Research Article

A NEW WAY OF DOING ETHICS

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ABSTRACT

The article exposes and analyzes Michel Foucault's ideas on ethics. He embarked on this particular analysis by surveying classical Greece, in order to discover some pointers in doing ethics for today. He called it aesthetics of existence, as the ancient Greeks patterned their individual existence based on what they believe as the way towards attaining a beautiful life. The two important principles that were dominant then were care of the self (*epimeleia heauton*) and know yourself (*gnothi heauton*). Through his genealogy, it became clear that the ancient people puts more accentuation on the know yourself principle, which lead to what he calls as history's wrong turning. He meant to look back in ancient period so that the modern subjects can have a glimpse of a possible paradigm they can adopt, which is to have a new ethics. Foucault would have that modern subjects also consider *rapport a soi* (the self's relation to itself) as an important component a subject should assume to have a veritable ethical dimension. Finally, Foucault argues that there is a new way of doing ethics which is more in congruence to the situation of the contemporary subject.

KEYWORDS: Foucault, genealogy, aesthetics of existence, care of the self, contemporary subject

INTRODUCTION

The field of ethics is a fertile ground for discussion in Philosophy nowadays. Discourses in this discipline are figuring in many fronts as it came to a point where, more than ever, it is necessary to ponder the meaning of human actions as they are. Human acts serve as a constant point of reflection for human beings, not the least of which are moral philosophers and ethical theorists, but the issues connected to ethics assume greater accentuation nowadays. A case in point is the emerging ethical problems posed by cyberspace and climate change phenomenon.

Michel Foucault, already a formidable thinker in the field of human sciences encompassing penology, psychiatry, medicine, law, sexuality among others, has some notable contributions in the field of ethics as it is included in the overall trajectory of his study which can be summed up as knowledge-power-subjectivity (ethics) axis. In engaging himself in this field, his aim is not concerned with erecting new moral or ethical system, nor is he concerned about fine tuning previously held moral concepts or theories. His concern is really more practical, that is, of making ethics a deeply personal endeavor.

In a related matter, ethics is significant as a discipline today if one considers the local academic setting, as it is retained as a Philosophy subject to be taught in tertiary level in the new Philippine curriculum after finishing K to 12 program which encompasses Pre-School, Basic Education, High School and Senior High School levels. In this regard, it is worth pondering if there is any relevant contribution a discussion of Foucault's ethics can have in view of the reemerging accentuation of ethics as an important discursive field. Looking at the history of ethics beginning the ancient Greek period through the lens of Foucault affords a broad and profound understanding of the elements, configurations, transmutations and evolution of

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ethics itself. In analyzing these, Foucault employed genealogy as his method.

FOUCAULT'S METHODOLOGY: A GENEALOGY OF ETHICS

The research utilizes the method of historical hermeneutics. As a basic philosophical study, this method is mainly comprised of investigation, criticism and reconstruction or the synthetic stage.

Criticism is where the researcher makes critical evaluations and judgments regarding the materials at hand. Here the researcher should be highly mindful that even a towering intellectual in his theoretical formulations and claims of various kinds should be put in a critical and uncompromising gaze. After all, he made no claim for the absolute gospel-truth quality of his works. Doing so will betray his anti-dogmatic stance.

Another step in this process is investigation,otherwise known as the analytic stage. Here is the attempt to make Foucault's ideas cohere with each other. With the idea of aesthetics of existence functioning as a kind of signpost, it is hoped that the ethical notions of Foucault will be made to fit to his ideas that pertains to the subject. It is the author's wish to show that the paradigm of aesthetics of existence will throw light to the subject in search of appropriate ethics for the present; and upon finding such "ideal" in the aesthetics of existence, he will be receptive to the possibilities of transformation, which is what an ethics of the self is all about.

Another process in the historical hermeneutics would be the reconstruction or the syntheticstage. The researcher's task in this stage is that of trying to organize everything he has, from the very beginning of his research to the point of concluding the present work.

As regards Foucault's own distinct method as he undertook an elaborate survey of what transpired in the history of ethics: he termed it as doing a genealogy of ethics. The scope of this survey is wide-ranging, spanning from the ancient Greek period leading up to the contemporary time. This article attempts at an analysis of Greco-Roman ethics, since his actual design for the ethical subject is the personal exemplification of the so-called aesthetics of existence; and in this theme both the ancient Greeks and the Romans are the societies which are exemplary practitioners of this principle.

It is the intention of Foucault to undertake a genealogy of ethics in order to prescribe some pointers towards the possible 'invention' of an aspired for new ethics of the present. Along the way, he suggests a philosophical or critical ethos that modern subjects can assume as a response to what he considered as an outdated way of looking at ethics. For him, morality as a code is becoming irrelevant, so there arise a need to put forth an alternative conception of ethics that is more attuned to the present situation. Notice that Foucault is not saying changes is happening to morality, for they are not due to its stability as proven throughout the course of history. Rather, it is in the way individual practice ethics that Foucault submits his

insights for considerations of contemporary subjects. Thus, the genealogist and archaeologist in him excavates ethical systems or ethical practices of past periods to be able to provide certain insights and suggestions, and not foundations as various ethicists are inclined to, for putting up an historically appropriate ethical behavior, at least in his mind, for the present circumstances and contexts of the modern subjects.

Genealogy of ethics is a retrospective analysis of ancient Greeks' way of relating to their own selves and to their society at large. It sheds insights to modern individuals as it can be seen how the Greeks are really concerned with their respective self-mastery (as exemplified by the Socratic injunction *gnothi heauton* orknow yourself) and on trying to live an exemplary or beautiful life. Thus it is no wonder that they were able to develop tools whereby they could attain this goalof living exemplarily. Those tools at their disposal are known as the technologies of the self. They are the materials ancient Greeks possess with a view towards attaining the proverbial beautiful life. Two prominent examples of these technologies are the principles know yourself and care of the self.

