

ARTICLE

Stations of the Self: Aesthetics and Ascetics in Foucault's Conversion Narrative

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ABSTRACT: Based primarily on his 1981-1982 course, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, I contend that Michel Foucault's robust treatment of ancient models for self-salvation answers his systematic problem of a lost spiritual art of living primarily through a sustained dichotomy between the Hellenistic-Roman and Christian models of conversion. In this way his intended recovery of an aesthetic-ascetic spiritual "resistance" is accomplished through a methodology of resistance. He relies on an accelerating arrangement of polarities between the aim and practice of immanent self-return and what he takes to be the coercive discourses of transcendent self-renunciation. Though such historiography may raise questions for some readers, my aim is simply to show how, for Foucault, the dichotomizing is necessary for grounding his own understanding of the art of "conversion."

Keywords: Michel Foucault, Aesthetics, Ascesis, Christianity, Spirituality

...we want to be the poets of our lives.

-F. Nietzsche

To pay attention to the work of Michel Foucault is to reckon with the predicament that, in what have come to be the stories of sexuality, power, psychiatry, governmentality, even subjectivity, the author is not, in fact, the self. It is perhaps to find ourselves in a situation that begs for a cautious retrieval of self-constitution – to undertake what Foucault in 1983 terms the "aesthetics of the self."¹

The unique bearing of this necessity is evident as soon as the phrase is uttered: first, its subject is not the "subject" in any enlightened or intellectualist sense of "knowers," but rather the "self" as something worthy of a craftsman's care; second, the inherent action is artistic, not epistemic or instrumentalist. The phrase itself thus registers a protest against our usual ways of appropriating, utilizing,

¹ Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, edited by Joseph Pearson (Semiotext(e), 2001), 166.

perhaps even collapsing the "self" into a coefficient through which the powers of philosophical and political discourse are multiplied. Indeed, the fact that we "find it impossible today to constitute an ethic of the self, even though it may be an urgent, fundamental, and politically indispensable task" is ultimately a predicament that begs for a reconciliation of the nature of truth and the conversion of the self.² Against the apparently inevitable dissolution of the subject within the apparatuses of power, there is this prospect of the self as a work of art, an ethics of self-constitution. But this is no simple wager, and Foucault's aesthetic/ascetic justification stands in need of clarification before any evaluation or enactment of such a conversion can be carried out.

My primary aim in this article is to clarify how Foucault understands the integration of knowledge and subjectivity such that an art of living amounts to a prescient and historically precipitated mode of resistance. His 1981-1982 lecture course at the Collège de France, published as *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* (2005), is not only his most rigorous statement on this topic, but reveals the way in which this recovery of a spiritual resistance is accomplished through a methodology of resistance. What are the exact terms by which this resistance advances? Taking an exegetical and explanatory orientation, I contend that Foucault's empirical elucidation of ancient models for self-salvation answers the systematic problem of a lost spiritual art of living by drawing and sustaining a strategic dichotomy between the Hellenistic-Roman and Christian models of *conversion*. I aim to show how this dichotomy is necessary for grounding his own understanding of "conversion," but is also decidedly critical of certain facets within Christian conversion. Certain readers may wish to contend with his treatment of Christianity within this methodology, but that is not my concern here.

I. Situating Foucault's 'Spiritual' Trajectory

Before proceeding to the textual work before us, several initial matters of clarification bear mention. First, Foucault's "aestheticist turn"³ carries in it the accent of an "ascetic" focus. To craft the self is to care for the self, to practice a certain mode of spiritual self-knowledge and self-concentration that intends a deliberate conversion of the self *to* the self for the sake of self-fulfillment. Such a practice, though fixed as an activity of self-examination, is dynamic and ongoing, without pretensions to anything like a "final" or decidedly "authentic" self. Though such a trajectory might elicit connotations of individualism, egoism, or withdrawal, this conversion is in fact essential to the axis on which subjectivity, knowledge, and world inevitably turn.⁴

² Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France*, edited by Frédéric Gros, translated by Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, 2007), 252.

³ Alexander Nehamas, *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault* (London and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1998), 180.

⁴ Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 13.

Practicing and enunciating the truth of the self in the world is a model of self-transformation integral to knowing the truth itself. However, the predominant neglect of this interest in the relationship between subjectivity and truth, indeed the complacent concealment of the injunction to "care for the self" (*epimeleia heautou*) beneath the opportunistic call to "know thyself" (*gnothi seauton*) as the knower and arbiter of truth in the recent lineage of Western philosophical practice, marks the precise problem which Foucault's aesthetic-ascetic turn seeks to oppose.

Second, to a historical present preoccupied by the belief that "knowledge itself and knowledge alone gives access to truth," Foucault asks: "Am I really the ethical subject of the truth I know?"⁵ It is a question that cannot be posed from within the framework of a reflexivity that submits the self to technologies of knowledge or religious self-renunciation. It is a spiritual question, rather, that must be excavated from the early history of philosophical practice, stripped of its entanglements with predominant discourses, and offered as an "ethopoetic" empowerment to today's "subjects." The question is thus answered by way of a focused interest in addressing the "long and continuous process that I will call a self-subjection" evident in early thought and practice.⁶ In this way if a practical resistance is to appear downstream of a reconfiguration of the hermeneutics of the self, we must first allow the upstream formulations of philosophical spirituality in Antiquity to resist their historical course.

Third, are we to assume this 'spiritual' turn pairing knowledge and selfhood marks an abandonment of politics and his longstanding critiques of power structures? Does this historical focus suggest a flagging interest in the discourses and predicaments of the present? I believe it does not. In fact, the thematic of 'conversion' marks a profound concentration on a subject-matter which, though seemingly anachronistic, is of precise interest to the Foucault we know well and in keeping with his broader sensibilities. As Alexander Nehamas explains: "By turning to the self in his later works and by living in a way consonant with his ideas, Foucault finally managed to express his 'deep love' for the excluded and the marginalized in practical terms. He made himself into a model of autonomy, a voice of one's own. Politics, as he might have put it, begins with the care of the self. His private project was of public significance."⁷ In a similar vein, James Bernauer and Jeremy Carratte argue that the "journey of Foucault's incarnational discernment culminated in his final efforts to restore philosophy to being... a form of caring for the self and not just a type of knowledge. That effort entailed a new appreciation for spirituality, which

⁵ *Ibid.*, 3, 463.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 237, 214.

⁷ Nehamas, *The Art of Living*, 180.

