

MICHEL FOUCAULT

# ETHICS

SUBJECTIVITY AND TRUTH

*Edited by*  
PAUL RABINOW

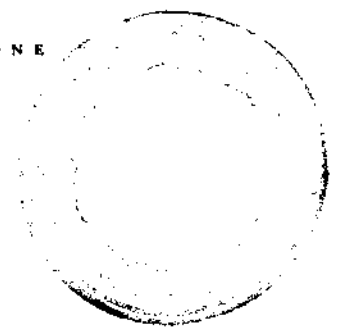
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## SUBJECTIVITY AND TRUTH

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**T**his year's course is to be the object of a forthcoming publication, so it will be enough for now to give a brief summary.

Under the general title of "Subjectivity and Truth," it is a question of beginning an inquiry concerning the instituted models of self-knowledge and their history: How was the subject established, at different moments and in different institutional contexts, as a possible, desirable, or even indispensable object of knowledge? How were the experience that one may have of oneself and the knowledge that one forms of oneself organized according to certain schemes? How were these schemes defined, valorized, recommended, imposed? It is clear that neither the recourse to an original experience nor the study of the philosophical theories of the soul, the passions, or the body can serve as the main axis in such an investigation. The guiding thread that seems the most useful for this inquiry is constituted by what one might call the "techniques of the self," which is to say, the procedures, which no doubt exist in every civilization, suggested or prescribed to individuals in order to determine their identity, maintain it, or transform it in terms of a certain number of ends, through relations of self-mastery or self-knowledge. In short, it is a matter of placing the imperative to "know oneself"—which to us appears so characteristic of our civilization—back in the much broader interrogation that serves as its explicit or implicit context: What should one do with oneself? What work should be carried out on the self? How should one "govern oneself" by performing actions in which one is oneself the objective of those actions, the domain in which they are brought to bear, the instrument they employ, and the subject that acts?

Plato's *Alcibiades* can be taken as the starting point:<sup>1</sup> the question of the "care of oneself"—*epimeleia heautou*—appears in this text as the general framework within which the imperative of self-knowledge acquires its significance. The series of studies that can be envisaged starting from there could form a history of the "care of oneself," understood as an experience, and thus also as a technique elaborating and transforming that experience. Such a project is at the intersection of two themes treated previously: a history of subjectivity and an analysis of the forms of "governmentality." The history of subjectivity was begun by studying the social divisions brought about in the name of madness, illness, and delinquency, along with their effects on the constitution of a rational and normal subject. It was also begun by attempting to identify the modes of objectification of the subject in knowledge disciplines [*dans ses savoirs*] such as those dealing with language, labor, and life. As for the study of "governmentality," it answered a dual purpose: doing the necessary critique of the common conceptions of "power" (more or less confusedly conceived as a unitary system organized around a center that is at the same time its source, a system that is driven by its internal dynamic always to expand); analyze it rather as a domain of strategic relations focusing on the behavior of the other or others, and employing various procedures and techniques according to the case, the institutional frameworks, social groups, and historical periods in which they develop. The studies already published concerning confinement and the disciplines, the courses devoted to the reason of state and the "art of governing," and the volume in preparation, with the collaboration of Arlette Farge, on the *lettres de cachet* in the eighteenth century,<sup>2</sup> constitute elements in this analysis of "governmentality."

The history of the "care" and the "techniques" of the self would thus be a way of doing the history of subjectivity; no longer, however, through the divisions between the mad and the nonmad, the sick and nonsick, delinquents and nondelinquents, nor through the constitution of fields of scientific objectivity giving a place to the living, speaking, laboring subject; but, rather, through the putting in place, and the transformations in our culture, of "relations with oneself," with their technical armature and their knowledge effects. And in this way one could take up the question of governmentality from a different angle: the government of the self by oneself in its articulation with relations with others (such as one finds in pedagogy, behavior counseling, spiritual direction, the prescription of models for living, and so on).

The study done this year delimited this general framework in two ways. A historical limitation: we studied what had developed in Hellenic and Roman culture as a "technique of living," a "technique of existence" in the philosophers, moralists, and doctors in the period stretching from the first century B.C. to the second century A.D. And a limitation of domain: these techniques of living were considered only in their application to that type of act which the Greeks called *aphrodisia*, and for which our notion of "sexuality" obviously constitutes a completely inadequate translation. The problem raised was the following, then: How did the philosophical and medical techniques of living, on the eve of Christianity's development, define and regulate the practice of sexual acts—the *khḗsis aphrodisiōn*? One sees how far one is from a history of sexuality organized around the good old repressive hypothesis and its customary questions (how and why is desire repressed?). It is a matter of acts and pleasures, not of desire. It is a matter of the formation of the self through techniques of living, not of repression through prohibition and law. We shall try to show not how sex was kept in check but how that long history began which, in our societies, binds together sex and the subject.