Foucault undertook his genealogy as he recognized that it can serve as a strategic methodology to pave the way towards the establishment of the so-called aesthetics of existence as a new way of doing ethics. Hence, his excursions throughout history using this method signifies a serious attempt to find possible replacement to moral code. (Moral code is the stable set of moral principles that were developed throughout the course of religious history.) It is his belief that the ancient Greek period is suitable to be looked upon as a starting point for a genealogical investigation of ethics. By so doing, Foucault intended to unearth whatever it is in antiquity's ethics that may have some bearings to contemporary or modern subjects. He, as a matter of fact, is motivated by a desire to provide a conception of ethics that is viable for the modern subjects.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

A few Foucaultian articles are reviewed here which specifically tackles his views about ethics.

The article C. Colwell in 1994 treats of how the subject exists as a problematic. Moreover, it debunks the suggestion that Foucault announced the death of man. On the contrary, it exists as a reality, that there is no need for Foucault to announce its occurrence in human history and culture. Colwell argues against the view that Foucault reverses his prior stand pertaining to the absence of an originary subject. The former says that such reading is a "misrepresentation of both the later works and the works in which the notion of an originary subject is most thoroughly argued against" (p. 56).

Upon Colwell's reading of Foucault in both *Discipline and Punish* and *History ofSexuality* I, he says that the subject is a result of "a micro-physics of power/ knowledge. By this he means that the body is surrounded by systems of constraints that force to take itself as an object of knowledge and self-discipline" (p. 56). These constraints

took two forms, namely, panopticism and the confessionary strategies.

Colwell's argument includes a view that Foucault does no abandon the possibility of political involvement. As such, he effectively positions himself among those who see in Foucault some political possibilities in spite of the absence of an originary subject that results in the cancellation of freedom. (Freedom is only possible in case of an originary subject that conditions it.) As he says "given Foucault's understanding of both power and the subject as differential in structure, there can be no such originary subject to be liberated, to be free (*sic*)" (p. 66). In spite of the later Foucault's advocacy of an aesthetics of existence, Colwell opines that it does not signal a return of an originary subject. To do so will only lead to failure. He insistently states that "there is no return to an originary subject in the late Foucault; there is only a continual retreat of the subject"(p. 67).

The article by Levy in 1998 argues in defense of Foucault by stating that the latter is not abandoning his earlier political involvements in favor of a more isolationist personal existence, as what Foucault's aesthetics of existence is often falsely construed. Quoting Levy:

"Foucault's two last major works (namely, *The Use of Pleasure and The Care of the Self*) are far removed from concrete political problems. But neither do they advocate a turning away from such engagement. Instead, they can most profitably be viewed as taking a step back from political engagement, in order to examine some of the larger problems it raises. Rather than proposing ethical principles or rules which we could seek to apply, *The Use of Pleasure* and *The Care of the Self* are mediations on the status of such rules. Rather than seeking to diagnose an inadequate existing set of rules and codes, to which he might oppose a better, Foucault examines the place of rules in ethical action" (p. 79).

Nor did Foucault, says Levy, unreasonably promote a return to Greek conception of ethics. His purpose is actually "to develop a contrast between morality, conceived as relatively codified or rule-bound system of prohibitions and obligation, and ethics, thought as a stylization of existence" (p. 80). It is the view of Foucault that what transpired is a gradual evolution of ethics, from Greek conception of it to Christian ethics characterized by the manifold prohibitions. Foucault's work thus appears as a response to an historical event in our cultures, in which code-bound moralities are gradually disintegrating and the exploration of new forms of ethics has become indispensable.

Interestingly, this view of Foucault is parallel to the view of Levinas on ethics, says Levy. On this reading, Foucault is engaged in an enterprise parallel to that of Levinas'; in so far as they are both trying to distinguish the codified regulation from the authentically ethical, which is the experience of obligation toward the Other prior to and apart from rules.

Another important point made in this article is the elaboration of the relationship, or rather, distinction

between law and discipline. Levy opines that this aspect of distinction between the two that Foucault's critics' often fail to take into account: "Foucault thus makes the crucial distinction.... between law and discipline or order. Discipline develops within the framework of the law, but it works against that framework" (p. 82).

After the previous review which mentioned a parallelism between Foucault and Levinas in some respects, this article by McNeill (1998) articulates, on the other hand, some similarities between Foucault and Heidegger. He argues here that Heidegger's Dasein is closely related to the *Care of the Self* of Foucault. He is comparing the early phase in Heidegger to the late phase in Foucault.

He pushes for the idea of the Dasein, that when it was said to exists for itself, it is not giving assent on "existentiell or ethical egoism, but is an ontological statement of essence that pertains to any Dasein as such, to Dasein in each case" (p. 54). As Heidegger explains in the essay On the Essence of Ground: "the statement that Dasein exists for the sake of itself does not contain the positing of an egoistic or ontic end for some blind narcissism on the part of the factical human being in each case....The statement in question contains neither a solipsistic isolation of Dasein, nor an egoistic intensification thereof" (p. 54).

McNeill made the point that Foucault and Heidegger share the same view that the self is not ontological; rather, "it is the relation to self that is ontological, or practical conceived as a way of being. More importantly, it is in the way one taken up or neglect this relation to self that is to be understood as originary ethics" (p. 53).