Foucault saw as an ensemble of practices that create not the mere consciousness of the subject but the very being of the subject and its paths of understanding.”⁸

Finally, and in a related vein, it is important to contextualize more specifically the direction of his 1981-1982 course with respect to his interest in the question of ‘sexuality’ leading into this period. Taking his 1980-1981 course, “Subjectivity and Truth,”⁹ as a gauge of sorts, Frédéric Gros (in his “Course Context” appending *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*) characterizes Foucault as “torn between, on the one hand, writing a reorganized history of ancient sexuality in terms of the problematic of techniques of the self, and, on the other, the growing temptation to study these techniques... in their historico-ethical dimensions, and in domains of effectuation other than sexuality.”¹⁰ What the 1981-1982 course reveals is that Foucault found in his examination of the techniques of the self a field of consideration that conferred an organizing principle and concern upon his larger work – an element beyond the methodology of the history of sexuality which, in effect, stood as the “unthought” theme of his longstanding interests. Though his procedure here is chiefly empirical, his genealogical emphasis on posing a question ‘in the present’ that looks backwards through history remains in principal – in this case as a question of the practices, techniques, and care of the self which mark out the historical processes of subjectivation. The reverse chronological bearing of this genealogy is, I hope to show, the necessary and effective means by which he may demonstrate how “the subject of true knowledge in the modern West” is, in effect, a substitute for “the subject of right action in Antiquity.”¹¹ Remarkably, the trajectory of the 1981-1982 course gathers both empirical-historical and systematic momentum the more Foucault comes to discover and prize the ethic of immanence at the historical core of an aesthetics of existence. Returning to my third clarification above, the self-governance of the self ultimately furnishes a model that may, in effect, restore even to modern subjects an impetus for vigilance and action in an age otherwise caught up in the coercive structures of power and governmentality.¹²

So what is the manner through which Foucault shelters and substantiates the necessity on which his aesthetic-ascetic trajectory depends? What is the genesis of the care of the self and how is it distinct from other, evidently problematic, uses of subjectivity? How are the *ascetic*, *mathetic*, and *parrhesiastic*¹³ practices of Antiquity

⁸ James Bernauer and Jeremy Carrette (eds.), *Michel Foucault and Theology: The Politics of Religious Experience* (Hampshire, UK and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004), 8.

⁹ Later formulated as *Le Souci de soi (The Care of the Self)*, the third volume of the *Histoire de la sexualité* (Gallimard, 1984).

¹⁰ See F. Gros’ “Course Context” appended to Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 514.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 523.

¹² See Gros, 507-511.

¹³ For the purposes of this discussion, *mathesis* denotes what Foucault elsewhere describes as “the science of calculable order” within the “exhaustive ordering of the world” explored under Classical *episteme*. See Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*

initially conceived and enacted such that the relationship between subjectivity and truth is integrated into an ongoing craft of self-fulfillment?

II. Spirituality, Salvation, and the Call to Conversion

Foucault's stated historical-empirical objective is to excavate the forms by which the relation between 'subject' and 'truth' take shape in the West.¹⁴ The historical moment that furnishes a guiding thematic for this problem is the nature in which the Delphic prescription *gnothi seauton* ("know yourself") is rendered: "You must attend to yourself, you must not forget yourself, you must take care of yourself."¹⁵ And it is through this principle domain of subjectivity and knowledge that the historical-empirical objective quickly generates what is, for Foucault, the systematic problem previously noted: We today cannot think or experience the full meaning of this precipitating injunction. The philosophical attitude of the Modern age is decidedly unhinged from the cultures of the self that characterized notions of truth in the period dating from fifth century BC to the fifth century AD.¹⁶ And we have known this for some time. The tendency of 19th century thinkers to exhibit anxiety over these lost mores illustrates that we are not content to greet what has become a truncated use of *gnothi seauton* with illusions of Faustian 'progress' – a fact which the "reappearance of the structures of spirituality" in the period of thought ranging from Kant to Heidegger exemplifies.¹⁷ As Foucault goes on to explain, "a whole section of nineteenth-century thought can be reread as a difficult attempt, a series of difficult attempts, to reconstitute an ethics and an aesthetics of the self."¹⁸ Such attempts are, however, tethered to a "belief in a continual progress for humanity" and tend to overshadow subjective forms of immanence with a methodological reliance on the transcendence of the ego.¹⁹ In short, we suffer a certain spiritual paralysis, and thus have little to be proud of "in our current efforts to reconstitute an ethic of the self."²⁰ That there is such an ethic or aesthetic to be reconstituted is, of

(New York: Vintage Books, 1994, 1970), 73-74. The text first appeared in French as *Les Mots et les choses* (Éditions Gallimard, 1966). *Parrhesia* refers to "free speech" in the general sense, but also denotes, for Foucault, a sense of frankness and truth in the context of a social situation. The word "refers to a type of relationship between the speaker and what he says... In *parrhesia* the speaker emphasizes the fact that he is both the subject of the enunciation and the subject of the enunciandum—that he himself is the subject of the opinion to which he refers... there is always an exact coincidence between belief and truth." See Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, 11-15.

¹⁴ Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 2.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 29. See also 18-19.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 251.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 309, 525.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 251. Foucault's summary statement on our situation and its consequences is as follows: "The point of enlightenment and fulfillment, the moment of the subject's transfiguration by the

course, the necessity on which Foucault's historical-empirical focus pairs with his systematic problem. What he finds in the broad terrain of Antiquity is "a thousand years of transformation and evolution in which the care of the self is undoubtedly one of the main threads."²¹

What remains significant ("available," perhaps) is that there was in this early trajectory a sustained appreciation for approaching the three-fold axis of subjectivity—truth—world that did not divorce the transformation of the self from the project of knowing truth. The distinct spiritual nature of this axis may be appreciated as the difference between a genitive and dative case: the self was the subject *of* true knowledge, not yet a subject *for* acquiring knowledge of truth.²² And in this genitive paradigm was the persistent belief that subjects of true knowledge were so insofar as they were subjects of true action. Truth, we may say, was at once an aim and an experience rooted in self-exercises, not a problem to be surmounted by intellectual systems; a framework of concentration and practice carried out on the immanent plane of life in the world, not a body of principles or facts identified and articulated on a plane of transcendence. As Edward McGushin explains, the "truth" Foucault is after is "not truth in the sense of the quality of correctness of a judgment; it is not a particular truth about some object to be known" but rather a conception of truth as "a fullness of being which offers itself only to those individuals who have performed the proper work on themselves."²³ But such truth and such a framework must be uncovered, recovered from the historical transformations that overtook it. Specifically, the historical-empirical task of separating the elements of a Hellenistic-Roman art of the self from the Platonic and Christian models that obscure and transpose it will serve the systematic interest of countering the objectification of the subject with a paradigm in which subjectivity and truth were "bound" together through the spiritual core of philosophical *askesis*.²⁴

'rebound effect' on himself of the truth he knows, and which passes through, permeates, and transfigures his being, can no longer exist," *Ibid.*, 18-19. Edward McGushin nicely captures the heart of Foucault's diagnostic concern by distinguishing it from what might appear to be proximate contemporary concerns: "The attention to, even obsession with, self-discovery, self-knowledge, and self-expression is, according to Foucault, one of the defining features of our present. Yet Foucault is skeptical about the meaning and the validity of this quest for selfhood. The modern obsession with being authentic and the modern proliferation of knowledges about the self is, in fact, a kind of prison." See Edward McGushin, *Foucault's Askesis: An Introduction to the Philosophical Life* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007), xv.

