

## Self Care and the Subject in Foucault's History of Sexuality

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**Abstract:** The category of sexuality is endemic to the modern society that Foucault wrote in and in reference to. In his History of Sexuality, Foucault seeks to destabilize his readers' relationship with sexuality and what stems from it. In his broader work, he implores us to attend to the imperative "take care of yourself," which he claims gives us a route to encounter, resist, and modify force relations. In this paper, I analyze the dual meanings of subject and subjectification in Foucault's History of Sexuality. I then show how resistance is formulated in the context of this subject and then analyze how his notion of the care of the self serves as a critique of his first description of subjectification.

In 1983, Michel Foucault gave a lecture series at Berkeley entitled *The Culture of the Self*. In it, he makes an analogy between Socrates and a fourth century Christian theologian, Gregory of Nyssa, explaining how both of them use the same Greek phrase, *epimeleia heautou*, to designate the imperative to “take care of oneself.”<sup>1</sup> Gregory of Nyssa uses the concept to advocate sexual abstinence as a means to immortality, while Socrates employs it as a supplication to his fellow Greeks to attend to what really matters in their lives. The result of the receipt of this imperative in both cases, Foucault concludes, is that we “light the lamp and search every corner of our souls.” For both philosophers, then, the imperative to know oneself was consequent upon the imperative to take care of oneself. In his *History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault describes how sexuality was constructed around the imperative to know oneself. The Christian imperative to confess all sins and its concordant emphasis on lust spawned a pervasive technology for creating knowledge which took its form in sex discourse. The knowledge-power complex arising from this is our modern category of sexuality, which, contrary to Socrates and Gregory of Nyssa, puts the imperative to know oneself first.

This category of sexuality is endemic to the modern society that Foucault is writing in and in reference to. In an effort to achieve another perspective on the self and to exert some autonomy against the power-knowledge apparatus of sexuality, Foucault implores

us to attend to the imperative “take care of yourself,” and he points to historical models, like Socrates and Gregory of Nyssa, to contextualize our response to this imperative. By doing the work of caring for the self, we give ourselves a route to encounter, resist, and modify the force relations of sexuality. In this paper, I will analyze the dual meanings of subject and subjectification in Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*. I will then show how resistance is formulated in the context of this subject. I will then analyze how his notion of the care of the self serves as a critique of his first description of subjectification.

## **1. Subjectification**

In Foucault’s chapter in *History of Sexuality* on the *scientia sexualis*, he describes the production of discourses surrounding sex as “an immense labor to which the West has submitted generations in order to produce ... men’s subjection: their constitution as subjects in both senses of the word”<sup>2</sup>. These two senses of subject are of a dominated subject and of a subject with an identity. The subject as an identity functions as an attachment point for the discourses surrounding the sexuality of the subject. These discourses multiply the relations of force the subject participates in, furthering their domination. These relations of force make the subject further an object for the production of these discourses, which in turn further enmesh the subject in the categories that constitute both types of subjecthood.

Indeed, these relations of force reciprocally define and direct the subject, such that Foucault claims:

One has to be completely taken in by this internal ruse of confession in order to attribute a fundamental role to censorship, to taboos regarding speaking and thinking; one has to have an inverted image of power in order to believe that all these voices which have spoken so long in our civilization—repeating the formidable injunction to tell what one is and what one does, what one recollects and what one has forgotten, what one is thinking and what one thinks he is not thinking—are speaking to us of freedom.<sup>3</sup>

The incitements to discourse and the discourses themselves are exactly the mechanisms by which the power of sexuality is actualized. The claim of these discourses is that they produce truth, and Foucault argues that, at the same time as they produce truth, they produce domination. So they give truthful content to answer the question “what is the subject?” and they produce tactics that at the same time dominate that subject. This is how sexuality is constituted as a knowledge-power complex. The direction to tell everything is itself an exercise of power, and the truth that the direction unearths is predicated upon the relationship of power that produces it. Thus the truth of sexuality and the subject that comes out of the practice of confession has relations of power baked in from the very start. Moreover, the truths of confession

are not confined to the confessional – they multiply as discourses and pervade the whole of society, making the words spoken in private into truths undergirding the social structure.