These are some similarities in the understanding of the self in the early Heidegger and the late Foucault: 1) the self is conceived ontologically, as a relation to self that is grounded in the possibility of freedom. Care for self designates a care for being, for the being of one's self in its finite openness to a historical world. 2) knowledge of the practico-ontological relation to self is precondition for assuming an ethical relation to others. 3) the critical practice of ontological knowing is an explicit mode of care for the self that continually recoils upon itself, putting its own being constantly in question through a hermeneutic attentiveness to its own genealogy. 4) such practice is intrinsically protoethical, unfolding as a singular engagement with and of one's own existence in each case. 5) as such, protoethical engagement is transformative participation in one's own being, a participation in the formation of the self as a worldly response to history. 6) finally, for both Foucault and Heidegger, knowledge of the practico-ontological relation to the self is attainable in a critical manner only through the practice of philosophizing.

David's article in 2001 explores the last phase in Foucault's academic life which centered on the ancient Greek notion of the *epimeleia heauton* (care of self). The *epimeleia heauton* is the principle with which the *techne tou biou* (art of living) becomes possible. He argues in behalf of Foucault that among the several versions of the care for the self, a specific version which is close to the intention of Foucault based on his reading of classical materials is that "'this return to the self' were really new

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practices of politics…" (p. 42). Thus, the article is trying to clarify that the notion of care of the self is a selfish, retreatist and apolitical in nature.

He made mention of the numerous ancient 'authors of the self' which became the main reference of Foucault in his own writings about this theme. Among the said ancient authors were: Seneca, Epicurus, Galen, Rufus, Epiktetus, Plutarch, Philo of Alexandria, Marcus Aurelius, Diogenes, among others. Again, speaking for Foucault, David argues that the reason why the former bothers to look back on those authors is because he "[Foucault] believed there is much we can learn from individuals who, notwithstanding the fact that they grappled with issues that in many respects are similar to the ones we face in our own time— such as the relation of the individual to a sometimes alienating social context—found ways to deal with them which involved problematizations, pattern of interaction, moral stances that, quite unlike our own, were grounded, neither in the rationality of the subject, nor in a universal morality, but in aesthetics of existence, where the relationship with the self was the dominant factor, and other sorts of relationships, if indispensable were secondary" (p. 54).

David also wrote of the belief of Foucault that the gradual displacement of the kind of ethics those authors promote by the morality that was being promulgated by early Christianity (from a morality that entailed the search for personal ethics, to one that exacted from the individual his obedience to a code of rules) constitutes "one of the biggest 'wrong turnings'" (p. 56) in the realm of ethics.

Meanwhile, an article of McGushin in 2002 undertakes a sleuthing of the researches of Foucault from the period 1981 to 1984, that is, the last years in Foucault's life. The object of McGushin's sleuthing is Foucault's wanderings into the ensemble of practices of the 'care of the self.' Specifically, it is about Foucault's researches into Plato or, to put it in another way, Socratic/Platonic theme of the care of the self.

This article tackles two areas that occupy Foucault's mind in the few years prior to his demise: the *parrhŭsia* and the care of the self. *Parrhŭsia* (or fearless speech) is a political discourse of truth. It may be understood also as truth-speaking. This theme is a great concern of the Athenians during the time of Plato as they are looking for the bond that would make their society exist cohesively. It is Plato who is able to identify that what they needed at that time was not a political *parrhŭsia* but an ethical *parrhŭsia*. McGushin explains that this transition came about because of the Socratic/Platonic problematization of democracy. "In the subsequent displacement of *parrhŭsia* from politics to ethics, what is revealed is how one fashions a mode of subjectivity in order to have access to true discourse to be spoken in the game of power relations" (p. 80). This perhaps explains why the earlier Foucault focuses on the power and power relations aspects, but noticeable is his shift of focus later on towards the subject or subjectivity. The researcher believes that Foucault's encounter with Socratic/Platonic texts, especially those that deal with *parrhŭsia* enabled him to undergo further development in his thought that resulted in his prioritizing of the 'subject'

theme later on through the prism of care for the self. McGushin adds "in the turn towards the subjective dimension as it shows itself through the arts of the self and especially through the practice of *parrhŭsia*, we see a new facet of his project" (p. 103). That is why Foucault's reading of Plato should be seen as a part of his continuing re-invention of his own way of thinking as an earnest effort to think differently.

Following the genealogical method of Foucault himself, Schrift (1997) retraces the former's ideas regarding the subject. He noted the big change of Foucault's conception of the subject from the period of *Discipline and Punish* to the period of *History of Sexuality*, especially the last two volumes, *The Use of Pleasure* and *The Care of the Self*. He suggested that it would be helpful to look at the "last development of Foucault's thought, where he suggests several ways we might reconfigure our understanding of the relationships between power and subjects" (p. 153). Such reconfiguration offers us a move away from the view of the subject as "modes through which institutionalized power relations are transmitted." Schrift implies that the earlier Foucault prior to the *History of Sexuality* series "might have placed too great an emphasis on domination by others as the sole form of governing" (p. 154). In view of this, then, is the necessity for the aforementioned reconfiguration.

Elsewhere, Schrift says Foucault is heavily influenced by Nietzsche, especially in those that pertains to the subject. By returning to a Nietzschean account of the subject, Foucault replaces the Sartrean project of an authentic self with the Nietzschean project of creatively constructing self. In so doing, "he both displaces the valorized free existential subject and retrieves a more ambivalent subject whose constitution takes place within the constraints of institutional forces that exceed its grasp and even at times its recognition" (p. 154).

So much about that influence on Foucault. Eventually, he came to see the need for reconfiguration of his notion of the subject because of too much emphasis on the external forces' influence on the subject. Later on "Foucault left us a task of thinking a notion of a subject that is both autonomous and disciplined, both actively self-forming and passively self-constructed" (p. 156).

ANALYSIS

What is Ethics for Foucault? How does it function in an individual in terms of what may be said as his behavior? In answering these, it is better to see ethics in the whole scheme of things wherein Foucault situate it.