²¹ Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 11-12. Foucault explains: "In short, with this notion of *epimeleia heautou* we have a body of work defining a way of being, a standpoint, forms of reflection, and practices which make it an extremely important phenomenon not just in the history of representations, notions, or theories, but in the history of subjectivity itself, or, if you like, in the history of practices of subjectivity," *Ibid.*, 11.

²² See also *Ibid.*, 416-417.

²³ McGushin, *Foucault's Askesis*, 39.

²⁴ See also Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 317, 333.

Any excavation must begin, of course, with some knowledge of what is sought. As we have begun to see, Foucault seeks in the thread of *epimeleia heautou* a paradigm in which the givenness of truth is predicated on a certain transformation in the being of the subject. For,

in the truth and in access to the truth, there is something that fulfills the subject himself, which fulfills or transfigures his very being. In short, I think we can say that in and of itself an act of knowledge could never give access to the truth unless it was prepared, accompanied, doubled, and completed by a certain transformation of the subject... in his being as subject.²⁵

Here again the notion of “transformation” denotes a work or craft of the self on the self; an aesthetic that travels by way of the ascetic, the practices of *askesis* sounds like a refrain throughout the ethopoetic tonality of Foucault’s course. As McGushin rightly observes, this *askesis* is at the heart of the care of the self which, in Antiquity, ordered “the practice of a certain way of living and speaking, a certain way of being with oneself and with others.”²⁶ What must not be overlooked, however, is the fact that this accent on *askesis* (as recovered and deployed by Foucault) occurs within a larger register of *conversion*. The aesthetics and ascetics of the self, particularly in the Cynic, Epicurean, and Stoic threads of the first century B.C. – first century A.D., are formulated according to an exercise of salvation centered on the notion of a “conversion to oneself.”²⁷ What must be identified and recovered in and from the spirituallized philosophy of the Hellenistic-Roman epoch is, quite plainly, a *conversion narrative*.

In view of contemporary and historical significations of the term, however, what must be differentiated from the model affiliated with ancient practices of self-conversion is the historical and conceptual narrative of Christian conversion, a schema of subjective salvation Foucault tirelessly identifies as self-renunciation: “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 *ethos*.”²⁸ More than a simple criterion for sound historiography, this necessity is also the source of a guiding dichotomy for Foucault’s systematic project.

²⁵ Ibid., 16.

²⁶ McGushin, *Foucault’s Askesis*, xiv.

²⁷ Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 248.

²⁸ Ibid., 211. Carrette rightly identifies Foucault’s attention to this problem: “The fascinating feature of Christianity was how the self was formed and shaped through the paradoxical act of renouncing the self... What Foucault’s later work demonstrated is that religious discourses ‘govern’ the self, both at the macro level of institutional order, and at the micro level of individual subjectification.” See Jeremy Carrette, *Foucault and Religion: Spiritual Corporality and Political Spirituality* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 149.

By counterposing the Hellenistic-Roman with the early and medieval Christian, the ascetic with asceticism, the conversion to self with the sacrifice of self, Foucault succeeds in weaving the historic thread of self-care into a spiritualized relationship between subjectivity and truth that unties itself not only from the fabric of modern epistemology and hermeneutics, but, perhaps more importantly, from an alternative spirituality that grants truth to the self by way of eliminating the self. An effective retrieval of the care of the self as a mode of resisting the objectification of the self within the knowledge-power apparatuses of history thus depends from the start on deploying an immanent-Pagan model of conversion against a transcendent-Christian model (the former must be allowed to “resist” the latter). Ancient texts and structures make this opposition available to Foucault, and, in taking it up as a methodological *tekhne* he bases the singular appeal of the spiritual-philosophical conception of the truth-subject relationship on the relief it brings from the spiritual-theological conception of the same. The currency of immanent self-fulfillment is derived from the interest it carries against transcendent self-fulfillment.

This guiding dichotomy is introduced by an appraisal of what Foucault terms the first significant “wedge” between spirituality and knowledge. The problem lies not with the ascendancy of modern science, but with Thomistic theology.²⁹ In seeking to provide a rational reflection on which faith could be secured, this apparatus simultaneously founded “the principle of the knowing subject in general,” a subject whose fulfillment depends on an association with the “highest degree of perfection in God.” The resulting “wedge” is that the spiritual necessity of “the subject’s work on himself” is dissociated from the knowing subject.³⁰ Thomistic theology is, of course, a formal and definite case. It represents the more subtle and informal sequence of discourses and practices wherein Christianity took up (“transposed”) prior models of spirituality. In this way, it is appropriate to take these comments as a legend of sorts, a key to understanding the dichotomizing terrain Foucault maps between the pagan and Christian, the ascetic and asceticism, and ultimately the rival camps of immanent and transcendent self-fulfillment.

Accordingly, there are three elements of Christian salvation (derived from this Thomistic legacy) that must be kept at bay. First, this salvation is constituted according to a “binary system” that pits life against death, morality against immortality, world against other. Second, and as a result, salvation amounts to a “crossing over” from the former to the latter terms. It is also anchored in a system of “events” (transgression, sin, Fall) that necessitate the corrective event of redemption. Finally,

²⁹ As Bernauer and Carrette have noted, the context for this critique is Foucault’s willingness to take theology as “a form of knowledge taking shape in historical processes.” This means he “returns theology to its history, to its struggles for authority and power, to its practices of the self and to its embodied reality. Foucault takes theology from its doctrinal closet into its pastoral reality,” Bernauer and Carrette, *Michel Foucault and Theology*, 2-3.

