Foucault Studies

RESPONSE

Discipline and Punish: Some Corrections to Boyle

James I. Porter, University of California, Irvine

This article has two aims: to bring out the numerous misprisions of Foucault contained in a recent polemical piece by a contributor to this journal, and then to restate the case for reading Foucault as part of the extended Enlightenment reception of classical antiquity rather than as one of its critics.

> ...[A] problem: Is one to involve oneself in polemics and reply to each of these distortions and, consequently, lay down the law to readers, which I find repugnant, or leave the book to be distorted to the point at which it becomes a caricature of itself, which I find equally repugnant?[1]

> Foucault's originality among the great thinkers of our century lay in his refusal to convert our finitude into the basis for new certainties.[2]

A reader happening upon Brendan Boyle's rather jarring critique of two articles of mine now some seven years old might feel a mild jolt of a surprise.[3] There is more than a whiff of crisis in his writing, as if a clutch of disciplines were on the brink of collapse (classical studies, philosophy, theory)—though Foucault is well established, his writings keep appearing in posthumous and plentiful abundance, and the world meanwhile has moved on to other things. Why defend the fort now? Indeed, so many charges are massed together by Boyle and with such a heady vehemence that an unsuspecting reader might

---

[1] Michel Foucault, *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977-1984*, edited by L. D. Kritzman (New York: Routledge, 1988), 52.

[2] Paul Veyne, "The Final Foucault and His Ethics," translated by Catherine Porter and Arnold I. Davidson, *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 20, no.1 (1993), 5.

[3] Brendan Boyle, "Foucault Among the Classicists, Again," *Foucault Studies*, no. 13 (2012), 138-56; James I. Porter, "Foucault's Ascetic Ancients," *Phoenix*, vol. 59, no. 2 (2005, Special issue: "Interrogating Theory—Critiquing Practice: The Subject of Interpretation," edited by W. Batstone), 121-32; James I. Porter, "Foucault's Antiquity," in Charles Martindale and Richard Thomas (eds.) *Classics and the Uses of Reception* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006), 168-79.

imagine that Foucault had indeed been robbed in his grave, while a more savvy reader would recognize that the charges are insubstantial and would guess that there was some ulterior motive lurking behind this tempest in a teapot. Taking nearly twenty pages to re-but me and the classicists "again," Boyle worries that classicists have lost sight of Foucault's most basic aims, thereby repeating a lament first voiced by Arnold Davidson in 1994.[4] This is all very odd: Foucault's legacy is fairly well sorted out in classics, where he is already somewhat passé, yet Boyle seems intent on reliving the culture wars of the nineties—or else on fashioning himself after one of his mentors from graduate school.

Normally, such an attack wouldn't warrant a reply, but here the case is different. In his zeal to set the record straight, Boyle does a great disservice to scholarship. He privileges distortion, misstatement, and innuendo over careful scholarship and criticism; he elevates uncritical orthodoxy over critical dissent; he privileges sham certainty over sensitivity to subtler dynamics; and, in his defense of philology against its purported abuses by philo-logists, he promotes narrow *Wortphilologie* (pointless terminological disputes) over deeper philosophical and historical argument—a surprisingly retrograde choice, since the field of classics has left this dated method trailing in the dust for several decades now. Boyle's mis-representation of Foucault is so basic and so widespread that it does have a serious bearing, not on my two articles from seven years ago but on the field of Foucault studies. Though legitimate criticism is a crucial part of scholarly discourse, one would expect such criticism to be made on the basis of a good grasp of the primary and secondary materials, above all where the complex and difficult thought of a thinker like Foucault is in question. We all struggle to make sense of Foucault. Straightjacketing his meaning into narrow catechisms and focusing on minutiae merely trivializes his achievement. For all of these reasons, and given the public nature of his charges, which appear in an online journal freely accessible to anyone and indexed by Google, and one of the main venues for Foucault scholarship today at that, a reply is warranted. Foucault deserves better.

<div align="center">***</div>

At the heart of Boyle's polemic lies a concern to protect Foucault from the criticism voiced by Hadot and others that Foucault's project on the ancient self was distorted by its insistence on reading an aesthetic dimension into ancient subjectivities.[5] *Self-fashioning* smacks too much of the aesthetics of the self for Boyle's tastes. Therefore he must find a way to tarnish the term and distance it from Foucault's intentions. This he does by gene-rating a false worry, namely whether "self-fashioning," "life as a work of art," and "the culture of the self" play a defining role in Foucault's final project. For good measure, he throws in a second skeptical worry, namely whether Foucault held anything like the view

---

[4] Arnold I. Davidson, "Ethics as Ascetics: Foucault, the History of Ethics, and Ancient Thought," in *Fou-cault and the Writing of History*, edited by Jan Goldstein (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1994), 63-80.

[5] Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, edited by Arnold I. Davidson (Malden: Blackwell, 1995), 211; Boyle, "Foucault Among the Classicists, Again," 147.

that history involves radical contingency. These are mere quibbles. Each of the claims under scrutiny is widely accepted by all Foucault scholars known to me other than Boyle. Foucault's commitment to an aesthetic view of subject formation cannot be eschewed by changing the terms of the debate, while the contingency of history is the premise that allows subjects to modify their identities at will, following criteria that are both aesthetic and ethical.