He undertook in the last phase of his knowledge-power-subjectivity (ethics) axis an extended analysis of how the subject can form himself ethically. It should be said that ethics for Foucault assumes several nuances that one cannot see in other moral philosophers. For instance, the self's relationship to itself (*rapport ŏ soi*) is practically overlooked by other ethical or moral theorists. But for him, it is this 'duties to ourselves' that he sees as needing more attention on the part of most contemporary subjects who are prone of overemphasizing the other forms of duties

(especially the external ones) as prescribed by manifold ethical theories.

Foucault intentionally leaves aside the question of morality itself. In his view, morality as represented by interdictions and prohibitions that were developed in all human cultures are basically stable; substantial change can never be expected from the different bodies of moral doctrines or principles, as was stated above. Now, there is another aspect of morality that an individual subject can change: it is the mode of how an individual relates to himself. This is the aspect, then, that individuals should give more attention to, since it is within his power and ability to modify and to effect change in his own ethical behavior.

The Ethics of the Self

Foucault conceives ethics as just one part of morals along with other parts, namely, people's actual behavior and moral codes. Ethics is concerned with the self's relation to itself. Ethics isthat which determines how the individual is supposed to constitute himself as a moral subject. Ethics as the relation to oneself as conceptualized by Foucault is quite different from other perspectives of ethicists/moralists. His purpose in having a different view is to try to isolate a distinctive point of analysis that is typically overlooked by others ethicists/moralists. Hence, Foucault took his analysis of ethics as only one among several possible parts of the study of morals.

Foucault understood ethics and morality as distinct from one another. For him, ethics is "conceived as an activity of disciplined self-knowledge in accordance with certain shared or communal norms, the latter (morality) as a discourse of rule-bound abstract generalities with no real claim upon the self and its modes of jointly private and social fulfillment" (Gutting, 1994, p. 161).

Morals or morality, on the other hand, is mainly consisted of people's actual behavior, that is, their morally relevant actions (forms of subjectivation), and of the moral code (codes of behavior) imposed on them. The moral code Foucault refers to are the rules that determine which actions are permitted, forbidden, or required; as well as that aspect of the code that assigns different positive and negative values to different possible behaviors. It is a collection of values and rules of action which are proposed to individuals and groups through the intermediary of various prescriptive mechanisms such as the family, educational institutions, and even churches.

It is usually the case that several societies emphasize the code in their morality. As regards morality of this type, the important thing is to focus on the instances of authority that enforce the code, that require it to be learned and observed, and that penalize infraction. In christianity, for instance, morality took the form of a code.

That is actually only one of the different possible ways of looking at morality. According to Foucault, morality has two main aspects. These are the 'codes of behavior' and 'forms of subjectivation.' As already mentioned, the former requires no further analysis as they are generally stable throughout history. But it can also be seen and defined as

the way in which individuals behave, and how far they conform or do not conform to the prescriptive systems of a given society. It is the behavior of an individual vis-a-vis the moral codes. Now, if there is a certain permanency about the moral principles, what actually changes is 'how' and 'why' individuals put these rules into practice. It is precisely these changes that Foucault is interested in analyzing, rather than in writing a history of how moral codes have changed.

However, there are some societies which emphasize more the forms of subjectivation. He explains its nature in this manner:

"On the other hand, it is easy to conceive of moralities in which the strong and dynamic element is to be sought in the forms of subjectivation and the practices of the self. In this case, the system of codes and rules of behavior may be rather rudimentary. Their exact observance may be relatively unimportant, at least when compared with what is required of the individual in the relationship he has with himself, in his different actions, thoughts, and feelings as he endeavors to form himself as an ethical subject. Here the emphasis is on the forms of relations with the self, on the methods and techniques by which he works them out, on the exercises by which he makes of himself an object to be known, and on the practices that enable him to transform his own mode of being" (Foucault, 1986, p. 30).

Thus, morality should be considered as possessing these distinctive facets. Foucault renders that the forms of subjectivation is more crucial for him. However, he does not dismiss that the code is unimportant in this regard. Foucault wanted to shift the emphasis to how the individual is supposed to constitute himself as a moral subject of his own actions without denying the importance of both.

The Ethical Four-Fold

Foucault saw ethical analysis as the free relationship of the self to itself (*rapport a soi*), and this particular mode of relationship can be examined through four basic categories: ethical substance, mode of subjectivation, ethical work and *telos.* Although he treats these categories as independent from one another, he recognizes as well that in any historical period they are always found in a specific configuration.

Ethical substance—*the way that the individual has to constitute this or that part of himself as the prime material of his moral conduct.*

For Foucault, the ethical substance is the prime material of moral conduct. It is that part of man's behavior which is taken to be the relevant domain for ethical judgment. Some questions might be asked regarding ethical substance. Are ethical judgments to be applied to feelings, intentions, or desire? What part of oneself is to be the substance or matter of ethics? Incidentally, Foucault believed that the ethical substance of Greco-Roman ethics was quite different from both the Christian and modern categories of ethical substance. According to Foucault, among the Greeks it is the *aphrodisia.* To the Christians it is the flesh.

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And to the moderns, it is desire. One's ethical substance will determine what part of oneself needs to be taken into account in the formulation of the moral code. Foucault sees the will to truth as the real material for the moral actions that individuals are taking.

Mode of subjection—*the way in which the individual establishes his relation to the rule and recognizes as obligated to put it into practice.*

The mode of subjection is the second major aspect of ethics. This aspect concerns 'the way in which people are invited or incited to recognize their moral obligations.' People might recognize moral obligations as being revealed by divine law; or as imposed by the demands of reason; or as resting on convention; or to use one of Foucault's most interesting examples, as deriving from the 'attempt to give your existence the most beautiful form possible.' Here, Foucault wanted to show that different people from distinct historical periods may be subjected to the same rules in different ways. For instance, faithfulness to one's spouse may be imposed as a requirement of reason or as a consequence of aesthetics of existence. The mode of subjection provides the linkage between the moral code and the self, determining how this code can get hold of moral subjects. It is the kind of practices by which subjects formed itself vis-a-vis its deontology. As Foucault himself says of it, it is the way in which the individual establishes his relation to the rule and recognizes himself as obligated to put it into practice.