³⁰ Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 26-27.

such salvation is a “complex operation” involving not only the instrumental efforts of the devoted subject, but also the concerted efforts of an external Other. Against this schema, Foucault insists that the salvation that “developed and appeared as an objective of philosophical practice and of the philosophical life” is something different altogether.³¹ The precise danger of the religious-Christian sensibility is that it tends to import a general motif of self-renunciation into the terrain. Victor Hugo’s description of the convent in *Les Misérables* is an apt expression of this tendency: “A convent is a contradiction—its object salvation, its means self-sacrifice. The convent is supreme egoism resulting in supreme self-denial.”³² By contrast, in its rudimentary form, the Greek verb *sōzein* (to save) prepares the way for a concept of salvation in which the self is the active, self-sufficient “agent, object, instrument, and end of salvation.” Instead of a salvation model premised on self-renunciation, this salvation “ensures an access to the self that is inseparable from the work one carries out on oneself within the time of one’s life and in life itself.”³³

Thus, the hermeneutic caution concerning *salvation* buttresses the historical key concerning the theological break with *spirituality*. There is something in the accomplishment of Thomistic theology that formalizes the schematic of Christian salvation, and in so doing sanctifies a certain broken relationship between subjectivity and truth. Such an interpretation is, of course, precipitated by Foucault’s account of the institutionalization of “pastoral power” in his 1978 course, *Security, Territory, and Population*. I have in mind his contention that this “birth of an absolutely new form of power” beginning in the third century A.D. required a “relationship of complete obedience” on the side of the subject, indeed a subjection of the subject through procedures of individualization that paired the attainment of salvation with the production of an internal truth of devotion. As the “embryonic point” of the coming political “governmentality,” this new birth of power reduced the relationship between subjectivity and truth to a diagnostic participant in the larger drama of obedience. With this discovery in mind, Foucault’s 1982 comments reinforce the concern that the Christian self is reduced to an obstacle that stands in the way of immortal truth, an assumption Christian practices and models antecedent to the middle ages nevertheless instigated and sustained.³⁴

Taken together, these elements afford Foucault with a *conversion* “construct” against which his focus on Hellenistic-Roman conversion practices and aims may stand out in sharp relief. If, under the Christian construction, conversion is a *telos* in

³¹ Ibid., 181-182.

³² Victor Hugo, *Les Misérables*, translated by Lee Fahnestock and Norman MacAfee (New York: Signet Classics, 1987), 520.

³³ Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 184-185.

³⁴ See Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, and Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977-1978*, edited by Michel Senellart, translated by Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001, 2005), 183-184.

its own right (a conversion *from* the self), the pagan conversion at the forefront of ancient spirituality is a technology of and for a *telos* that is the self (a conversion *to* the self). How is this dichotomy crucial to Foucault's advocacy of a spirituality that maintains a constitutive relationship between the care of the self and the knowledge of truth? How does his particular conversion narrative proceed such that the self stands out as the empowered site of aesthetic-ascetic transformation and is not sacrificed into a subjectivity that lays ultimate truth on the side of religious or rational objectivity?

III. Turn Your Gaze on Yourself: The Concentrating Movement of Self-Return

To answer these questions we must look more pointedly at the manner in which Foucault formulates the Hellenistic-Roman model(s) of conversion, the root of what he advances as the spiritual genesis that potentially initiates a larger "art of living." Put broadly, the uncovering and recovering of ancient conversion practices centers on an opposition between *self-return* and *self-renunciation*. Specifically, Foucault emphasizes the movement and position of the self-examining "gaze" on the side of self-return, and their counterparts in decipherment and divine truth on the side of self-renunciation. The result of these distilling comparisons will be a clearer understanding of how the *self-subjectivation* that marks conversion practices in Antiquity is accented in accelerating contrast to the *self-objectivation* model in Christianity.

The spirituality of self-return is represented by an image of *turning* in ancient literature and practice: "We must turn away from everything that turns us away from our self, so as to turn ourselves towards our self."³⁵ But this turning owes nothing to a Platonic, or later Christian, opposition between this world and a higher one. It is, rather, "a reversion that takes place in the immanence of the world," liberating the self toward a concentration on what the agent can, in fact, control. The turn intends "the establishment of a complete, perfect, and adequate relationship of self to self."³⁶ Foucault forecasts the broader distinction in the following way:

You see that conversion is defined here as a movement directed towards the self, which doesn't take its eyes off it, which fixes it once and for all as an objective, and which finally reaches it or returns to it. If conversion (Christian or post-Christian *metanoia*) takes the form of a break or change within the self, if consequently we can say that it is a sort of trans-subjectivation, then I would propose saying that the conversion of the philosophy of the first centuries of our era is [oriented by the question... How, by fixing your self as the objective, can you establish a full and adequate relationship of self to self?³⁷

³⁵ Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 206-207.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 209-210.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 214-215. He continues: "I do not think that what is involved in the theme of conversion to the self, of return to the self, can be assimilated to *metanoia* understood as a founding conversion

How such conversion avoids a caesura in the self is detailed by a study of the motion of the gaze within this turn. The movement that requires the subject “to convert himself, to direct himself to himself, or to revert to himself” is premised on an initial “conversion of the gaze” to focus on oneself. Distinct from a theoretical vision or representation, this gaze is, in effect, a practice by which, as McGushin notes, “one is not only that which appears before one’s gaze when one looks, but also the activity of looking into oneself.”³⁸ Initially, this amounts to an injunction that one not gaze upon the content of everyday apprehensions or sustain a curiosity toward neighbors. Plutarch’s concern, rendered as *trepein tēn psuken* (turn our soul around), is that one undertake “exercises of non-curiosity” toward external apprehensions and instead apply a kind of teleological concentration (like that of an athlete) upon his aims, corresponding efforts, and the clarity of his consciousness.³⁹ The gaze affords a “presence of self to self,” setting in motion a “trajectory” from self to self.⁴⁰ As a result, the teleological concentration on the self entails a turn toward a mode of knowing which puts the self in an ethical relation to truth.

Foucault initially distinguishes this turning of the gaze (under Cynic, Epicurean, and Stoic models) in a straightforward way from the “decipherment of the self” that characterized later monastic practice, a mode of self-exegesis prone to dwell suspiciously on the “secrets of conscience.”⁴¹ Against this, as we have begun to see, in the earlier model the knowledge one seeks through the trajectory of self to self is of paramount immanent use – “knowledge in which human life is at stake,” knowledge that is “capable of producing a change in the subject’s mode of being.” The turn should yield a species of knowledge that will transform the self, a knowledge deemed necessary for the person “who has to cultivate his own self and takes himself as the objective of his life.”⁴² This amounts to an awareness of the potency of self-dependence (*autarkeia*), and the identification of the interference external impulses or temptations might pose.⁴³ And it is the virtue of this interest in

taking place through a complete change of the subject himself, renouncing the self, and being reborn from himself. This is not what is involved” (Ibid., 215, cf. 211).

³⁸ McGushin, *Foucault’s Askesis*, 36.