### **1.1 Identity**

The first mode of subjectification, then, is what I am calling the “identity,” a set of labels that influence and code the actions of the person possessing the identity. The identity is the mode of the subject’s participation in society. It constitutes a relationship to a set of norms that guide the actions of the subject. By relating to the norms of society in a particular way, the subject carves a place and an identity for itself within the social body. For every norm of behavior there is a continuum, and each subject finds itself somewhere along this continuum in every category. Hence Foucault claims that:

One must not suppose that there exists a certain sphere of sexuality that would be the legitimate concern of a free and disinterested scientific inquiry were it not the object of mechanisms of prohibition brought to bear by the economic or ideological requirements of power. If sexuality was constituted as an area of investigation, this was only because relations of power had established it as a possible object; and conversely, if power was able to take it as a target, this was because techniques of knowledge and procedures of discourse were capable of investing it. Between techniques of knowledge and strategies

of power, there is no exteriority, even if they have specific roles and are linked together on the basis of their difference.<sup>4</sup>

Hence this identity that a subject finds itself with and identifies with is an artifact of the power-knowledge complex of sexuality. There is no free and unburdened sexual identity under this theory, and hence the identity is itself a handle for the discourses and relations of force that the knowledge-power complex embodies. This subjectivity is simultaneously extrinsically defined and internally unstable. Since the identity is based on norms and subject to dynamics beyond the control of the subject, there must always remain internal uncertainty about the identity. A subject can never be sure whether they are deficient to their identity, or whether a new identity has arisen that might supersede the current one. The uncertain relationship of a subject to their subjectivity demands attention to the norm around which the identity is based and participation in its creation and continual evolution for its maintenance.

## **1.2 Domination / Subjugation**

The other significance of the subjectification described above is subjugation: the subjugation of the subject in the context of an apparatus of power. The subject, at the same time as it gets an identity, has its behaviors channeled, directed, and incited by the relations it engages in. Indeed, the subject

becomes dominated by the very forces that create their identity. The subjecthood of identity does not come with autonomy, but rather seems to wrestle with autonomy because it seems imposed from without. But this is not quite correct, because the domination and the identity of a subject come both from within and from without, and in Foucault's theory the difference between those two sources is not really intelligible, because force is always relational. Hence there is no power of domination without a subject, and there is no subject without a power. Indeed, Foucault claims in the method chapter:

Power comes from below; that is, there is no binary and all-encompassing opposition between rulers and ruled at the root of power relations, and serving as a general matrix--no such duality extending from the top down and reacting on more and more limited groups to the very depths of the social body. One must suppose rather that the manifold relationships of force that take shape and come into play in the machinery of production, in families, limited groups, and institutions, are the basis for wide-ranging effects of cleavage that run through the social body as a whole.... Major dominations are the hegemonic effects that are sustained by all these confrontations.<sup>5</sup>

Domination such as Foucault describes is maintained and reinforced at every level of the social body. It is part of the social ecosystem. The two dynamics of subjectification are not separable in their

implementation, in fact they are mutually reinforcing and co-dependent. In this way, identity is constituted as an arm of hegemonic domination, and hegemonic domination is constituted as an arm of identity; the two cannot be separated when they are conditioned by an apparatus such as sexuality.

## **2. Resistance**

One of the main tasks of Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality* was debunking what he termed the "repressive hypothesis." This theory claimed that cultural and governmental forces had conspired over the past centuries to stifle true discourses on sex and mold the sexuality of the populace to their ends of reproduction and labor force participation. The counter attack that the repressive hypothesis proposed was the liberation of the sexuality from the oppressive repression of these Victorian mores and capitalist governments. This counter attack would be achieved by inciting and perpetuating true and unrepressed discourses on sexuality that would constitute sexuality on its own terms and form a united front against the agents of repression. Foucault rejects this analysis on the grounds of his theory of sexuality as an apparatus that subjectifies the individual. As we saw earlier from page 98 of the *History*, this theory concludes that there is no neutral substrate of sexuality underneath the discourses that constitute it. The theory of resistance, then, needs a complete reworking.

In his *History of Sexuality* Foucault begins to articulate such a theory of resistance. In the method chapter, Foucault describes resistances as “the odd term in relations of power; they are inscribed in the latter as an irreducible opposite. Hence they too are distributed in irregular fashion: the points, knots, or focuses of resistances are spread over time and space at varying densities.”<sup>6</sup> Resistances are not strategically unified, but instead they form with and as integral parts of power relations. These resistances are the bloom of the human encounter with power relations. Such encounters create knots and swirls and eddies where force doesn’t flow freely but is obscured and diverted and frictive. As such, resistances, as relations of force, are based in the most local, most personal exchanges and dynamics. Indeed, Foucault goes further to claim that:

Are there no great radical ruptures, massive binary divisions, then? Occasionally, yes. But more often one is dealing with mobile and transitory points of resistance, producing cleavages in a society that shifts about, fracturing unities and effecting regroupings, furrowing across individuals themselves, cutting them up and remolding them, marking off irreducible regions in them, in their bodies and minds.<sup>7</sup>

Individuals are here the loci of resistances in power relations. In the context of sexuality, they are at once subjectified by and resistant to these power relations.