It would be completely arbitrary to connect a particular moment in time to the emergence of the "care of oneself" in regard to sexual acts; but the proposed demarcation (around the techniques of the self in the centuries immediately preceding Christianity) has its justification. In fact, it is certain that the "technology of the self"—reflection on modes of living, on choices of existence, on the way to regulate one's behavior, to attach oneself to ends and means—experienced an extensive development in the Hellenistic and Roman period, to the point of having absorbed a large portion of philosophical activity. This development cannot be dissociated from the growth of urban society, from the new distribution of political power, or from the importance assumed by the new service aristocracy in the Roman Empire. This government of the self, with the techniques that are peculiar to it, takes its place "between" pedagogical institutions and the religions of salvation. This should not be taken to mean a chronological succession, even if it is true that the question of the education of future citizens seems to have occasioned more interest and reflection in classical Greece, and the question of an afterlife and a hereafter caused more anxiety in later periods. Nor should it be thought that pedagogy, government of the self, and salvation constituted three utterly distinct domains, employing

different notions and methods; in reality there were numerous cross-overs and a definite continuity between the three. The fact remains that the technology of the self intended for the adult can be analyzed in the specificity and breadth it took on during this period, provided it is pulled out of the retrospective shadow cast on it by pedagogical institutions and the salvation religions.

Now, this art of self-government as it developed in the Hellenistic and Roman period is important for the ethic of sexual acts and its history. Indeed, it is there—and not in Christianity—that the principles of the famous conjugal arrangement, whose history has been so long, were formulated: the exclusion of any sexual activity outside the relation between spouses, the procreative purpose of these acts, at the expense of pleasure as an end, the emotional function of sexual relations in the marriage partnership. But that is not all; it is also in this technology of the self that one observes the development of a form of uneasiness about sexual acts and their effects, an uneasiness whose origin is too readily attributed to Christianity (when it is not attributed to capitalism or “bourgeois morality”!). Of course, the question of sexual acts was far from having the importance then that it would subsequently have in the Christian problematic of the flesh and its lusts; the question, for example, of anger or reversal of fortune undoubtedly looms larger than sexual relations for the Hellenistic and Roman moralists; but even if the place of sexual relations in the order of concerns is rather far from being the first, it is important to note the way in which these techniques of the self connect the order of sexual acts to the whole of existence.

In this year’s course we focused on four examples of these techniques of the self in their relation with the regimen of the *aphrodisia*.

1. The interpretation of dreams. Artemidorus’s *Oneirocritica*,<sup>3</sup> in Book One, Chapters 78–80, constitutes the basic text in this area. The question raised there does not directly concern the practice of sexual acts but, rather, the use to be made of the dreams in which they are represented. In this text, it is a matter of determining the prognostic value they should be given in everyday life: what auspicious or inauspicious events may one expect according to whether the dream has presented this or that type of sexual relation? A text of this sort obviously does not prescribe any morals, but it does reveal, through the play of positive or negative significations that it ascribes to the dream

images, a whole set of correlations (between sexual acts and social life) and a whole system of differential valuations (hierarchizing the sexual acts relative to one another).

2. The medical regimens. These aim directly to assign a “measure” to sexual acts. It is noteworthy that this measure almost never concerns the form of the sexual act (natural or not, normal or not), but its frequency and its moment. Quantitative and circumstantial values are all that is taken into consideration. A study of Galen’s great theoretical edifice shows clearly the connection established in medical and philosophical thought between sexual acts and the death of individuals. (Because each living being is destined to die, but the species must live eternally, nature invented the mechanism of sexual reproduction.) It also clearly shows the connection established between the sexual act and the substantial, violent, paroxysmal, and dangerous expenditure of the vital principle that it involves. A study of regimens properly speaking (in Rufus of Ephesus, Athenaeus, Galen, Soranus) shows, through the endless precautions they recommended, the complexity and tenuousness of the relations established between sexual acts and the life of the individual: the sexual act’s extreme sensitivity to all external and internal circumstances that might make it harmful; the immense range of effects of every sexual act on all parts and components of the body.

