–59, 162–63.

tems of action[11] (not to be confused with the history of cultural repre-
sentations, or "ideas"),[12] a project whose proper task is to describe "the
conditions under which human beings problematize what they are,
what they do, and the world they live in" (p. 16).[13] The conventional ap-
proach, which Foucault considers valid enough but uninformative for
his purposes, treats morality as a set of values and rules of conduct that
are prescribed for individuals and groups by various agencies of author-
ity in the society, such as the Church or the family, and are either artic-
ulated explicitly in formal doctrines and codes of behavior or are
handed down and enforced by a variety of informal strategies; it also
takes into account the actual behavior of individuals, their relation to
the dominant values, and the degree to which they resist or obey a moral
code of whose content they are more or less aware (pp. 32-33). Virtually
all students of ancient morality, I think it is fair to say, have been guided
hitherto by a conception of morality that approximates to the one
Foucault outlines. What is wrong with it is that it places too much inter-
pretative weight on the *content* of a moral system and ignores the dis-
cursive structures that determine that system's characteristic orienta-
tion. Foucault illustrates the defect of studying morality solely in terms
of its content by identifying four themes attested in both pagan and
Christian sources that would seem, in and of themselves, to argue for a
continuing ethic of sexual austerity in Western culture: fear of sex;
praise of monogamy; condemnation of effeminate men; and glorifica-
tion of resistance to appetite. These four themes, when examined as to
their content, may well reveal striking differences in emphasis or tonal-
ity in their pagan and Christian manifestations, and there remain a
number of valid historical criteria for distinguishing the unique flavor
of otherwise identical pagan and Christian interdictions, but traditional
methods do not provide a clear and simple means of describing the con-
ceptual or discursive gap separating, say, Greek from Victorian prohibi-

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[11]Original preface to *The History of Sexuality*, Volume II, in Rabinow (note 7
above) 334-35.
[12]See Reiner Schürmann, " 'What Can I Do?' in an Archaeological-Genealogical
History," *JPhilos* 82 (1985) 540-47, esp. 542.
[13]Foucault defines "problematization" as "the ensemble of discursive and non-dis-
cursive practices that makes something enter into the play of the true and the false and
constitutes it as an object of thought (whether in the form of moral reflection, scientific
knowledge, political analysis or the like)" (interview with François Ewald, "Le souci de la
verité," *Magazine littéraire*, 207 [May 1984] 18, quoted by Flynn [note 2 above] 533).

tions against masturbation.[14] Even worse, such thematic continuities might seem to suggest that sexuality is a cultural invariant and that historical variations in its expression merely reflect the differential impact on sexuality of the various mechanisms employed in different societies to repress it; but that, as Foucault remarks, would be in effect to place desire and the desiring subject outside the field of human history (p. 10) — as John Boswell, for example, has tried to do in *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (1980).

Foucault will later devote a separate chapter of Volume Two to the classical Greek expression of each of these four themes: "diaetetics," or the regimen by which one controls the economy of one's own body and physical style of life; "economics," or the husband's relation to his wife and household; "erotics," or a man's relation to boys and other objects of longing; and the will to truth, or the philosophical renunciation of sexual pleasure. He readily admits that the persistence of these themes raises complex questions about continuity and discontinuity in the evolution of Western morality, but he aspires to penetrate beyond such thematic correspondences by means of an emphasis on "ethics" rather than "morals." Following, apparently, Hegel's distinction between *Moralität* and *Sittlichkeit*, Foucault regards "ethics," in pointed contrast to "morals," *not* as a system of prescriptive codes and a pattern of behavioral response but as a relation that one establishes with oneself in the act of constituting oneself as a moral subject (this relation, of course, is not necessarily a self-conscious one, nor does it imply the moral independence of an individual from his society). In order to refute the currently fashionable "repressive hypothesis" and to uncover the discontinuities between different historical forms of sexual experience, Foucault sets out to construct a genealogy of "ethics": this comprises, as it pertains to sex, the genealogy of the subject as a subject of ethical actions and the genealogy of desire as an ethical problem.[15] Foucault acknowledges that morality includes both systems of rules, on the one hand, and forms of subjectification and self-fashioning (*pratiques de soi*), on the other, but he finds that the morality of classical Greece features the latter more than the former; his history of ancient sexual morality (to be continued in Volume Three), then, will concen-

[14]See Foucault and Sennett (note 7 above) 6, on the shifting significance of masturbation in moral discourse about sex.