³⁹ Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 217-219, 221.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 222-223.

⁴¹ Ibid., 222, 235.

⁴² Ibid., 237-238.

⁴³ Ibid., 240-241. Foucault is careful to insist such knowledge is not simply self-objectifying: “What is required, and of what valid and acceptable knowledge (*savoir*) must consist for both the sage and his disciple, is not a knowledge that would focus on themselves, not a knowledge that would take the soul or the self as the real object of knowledge (*connaissance*). It is, rather, knowledge (*savoir*) concerning things, the world, the gods and men, but whose effect and function are to change the subject’s being. This truth must affect the subject. It does not involve the subject becoming the object of a true discourse” (Ibid., 243-244).

transformative self-knowledge that opens up the primary question of the truth of the subject. Since the interest in knowledge is born from an interest in preparing the self to attain itself, one's posture toward truth is never divorced from one's care of the self.⁴⁴

The significance of this visual immediacy between the question of truth and the knowledge of oneself is underscored by a still more aggressive comparison with the ascetic-monastic model of the third and fourth centuries A.D. As I have begun to indicate, under this model truth is assumed to be external to, and in a position of authority over, the subject. One "knows" the truth as it is given via Text or Revelation, in which case the purpose of self-knowledge is to conform oneself to this truth, and the ethic affiliated with this knowing is ultimately determined by an antagonism toward the self.⁴⁵ "For everything lies at the innermost recess of the soul" says John Cassian in the fourth-fifth century, "[all] the corners of our heart must therefore be examined thoroughly."⁴⁶ This amounts to a "circular relation" in which one's salvation depends on the program set forth according to revealed knowledge; knowledge purported to be transformative is already granted a discourse of power over the self.⁴⁷ The normative truth of the self is told from the "outside," as it were, in which case the only truth that matters is that which aids the subject in his task of self-renunciation – a *telos* of knowledge that is strikingly distinct from the *telos* of self-preparation and fulfillment found in the Hellenistic-Roman model.

Given the deepening of this dichotomy in Foucault's understanding, certain readers might charge that a more nuanced account of the proximity between the Stoic and Christian positions is required. Is not a figure such as Cassian also keen on the perfection of the self-self relation? Cassian writes: "Scripture summons our free will to different degrees of perfection, and this in proportion to the condition and the measure of the individual soul." It remains true, however, that such a relationship depends on self-renunciation and the attainment of a *spiritual* knowledge on the other side of the given self: "With renunciation we can reach perfection... No man who is still under the sway of fleshly passion... will be able to possess spiritual know-

⁴⁴ Ibid., 253. Ultimately, observes McGushin, "truth is a saving power which accomplishes and completes the subject in its very being" (McGushin, *Foucault's Askesis*, 41).

⁴⁵ In his 1978 course this configuration of internal truth in terms of external revelatory truth translated into the examination of "a certain secret inner truth of the hidden soul" which would then individualize the subject by bestowing merits or faults upon this inner truth (*STP*, 183). In the same way, Foucault's 1982 comments center on the limited, submissive way in which a knowledge of the self "is entailed and required by the fact that the heart must be purified in order to understand the Word... the Word must be received for one to be able to undertake purification of the heart and realize self-knowledge" (Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 255).

⁴⁶ See John Cassian, *Conferences*, translated by Colm Luibheid (New York and Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1985), 46, 57.

⁴⁷ Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 255.

ledge."⁴⁸ Presumably, these guidelines assume some level of 'control' on the side of the subject, but their larger objective remains reliant on a transcendent Word or a spiritual knowledge that will only come to those bent on self-renunciation. For Foucault, the translation of the immanent self into tropes of "flesh" collapses the singularity of self-return into the discourse and practices of an other-worldly economy. The positive work of such conversion and resistance is wagered on the eschatological arrival of a heavenly Kingdom,⁴⁹ whereas Foucault requires a spiritual knowledge in/of the self that is productive on the plane of immanence.

If Christianity makes self-decipherment the currency of a divine appeal in an economy of self-renunciation, the Hellenistic-Roman turn toward the self enriches the field of knowledge by making it a stakeholder in transformative truth. If a teleological obsession with divine truth and immortal transformation confine knowledge and morality to the self-annihilating practice of decipherment, a teleological concentration on the self yields the inseparability of knowledge and morality. Both models employ a rigorous ascetic, and both aspire to an ethical mode of self-examination. However, as we shall continue to realize, points of apparent proximity in fact yield greater polarity. It is by virtue of Foucault's attention to this turn of the gaze that we begin to appreciate the manner in which what I am calling the immanent model of conversion is allowed to resist the transcendent model that otherwise transposes and conceals it.

IV. The Ethopoetic Art: *Mathesis* and *Askesis*

Critical to the larger converting work sought by this concentrating movement of the gaze is the caution that the relationship between subjectivity and truth in the immanent model not be understood simply as a reduction to isolated self-knowledge. The conversion to the self, like Christian circularity, involves an "other." However, this "other" is not a Text, a risen Lord, or a dogmatic body of revealed truth, but is, in keeping with the plane of immanence, *nature*. The question of the truth of the subject is posed and practiced through a turn toward the self *in* its relationship to the natural order. Says Foucault, conversion is associated with a further concentration, an "*inflection* of the *gaze* onto the self within the entire course of the order of the *world* and with its general and internal organization."⁵⁰ Bearing in mind earlier comments by Foucault regarding the ultimate incommensurability of "being" and "language," it is safe to assume he does not believe anything like a fixed order of "nature" can be captured in thought or discourse.⁵¹ That said, within the Classical *taxinomia* (systematic signs) of the natural order there is a dynamic bearing

⁴⁸ Cassian, *Conferences*, 90, 170-171.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 46: And when "the devil has been chased away from it and when sin is no longer in charge of it, then the kingdom of God is established there."

⁵⁰ Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 260, my emphasis.

⁵¹ See Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 338-339.

between self-knowledge and the representations serving the continuum of things – the ancient practices and discourses that interest Foucault did not see the articulation of nature’s “order” as a contradiction to human “agency.” It is the workings of a relational dynamism, and not a determinative grid-like identity laid upon nature, that interests Foucault.