A second issue concerns Boyle's distortion of my critique of theorists who claim to be following Foucault, theorists who advocate aesthetic self-fashioning either after or *à la* Foucault: Boyle tries to conflate me with the very theorists I am myself critiquing—a palpable polemical ploy that does nothing to dissipate what I call the undeniable if now slowly fading "Foucault-effect" in the Academy. Third, in his attempt to legislate what Foucault can only ever have meant, Boyle assumes that Foucault's late thought is mono-lithic, never evolving, written in stone, and unimpeachable. It is none of these things, and it is a hindrance to understanding Foucault to assume otherwise. Fourth, legitimate criticism of Foucault includes historicizing Foucault's own contingency, in line with Foucault's own dictates and desiderata. Foucault's theory about antiquity interestingly betrays traits that are best explained by his inheritance of post-Enlightenment classicism. To make such an analysis is not proof of a personal tastes ("Porter does not like Foucault's project"). Among mature scholars, criticism has other, higher functions than exhibiting private wants and grudges, though Boyle has yet to learn this lesson. Lastly, a truly substantive engagement with my essays would have reckoned with their second major theme, namely that Fou-cault's ancients are proto-Christians, and that this historical trajectory in fact captures the *telos* of his genealogy of the modern subject. In this respect too Foucault is following abundant eighteenth- and nineteenth-century precedents in Europe, from the Romantics onward.

Putting Foucault into historical perspective is the next inevitable step towards making sense of his thought. Foucault's influence in the Academy is already less imme-diate than it was two decades ago. He is becoming less of a catalyst surrounded by acolytes and increasingly an object of scholarship (as the present journal illustrates), a feature of the larger historical landscape, and indeed a specimen of the classical tradition to which he in fact belongs—hence subject to a different set of inquiries, such as reception studies in classics, intellectual history, disciplinary studies, and the like. It is therefore safe to predict that dispassionate analysis, or at least rhetoric that is less invested on all sides, will soon replace overheated polemics in studies of Foucault. But now to the individual arguments.

Words, Words, Words
Self-fashioning vs. self-care?
Boyle complains that "self-fashioning" is an objectionable way of rendering Foucault's final inquiry into the "care of the self" because the term "self-fashioning" does not appear in

either *The History of Sexuality* or in *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*.[6] Obviously, the term *self-fashioning* is absent from the French originals (my point of reference throughout). If it is absent in the English versions, this merely reflects the translators' choices. But this is of little moment. What *does* matter is whether there is any substantive distinction in Foucault's mind between what the two expressions represent, and whether they capture his own idea of his project. And here the answer is plain: there is no reason to doubt the equivalence of these expressions, which for this same reason are universally accepted in the secondary literature on Foucault.

Foucault has dozens of ways of referring to the processes of self-constitution in antiquity, early and late.[7] All of these are Foucault's equivalents for *epimeleia heautou*, *cura sui*, *technē tou biou* (art of life) and the processes they entail. Self-modification, self-transformation, self-displacement, the self's rendering itself other than itself, working on itself, elaborating itself, progressively, etc., *are* a form of self-fashioning and a form of self-care, in any language, which explains why the translator of *The History of Sexuality* vol. 2 saw fit to render *se constituer* with "to fashion himself"[8] and why Dreyfus and Rabinow opted to render *pratique de soi* with "self-forming activity."[9] One can quibble all day long about the term *self-fashioning* as a way of capturing these various expressions and their underlying idea. Recourse to a simple stipulation, and one that is moreover conventionally accepted among scholars in the English-speaking world, nips all such futile debate in the bud.

Not so for Boyle, who appeals to examples within Anglophone scholarship that have managed to produce "critical but sympathetic" readings of Foucault without, apparently, misstating his objectives or misrendering his terminology: for instance, work by David Hal-

---

[6] "Why, then, would Porter think that Foucault's project is a project of "self-fashioning," given the overwhelming evidence to the contrary?" (141)

[7] "Le sujet se modifie, se transforme, se déplace, devienne ... autre que lui-même" in a "travail de soi sur soi, une elaboration de soi sur soi, un transformation progressive de soi sur soi" "*Bildung*," "*Selbstbildung*" [German for "self-fashioning"]. (Michel Foucault, *L'Herméneutique du sujet: Cours au Collège de France, 1981-1982*, edited by Frederic Gros (Paris: Gallimard/Seuil, 2001), 17 [delivered in 1982, published in 2001]); or, if we consult *L'Histoire de la sexualité*, vol. 3 [1984]: "techniques d'existence," "maîtrise du sujet," "style d'activité [du sujet]," "intensification du rapport à soi par lequel on se constitue comme sujet de ses actes," "*Erwachsenerziehung*," "culture de soi," "se faire culte de soi," "souci de soi," "un stylistique de l'existence," (17; 48; 49; 55; 57; 84; 89; 175) and what in the previous volume (vol. 2) he referred to as "arts de l'existence" and "techniques de soi" according to which individuals "cherchent à transformer eux-mêmes, à se modifier dans leur être singulier, et à faire de leur vie un ouvre qui porte certaines valeurs esthétiques et réponde à certains critères de style." (*L'Histoire de la sexualité vol. 2*, 16-17: and in translation, *The Use of Pleasure: Volume 2 of The History of Sexuality*, translated by Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1985), 10-11).

[8] Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 251.

[9] "...which I call the self-forming activity [*pratique de soi*] or *l'ascétisme—asceticism* in a very broad sense." (Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics," 265)

perin, Martha Nussbaum, and Paul Allen Miller.[10] But his appeal is self-vitiating: each of these scholars accepts the equivalence that Boyle would deny.[11] Has he bothered to read them? Their views are echoed elsewhere across the world in publications on Foucault, both among classicists and non-classicists, and the examples can be multiplied *ad nauseam*.[12] Indeed, one need look no further than the editors of the very journal who found Boyle's piece worth printing.[13]

Obviously, by reaffirming that Foucault's project was centrally concerned with self-fashioning I was saying nothing new, and nothing controversial. Indeed, Foucault confirms the claim himself when, in *The Use of Pleasure,* right after the quotes given above, he expands on the history of the terms and ideas he has just *adopted* (and in no way coined)—namely, "these aesthetics of existence and these technologies of the self": "*It has been a long time now since Burckhardt pointed out their significance for the epoch of the Renaissance*, but their perpetuation, their history, and their development do not end there." Then comes a footnote:

> It is not quite correct to imply that since Burckhardt the study of these arts and this aesthetics of existence has been completely neglected. One thinks of Benjamin's study on Baudelaire. There is also an interesting analysis in Stephen Greenblatt's recent book, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980).[14]

Elsewhere, Foucault happily endorses the "permanent creation of ourselves in our autonomy,"[15] sometimes adding "as a work of art."[16] There is no difference between self-fashioning and self-creation, self-transformation, self-elaboration, and so on—not in Fou-

---

[10] Boyle, 138.