Their identity is created by these strategies of power while they also resist these same strategies. Thus an individual is cut up and remolded in a way that subverts their identity. This subversion of identity is itself a form of resistance. In the beginning of the method chapter, Foucault claims that “power must be understood in the first instance as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization.”<sup>8</sup> This power is everywhere, and resistance takes place when the structures put in place by power are subverted, challenged, changed, or denied. By its nature, resistance can happen anywhere and in any context, because resistances and power are immanent to each other, constantly entwined in every instance.

### **3. Care of the Self**

One way to stake a position contrary to and undermine the power of *scientia sexualis* is to interpret and employ its known counterpart, *ars erotica*. Through constituting for oneself a different mode of sexuality, focused on bodies and pleasures, one destabilizes the categories and relations of force that the *scientia sexualis* establishes and maintains. *Epimeleia heautou*, “take care of yourself,” is similarly directed. Taking an interest in the self is not a process of careful observation such as is enjoined in the *scientia sexualis*. It is a constant practice, like the *ars erotica*,

a way of being, or a precise attention to and awareness of how we are constantly producing our being and an effort to exert conscious control over that. In this way, take care of yourself implores an ethics of the self, or an ethical practice. Ethics are not a set of goals so much as a set of practices, a part of “practical wisdom.” Just as sexuality creates a field of force relations that affect actions and behaviors constantly, this inner directed practice of taking care of yourself modifies or affects force relations constantly. Hence the care of the self constitutes a resistance to the apparatus of sexuality and a critique of the subjectification it engenders.

### **3.1 Sexuality and Solitude**

In *Sexuality and Solitude*, Foucault distinguishes four types of techniques: techniques of production, techniques of communication, techniques of domination, and techniques of the self. Whereas techniques of domination involve the social body disciplining and giving form to the individual, techniques of the self are “techniques that permit individuals to effect, by their own means, a certain number of operations on their own bodies, their own souls, their own thoughts, their own conduct, and this in a manner so as to transform themselves, modify themselves, and to attain a certain state of perfection, happiness, purity, supernatural power.”<sup>9</sup> In this way, the results of techniques of the self and techniques of domination are similar: they

form the body and mind of an individual. The crucial difference between the two is the source of the shape of the subject that results. In domination, the shape is imposed from without, in accordance with strategies and through the machinations of an apparatus that have implications far beyond the particular subject in question. Techniques of the self are imposed from within; their source and their authority is internal to the subject, and hence they are more malleable from the point of view of that subject.

Of course, techniques of the self and techniques of domination can also be intertwined. In *Sexuality and Solitude*, Foucault describes how in the history of Christian societies (i.e. western societies), confession, a technique that both produces knowledge and modifies the self, was incorporated into a system of domination. The church enjoined confession by its adherents, and its domination was founded in part in the way its principles of truth guided and judged this confession. The injunction to confess produced discourses about the subject, and the principles of truth judged and molded these discourses. In particular, discourses about sexuality were of paradigm importance. Sexuality came to symbolize the false, deceitful, untrue ideas and thoughts that Christian confession would root out. Thus arose a particular technique of the self. Not only did the Christians impose a sphere of domination on their followers, they demanded that they be their own

harshest critics, they bear witness against themselves and be the first watch against their own uprising. This imposition or inculcation of this technique of the self that was also a technique of production facilitated domination from above and created domination from within. The molding of a human being proceeded from every level of its existence and through all possible techniques.

Indeed, confession, this Christian technique of the self, concerned itself also with producing a certain way of being, one of purity. “The criterion of purity ... consists in discovering the truth in myself and defeating the illusions in myself, in cutting out the images and thoughts my mind continuously produces.”<sup>10</sup> The relationship of purity is a kind of a relationship to oneself. Purity is not a state, as we see above; rather it is a constant practice, a vigilance against error, an undying fealty to the truth of the Christian dogma, which demands excision of sexual thoughts. Through this commitment to the ethical practice of purity, the practitioner’s relationship to themselves becomes subsumed within the apparatus of Christianity. So their subjection through a relationship with themselves and a relationship with outside forces is unified under the apparatus of Christianity and its dogma. This unification of techniques of subjectification under one apparatus consolidates the strength of the apparatus and solidifies its dominance.