Ethical Work**--**the work one performs to attempt to transform oneself into the ethical subject of one's behavior: (*What are the means by which we can change ourselves in order to become ethical subjects?*)

This aspect of ethics concerns the means by which individuals change or elaborate themselves in order to become ethical subjects. It is the so-called self-forming activity (*practique de soi*) or 'ascetism' in its broad sense. In Christianity, for instance, self-examination has the form of a self-deciphering, and gives rise to a set of techniques that help people to change into the kind of subjects who can behave ethically.

Telos—*the place an action occupies in a pattern of conduct. It commits an individual...to a certain mode of being, a mode of being characteristic of the ethical subject.*

The final aspect of ethics is *telos*, referring more or less to the kind of being to which individuals aspire particularly when trying to act ethically. Should the subjects become pure,' or immortal, or free, or masters of themselves?

An individual either conforms to, or disregards, a given set of values or prescriptions according to four different rubrics: (1) The "determination of ethical substance," referring to the way in which an individual can choose to make 'a part of himself or a mode of behavior' the prime material of his ethical conduct. For instance, there may be a general moral rule of conjugal fidelity, but in relation to this rule the individual may choose to make his behavior conform only from an external perspective (keeping up appearances), or he may decide that the essence of fidelity consists in the mastery of one's desires. (2) The "mode of subjection," referring to the way in which an individual chooses the conditions under which he will recognize and carry out obligation. For instance, one practices conjugal fidelity to the extent that one has chosen to join or remain part of a group that for traditional or spiritual reasons it is an abiding principle for. (3) The 'form of elaboration of ethical work,' referring to the individual's chosen means. For instance, sexual austerity may be practiced through 'a long learning, memorization, and assimilation,' or it can be practiced in a 'sudden, all embracing and definitive renunciation of one's pleasure.' (4) The 'telos of the ethical subject,' referring to the place that ethical substance occupies in a pattern of conduct. For instance, conjugal fidelity could be an element in a schema of moral conduct aspiring to make its practitioners complete masters of themselves, or it could be an element in a moral program of radical detachment from the world (David, 1997, p 62-63).

Figure 1: Foucault's schema in his ethical four-fold
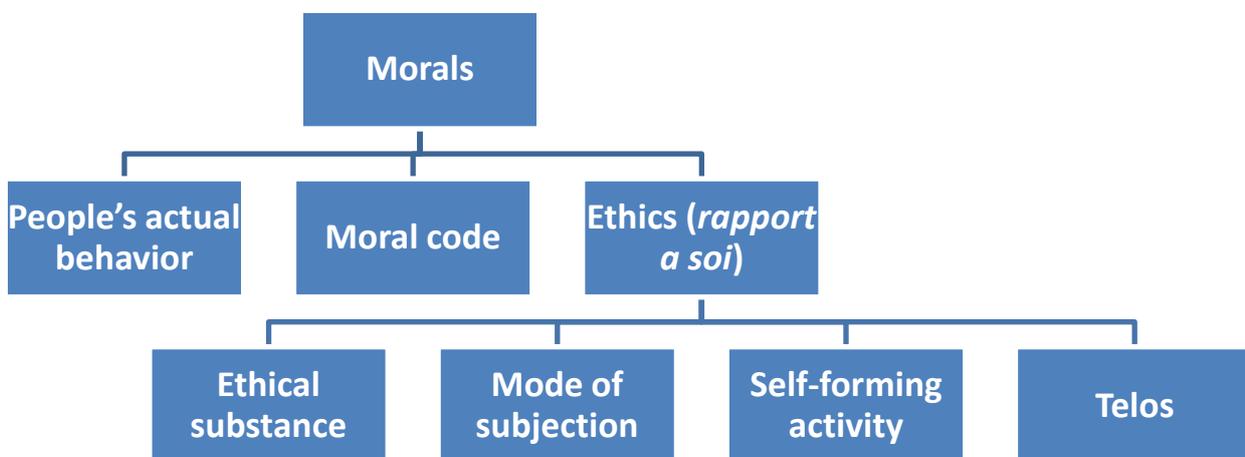
Ethics in Imperial Period

The Imperial Period (Roman Empire) is like a watershed in the history of ethics. Foucault opines that its advent brought about a shift in how people behave, particularly in matters pertaining to sexual ethics. During this period, there developed a new accentuation and an emerging attitude of severity that was clearly manifested in the thinking of philosophers and even physicians in the course of the first two centuries of the first millennium. This so-called austere tone can be seen in the writings of Epiktetus (*Discourses*), Seneca (*Letters to Lucilius, On the Shortness of Life, On the Happy Life, On the Tranquility of Mind*), Plutarch (*Apophthegmata laconica*), Marcus Aurelius (*Meditations*), Musonius Rufus (*Reliquiae*),among others.

In relation to this, Foucault stated that this accentuation eventually developed to focus on the self's relation to itself (*rapport a soi*). *Rapport a soi* then is the eventual objective of this accentuation that transpired during this period. (It must be noted though that it is also the mode of aesthetics of existence.) Subsequently, there emerged a gradual creeping-in of a systematization of ethics or morality. In effect, it is here where one can situate the genesis of civilization's 'wrong turning.' To this growth can be attributed the efforts of imperial political power then, for instance by Augustus, to raise moral standards in a more or less authoritarian manner.