[11] Paul A. Miller, "The Art of Self-Fashioning, or Foucault on Plato and Derrida," *Foucault Studies,* no.2 (May, 2005), passim; Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2009), xi: "*Foucault's otherwise illuminating writing on self-fashioning in the Hellenistic period*" (*my emphasis*); David Halperin, *What Do Gay Men Want?: An Essay on Sex, Risk, and Subjectivity* (Ann Arbor: Michigan UP, 2007), 7: "*Foucault, then, was concerned almost entirely with the techniques of self-fashioning.*" (*my emphasis*)

[12] E.g., Rabinow, Introduction to *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, xxiii (*self-fashioning* names Foucault's general concerns in his unfinished genealogical project); David Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (New York: Oxford UP, 1995), *passim*; Nehamas, *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault* (Berkeley: UC Press, 1998), 104, 179, 183.

[13] See Sverre Raffnsøe, Alan Rosenberg, Alain Beaulieu, Sam Binkley, Jens Erik Kristensen, Sven Opitz, Chloë Taylor and Ditte Vilstrup Holm, "Editorial," *Foucault Studies,* no. 9, (September, 2010), 3: "*Foucault shows that we are simultaneously disciplined and self-fashioning selves.*"

[14] Foucault, *History of Sexuality Vol.2*, 11. (*appears in an asterisked note*). He is referring to Jacob Burckhardt, *Die Cultur der Renaissance in Italien: Ein Versuch* (Basel, 1860).

[15] Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" in *The Foucault Reader*, edited by Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon). 44.

[16] Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics," in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth,* 262.

cault's mind at least, and not in any of his reasonable readership. Boyle's insistence that to equate self-fashioning with self-care is to offend Foucault's intentions is simply bizarre. If he wishes to insist on the criticism, he should confront not the classicists again, but the majority of theorists who concern themselves with Foucault. But first of all, he should confront Foucault himself. And finally, he should confront himself: "'*self-fashioning*' *never departs from the practice Foucault took it to be*. It never, that is, becomes anything other than what Foucault describes as *epimeleia heautou*."[17]

Life as a Work of Art
Boyle's philological quibbles are a smoke screen. Behind them lies another level of objection: he finds *self-fashioning* offensive because it recalls too vividly the aesthetic dimensions of Foucault's project, which at times has been critiqued as a form of aestheticism. The latter critique about aestheticism may be off-base, but the fact that Foucault stands in a long tradition of inquiry into the aesthetics of the self ought to be beyond dispute. Foucault tells us as much himself when he voluntarily inserts himself into the Burckhardtian tradition of the self, state, and society as a "work of art."[18] Boyle's argument that such formulations as "life as a work of art" are "entirely absent from *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, and thus make for rather scanty evidence with which to reproach Foucault,"[19] is both false and specious. The Collège de France lectures date from 1981-2, while the interview just cited ("On the Genealogy of Ethics") dates from April 1983. To take the former as Foucault's last and canonical word is merely an act of desperation, one that is moreover factually wrong. In the Collège lectures, Foucault *does* use the formulation, as in: "*Making one's life the object of a technē—a beautiful and good work...*,"[20] while he also has at his disposal a long list of equivalents ("art/technique of living/life/existence," "art(s) of the (care of the) self," "aesthetics of the self," "working on oneself," etc.). As the editorial note (n.14) to page 424 observes, once Foucault lighted on the idea of "life as a work of art" and its underlying significance, he developed it with increasing tenacity over the next two years—further attesting to the dynamic and evolving nature of his thought, which tended to shift its center or centers of gravity over time (in this case, rather subtly, to be sure). [21]

Boyle[22] finds the evidence cited for claims about the prominence of the aesthetics of self-fashioning in Foucault wanting, but he simply hasn't read closely enough.[23] The same interview by Foucault from 1983 has all the evidence one could wish to have, all of it echo-

---

[17] Boyle, 142n.11; *my emphasis.*
[18] See at n.14 above.
[19] Boyle, 148.
[20] Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981-82*, edited by Frédéric Gros, translated by Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave, 2005), 424; *my emphasis*.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Boyle, 140.
[23] See Porter, "Foucault's Antiquity", 169 n.3 (citing, Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics").

ing the language of the 1981-2 lectures. Perhaps the following would suffice: "the principal target of this kind of ethics [in antiquity] was an *aesthetic* one," viz., "the will *to live a beautiful life*," "an aesthetics of existence"; or, "*the principal work of art* which one must take care of... is *oneself, one's life, one's existence*," "there is only one practical consequence: we have to create ourselves *as a work of art*," etc.[24] If that isn't sufficient, why not consider the later Collège lectures on *parrhesia* from 1983-4, entitled *The Courage of the Truth*? There we read statements like the following:

> What I would like to recover is how truth-telling [from Socrates onward in antiquity] interacted with the principle of existence *as an oeuvre to be fashioned in all its possible perfection*, how the care of the self ... was governed by *the principle of a brilliant and memorable existence ...* [and] how *the objective of a beautiful existence* and the task of giving an account of oneself in the game of truth were combined." [25]

Foucault goes on to gloss this ensemble of concerns as "the question of the true life/*aesthetics of existence.*"[26] I could go on listing such testimonies from Foucault, but why take up the space? It seems incredible that one should have to argue for such manifestly indisputable and universally accepted facts about Foucault's philosophy.