### 3.2 Care of the Self as Resistance

Once we have a way of understanding power where the unit of power is force, then we understand that we can participate in the realm of power by participating in the realm of force relations. Participation on this level, the most local and the most personal level, is colored at all times by the way of being of the subject involved. Force relations are just that – relations. Invisible currents that pervade our space and interact with us at all times. Because they are pervasive and immanent to our lives at every moment, our every action, every detail in the shape of our lives, affects them. So to have an intentional effect on force relations at this level, we must make ourselves on this level; we must give shape to ourselves on this level; and to do this is to pursue techniques of the self. Taking an interest in the direction of the techniques of the self and to take ownership for them is called taking care of yourself.

Sexuality is an apparatus of power and knowledge. It is composed of techniques of knowledge and tactics of power, and it encompasses many strategic aims. These can make sexuality appear institutional in its scope and scale; so monolithic and powerful that it is incomprehensible to the mind and invulnerable to the spirit. But Foucault asserts, in the rule of double conditioning, that

[n]o “local center,” no “pattern of transformation” could function if, through a series of sequences, it did not eventually

enter into an over-all strategy. And inversely, no strategy could achieve comprehensive effects if [it] did not gain support from precise and tenuous relations serving, not as its point of applications or final outcome, but as its prop and anchor point. There is no discontinuity between them, as if one were dealing with two different levels (one microscopic and the other macroscopic); but neither is there homogeneity (as if the one were only the enlarged projection or the miniaturization of the other); rather, one must conceive of the double conditioning of a strategy by the specificity of possible tactics, and of tactics by the strategic envelope that makes them work.<sup>11</sup>

Hence strategies of power always retain human beings as a key element; our human capacity to exercise force is a limiting factor on how force expresses itself. The strategies that Foucault talks about are on such a large scale and are simultaneously so tightly coordinated because they exist from the ground up, and every detail is attended to explicitly and extensively by an agent pursuing tactics of power. At every level of abstraction the strategy is pursued as intensely as possible because the strategy simultaneously is composed of and makes efficacious tactics that are actually employed and pursued. These tactics exist at a human level. Deconstructed in this way, strategies of power lose none of their force and potency, but they reveal a facet of their intelligibility, as tactics of power, which we as humans can understand and interact with.

This is in fact exactly what Foucault claims power to be: “the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization.”<sup>12</sup> These force relations are intelligible to individuals. Consider, then the idea of resisting force relations. Since relations of force are constantly active, their resistance must be constantly active. Indeed, the force relations are immanent in their operation, they are always already present. They constitute a kind of current of society. So resistances must happen on the level of this current, of this always already present; they must take the form of dynamics. Moreover, they must be an intentional participation in dynamics on the level of the current of force relations. So the resistance to force relations takes the form of an activity that is itself immanent to participation in society. This is how Foucault sees the injunction *epimeleia heautou*, “take care of yourself” as a critique of sexuality. Taking an interest in one’s way of being means one directs it and affects it. Modifying this “way of being” exerts autonomy over one’s immanent and implicit participation in the field of force relations.

The care of the self is an explicit intention to modify the self, reflexively defined, through techniques of the self. This practice is different from and a renunciation of the subjectivity discussed earlier in this paper. Where the earlier subjectivity was composed of an identity and of domination, always intertwined, this idea of the self is a constant practice of altering the self, of

making the self. This practice necessarily conflicts with these two senses of subjectification, destabilizing their immanence in the lives of individuals and providing a feeling of distance from them that makes the possibility of remaking this subjection more real.

## Notes:

1. Michel Foucault, "Culture of the Self", 13 Jul. 2010 (Youtube, Apolloxias's channel) 7:00.
2. Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction*, tr. Robert Hurley (Vintage Books, New York, 1990) 60.
3. Ibid. 60.
4. Ibid. 98.
5. Ibid. 94.
6. Ibid. 96.
7. Ibid. 96.
8. Ibid. 92.
9. Michel Foucault, *Sexuality and Solitude*, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Robert Hurley and others (The New Press, New York, 1997) 177.
10. Ibid. 183.
11. Foucault, *History of Sexuality* 99-100.
12. Ibid. 92.

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