Ethics for a contemporary mobile world

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Abstract

Michel Foucault is well known for his earlier archaeological and genealogical periods. In comparison, Foucault’s later ethical period, which includes works such as The Use of Pleasure (1985) (UP) and The Care of the Self (1986) (CS) explore ‘practices of the self’ (Davidson 1986:221). In UP, Foucault explores the ‘self’s relationship to self’ or what he terms ethics, focusing predominantly on the self’s constitution of self as a moral agent. CS, though an ongoing elaboration of ethics, primarily discusses a dominant theme within ethics, that is, a certain epoch in time when care of the self was a dominant mode of ethics.

Ethics and care of the self however, are often conflated within the literature. This may result in a perception that ethics and care of the self are necessarily connected. Yet some styles of life may have little to do with ethics – or may be thoroughly infused with ethical obligations. Care of self may exist in tension with ethics or may infuse only one aspect of ethics. Decoupling ethics from care of the self may produce interesting contemporary examples of new lifestyles that are yet to be acknowledged in a contemporary mobile world.

Introduction

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styles of life may have little to do with ethics – or may be thoroughly infused with ethical obligations. Care of self may exist in tension with ethics or may infuse only one aspect of ethics. Decoupling ethics from care of the self may produce interesting contemporary examples of new lifestyles that are yet to be acknowledged in a contemporary mobile world.

Conflating ethics and care of the self

Though Foucault’s later works have been broadly underutilized, fairly recent attention has occurred in areas such as philosophy, marketing, accounting, sociology, culture, the medical humanities, nursing, politics, education, and information technology. There is however a general conflation in the literature between his conceptualization of ethics (1984d/1985:28-30) that is, the self’s relationship to oneself, (1984a:352) and care of the self or epimeleia heautou, as a dominant form of ethics (1984c/1986:43) during the Hellenistic and Greco-Roman culture of Ancient Greece (1984a:359). The former is his predominant concern in UP and the first section of a work in progress article (1984a), whilst the latter is his focus in CS and the latter part of the same article.

There are a number of reasons for the conflation. Firstly, it rests in part on Foucault’s articulation on practices of the self concerning both ethics and care of the self in his various interviews concerning generally, his later works and his preliminary formulations. A common venture within UP and CS concerns Foucault’s lament that, ‘I must confess that I am much more interested in problems about techniques of the self and things like that than sex … sex is boring’ (1984a:340). Both texts concern practices of the self, the first, practices of the self as conceptualized through ethics, the second, practices of the self through care of the self as a dominant mode of ethics.

Yet this seems to be connected to the second reason for the conflation, that is, a general failure to undertake a close reading of Foucault’s later works. This includes texts such as UP and CS, but also his ‘corpus’ (Kritzman 1990) of articles, interviews and seminars. This can lead to a ‘cherry-picking’ of his ideas and concepts (Schurich and McKenzie 2005) or a general failure to recognize distinctions in his work that are developed in his constant rearticulations and reflections regarding the overall aims of his work. Though my understanding of Foucault’s work is not ‘a true or accurate representation of his
work’ (Scheurich and McKenzie 2005: 841), I do find that it is increasingly important to read his works in chronological order simply because he constantly re-articulates his goals and aims, re-evaluates his own current position in the context of his last writings and acknowledges his successes and failures in his previous works. Foucault’s later period is no exception to this consistent reviewing of his work and what “he really meant”.

The third reason for conflating ethics with care of the self rests in an application of his genealogical method to practices of the self generally. A distinction can be made within his later works that ethics and care of the self, reflect more precisely the self as an active subject in the constitution of self, as opposed to the self as object, as a passive subject being constituted in, and by, theoretical discourses and discursive practices (1984b/1988:11), as is often presented in his genealogical period. Some of the contemporary care of the self literature still reflects a genealogical approach towards the subject, rather than presenting the subject’s articulation of self. The latter period’s active subject is also a reflection of Foucault’s concept of ‘relationships of power’ (Foucault 1984b/1988 p. 11) as productive, and as a reduction of the effect of power relations as coercive: ‘the practice of self, which would allow these games of power to be played with a minimum of domination’ (Foucault 1984b/1988:18). Thus ethics and care of the self are generally conflated into practices of the self as an overall theme within a genealogical preoccupation.

The next section focuses on the distinction Foucault made between his conceptualization of ethics and care of the self.

**Distinguishing ethics and care of the self**

One of the ways of recognizing the distinction between Foucault’s conceptualization of ethics and care of the self rests in the reasons why he was interested in care of the self. In the first half of his work in progress article (1984a:340) and in UP, he discusses the four characteristics of ethics. That is, the *substance éthique* (ethical substance), the *mode d’assujettissement* (mode of subjection), the *techne* (self-forming activity) or *travail éthique* (ethical work) (Foucault 1984d/1985:27) and the *teleology* or *telos* (the goal of ethical work) (Foucault 1984a:352-358). He then applies these to ‘the Greeks’ noting that
the *mode* (mode of subjection) of the Greeks ‘was a politico-aesthetic choice’ (Foucault 1984a:357). This ‘politico-aesthetic choice’ is dominated by care of the self as presented in the second half of that article and as articulated more fully in CS.