Is Less More?

One more correction is needed. Boyle insists that Foucault's notion of self-fashioning/ cultivation/care of the self is not to be confused with an additive process; Foucault only and "always" has in mind a subtraction: "When Foucault provocatively suggests making human life, like a lamp or a house, into a work of art, he has in mind an artistic practice ordered around paring-away."[27] Foucault may have this "in mind" but where does he say so? On this Boyle is silent. And rightly so, for two reasons. First, try to make a lamp or a house by paring stuff away. The very idea is incoherent. Such objects are constructed of multiple parts. Indeed, they are "multidimensional" objects representing a multiplicity of practices and relationships, as Rabinow puts it in his comment on this very image from Foucault,[28] or as Foucault puts it, they represent an "interplay" of factors, from (on the pagan side) *appropriations*, *additions*, and *unifications* of disparate, "heterogeneous" elements fashioned into an "*assimilative*" unity—the relevant metaphors here are *incorporation* and honey-*gathering* bees, both from Seneca—to (on the side tending towards Christianity)

---

[24] Ibid., 254, 255, 271, 262.

[25] Michel Foucault, [*The Courage of the Truth*] *The Government of Self and Others II; Lectures at the Collège de France, 1983-1984*, edited by Frédéric Gros, translated by Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave, 2011), 163.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Boyle, 149.

[28] Michel Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth. The Essential Works of Michel Foucault, 1954-1984, v. I*, edited by Paul Rabinow (New York: The New Press, 1997), xxxi.

abstentions and restrictions.[29] Second, if Boyle fails to cite Foucault here by chapter and verse it is because Foucault makes no such claims, though Hadot does. That is why Boyle quickly slides from "Foucault" to "both Foucault and Hadot":

> In so doing [viz., in holding this view of self-constituting as self-paring], [Foucault] shows himself quite close to Hadot. That is, for both [*sic*] Foucault and Hadot the governing artistic practice for transforming a human life into a work of art is something like sculpture, not painting. It is by paring-away, reducing, and eliminating (all sculptural processes) that the human life becomes an 'art object,' and not, as Porter implicitly suggests, by adding, developing, and expressing.[30]

Nothing in Foucault is given to substantiate this claim.

Two comments: First, Foucault's idea of subjectivity in antiquity involves a rich set of multidimensional practices. To equate this complex fabric to a process of subtraction alone is extremely reductive. Pagan practices can be assimilative and additive, as we saw ("*afin d'unifier cent éléments divers* comme l'addition fait, *de nombres isolés, un nombre unique*"),[31] while renunciation, abstention, self-mortification, and privation increasingly characterize *Christian* subjectivity for Foucault. Nor does Foucault anywhere adduce the Plotinian example or compare the self to a sculptural work of art. Lastly, I never claimed that Foucault understood ancient techniques of the self to be additive *or* subtractive. What I said was that Foucault's history of sexuality "reveals the history of the emergence of the ascetic, self-disciplining Subject, a Subject that results from the (self-)imposition of a 'style,' one that entails tremendous *constraints, abnegations, denials, and abstentions*, what Foucault calls 'techniques of the self'."[32] Why does Boyle insist on this distortion? The answer lies in the nature of his polemics, which issues broad critiques buttressed by hedged references (in this case, references to Hadot, F. Gros (which proves irrelevant upon inspection), and a "suggestion" by Foucault in "What is Enlightenment?" but with no textual evidence to back this up). Which takes me to my second point.

The reason for the roundabout nature of these claims—the reason, that is, why they fail to connect up with hard evidence either in Foucault or in my own articles—is their derived nature. They are an (unattributed) reenactment of an argument made by Arnold Davidson in his essay, "Ethics as Ascetics" (1994), the essay in whose shadow Boyle, all but eclipsed, constructs his own, "again."[33] The argument chosen by Boyle ill-suits Foucault because it was never meant to do so in the first place. In his own essay, Davidson introduced

---

[29] Ibid., "Self Writing," esp. 213-214, 221; *my emphasis.*

[30] Boyle, 149.

[31] Foucault, "L'ecriture de soi," *Corps écrit*, no. 5 (Feburary, 1983), 12, or in translation at *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, 213 (where "is formed of" is meant to render "comme l'addition fait"). "Adding" appears further up the same page. The original language is from Seneca.

[32] Porter. "Foucault's Antiquity," 173; cf. 174.

[33] Boyle, 138.

the contrast between self-fashioning as posing or posturing (in the way of a dramatic character) with that of the sculptural model, which derives from Plotinus.[34] The example of Plotinus is, however, not given by Foucault; it is *Hadot's*.[35] Davidson was, in fact *contrasting* Hadot's *superior* conception of self-constitution with Foucault's, against which Davidson was taking a somewhat critical stance, moved by the very sorts of embarrassment that F. Gros was seeking to palliate in his own postscript to Foucault's lectures. Davidson writes, "This [sc., the Plotinian, sculptural and subtractive model adduced by Hadot] is a kind of interiorization that aims at transcendence, and *if Foucault's interpretation of ancient ethics seems sometimes to border on an estheticization of the self*, *Hadot's interpretation insists on the divinization of the self*" *via* a "dilation of the self beyond itself," resulting in "that cosmic consciousness in which one sees the world 'from above'"[36]—a view that Davidson greatly prefers.[37] Hadot may have the better of this argument, but that was not relevant to my own essay, which is concerned to show how Foucault constructs his view of ancient subjectivity on a model of prohibitions, in stark contrast to his own dictates in vol. 1 of *The History of Sexuality*.[38] When we come back to Boyle we now see more clearly what is involved. A critique of Foucault by Davidson is here being conflated with a view that Foucault *allegedly* held, which then is used to tar another critical reading of Foucault (my own)—or rather, is used to tar it *by implication*, since I never claimed that self-care or self-fashioning was a matter of *adding* to the self. But that is of little moment, for all Boyle says is that this is what I "*implicitly* suggest[ed]," and from there the author feels emboldened to turn an implication into a fervid intention: "Porter is *keen* to foist upon Foucault"—and also, by implication, upon Hadot (though I take no positions on Hadot in this regard)—the view of "transformation-by-addition." Interestingly, the view that Boyle says Foucault and Hadot share —in contradistinction to Davidson, his source, who was clear about the difference between the two philosophers—is "their picture of *epimeleia* as the *imposition* of order on the soul."[39] And imposition (like "dilation") is not a kind of addition? The only real addition going on here is happening on the level of polemics, where Foucault and Porter are being supplied with claims that neither of them made, so that Porter can appear to be contradicting a version of Foucault who never existed. This is questionable scholarship in the harness of polemics, again.