Hence, the attitude of severity that ensued is traceable to a renewed accentuation given to the relationship to oneself. This intensification would have a strong resonance especially when one analyzes the subsequent christian ethics. Yet surprisingly, this accentuation also gave rise to a development of another accentuation practice that at first seem go hand in hand with the precept of the care of the self, the precept of know yourself. The other accentuation is all about the valorization given to the latter and to the almost total neglect accorded to the former. There was to be noted a gradual and subtle shift whereby the concern for the Socratic principle of self-knowledge (*gnothi heauton*) slowly replaced the practice of the care of the self (*epimeleia heauton*) as the main imperative for the ancient period's ethical subjects. It is what Foucault mentioned as the philosophic tradition's overemphasis given to the know yourself principle, and the inverse forgetfulness concerning the care of the self principle. "There has been an inversion between the hierarchy of the two principles of antiquity, 'Take care of yourself' and 'know thyself.' In Greco-Roman culture knowledge of oneself appeared as the natural consequence of taking care of yourself. In the modern world, knowledge of oneself constitutes the fundamental principle" (Martin, Gutman & Hutton, 1998, p. 21).

Foucault used as a jumping board in his hermeneutics of the subject the general theme of the care of the self. The care of the self is foremost among all the technologies of the self which ancient people aspire to put into practice. Foucault intends to show that the current preoccupation with the theme of "know yourself" (*gnōthi heauton*) should be treated as directly associated with the aforementioned theme. Because in antiquity, know yourself is the result of the observance of care of the self.

At any rate, the care of the self as the dominant ethical theme of antiquity is one of the objects of Foucault's so-called genealogical gaze. In effect, what he really sought was the elements which constitute this ethical practice. He even pointed out the importance of this ancient imperative which paves the way to 'aesthetics of existence.'

Ancient Ethical Injunction as Aesthetics of Existence

Foucault believes that ethics during the classical period promotes a mode of living which can be characterized as aesthetics of existence. It is an ethics that teaches an individual how to conduct himself, both in his personal and public dimensions. Aesthetics of existence during that period is mainly reserved to the elite class of their society. For the classical people, aesthetics of existence is not an ethics that attempts to give norm to the general populace; rather it is applicable to only a few who are willing to have such conduct of self-regulation. In Stoic ethics, for instance, there is no intention that the normalization of the general populace is ever attempted. For them and to the rest of ancient Greece, the reason for making this choice was the will to live a beautiful life, and possibly as a result, to leave to other people memories of a beautiful existence as lived by those who made their lives some examples of aesthetics of existence.

Greek ethics can be said as centered on the problem of personal choice. Moreover, at the root of their ethics is a concern for the attainment of a mode of existence that can be characterized as a beautiful life, an existence that is innately aesthetic in nature. Their ethics is different in the sense that it can be characterized as relational on a personal and societal level. Unlike the Christians, for instance, beginning medieval period, their ethics it is not deeply concerned with the metaphysical or religious dimensions. Rather, it is focused on enabling among individuals a stylization of their respective existences. In other words, their ethics' gives prominence to the will as it highly regard one's choices in life, whether to live like this or to live like that. For this reason, Foucault indicated that he looks at the Greeks and, to some extent the Romans, as providing a veritable paradigm in his project of finding new ways of doing ethics for the contemporary subjects.

Care of the Self

The care of the self represents the culmination of Foucault's academic work. This theme became pronounced in ancient times as it was developed by the Epicureans, by Seneca, by Pliny and a host of other ancient philosophers. Clearly, it was a widespread imperative during that time. The *technē tou biou* (art of living) eventually developed into the *technē* of the self, and it further metamorphosed into an aesthetics of existence, as Greek ethics became more and more concerned with the problem of the personal choice as regards one's manner of living. It underscores, again, their abiding concern with the will to live a beautiful life.

Some factors can be attributed to the establishment of the care of the self prior to its relative obscurity at the onset and during the christian era, as an important imperative in antiquity. For one, Foucault underscored that the growing

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individualism' during the Hellenistic times gave rise to its growth. This emerging individualistic attitude of the people comprised of giving more importance to the private and personal aspect of their existence. As a result, people give more focus on their conduct, thereby affording more time for themselves. Another reason is subsequent disintegration of the *polis* which resulted in people being forced to deal with their inner selves. It pave the way for people to resort to Philosophy as perhaps to serve as their anchor during those seemingly difficult times characterized by social tumult. Philosophy in those times provided ancient people with rules of conduct but that were comingled with their personal concerns. Therefore, it can be opined that this individualism entails an intensification of the values of private life, or that the importance accorded to the relation to self is associated with an exaltation of individual singularity.

The motif of the care of the self connotes the medical aspects as well. Thus, in the notable treatises of Galen is stated the things or activities that an individual should observe, as another form of the care for the self, regarding his body. Caring for the self then is about caring for one's soul and one's body; this imperative is clearly concerned with a holistic caring for oneself.

The aesthetics of existence during the ancient period revolves around the practice of the care of the self. "It is with the care of the self that one can find the locus of the strategy for ethical practice by the ancient people. It is evidently tied with asceticism taken in its original sense. Asceticism is significantly expressed in care of the self. Care of the self entails knowing a number of rules of acceptable conduct or of principles that are both truths and prescriptions. To take care of the self is to equip oneself with those truths. This is where ethics is linked to the game of truth" (Rabinow, 1998, p. 288). Technologies of the self (care of the self as its example par excellence), in other words, are ways of attempting to 'live the truth, tell the truth, and be changed by the truth.'