In the same article, Foucault is asked ‘What is the care of the self which you have decided to treat separately in *Le Souci de soi* [CS]?’ to which he provides various responses, including, his interest in *epimeleia heautou* (taking care of one’s self) in the Hellenistic and Greco-Roman culture (1984a:359); his interest in ascetic themes and austerity practices ordinarily attributed to Christianity but developed during the time of ‘care of the self’ which ‘Christians later directly borrowed’ (1984a:361); and the choice people made about this existence (1984a:361).

These articulations are subsequently taken further in an interview with Foucault in early 1984 (1984c/1994) where he is asked: ‘Ethics is what is achieved in the search for or the care of the self?’ He replies:

> In the Greco-Roman world, the care of the self was the *mode* [emphasis added] in which individual freedom – or civic liberty, up to a point – was reflected as an ethics. If you take a whole series of texts going from the first Platonic dialogues up to the major texts of late Stoicism - Epictetus, Marcus Aurelius, and so on – you will see that the theme of the care of the self thoroughly permeated moral reflection (1984c/1994:284).

I emphasize *mode* to more fully reflect that care of the self was a dominant mode within Foucault’s conceptualization of ethics as applied to Greek and Hellenistic culture. Further on, Foucault also talks of *care of the self* as permeating the other aspects of his conceptualization of ethics:

> I believe that among the Greeks and Romans – especially the Greeks – concern with the self and care of the self were required for right conduct and the proper practice of freedom, in order to know oneself [*se connaître*] … as well as to form oneself, to surpass oneself, to master the appetites that threaten to overwhelm one (1984c/1994:285).

He concludes:

> What we have here is an *entire ethics* [emphasis added] revolving around the care of the self; this is what gives ancient ethics, its particular form. *I am not saying that ethics is synonymous with the care of the self* [emphasis added], but that, in antiquity, ethics as the conscious practice of freedom has revolved around this

Thus ‘care of the self’ was the ethical mode of subjection of Greek culture at a certain point in history. In particular, care of the self was such a dominant mode that it also permeated all other aspects of Foucault’s conceptualization of ethics, that is, the ethical substance - the aphrodesia of the Greeks - the various self-forming activities or ethical work and the telos of which care of the self aimed at self-mastery. Care of the self is therefore a particular historical expression of the mode, and as Foucault states, resulted in ‘an entire ethics’ during the Hellenistic and Greco-Roman culture. Thus CS, focuses on a dominant theme within ethics, particularly, the problematization of sexual behaviour during that epoch.

Yet there is not a necessary correlation between ethics and care of the self. Conceptually, a particular culture’s ethics, as discussed by Foucault, may be entirely different from the Greco-Roman culture discussed by Foucault whose entire ethics focused on a care for self. For example, and as Foucault argues, the Christian period following the Greco-Roman period focused on renunciation of self which produced an entirely different ethics to that of care of the self. Though there may have been an overlay between certain technes, ultimately the other aspects of ethics differed widely and the overall orientation was different from the Greek imperative ‘take care of yourself’ (Foucault 1982/1994:228). As Foucault notes:

"In the Christian book … I try to show that all this ethics has changed. Because the telos has changed: the telos is immortality, purity, and so on. The asceticism has changed, because now self-examination takes the form of self-deciphering. The mode diassujettissement is now divine law. And I think that even the ethical substance has changed, because it is not aphrodesia, but desire, concupiscence, flesh, and so on (1984a:358)."

On that basis Foucault’s ethics can be disengaged from care of the self as a methodological tool and thus utilized separately. It may be that in an application and analysis of ethics during a particular period, the overall focus of a particular ethics may be the antithesis of care of the self as was found in the Christian renunciation of self. By decoupling ethics from care of the self, there may be room for interesting research that finds different conceptions of ‘self’ that are far removed from the Greek imperative of ‘take care of oneself’. There may very well be ‘styles of life’ as Davidson argues
(Davidson 1986:124-125) that express an ethics in the constitution of different subjectivities.

I turn now to examples in the literature that conflate ethics with care of the self.

**Literature on ethics and care of the self**

St Pierre’s article, *Care of the Self: The Subject and Freedom* (2004) based on her unpublished PhD dissertation, focuses on the construction of subjectivity in older, white southern women. Her work primarily focuses on ‘subject constitution’ via practices of the self, however it tends to literally conflate ethics with care of the self. St Pierre asserts that both UP and CS ‘examine care of the self for the ancient Greeks’ (2004:335) and further that ‘Care of the self has four major aspects’ noting Foucault’s conceptualization of ethics (2004:339). St Pierre also ‘theorises the four aspects of care of the self for these older women …’ (2004:342) again according to Foucault’s conceptualization of ethics. St. Pierre does note a distinction between these texts, however without emphasizing care of the self as an intensification of practices of the self (2004:338).