Culture of the Self vs. Care of the Self?
Another misguided attempt to split hairs where there are none to split is in Boyle's in-

---

[34] Davidson, "Ethics as Ascetics," 138.

[35] Ibid., n. 66.

[36] Ibid., 139.

[37] Cf. also Davidson's introduction to Hadot's *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 24-25: "Foucault made no place for that cosmic consciousness."

[38] Ibid.

[39] Boyle, 149.

sistence (couched as expert reassurance) that we should "remember, though, that Foucault is not interested, primarily, in *culture de soi*. He is interested in *souci de soi*"—as "the subtitle of the third volume of *The History of Sexuality* or virtually any page of *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*" will show.[40] The remark is again unfounded, no matter how one understands it (*any* page? *virtually* any page?). The equivalence of the two terms *culture de soi* and *souci de soi* is abundantly attested in *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*.[41] As for vol. 3 of *L'Histoire de la sexualité*, chapter 2 is simply entitled "La *culture* de soi," and Pierre Hadot's famous critique of Foucault in his *Philosophy as a Way of Life* is entitled "Reflections on the Idea of the '*Cultivation* of the Self'" (French original: "Réflexions sur la notion du '*culture* de soi'").[42] Evidently Hadot felt that Foucault's central "idea" was not what Boyle singles out.[43] *Pace* Boyle, *no* distinction between the two expressions is made by Foucault, because culture of the self just is care of the self for Foucault. Both terms can render *l'art de l'existence*, *technē biou*, *epimeleia heautou*, etc.[44] Probably the best way to distinguish the terms if one wishes to do so (though Foucault is never militant about such axiomatic definitions) is to say that *souci de soi* is the more general phenomenon, and, in a narrow sense, the prior one (under the rubric of Platonic *epimeleia*, though it has later avatars in the same tradition), while *culture de soi* is what effloresces as the intensified, "golden-age" expression of *souci de soi* at Rome, as a genuine culture of the self, *en route* to Christian practices of the self.[45] To claim, as Boyle does, that Foucault is interested, "primarily" or otherwise, in the former but not the latter is nonsense. Quite the contrary, it is this very "explosion" and "generalization" of practices of the self, made coextensive with an individual's life in the form of a cultivation/culture of the self, that is of *paramount* interest to Foucault, for it defines the historical arc of his project.[46]

The Contingency of History

One of my critiques of Foucault was that his conception of the subject and of self-fashioning is awarded an overly ambitious and not always coherent historical job to perform—namely, the task of explaining

---

[40] Ibid., 141.

[41] Compare, at random, Foucault, *L'Herméneutique du sujet*, 14 (where these two expressions are used interchangeably), 32 (I will quote the English, 30: "the period of the golden age of the culture of the self [*culture de soi*], of the *cultivation of oneself* [*cultivation de soi-même*], of the *care of oneself* [*souci de soi-même*], which we can place in the first two centuries A.D.," on which see also ibid., 502n.21 (English, 548n.21). 117, 172-4, 427, 477, etc., where *culture de soi* is used, likewise often equivalently for *souci de soi-même*; Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth,* 232 ("the culture of the care of the self"), 234-5 (care of the self as cultivation of the self), 277-278.

[42] Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 206-213.

[43] Hadot's translator, Arnold Davidson, glosses Hadot's critique as one that concerns "the *care* of the self," without fussing over the difference in terminology. (Hadot, 24)

[44] Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité, vol. 3; Le Souci de soi* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984), 57-65.

[45] Cf. ibid., 57-58.

[46] Foucault, *L'Herméneutique du sujet,* 83-4; Foucault, *L'Histoire de la sexualité, vol. 3*, 59.

> pagan and postmodern subjectivities; the contingency of all history; historical change, conceived as rupture (by claiming that contingency somehow releases subjects from necessity); the artfulness of identity (which leaves wide open the question of how to decide what kind or genre of art identity is meant to embody); the history of sexuality and the history of subjectivity (while often leaving uncertain which of these two histories is in focus at any given moment); and so on.[47]

That Foucault actually makes such claims on behalf of his project was, I thought, as uncontroversial as labeling his project of self-care and self-cultivation one of self-fashioning. Yet Boyle finds these claims of mine incredible, including the least controversial claims of all: "the contingency of *all* history?" he writes, as if astonished to hear this for the first time. Perhaps he should read more of Foucault. Compare "What is Enlightenment?," where Foucault recommends "a historical investigation into the events that have led us to constitute ourselves," a genealogical analysis that "will separate out, from *the contingency that has made us what we are*, the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think."[48] Similar statements appear elsewhere,[49] and indeed the principle lies at the root of Foucault's final philosophy. Historical contingency is the premise of self-transformation: it provides the grounds for radical ruptures within human experience.[50] Of course, such a view dates Foucault's own theory as itself a product of a historical epoch—that of the Enlightenment and then an extension of modernism (on his own reckoning)[51]—which is to say, it shows Foucault's theory to be *itself* subject to historical contingency. And if Boyle were to read around a bit more, he would once again find himself caught out by the scholarly community, which echoes Foucault while roundly contradicting himself, e.g. Jan Goldstein: "In keeping with *Foucault's own genealogical dictum about the radical contingency of history*, ..."[52] Is there really anything to discuss here? If one has to defend even the most elementary of universally accepted facts about Foucault's positions, then advanced scholar-

---

[47] Porter, "Foucault's Antiquity", 169.