The Political Implication of the Care of the Self

The care of the self has another dimension which avoids the pitfall of absolutizing the attention given to the self. This is the dimension of 'care for others.' The care of the self is a veritable social practice, and it represents an intensification of social relations. The problem, for instance, of relationships with others is present throughout the development of the care of the self. It implies also a relationship with others as the proper care of the self requires listening to the lessons of a master. From this perspective, the care of the self appears as a pedagogical, ethical, and also ontological condition for the development of a good subject-ruler. To constitute oneself as a governing subject implies that one has constituted oneself initially as a subject who cares for oneself. What the literature of ancient period reveals is a manifold citations of how to go about with the self-formation of an aspiring leader of the *polis.*

Ultimately, though, this development is a manifestation of a growth of appreciation given towards the self, which is what Foucault termed as the growth of individualism. In relation to this, it can be said that another form of problematization for the ancient ethical subject is due to an emerging configuration of the political dynamics in imperial times side by side with the decline of city-states.

The exhortation of Socrates for future leaders is a good example of why a prospective leader should take care first of oneself: "You want to become a politician, to govern a city, to care for others, and you have not even taken care of yourself. If you do not care for yourself you will make a poor ruler" (Rabinow, 1998, p. 96). Interestingly enough, he proposes none other but himself as an ideal figure of someone who practices this precept. The paradigm Socrates provided in this regard can be found in the *Apology*. He teaches the Greek citizens to attend to themselves (rather than to their possessions), and subsequently, he teaches them to attend to the city-state itself. In this equation, if both the general populace and their leaders take care of themselves, there is nothing that will hinder for any given city or society not to function properly. The care of the self, properly speaking, would always be useful for the maintenance of a city or society.

Ethics for the Modern Subject

Foucault does not hide his acute observation of moral-ethical history that led him to stipulate an invention of a new form of ethics, one that would be in tune with the predicaments of the contemporary moral subjects. History itself, and its manifold developments necessitates, as Foucault observed, an overhauling of modern subjects' ethical and moral understanding. However, by saying a new form of ethics, it does not mean the building-up of new edifices of ethical or moral system. Nor is it about Foucault prescribing a different set of doctrines borne out of a reaction to the previous moral systems. It is rather the attainment of a new way of looking at ethics, or more correctly, a new way of doing ethics.

He sees a different kind of imperative that looms in the horizon of modernity. The present times for him poses manifold problems that cannot be addressed sufficiently by traditional morality. For this reason, a historical necessity regarding a new ethics arises. "In the modern world, it seems to have become impossible to ground an ethics. There is no longer nature or reason to conform to, no longer an origin with which to establish an authentic relation; tradition or constraints are no longer but contingent facts" (Davidson, 1997, p. 230).

When asked regarding what kind of ethics should be established now given the fact that ethics is related only by 'historical coagulations' (and not by analytical or necessary interconnections or interdependence) with other social structures like economics and politics, Foucault replied:

"What strikes me is the fact that in our society, art has become something which is related only to objects and not to individuals, or to life. That art is something which is specialized or which is done by experts who are artists. But couldn't everyone's life become a work of art? Why should the lamp or the house be an art object, but not our life" (Rabinow, 1984, p. 350)?

For this reason, Foucault indicated that he looks at the Greeks and, to some extent the Romans, as providing a veritable paradigm in his project of finding new ways of doing ethics for the contemporary subjects. Ultimately, being in the realm of modernity, Foucault would like the subjects to see the adaptation that they need to undergo. He says that "to be modern is not to accept oneself as one is in the flux of passing moments; it is to take oneself as object of complex and difficult elaboration….Modernity does not 'liberate man in his own being;' it compels him to face the task of producing himself" (Rabinow, 1998, p. 312). In addition, to be a modern subject entails a constant elaboration, that of doing diligent work on the self.

The New Ethics as a Self-Crea*tion*

For Foucault, the self is not a given. As a consequence of that, Foucault believes that human individuals are obligated to create themselves as works of art. Foucault emphasizes that if one is really to make oneself into a work of art, one should do it without recourse to any preconceived notions or universal rules. Because for him, history does not offer any foundations or origins; "it offers no constants, no comfort, no consolation" (Rabinow, 1998, p. xxix). It is in this view that Foucault differs considerably from the Sartrean idea that there is an authentic self that one has to fit as a moral being. As Foucault states in one of his interviews: "we should not have to refer the creative activity of somebody to the kind of relation he has to himself, but should relate the kind of relation one has to oneself to a creative activity" (Rabinow, 1998, p. 103). He admitted that this view is much closer to Nietzsche's as expressed in *The Gay Science* rather than to Sartre. Foucault follows Nietzsche in his deep admiration for the Greco-Roman culture, especially in the classical period's denial of a fixed essence of human nature, thereby allowing the human agents room to maneuver for a personal crafting of their own selves.

Partly as a reaction to Sartre's notion of authenticity, Foucault proposes the practice of creativity; that people have to create themselves into a work of art. Foucault's ethics does not hesitate to undertake a series of critiques in the context of one's concrete historical circumstances and experimental transgression of the self in case such situations present themselves. This ethics, then, is a form of resistance against the modern power-knowledge-subjectivity relations.

As a result, Foucault invites individuals to have an alternative conception of their subjectivities. Creating one's self as a work of art would be an existence rooted not from traditions, established discourses (of the human sciences, penology, medicine, psychiatry), but borne out of a conscious practice of freedom. Foucault argues strongly to make the value of liberty or the conscious, reflective freedom the highest value there is for the contemporary subject. For it is his firm belief that to practice freedom is primarily what qualifies and constitutes a subject's being ethical.

The present time, or rather, the modern man, has to deal with constituting a new type of morality or ethics.Modernity had imbued modern man with skepticism in various fronts, not the least of which is about traditional morality. This period induced the condition that morality as a reference, a system or as a stable ground of an individual's actions, suddenly became suspicious. Foucault's diagnosis in his late works, namely, *The Use of Pleasure* and *The Care of the Self,* is that in due to modernity, it has now become practically impossible to ground an ethics. He is convinced that there is a need to constitute a new ethics. It implies that people themselves have to build their own ethics.