With reference to Seneca’s Stoic morality, Foucault notes: “We can only arrive at the self by having passed through the great cycle of the world.”⁵² The gaze thus continues its turn through the self to a provisional “view of the whole world from above,” which reveals to the self the ordered location in which one’s life is situated.⁵³ The position of one’s life is rendered meaningful in terms of a larger immanent order, not in terms of an other-worldly salvation that requires one to renounce and sacrifice his earthly position. Seneca thus inscribes in Stoic conversion a necessary partnership with *mathesis*: “this principle (‘turn your gaze on yourself’), connected to the double necessity of converting to the self and knowing the world, gave rise... to what could be called a spiritual modality, a spiritualization of knowledge of the world.”⁵⁴ Foucault himself may well question the epistemology afforded by such *mathesis*, but what is compelling in this elaboration of the thematic of self-return is the recognition that an awareness of one’s place in the world has everything to do with how one must choose to live in the world.⁵⁵

However, this inflection of the gaze through the self and into the world must serve the project of conversion in a still more penetrating way: it must furnish the concentration on the self with a program of exercise, or better, *askesis*. It is here that the comparison with Christian conversion again accelerates by way of a proximity that is in fact polarizing. In Marcus Aurelius the spiritualization of knowledge obtains, as with Seneca, through an inflection of the gaze, but with a shift in position. His is not a point of view on the world from above, but a deliberate study of the details of nature from the position at which Seneca arrived – the self’s precise

⁵² Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 266.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 284-285.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 289.

⁵⁵ Although Foucault does not compare this *mathetic* component with a Christian theology of nature, we may assume he believes the role of the ‘world’ is there obscured and jettisoned by the governing axis of revealed truth on one side, and subjective obedience on the other; would not the individualized penitent bypass the world in his preoccupation with other-worldly truth and spiritual deliverance? Cassian, for example, would insist that the world reveals God’s providential hand – “His presence is known when we meditate on the fact that the sands of the sea are numbered by Him, that He keeps a count of the waves” (Cassian, *Conferences*, 50), in which case it “is right for us to believe, with unshaken faith, that nothing is done in this world without God” (*Ibid.*, 98). Foucault, however, would likely reply that such traces of *mathesis* are prejudiced by an interest not in the self’s place in the order of the world, but the world’s evidence of the glory of God – one gazes on the world as evidence of God’s power rather than as the visual exclamation point for one’s precise time and space in life.

placement in the world. Foucault's considerable attention to this subtle change suggests a closer kinship with its epistemic quality; if the "view from above" was something of an imaginative variation, this "view from within" nature is more immanent and more aware of its representational modalities. One experiences his specific position in the world by actively engaging with the flux of representations surging from the world through one's mind in the form of images. Nature, as it were, "comes under the mind," and the subject who wishes to know and care for himself will do so through a deliberate relation to the represented world.⁵⁶ What Foucault finds in this *parastēma* (precept) is a programmatic connection between truth and conduct that crystallizes the pairing of self-knowledge and morality uncovered under the first turn of the gaze – one's task is to interpret the images of worldly objects on the basis of how they inform the good, freedom, and reality of the subject. The finite gaze of the mind must reorganize the order of the world, "intercepting" each representation so as to "grasp its objective content."⁵⁷ The representational contingency is thus also an opportunity insofar as the world's "order" and "objectivity" are understood on the level of representations (even, one could say, intentionality), and do not imply a fixed or determinative cosmic mechanism delimiting self agency. Utilizing modes of *eidetic* and *onomastic* meditation,⁵⁸ then, the subject situates himself in a realm of finitude, yet with a soul empowered as the active, rational principle which organizes the world: "We exercise ourselves with regard to all the different representations offered by the world... in order to define, with regard to each, in what they consist, to what extent they can act on us, whether or not we depend on them or they on us."⁵⁹

The world is partner in the project of disclosing the self. And what is remarkable, in terms of Foucault's larger project, is that this initial formulation of self-exercise – of *askesis*⁶⁰ in terms of *mathesis* – is that it is a manner of *surveillance*.⁶¹ I

⁵⁶ Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 290, 293.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 291-292, 294.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 296: *Eidetic* meditation entails an exercise of verbalization, an internal saying or naming of the essence of the object displayed before our inward concentration. The aim is to "grasp the complex plenitude of the object's essential reality and the fragility of its existence in time" (*Ibid.*, 295-296). But to this emphasis on finitude is added *onomastic* meditation, an assessment of the object in terms of its value which, in so doing, exercises the soul of the beholder in an "enlarging" way. Through this evaluative work, the soul discovers "its true nature and, at the same time, its true destination... its perfect equivalence to the general reason of the world."

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 298.

⁶⁰ We are now in a better position to appreciate how Foucault defines *askesis* in the strict sense. It is the "principal axis... putting these true discourses to work, activating them, not merely in the memory or thought... but in the subject's activity, that is to say: how to become the active subject of true discourse." That is, *askesis* in terms of transforming the true discourse (the truth) into *ethos* (*Ibid.*, 416).

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 298.

gaze (through the position of my self) upon the representations of natural objects in order to survey and order them, and in so doing I constitute the truth of myself (as a free agent of organization) in conjunction with the truth of the world. The inward and outward inflection of the gaze allows the knower to return to himself by way of the world – a conversion to the self in which the exercises of *askesis* are conjoined with the interests of *mathesis*. There is no impetus for either a retreat from the world (in its material sense) or a yielding of the self before a higher, revealed truth (in the spiritual or categorical sense). Thus, it is by this position and movement of the gaze in Seneca and Aurelius, that Foucault counters the “circular” relation of knowledge and truth in the Christian conversion model.

Cassian, for his part, adopts the exercise of surveillance in a similarly internal way, but according to a different project altogether. His mill-grain and money-changer illustrations convey an interest in evaluating representations on the basis of their purity and spiritual origin.⁶² This means his exercise of surveillance holds no interest in the immanent content behind the representations, concerning itself instead with the psychical reality alone as a partner or (more likely) threat to one’s spiritual well-being.⁶³ His gaze does not cycle between self and nature, but deciphers the intrusions of sin in the mind. The motivation for meditative *askesis* is not a reciprocation between self-truth and cosmic-truth, but a renunciation of worldly intrusions in the mind of the devoted. The accelerating polarity thus unfolds in the following way: knowledge, for Seneca and Aurelius, is “spiritual” insofar as it transforms the self and organizes the world at the same time. Knowledge, for the Christian, is spiritual insofar as it treats worldly representations as a threat to the full sacrifice of the self. The internal conversion of the gaze under the immanence model locates knowledge of the world within the *telos* of the self, whereas the internal conversion of the gaze under the transcendence model passes through a lens in which a spiritual truth and subjective requirement are predetermined.

Because Stoic spiritual knowledge is never constituted in opposition to a knowing of the world, the resulting coupling of *mathesis* and *askesis* allows us to “acquire something that, precisely, instead of leading us gradually to renounce ourselves, will allow us to protect the self and to reach it.”⁶⁴ The ascetic goal of constituting a full, perfect, and complete relationship of oneself to oneself begins, in effect, by telling the truth (speaking, naming) of one’s position in the world.⁶⁵ Suffice it to say Foucault is here interested in this positional and “verbal”

⁶² See Cassian, *Conferences*, 54.