[48] Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?," 46.

[49] E.g., Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, 139-140: "We have to dig deeply to show *how things have been historically contingent*, for such and such reason *intelligible but not necessary*. We must make the intelligible appear against a background of emptiness and deny its necessity." (Ibid., 154)

[50] See Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?," 39.

[51] Ibid., 39; 43.

[52] Jan Goldstein, *Console and Classify: The French Psychiatric Profession in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987), 411; Further Gutting, "Introduction to Michel Foucault: A User's Manual" in Gary Gutting (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006), 10; Todd May, "Foucault's Relation to Phenomenology," in *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*, 300; Alexander Nehamas, *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault* (Berkeley: California UP, 1998), 169-70; Colin Koopman," Foucault Across the Disciplines: Introductory Notes on Contingency in Critical Inquiry," *History of the Human Sciences* vol. 24, no. 4 (2011), 5: "This is now a classic theme in the literature on Foucault."

ly debate can hardly ever get off the ground.

Obviously, I did not expect the criticisms that I layered into my description of Foucault's project to be uncontroversial. But Boyle seems not to care about my arguments *per se*, only about the way I characterize, or rather (on his view) mischaracterize Foucault to begin with. "Porter does not direct the reader to a place in Foucault's work in which such a claim [about the equivalence of self-fashioning and self-care and their entailments] is made. ...But one must remember, however, that this list [given in "Foucault's Antiquity,"[53]] is Porter's creation. Foucault never says anything like it. *Nor does he intimate anything similar.*"[54] This is not an argument; it is a tantrum.

Boyle is utterly wrong, and he is contradicted both by Foucault (in the late works *passim*, in addition to his essays on history and genealogy) and by Foucault's readers. It is alright for, say, Miller to use *self-fashioning* to describe Foucault's practice, but not for Porter, because Miller "never departs from the practice Foucault took it to be."[55] Criticism of fellow scholars here reveals one of its deeper aims: that of playing the part of the thought-police. But whose thought is being policed here? Suppose Foucault thought his practice described one thing when in fact it described another. What is a reader to do? And are we to imagine that Foucault was infallible whatever he thought? That he never erred about what he took his thoughts to be? Or that his thoughts were never in flux, a work in progress (which he openly acknowledged them to be),[56] obeying different demands of the moment, possibly, even—*contingent*?

But then again, *which* Foucault? Foucault's thought is like a moving target: it was constantly on the prowl, always shifting and evolving, looking for new formulations, new strategies, new ways to shape its images of history. This is one of the most exciting facts about him: he is never dull. His thought is feathery and complex. The main lines of his intellectual projects can be made out, but he was not an axiomatic thinker: he worked in rich, tangled skeins that are vulnerable to various kinds of inconsistency and criticism. Any intellectual achievement worth its salt invites challenges. Hagiography of Foucauldian scripture does him, and ourselves, a disservice. To assume otherwise is not to read Foucault. It is to establish a Foucault-catechism. And woe to the reader who strays from the sacred path! *Discipline and Punish*, indeed.[57]

Confusions: Foucault and the Foucault-effect

Foucault, I say, created a "Foucault-effect" in the Academy, which is to say he encouraged a trend that celebrated self-fashioning subjectivities in different domains (sexual, philoso-

---

[53] Porter, 169; quoted p. 189 above.

[54] Boyle, 140. (*my emphasis*)

[55] Ibid., 142n.11.

[56] E.g., Foucault, *Politics, Philosophy, Culture,* 251.

[57] "But even here, when Porter's criticism is on roughly the right track, it is formulated in a manner that cannot go uncorrected." (Boyle, 149)

phical, subaltern, etc.) whose exponents, I further suggested, beyond discovering some liberating elements in his reading of the ancients, overlooked numerous complications in Foucault's own project.[58] These spin-offs of Foucauldianism must have found something to profit by in Foucault's obsessions with antiquity: why else would they care to read about Epictetus and Augustine if their objectives were not antiquarian but were located in the present? Here, self-fashioning often comes to signify "a kind of self-creation, free from all forms of necessity and constraint."[59] But this is not how Foucault characterizes the ancient forms of self-fashioning or self-cultivation, at least not most of the time, nor is it how I described Foucault, *pace* Boyle. In "Foucault's Antiquity" I describe such techniques in the following way: "the classical model of self-production, the Greek and then Roman 'art of life' (*technē tou biou*), which is the art of 'exercising a perfect mastery over oneself' – in other words (which are Foucault's), an 'aesthetics [and 'ascetics'] of existence' freely constructed *within a system of relations of power that are enabling and constraining at one and the same time.*"[60] Further, I state, "subjects *aren't freed* by self-fashioning; *they are subjected to severe and austere constraints*, which are the conditions of their birth and existence as subjects."[61] In his rendition of my arguments about Foucault, Boyle lops off all mention of constraints and power relations that form the cadre within which subjectivity can emerge at all. Having distorted my characterization of Foucault in this way, he goes on to conflate it with my characterizations of Foucault's postmodern adoptees, as if I had conflated these myself. And finally he reduces these last characterizations to a caricature ("a 'Californian' form of narcissism") to which I am made to assent, which then boomerangs back to Foucault again: "Porter's Foucault, then, sounds very much like the interviewers' narcissist."[62] Alas, this statement does not reflect "my" Foucault or anything else I said in my articles; it is a confection of Boyle's own making. Foucault, as I read him, is not a Californian narcissist. He is, on the contrary, all too fascinated with Christian *ascetic* practices and their precursors among the pagan cultures of Greece and Rome (see below).