[15]See Foucault and Sennett (note 7 above) 3–5; "On the Genealogy of Ethics" (note 2 above) esp. 240.

trate neither on moral codes and systems of rules nor on human behavior that violates or conforms to them but will analyze the prevalent mode or modes in which human beings constitute themselves as moral subjects, as the subjects of their own actions, and it will catalogue the techniques by means of which they do so. What Foucault has tried to write, in short, is a history of "technologies of the self."[16]

Such a genealogy of man as a moral subject must comprehend, according to Foucault, at least four aspects of moral self-constitution: (1) "ontology," or determination of the ethical substance, the material that is going to be worked over by ethics—i.e., what part or aspect of myself is concerned with moral conduct, is taken as an object of moral observation and control? (2) "deontology," or mode of subjection—how do I establish my relation to moral imperatives, in what terms do I recognize my moral obligations or define my adherence to moral values? (3) "ascetics," or ethical work—what do I have to do to become moral, what are the means by which I change myself in order to become an ethical subject? (4) "teleology," or ethical goal—how do I conceive the end to which being moral will contribute, what is the kind of being to which I aspire when I behave in a moral way? (pp. 33-35).[17] This way of setting the question allows Foucault to address the problem of understanding the transition from pagan to Christian varieties of sexual experience not by asking how Christians took over, assimilated, or modified classical codes of ethics (as historians of ideas have done) but by asking how one's relation to oneself as a moral subject changed with the coming of Christianity (pp. 38-39).[18]

Because Foucault's exposition is deliberately schematic, his thesis is easy to summarize. The ethical material on which the sexual morality of the classical Greeks was supposed to operate is what they called *aphrodisia*; their mode of submission is *chrêsis* (whence the title of Volume Two: *L'usage des plaisirs* translates *chrêsis aphrodisiôn*, an Aristotelian tag); the ethical work to be performed is *enkrateia*; and the

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[16]Foucault and Sennett (note 7 above) 3-5; "On the Genealogy of Ethics" (note 2 above) 230.

[17]See also Foucault's explanation of his analytical method in "On the Genealogy of Ethics" (note 2 above) 237-43.

[18]See also Foucault and Sennett (note 7 above) 5. To say, as Lefkowitz (note 3 above) 465, does, that "Foucault seems to have been interested in what Greek and Roman writers said about sex because of their influence on our ways of thinking" is therefore to get his whole enterprise exactly backwards.

goal is *sophrosynê*.[19] The first two of these elements require some amplification.

Aphrodisia refers to those actions, contacts, and forms of self-expression that procure the individual a certain type of pleasure. The word implies something very different from the modern understanding of "sexuality," according to Foucault, in that it does not refer to some mute force within us that makes itself felt in all sorts of indirect and devious ways other than the performance of sexual acts; rather, it designates the more concrete processes of sexual enjoyment: *aphrodisia* includes within its sphere three aspects of sexuality that we tend to distinguish — sexual acts, sexual pleasure, and sexual desire — and thereby reflects the continuous circuit of responsiveness connecting the desire that leads to the act, the act that produces pleasure, and the pleasure that evokes (anticipatory) desire. Secondly, *aphrodisia*, literally "the things of Aphrodite," are measured by their intensity and frequency (whence the corresponding and typical Greek concern about an agent's moderation or incontinence) as well as by the direction of their current, so to speak, which defines in every instance a subject and object, an active and a passive participant. Finally, *aphrodisia* are never bad in themselves but are morally problematic for two reasons: first, they represent a lower pleasure, common to both men and beasts; second, the impulse associated with them is by nature "hyperbolic" — it tends greedily, if indulged, to seek more intense and frequent satisfaction, refusing to limit its demands to the bare requirements of need (pp. 49-61). These observations contribute to Foucault's first major conceptual breakthrough, as I see it: namely, his ability to specify so clearly the