The dissolution of the moral code in his view brought a peculiar situation in the West that posed several challenges, among which is to locate a new strategic possibility for an ethics. Without the presence of the code, or rather it is more apt to say basing from Foucault's view, without its credibility anymore, how will the contemporary subjects ground their beings, behaviors, projects? Supposing that it is true, how then can people cope with their respective existence when the ground that supposedly provides stability to their existence has been taken away? This new strategic possibility Foucault is proposing is equivalent to the self's new imperative to relate to itself (*rapport a soi*).

Foucault sets up two 'ideal' types of moral systems: one that emphasizes the moral code and another that emphasizes ethical practices. He prefers the latter ideal. Thus, Foucault deemed the new imperative, among other imperatives in contemporary time, for the contemporary subject is the task of enabling a shift from the code to *rapport a soi* (regarding which should be given more stress by the ethical subjects themselves in their moral dimension).

A New Way of Doing Ethics Today

Foucault provides a general prognosis regarding the need to do ethics today. First, he says that modern man should look at the clues provided for by the classical people who, so it seems, adhered to an ethical dictum which is an aesthetics of existence. Considering the supposed dissolution of the code in modern period, people have no other recourse but to build their own ethics. Foucault interprets this dissolution as flowing out of the contemporary revision of belief in humanism. It became a disbelief. He thus proposes a challenge prompted by the realization that humanism has run its course already: "the self is not given to us, I think that there is only one practical consequence: we have to create ourselves as a work of art" (Rabinow, 1984, p. 350).

Foucault makes known his preference for anchoring the individual existence in aesthetic manner. It refers to Foucault's notion of the need for an individual to create or cultivate oneself. In other words, it is a precept that entails the individual to undertake the process of self-invention. Through it, he proposes that man should intentionally create himself into a work of art. Simply put, for Foucault man is a form, not a substance. Moreover, man's form assumes an identity which is multi-faceted and never the same at all time. The implication of this self-invention is that man's *bios* should be seen as a project. As he said "from the idea that the self is not given to us, I think that

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there is only one practical consequence: we have to create ourselves as a work of art." In saying that, Foucault looks back on the antiquity wherein the view of aesthetics of existence was that it is principally an effort to affirm one's liberty and to give to one's own life a certain form in which one could recognize oneself, and also to be recognized by others, as one's existence is a conscious attempt at styling or exemplifying one's own existence.

Going further in this argument, this task of self-stylization gives individuals an opportunity to escape the *cul-de-sac* position normally peddled to people, which is comprised of seeing in the relationship between society and morality an analytic or necessary link. Corollary to Foucault's debunking of this position is that the self automatically becomes the new strategic possibility, that is, for an ethics. The battleground for the fulfillment of the self lies in nowhere else but in the self itself. It can therefore be said that for Foucault, the task of the self is to evolve a distinct style of existence. The ethical is now assuming an attitude of aesthetics of existence.

Foucault looks on aesthetics of existence as primarily a work in progress; indeed, as a life-long project. Making oneself as a work of art which involves a constant aesthetic elaboration of the self, is a rejoinder by Foucault that in effect, there is now another form of dissolution. It is a dissolution of the analytical relations which people in general previously believed as existing between the various realms of human society, such as in their politics and in economics being necessarily linked to their morality. Eliminating those analytical relations from people's consideration removes from modern subjects the fear of a resultant havoc in their society and in their lives in case a reconfiguration or modification of them, and their subsequent relations to man, transpired.

This aesthetics of existence, then could serve as exemplary without falling into subjectivizing discourse. As he interprets it, aesthetics of existence would serve as an antidote to the supposed moral indifference that characterized modernity.

CONCLUSION &DISCUSSION

How one should view the new ethics or a new way of doing ethics that Foucault proposes? In *The Use of Pleasure* it is defined as "those intentional and voluntary actions by which men not only set themselves rules of conduct, but also seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being, and make their life into an ouvre that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria" (Foucault, 1986, p. 10-11). In a way, this new ethics represents an ideal subjectivity that is practiced with as little domination as possible. In another respect, an acting subject in this new way of doing ethics should always be active in negotiating his subjectivity in spite of different discursive practices concerned with their own truth games. It is after all, the result of Foucault's analysis of subjectivity-ethics axis, which reveals the evolution of a subject from a passive state to an active status. This active status Foucault suggests' entails a way to work on ourselves that would allow us to invent a way of being.

The artist of the self performs this self-invention or self-creation. The technologies of the self, in this sense—whether of antiquity, Christianity, or of modernity—can be taken by the artist of the self as multiple strategies for the possible attainment of a still improbable manner of existing. Foucault views ethics as essentially a mode of self-formation, the way people fashion their freedom.

While Foucault's ethics may be lacking in rigour which is present in several other ethical elaborations, he can be credited, though, for his novel view of ethics, which is involves an entirely different conceptualization of it. It is this aspect of pointing towards ethics as *rapport a soi*, the self's relation to itself, that bears serious consideration in view of it's possible inclusion to the subject Ethics as a retained Philosophy subject in the tertiary level. It is also worth noting that an individual can consider making their lives an aesthetics of existence; an existence which is founded on one's own stylization of his existence and in which the element of freedom is almost absolutely upheld as it is practiced. This view is markedly similar to what several individuals, in particular artists, in the contemporary period is adopting. It is unconventional but a small percentage of people are doing it already.

More significantly, by making an historical analysis of Greek ethics, Foucault was able to discover that the moral systems which were founded in the past were built on the assumption that there are necessary connections existing between the individual's ethics/morality and the society in its different aspects. It is at this point where he made the contentious idea that this particular view has without basis. Hence, it can and should be debunked.

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