3. Married life. The treatises on marriage were quite numerous in the period under study. What remains of the work of Musonius Rufus, Antipater of Tarsus, or Hierocles, as well as the works of Plutarch, shows not only the valorization of marriage (which seems to correspond to a social phenomenon, according to the historians) but also a new conception of the marital relationship: added to the traditional principles of the complementarity of the two sexes necessary for the order of the “household” is the ideal of a dual relation, involving every aspect of the life of the two partners, and establishing personal emotional ties in a definitive way. Sexual acts must find their exclusive place inside this relationship (a condemnation of adultery therefore, understood, by Musonius Rufus, no longer as an infringement on a husband’s privileges but as a breach of the marriage tie, which binds the husband as well as the wife<sup>4</sup>). So they must be directed toward procreation, since that is the end given by the nature of marriage. And, finally, they must comply with an internal regulation required by modesty, mutual affection, and respect for the other (Plutarch offers the most numerous and valuable indications on this last point).

4. The choice of loves. The standard comparison between the two loves—the love for women and the love for boys—left two important texts for the period studied: Plutarch's *Dialogue on Love* and Lucian's *Amores*.<sup>5</sup> An analysis of these two texts attests to the persistence of a problem with which the classical period was very familiar: the difficulty of giving a status and a justification to sexual relations in the pederastic relationship. Lucian's dialogue concludes ironically with a precise reminder of those acts which the erotics of boys sought to elide in the name of friendship, virtue, and pedagogy. Plutarch's much more elaborate text brings out the mutual consent to pleasure as an essential element in the *aphrodisia*; it shows that this kind of reciprocity in pleasure can only exist between a man and a woman; better still, in the marriage relationship, where it regularly serves to renew the marriage covenant.

## NOTES

- 1 Plato, *Alcibiade*, trans. M. Croiset (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1925). [Plato, *Alcibiades*, trans. W. R. M. Lamb, in *Plato* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 1967), vol. 12].
- 2 M. Foucault and A. Farge, *Le Désordre des familles: Lettres de cachet des archives de la Bastille au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris: Gallimard-Julliard, 1982).
- 3 Artemidorus, *La Clef des songes: Onirocriticon*, trans. A. J. Festugière (Paris: Vrin, 1975), bk. 1, chs. 78–80, pp. 84–93. [Artemidorus, *The Interpretation of Dreams: Oneirocritica*, trans. R. J. White (Park Ridge, N.J.: Noyes, 1975), bk. 1, pp. 58–66].
- 4 C. Musonius Rufus, *Reliquiae, XII: Sur les aphrodisia*, ed. O. Hense (Leipzig: Teubner, 1905), pp. 65–67.
- 5 Lucian (attrib.), *Amores: Affairs of the Heart*, trans. M. D. Macleod, in *Works* (London: Loeb Classical Library, 1967), no. 53, pp. 230–53; Plutarch, *Dialogue sur l'amour*, trans. R. Flacelière, in *Oeuvres morales* (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1980), vol. 10, §769b, p. 101 [Plutarch, *The Dialogue on Love*, trans. Edwin Minor, Jr., F. H. Sandbach, and W. C. Helmbold (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1961), vol. 9, pp. 427–28].

## THE HERMENEUTIC OF THE SUBJECT

This year's course was devoted to the formation of the theme of the hermeneutic of the self. The object was not just to study it in its theoretical formulations but to analyze it in relation to a set of practices that were very important in classical and late antiquity. These practices had to do with what was often called in Greek *epimeleia heautou*, and in Latin *cura sui*. This principle that one needs to "attend to oneself," to "take care of oneself," is doubtless obscured by the radiance of the *gnōthi seauton*. Yet, one must bear in mind that the rule of having to know oneself was regularly associated with the theme of care of the self. Through all the culture of antiquity it is easy to find evidence of the importance given to "concern with oneself" and its connection with the theme of self-knowledge.

To start with, in Socrates himself. In the *Apology*, one sees Socrates presenting himself to his judges as the teacher of self-concern.<sup>1</sup> He is the man who accosts passersby and says to them: You concern yourself with your wealth, your reputation, and with honors, but you don't worry about your virtue and your soul. Socrates is the man who takes care that his fellow citizens "take care of themselves." Now, concerning this role, Socrates says three important things, a little farther on in this same *Apology*: it is a mission that was conferred on him by the deity, and he will not give it up before his last breath; it is a disinterested task for which he doesn't ask any payment, he performs it out of pure benevolence; and it is a useful service to the city-state, more useful even than an athlete's victory at Olympia, for by teaching citizens to attend to themselves (rather than to their possessions), one also