[19]Foucault's choice of terms is careful and deliberate. Nussbaum (note 3 above) 14, has accused Foucault of employing, unwittingly, a nineteenth-century "empiricist-utilitarian" notion of pleasure and of neglecting Greek controversies about its nature — i.e., whether pleasure is a sensation, an activity, or "something that supervenes on activity" — but that (peculiarly Aristotelian) problematic, evident even to a Greekless reader of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, bears entirely on the definition of *hêdonê*, not *aphrodisia*; far from being blinded to the subtleties of ancient philosophical discourse by philological incompetence ("Foucault is not enough of a classical scholar even to perceive the issues," Nussbaum claims), Foucault reads his texts with rather more precision than Nussbaum who, in her haste to play Wilamowitz to Foucault's Nietzsche, has apparently confused *aphrodisia* with *hêdonê*. The term *plaisir*, in Foucault's title and vocabulary, does not signify "pleasure," after all, but is simply a vernacular equivalent (though an obviously inadequate one) of *aphrodision*: *l'usage des plaisirs* literally means, then — translating from the French via the Greek — "the management of venereal acts, pleasures, and desires," as Flynn (note 2 above) 535, and David Konstan, "Letter to the Editor," *New York Times Book Review* (22 December 1985) 4, properly observe.

ground of the Greeks' consistent assimilation of sexual desire to the other human appetites — these being, canonically, desires for food, drink, and sleep — and their tendency to view them all as qualitatively interchangeable "necessities," or compulsions, of human nature[20] (Plato, of course, is the bizarre exception to this tendency, though Foucault apparently has failed to notice this). Foucault recaptures something of the Greeks' original outlook when he places the Greek debate about how much sex it is good to have into the larger context of "diaetetics," the technique for achieving a properly balanced physical regimen. It would be interesting to determine, Foucault remarks, exactly when in the development of Western culture sex became more morally problematic than eating (pp. 61-62); he seems to think that sex won out only at the turn of the eighteenth century, after a long period of relative equilibrium during the Middle Ages.[21] (The evidence newly assembled by Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* [forthcoming], suggests that moral evolution may not have been such a continuously linear affair as Foucault imagines.)

It is a feature of moral life in classical Greece, Foucault observes, that universal interdictions are few and far between. They tend also to be rather unspecific. The Greeks had no Decalogue, just some basic rules of thumb, of which the most prominent were: respect the laws and customs of the country; try not to offend the gods; and don't violate the dictates of your own nature (pp. 63-64). Foucault draws from these observations another startling and acute conclusion. The general requirements of Greek morality radically underdetermine the definition of proper conduct for an individual in any particular situation; they leave room for a self-imposed (though no doubt communally enforced) ethic of sexual restraint within the larger field of a Greek male's moral freedom. Greek morality, in other words, doesn't concern itself so much with the forbidden as with the voluntary (in principle, at least): morality is therefore not a matter of obedience to specific prescriptions but a regulated usage, or *chrêsis*, of morally unrestricted pleasures. No moral value, either positive or negative, attaches to certain kinds of caresses, sexual postures, or modes of copulation. Instead, the ethic governing the usage of pleasures takes the form of a kind of calculated economy of

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[20]Heinz Schreckenberg, *Ananke. Untersuchungen zur Geschichte des Wortgebrauchs = Zetemata* 36 (Munich 1964), esp. 50-61.

[21]"On the Genealogy of Ethics" (note 2 above) 229; also, Foucault and Sennett (note 7 above) 5-6; Michel Foucault, *Le souci de soi = Histoire de la sexualité* 3 (Paris 1984) 166.

sexual spending: limit yourself to what you really need; wait until the most opportune moment to consume; and take into account your own social, political, and economic status. Sexual morality is thus subsumed by the more general practice of self-regulation with regard to enjoyment that constituted for the Greeks an art of living, a technique for maintaining personal equilibrium, "an aesthetics of being." Sexual morality is not part of an attempt to normalize populations but an element in a procedure adopted by a few people with the aim of living a beautiful and praiseworthy life—not a pattern of behavior for everybody but a personal choice for a small élite. Greek morality, Foucault concludes, does not justify and internalize interdictions: it stylizes freedom (pp. 103–111).