⁶³ Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 299-300.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 320.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* Foucault explains: “The *askesis* is what enables truth-telling—truth-telling addressed to the subject and also truth-telling that the subject addresses to himself—to be constituted as the subject’s way of being. The *askesis* makes truth-telling a mode of being of the subject” (*Ibid.*, 326-327).

characterization of truth, and not in the tradition of adequation or correctness that might lay claim to this era. Stoic *paraskeue*, not unlike Greek *parrhesia*, involves transforming *logos* into *ethos* in accordance with the procedures of *askesis*.⁶⁶ Any discourse of *logos* necessarily becomes a practice of *ethos* – virtuous behavior will be a way telling the truth in terms of oneself and not, as it were, telling the truth of a Revelation or Text on the basis of “the sacrifice of successive parts of oneself and the final renunciation of oneself.”⁶⁷ What is increasingly evident in this further treatment of the gaze in the Hellenistic-Roman model of conversion is that the intended spiritual transformation of the self lays a premium on the subjectivation of truth and not the objectivation of the subject in terms of Truth. The necessary interaction between an interior gaze that is also a gaze upon the world with a *telos* of enunciating or practicing “true” discourse sets in place what should have been a guard against the schismatic sacrifice of the self (and its place in the world) to a discourse that promises other-worldly salvation of self-fulfillment. The resistance that should have happened, historically speaking, is, through Foucault’s polarizing proximities, reinstated behind the concealing function of Christian transpositions.

Thus far we have seen that, having established his conception of these two rival models of conversion according to a difference between subjectivation and objectivation in their mode of relating self and truth, Foucault has identified the genesis of two competing notions of salvation which will lead to the aforementioned historical break between theology and spirituality. The objectification of the self in a true discourse already amounts to a caesura on the level of spiritual self-fulfillment. We must now consider how this transposition of self-return into self-renunciation, of self-finality on the plane of immanence into self-transcendence on the plane of immortality, is also a break which insinuates itself in a practical way into the truth-telling exercises of each model.

V. Form v. Rule: The *Parrhesiatic* Divide and the Question of Preparation

At the center of Christian *askesis* is an exercise of truth-telling in which the devoted objectifies himself in a “true discourse”: the *confession*.⁶⁸ The penitent’s confession is

⁶⁶ See Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, 14-15.

⁶⁷ Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 327. Foucault has in mind the monastic conception of decipherment: “The exercises of self-knowledge, which Christian spirituality will develop in terms of, on the basis of, and following the model of the old Stoic suspicion towards oneself, basically consisted in this decipherment of the self as a tissue of impulses of thought and of the heart, which carry the mark of evil and which may be instilled in us by the close or even internal presence of the Devil. These are exercises, then, that are far from being focused on knowledge and which, when they do focus on knowledge, focus on suspicion of the self more than on recognition of the divine” (Ibid., 422).

⁶⁸ Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 333. The confession, that is, represents “a movement of self-renunciation which proceeds by way of, and whose essential moment is, the objectification of the self in a true discourse,” Ibid..

already an acquiescence to a "pastoral" power configuration in the form of, for example, a spiritual director.⁶⁹ Writing from the point of view of a skeptical character within a later Jesuit formulation of this relationship, Dostoyevsky's diagnosis is on the mark: "When you choose an elder, you renounce your own will and yield it to him in complete submission, complete self-abnegation... The obligation involves confession to the elder by all who have submitted themselves to him, and an indissoluble bond between him and them."⁷⁰ That the subject has a "truth" to say is in keeping with the Stoic model, but the fact that this truth is "the truth about himself," predetermined by a terrific suspicion of the self right away handicaps the power of the person, offering it up to the authoritative model of salvation purveyed by the ecclesiastical institution.⁷¹ Foucault observes:

It is, I think, an absolutely crucial moment in the history of subjectivity in the West, or in the relations between subjectivity and truth, when the task and obligation of truth-telling about oneself is inserted within the procedure indispensable for salvation, within techniques of the development and transformation of the subject by himself, and within pastoral institutions... truth-telling about oneself became a condition of salvation, a fundamental principle in the subject's relationship to himself, and a necessary element in the individual's membership of a community.⁷²

Initially, there is a sense of proximity between Christian confession and the practices of listening, reading, writing, and speaking within philosophical ascesis. Both models support the subjective desire to "say the truth about oneself."⁷³ Both render truth an exercise that marks a point of communal practice, for one must respond "to the words of truth that teach me the truth and consequently help me in my salvation" with a "discourse of truth by which I open the truth of my own soul to the other, to others."⁷⁴ The polarizing difference, however, is that Stoic *meditatio* are instruments practiced so that one may become the subject *of* truth, not subject *to* truth. The confessor's speech assumes the authority of a more original, revelatory voice (that of the divine), in which case it is neither dynamic nor originating, but dutiful and condemning. Truth-telling, within the pastoral, does not aim at liberating the subject as a site of moral *logos* and *praxis*, but at preparing the subject for a final liberation from the bondage of the self. Here all "truths" of the self are adjudicated on the basis of divine "Truth." By contrast, *parrhesia* in the Stoic sense, even

⁶⁹ See also Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, chapters 5-7.

⁷⁰ Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, translated by Constance Garnett (New York: Penguin Books, 1980), 38-39.

⁷¹ Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 363-364.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 364.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 362.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 391.

in its preoccupation with lexical rules (*lexis*), intends a certain moral *libertas*: “The truth, passing from one to the other in *parrhesia*, seals, ensures, and guarantees the other’s autonomy.”⁷⁵ Such truth is by definition critical but stabilizes self-examination as a mode of conversion.