Foucault's Own Historical Contingency

Boyle is so intent on foisting arguments on me that I never made or intended, and on making distinctions that he does not fully control himself, that he utterly fails to grapple with the real thrust of my articles.[63] Rather than rehearse these all over again, I will simply men-

---

[58] Porter, "Foucault's Ascetic Ancients," 123.

[59] Boyle, 142.

[60] Foucault, "Foucault's Antiquity,"121. (*my emphasis*)

[61] Ibid., 125. (*my emphasis*)

[62] Boyle, 147.

[63] Symptomatically, he states that though there is "some difference in emphasis" between the two essays, "I don't think that [this] affects the argument" of his own essay (139n.3). Obviously not if one is unconcerned with the different substantive issues raised in each essay but only with a more indiscriminate kind of polemics. The present section touches on the main theme of Porter, "Foucault's Antiquity," and

tion two of my arguments that are more relevant to Boyle's problematic understanding of Foucault, in quick succession. The first has to do with contextualizing—historicizing—Foucault, something that no Foucault catechism can allow for, but which any reasonable critical scholarship must endeavor to do. Foucault not only accepted the contingency of history, he was also aware of the fact of his own historical contingency. Thus, in "What is Enlightenment?" (1984), he writes, "we must try to proceed with the analysis of *ourselves as beings who are historically determined, to a certain extent, by the Enlightenment.*"[64] He also seems to recognize, in the same essay, that his own method of inquiry and the very problem it presupposes are themselves the product of the Enlightenment: "I have been seeking, on the one hand, to emphasize the extent to which a type of philosophical interrogation—one that simultaneously problematizes man's relation to the present, man's historical mode of being, and the constitution of the self as an autonomous subject—is rooted in the Enlightenment."[65]

My point, especially in "Foucault's Antiquity," was to illustrate some of the many unnoticed ways in which Foucault's project of reclaiming a model of the self from antiquity was precisely an inheritance of the modern Enlightenment, most likely thanks to the offices of Nietzsche (whose complex views of ancient selves are thinned out on Foucault's reading of genealogy).[66] *Bildung* and *Selbstbildung*, used by Foucault in his *L'Herméneutique du sujet*[67] as a way of naming *souci de soi, epimeleia heautou, la formation du soi,* and *culture de soi*, etc., are only two of the most recognizable clues to this inheritance. The aestheticized nature of self-formation in antiquity as Foucault understands this, and which Hadot, Davidson, and others have justly highlighted, is one more index of this same inheritance. Inserting Foucault into the—for Foucault, decidedly German—Enlightenment tradition, which runs from Humboldt and Winckelmann to Burckhardt and Nietzsche, is a fruitful way of contextualizing Foucault's intellectual inheritances: it gives them a much-needed contour. Not the least of the benefits of reframing Foucault's final project is that it allows us to perceive the various elements of classicism that inflect his reading of Greece and Rome. Foucault does not stand outside of the classical tradition like some objective watchtower or Olympian deity. He is an active *part* of that tradition, and one of its most recent exemplars. He has also, of course, had an indubitable impact on the Academy, most significantly inspiring areas and even fields of research where none existed before, and elsewhere inspiring what I have called "the Foucault-effect." This latter includes the writing and thinking of Judith Butler, Richard Rorty, David Halperin, and Alexander Nehamas (to

---

the next that of Porter, "Foucault's Ascetic Ancients."

[64] Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?," 43. (*my emphasis*).

[65] Ibid., 42.

[66] On which, see now James I. Porter, "Nietzsche's Genealogy as Cultural Critique," in Ruth Sonderegger and Karin de Boer, eds., *Conceptions of Critique in Modern and Contemporary Philosophy* (London: Palgrave, 2011), 119-36.

[67] Foucault, *L'Herméneutique du sujet*, 45-46; 60n.4.

mention only those most prominently discussed in my 2006 article), who develop theories of self-fashioning while also reflecting Foucault's influence to a greater or lesser extent.[68] But increasingly Foucault's effect is waning: he is becoming more or less a historical pheno-menon rather than a front-page item in the daily news.

Once Foucault's place within history is acknowledged, a better grip on his project will be possible. He will no longer appear like a messiah, a prophet, or a personal trainer, and will henceforth take up a position alongside other historical figures from the past. His thought won't primarily be channeled by partisans; it will be studied by scholars in classical reception, intellectual history, philosophy, sociology, and other fields who are keen to clar-ify, and not sanctify, Foucault's achievements. This approach to Foucault was, after all, the way I began "Foucault's Antiquity,"[69] which appeared in a volume devoted to classical re-ception. There is much more valuable work in this same vein awaiting to be undertaken.