Here is the point at which Nietzsche naturally comes to mind. In the Third Essay of On the Genealogy of Morals, Nietzsche sought to distinguish the origins and significance of what he called the ascetic ideal from its multitude of subsequent adaptive uses, its later incorporation into a system of purposes. Nietzsche ultimately saw in asceticism not a symptom of weakness, not an example of the typically Christian tendency to make a moral virtue out of material necessity, but the expression of a powerful will. Currently manifested in the secular priesthood of philological scholarship as a will to truth (what Foucault, in the title of Volume One, calls a volonté de savoir), the will expressed by asceticism was, according to Nietzsche, originally an instrument of the power-hungry; it derived not from moral scruple or hatred of pleasure but from an instinct of mastery over self and others. Foucault similarly sees the Greek moralists in terms of a will to power, a strategy for achieving domination of self and others; that is the key, in his view, to an ethic that paradoxically combines categorical permission and voluntary suppression. Like Nietzsche, Foucault measures the change in outlook that accompanied the triumph of Christianity by gauging the extent of a shift in the valuation of activity and passivity: the paradigm of moral virtue is no longer represented by a man in a position of power who nonetheless takes no advantage of it but by a woman (usually) who is outwardly helpless but able to defend her moral integrity (specifically her chastity) against the onslaught of the wicked and powerful; the classical ideal of self-restraint has yielded to an ideal of purity, based on a model of physical integrity rather than on one of self-regulation.[22] Fi-

[22]In Foucault and Sennett (note 7 above) 5–6, Foucault illustrates this shift by attempting to document a change in the emphasis of sexual ethics from a concern with

nally, one may even see in Foucault's own analysis an instance of a dis-
cursive tendency whose beginnings Nietzsche first glimpsed and her-
alded: the tendency of the will to truth to take *itself* as an object of
genealogical scrutiny and, by means of a consequent heightening of
self-consciousness, to put ethics — or moral science (as it used to be
called) — out of existence. As Foucault has written elsewhere, with refer-
ence to Nietzsche, truth is an error with a history from which we are
barely emerging.[23]

There is a good deal more to Foucault's portrait of Greek moral
discourse than I can indicate here. His account affords a great many
local insights into individual authors and texts; the most persuasive vin-
dication of his discursive archaeology consists, perhaps, in his ability to
distinguish clearly and precisely between the ways moral discourse is
typically structured in classical Greece (Volume Two), Imperial Rome
(Volume Three), and early Christianity (Volume Four). But my for-
bearing reader may still be wondering whether anything Foucault has to
say is really new and what, if anything, he may have to contribute to the
interpretation of classical Greek culture. I should like to offer two illus-
trations pertaining to Greek philosophy from which so many of
Foucault's examples are derived.

Foucault's analysis of Greek moral discourse bears on two promi-
nent and competing modes of defining virtue in Greek ethics: Socrates'
craft-analogy and Aristotle's doctrine of the mean. Both have to do with
the problem of specifying the relation between moral virtue as the at-
tribute or possession of individual agents and moral virtue as realized in
concrete action. It would be inappropriate to expect Foucault's work to
answer the difficult philosophical questions engendered by Socrates'
habit of conceptualizing moral virtue according to the model of various
crafts, from medicine to carpentry — to determine, for example,
whether or not Socrates regards moral knowledge as reducible to propo-
sitional knowledge — but Foucault's interpretation of Greek sexual mo-
rality in terms of the usage of pleasures does make it seem more natural,
at any rate, for a classical Greek to think of moral virtue as a *pratique
de soi*, an art of self-fashioning, a technology of the self. Similarly: Aris-

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penetration to a concern with erection. Cf. also Foucault's published excerpt from Vol-
ume Four, "Le combat de la chasteté," in Philippe Ariès and André Béjin, eds., *Sex-
ualité occidentale = Communications* 35 (1982) 15-25.

[23]"Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" (note 2 above) 144. See Charles Taylor,
"Foucault on Freedom and Truth," *Philosophy and the Human Sciences: Philosophical
Papers* 2 (Cambridge 1985) 152-84.

totle's definition of moral virtue as a mean implies the specification of proper conduct in terms relative to the individual moral agent and his immediate circumstances. "How much practical guidance does Aristotle really offer?" asks Terence Irwin in the introduction to his new translation of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1985): "Despite his emphasis on the practical function of ethics, he does not offer many specific moral rules. . . . Aristotle is more concerned with identifying the right states of character than with specifying the range of actions associated with them [and] he thinks detailed ethical instructions require reference to social and political conditions." Aristotle's doctrine makes perfect sense in the larger context of a culture in which ethical prescriptions radically underdetermine proper conduct. Foucault's account suggests that Socrates' craft-analogy and Aristotle's doctrine of the mean, despite their lack of immediately discernible relevance to one another, are each of them consequences, in different ways, of the essentially improvisatory character of virtuous action in Greek morality.

The reason for reading Foucault, then, is much the same as the reason for reading Nietzsche: he may not tell us anything new, but he will enable us to understand considerably better what we already know, and he will help us to figure out how to go about the bewildering process of discovering who we are.

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