Relatedly, there is also a difference in terms of the placement of the primary obligation to truth in the relationships that support and sustain *parrhesia*. Under the Hellenistic-Roman model, the speech which guides the subject toward the enunciation of the truth of himself originates on the side of the master or counselor, one who exhibits the “coincidence between belief and truth... in a *verbal activity*.”⁷⁶ There is a pedagogical concern to transmit a truth that will endow the subject with the “aptitudes, capabilities, knowledges” requisite for practicing a *logos* in the *ethos* of one’s life; and there is a psychological concern to help the subject modify his mode of being. Under what comes to be the Christian “psychagogical” practice, it is the soul of the guided subject who’s very potential to be guided depends on “his enunciation of a true discourse about himself.” The very definition of Christian confession thus means that “the subject of enunciation must be the referent of the utterance.”⁷⁷ This of course assumes a *parrhesiastes* as interlocutor (a priest, elder), but Foucault would likely question the designation of the term for a pastoral power structure in which the “critical” and ethical activity of spoken truth is verified on the basis of divine revelation and spiritual persuasion, and not a coincidence of belief and truth appropriate to the frank “improvement” of the subject in/for this world and this body.⁷⁸

Pursuant to its interest in interrogating the self, Foucault admits that Christianity was receptive to the Stoic emphasis on supporting truth-telling through regimes of *abstinence* and *tests* that exercise *preparation*. But the reception happens by way of a pointed redeployment. For Seneca, such exercises entailed the submission of the self to a *forma* (form)⁷⁹ – an art of living “which enables the individual to have the appropriate attitude [towards] himself and the events of his life: sufficiently detached to be able to bear misfortune when it arises.” The practice of tests, to be sure, always involves “a certain questioning of the self by the self” in terms of knowing what you are capable of; “the whole of life must become a test.” In this sense, tests must affect a general attitude towards reality.⁸⁰ Indeed, life must be “recognized, thought, lived, and practiced as a constant test.” The idea is that the

⁷⁵ Ibid., 379.

⁷⁶ Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, 14.

⁷⁷ Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 407-409. For an indication of Foucault’s later analysis of Christian *parrhesia* see Ibid., 411 n30.

⁷⁸ See also Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, 19-20.

⁷⁹ Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 424.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 429-431. See also, in this context, his comments concerning practices of *meletan* and *gumnazein*, as well as his treatment of Stoic *memory* exercises, Ibid., 425-426; 480-484.

constancy of "preparation" resulting from tests becomes, in effect, a way of caring for oneself by educating oneself.⁸¹ For Christianity, by contrast, the *tekhnē* of abstinence and tests were the means by which the subject submitted not to a *forma*, but a *regula vitae* (rule of life). One does not render life a work of constant preparation, but tests the truth and progress of his obedience so as to prepare for ultimate salvation and immortality. Here, then, is another point of proximity between models of conversion in which the definitive difference lies in their opposing aims for the self. Foucault's historical observation that "there is both a transposition of these questions and, at the same time, a completely different system in both theory and practice" again substantiates his more systematic interest in advancing the immanent spirituality by negatively appraising the transcendent spirituality that transposes it.⁸²

At the summit of this sustained appreciation of the Hellenistic-Roman conversion model by means of charting its concealment in that of Christian spirituality is the more global comparison of two *ascetic systems*. In Christian asceticism, "the essential function... is to determine and order the necessary renunciations leading up to the ultimate point of self-renunciation."⁸³ Foucault, of course, has hinted at this definitive quality all along. However, by letting it stand as a culminating point he wagers that his students are now in a position to fully appreciate the heresy that *it* (and not the immanent model of conversion) harbors. The heresy is not simply the abiding course of self-renunciation. It is committed by virtue of the methodical, intentional, untiring determination of this course on the practical basis of terms uprooted from their pagan moorings. The heresy is that Christian conversion, and the discourse of spirituality surrounding it, results in an ascetics without aesthetics – there can be no aesthetic of the self (in this world) because the self's transcendence consists in its own willful elimination.

In this way the resistance Foucault wants to rehabilitate for the model of immanent conversion offers 'relief' for today's subjects by standing out in sharp relief against the Christian heresy committed against the self. Philosophical askesis seeks the constitution of our selves insofar as "one situates oneself within or takes as the correlate of oneself, a world that is perceived, recognized, and practiced as a test."⁸⁴ The immanent position of the self, to which the self returns through conversion, is thus a site of *ascetic* practice insofar as the subjected is empowered to approach himself as an *aesthetic* "work." Ascetic rigor is inspired by aesthetic freedom. The immanent world (*bios*) does not condemn the subject nor demand that he make himself a sacrifice. Rather, we discover, experience, and transform ourselves on the basis of the world, thereby advancing toward an "aim or salvation" that is

⁸¹ Ibid., 437-439.

⁸² Ibid., 446-447.

⁸³ Ibid., 485.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 485-486.

“our own perfection”⁸⁵ here, now, regardless of the narrative social, political, and religious power structures cast on us. This is how our art of living must consist in an ongoing conversion: “Ultimately I would say, in a word: one lives ‘for oneself.’ One lives with the relationship to one’s self as the fundamental project of existence, the ontological support which must justify, found, and command all the techniques of existence.”⁸⁶

If my reading is correct, Foucault’s interest in furnishing an art of living for today’s subjects, a spiritual ethic of self-constitution and self-care, is attained by passing his own aesthetic-ascetic turn through its original course in Antiquity. The integrity of this turn, however, depends on a deliberate and persistent detour from the Christian conceptions of salvation and conversion which otherwise tend toward the destruction (or at best, deferral) of the self. Initially, this detour is approached as a prerequisite means of forestalling our tendency to import the traditional Thomistic schema of faith and salvation into any conception of spirituality and conversion. Programmatically, the detour is substantiated and sustained by presenting the *telos* and *praxis* of Hellenistic-Roman conversion in contrast to the Christian models that subsume and conceal it. If we today are to gain any resources or inspiration from the Ancient care of the self we must first shield its orthodoxy from the Christian heresies of self-objectivation.

I expect scholars of early Christian asceticism may take issue with Foucault on this point, and such a dialogue would be welcome. For the moment, however, I do not want to lose sight of the broader trajectory of Foucault’s aesthetic/ascetic concern. Indeed, it is as though Foucault intends that his performance of historical advocacy in effect catalyze our contemporary spiritual resistance. By tracking with his historical-empirical work we are equipped to join him in the application of his systematic interest. It is fair to say his work on these matters is motivated by a desire to enrich the field of resistance amid those discourses and power structures organizing the larger social-political sphere. The critical scope of his historical study, that is, is performed in the service of a rehabilitation of the care of the self in the present. I believe this itinerary is all the more pronounced in the final sections of his *Fearless Speech*, where Foucault defends his “genealogy of the critical attitude in Western philosophy” as an inroad to contemporary problems and not as a detour in “historical idealism.”⁸⁷ Pastoral power and transcendent salvation may well not be “the” central obstacles to immanent “conversion” today, and we are equipped with a versatile understanding of aesthetic-asceticism that should allow us to examine the viability or paralysis of self-subjectivization under discourses ranging from technology and bio-power to capitalism, globalization, science, and security. To carry the

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 486-487.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 448.

⁸⁷ Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, 170-171.

question of "conversion" forward into the historical present is, as we have learned to do with his other genealogical and archaeological thematics, a matter of placing Foucault in critical dialogue with the ideas and practitioners of other disciplines.

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