Foucault's Ancients as Proto-Christians

The second of my arguments was a more controversial one. It had to do with the palpable fact that Foucault's genealogy of the modern subject traces the rise of a subject of prohibi-tions and constraints, produced by a regime of harsh, self-, or rather culturally and socially, imposed austerity and self-invigilation. The theme is delicately traced in Foucault. That is, he hedges his bets on the actual continuities that underlie the pathways that lead from pa-gan antiquity to Christianity, at times emphasizing these, at other times playing them down. I believe we get a good sense of the fundamental trajectory of this aspect of his project in such statements as the following:

> Christianity is usually given credit for replacing the generally tolerant Greco-Roman lifestyle with an austere lifestyle marked by a series of renunciations, interdictions, or prohibitions. Now, we can see that in this activity of the self on itself, the ancients deve-loped a whole series of austerity practices that the Christians later directly borrowed from them. So we see that this activity became linked to a certain sexual austerity that was subsumed directly into the Christian ethic. We are not talking about a moral rupture between tolerant antiquity and austere Christianity.[70]

That is, Foucault went back to pagan antiquity in search of the origins of the modern self, and found, I believe much to his surprise, the origins of the self-disciplining, self-con-stituting *Christian* self. Indeed, if Foucault's gaze repeatedly returns to the first few cen-turies of our era at Rome, this is because it is here he believes that the ancient culture of the

---

[68] Evidently I am not alone in pursuing this interest. See R. Lanier Anderson, and Joshua Landy "Philo-sophy as Self-Fashioning: Alexander Nehamas' Art of Living: *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault* by Alexander Nehamas," *Diacritics,* vol. 31, no. 1 (2001), 25-54.
[69] Porter, "Foucault's Antiquity," 168-69.
[70] Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics," 271.

self finally comes to fruition at all.[71] "Antiquity," he says (a term that is provocatively vague—it essentially sums up the essence of all that precedes modernity, but *includes* the Christian era and Christian practices), "never stopped posing the question of whether it was possible to define a style common to these different domains of conduct [viz., as pertained to truth, power, and individual conduct]. In fact," he continues,

> the discovery of such a style could probably have led to a definition of the subject. The unity of a "style of morality" began to be thought of only during the Roman Empire in the second and third centuries, and it was thought of immediately in terms of code and truth.[72]

This was the Roman achievement—the discovery of a uniform and universalizable style of subjectivity. Everything hitherto was mere anticipation and stumbling:

> [The Greeks] immediately stumbled upon what I consider to be the contradiction of the mortality of antiquity between the relentless search for a certain style of existence on the one hand and the effort to make it available to all on the other. While the Greeks probably approached this style more or less obscurely with Seneca [sic] and Epictetus, *it found expression only within the framework of a religious style*. All of antiquity seems to me to have been a "profound error." [*Laughter*][73]

When he looked ahead into the early modern period during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Foucault saw more of the same: a "reactivation of these ancient techniques [inherited from the Stoics] in the form of Christian spiritual practices."[74] And when he pondered the historical fate of the still later modern subject and how it stood in relation to the classical culture of the self, Foucault decided that this earlier culture of the self never "disappeared or was covered up. You find many elements that have simply been integrated, displaced, reutilized in Christianity," though it also "lost a large part of its autonomy"[75]—inevitably so, as it was harnessed to a larger cultural mechanism.

Whether the ancient culture of the self ever enjoyed the autonomy Foucault here appears to credit it with is disputable. To the extent that it did, Foucault's claim is that it produced subjects who stood out from their culture like decorations, as works of art. But

---

[71] Cf. p. 188 at n. 46 above on the "explosion" and "generalization" of practices of the self.

[72] Foucault, *Politics, Philosophy, Culture*, 244.

[73] Foucault, *Politics, Philosophy, Culture*, 244; Cf. Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, 320: "The difference between paganism and Christianity should not be characterized therefore as a difference between a Christian ascetic morality and a non-ascetic morality of Antiquity. You know that this is an utter fantasy. Asceticism was an invention of pagan Antiquity, of Greek and Roman antiquity." Cf. "On the Genealogy of Ethics," 270-71.

[74] Ibid., 276.

[75] Ibid., 278.

art is of course never an autonomous entity, any more than individuals or subjective practices are. They may produce the *illusion* of autonomy—of resulting from free choices, self-willed acts, and autonomous agency, all of which Foucault set such great store by, not only in his desiderata for "us today" (in the name of "the constitution of *ourselves* as autonomous subjects," of the "permanent creation of *ourselves* in our autonomy," and of the "work carried out by *ourselves upon ourselves* as free beings"),[76] but also as reflective of, and even continuative of, the ancient cultures of the self, which he felt operated on identical principles[77]—astonishingly so, because to attribute such freedoms to the ancient Greeks is to flirt, at one and the same time, with a retrojection of modern concepts (especially Kantian and post-Kantian ones), nostalgia, voluntarism, and self-contradiction.[78] I say self-contra-diction, because it's not at all clear what it would mean to return to such a picture of the ancient Greek self while also holding onto a historical trajectory in which that self is destined to become Christian—indeed, is *already* groping its way towards an unfree, prohibition-based Christianity, and with such overwhelming tenacity that it warrants being labeled "proto-Christian." That fantasy—of Greeks presenting themselves in the guise of (proto-) Christians—is as much an inheritance of the German Enlightenment and the later nineteenth century as is the fantasy of free-wheeling Greeks appearing in the guise of autonomous works of art.[79] But excavating more fully this facet of Foucault's final profile must wait for another occasion.

James I. Porter
Department of Classics
400 Murray Krieger Hall
University of California, Irvine
Irvine CA 92697-2000
USA

---

[76] Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?," 43, 44, 47; *my emphasis*.

[77] Foucault, "the subject's free and rational choice," *History of Sexuality vol. 3*, 64; Cf., e.g., Foucault, *Politics, Philosophy, Culture,* 247: "It is important to ... show how the same advice given by ancient morality can function differently in a contemporary style of morality"; see also ibid., 248.

[78] See Foucault, *Politics, Philosophy, Culture*, 249: "The point is rather to see to it that European thinking can take up Greek thinking again as an experience which took place once and with regard to which one can be completely free."

[79] For relevant background, see now Miriam Leonard, *Socrates and the Jews: Hellenism and Hebraism from Moses Mendelssohn to Sigmund Freud* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 2012). Nietzsche, incidentally, did not fall victim to this fantasy. He ridiculed it. See James I. Porter, *Nietzsche and the Philology of the Future* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2000), 220-24 with 380n.177 ("*Vorahnung des Christenthums in der Antike*," "anticipation of Christianity in antiquity").