In presenting a literal conflation of ethics with care of the self, St Pierre’s work develops a tension that is left unexplained. St. Pierre articulates that the *ethics* of women in Milton are:

> The ethical substance – the part of the self to be worked on by ethics – is the sinful part of a humanist self, that part of a unified, stable self that is flawed and unable to sustain the love and duty expected by one’s personal God … the mode of subjection … officially, through divine law and, unofficially, through the women’s desire, much like that of the ancient Greeks, to have a beautiful existence as defined by their culture. … Their arts of existence, practices of the self, or self-forming activity, are many … The telos of Milton women – the goal of their work – is to be immortal and to live forever with God. However, the path to immortality is marked by other goals that contribute to an ‘ethics of pleasure” and “an ethics of control” (2004:344).

In contrast, St Pierre’s conception of *care of the self* as a social practice for the women of Milton is articulated as:

> Within friendship relations, they practice self-formation in elaborate, aesthetic rituals that privilege what they value – learning something new every day, self-discipline, an attention to detail that expresses beauty and love, doing their duty to themselves and others, and remaining cheerful in the face of adversity. Their practices of the self in friendship relations – practices that both accommodate and
resist the codes that control them – move into their more public practices, their jobs, and their community and mark their patriarchal culture in very distinct ways (2004:344).

There is a tension in St Pierre’s work\textsuperscript{10} between an ethics of Milton women which focuses on Christian values and a renunciation of self - ‘the official version’; and care of the self as practiced by Milton women which affirms self-constitution in the beautification of one’s life - the ‘unofficial’ version. The latter version seems to be a resistance to ‘the codes that control them’ and the ‘official’ ethical canon. St Pierre acknowledges this tension, describing this conflict as ‘sites of resistance and freedom’ (2004:342) in the constitution of women’s subjectivities within a strong patriarchal culture. However, this tension seems to indicate that ethics for Milton women are not primarily concerned with ‘know thyself’, as would be argued by Foucault with respect to Christian ethics in the renunciation of self, but rather, care of the self as an affirmation of self, which challenges that presumption.

Chambon and Irving’s article (2003), is an example of the second type of conflation. It applies a very limited notion of care of the self to artistic works of art - purely as a practice of self - without articulating the elements that make up care of the self. For instance, elements such as knowledge of self; truth and principles that comprise accepted conduct; creating time for oneself that results in a labour on oneself; being engaged in a true social practice which is embedded in customary practices – which result in a conversion of self – are discussed in CS (Foucault 1984e/1986:45-67).

Quite a few articles fall into the third type of conflation, applying a genealogical approach to an analysis of ethics and care of the self. For example, Ken McPhail (1997), applies Foucault’s conceptualization of ethics to accounting education and its implication for students, in particular, the way a rationalist model may ‘actively subjugate other, emotional modes of subjection’ (1997:18). White and Hunt readily acknowledge that they apply a genealogical approach (2000:97 & 101) towards the construction of self within citizenship\textsuperscript{11} even though they acknowledge ethics as the way ‘through which we constitute ourselves as ethical beings’ (2000:97). The difference is whether the focus rests on discursive self-constitution of subject as object (genealogy) as opposed to the subject’s own articulation of self-constitution, utilizing discursive knowledge in the

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articulation of self as subject (ethics). Mark Hayter alludes to this in his exploration of ‘practices of self’ in contraceptive counselling between nurses and contraceptive-using women. Hayter examines ‘how nurses instruct contraceptive-using women in self-care practices’ finding that nurses ‘utilize the discourse of risk as a technique to reinforce and develop self-care practices’ and also ‘instruct women in the development of self-care regimen’ (2006:33). Though Hayter focuses on the implementation of medical discourse in the form of risk regimes, he acknowledges the need to account for women’s modification or resistance to self-examination techniques (2006:41) in particular, research that explores contraceptive instruction from the women users’ perspective …’ (2006:41). This latter aspect is more representative of Foucault’s later work and his emphasis on the active subject.

**Decoupling ethics from care of the self**

Two articles that clearly focus on Foucault’s conceptualization of ethics are Moisander and Pesonen’s work with eco-communards (2002) and Aycock’s examination of internet discourse surrounding chess (1995). Both articles apply the four aspects of ethics (uncoupled from care of the self) to produce interesting contemporary examples of a praxis of ethics. Moisander and Pesonen articulate eco-communards overall practice of self as “resistance by not resisting” by ‘their pursuit of “changing the world”, with ‘the main focus’ being ‘an attempt to change themselves’. One mode of subjection is ‘a mutual quest for “community”, which guides and constrains people in these communes” (2002:340). Aycock identifies each aspect of ethics to produce some interesting results concerning self-fashioning (souci de soi). Aycock identifies that the inner substance is ‘a romantic image of “strength” or a modernist image of “skill” (1995:2); the mode of subjection requires a keeping of one’s “cool”; (1995:3) self-forming activities focus on ‘the intensity of personal routines’ that involve improving skill via rules of play and technical information whilst ‘the goal of personal transformation is the formal mastery of chess’ (1995:6). Both these articles focus on the subject’s articulation of self.

**Conclusion**

There is a general conflation within the literature between Foucault’s conceptualization of ethics and care of the self. Much of my concern with the conflation rests on the failure
to acknowledge that care of the self dominated ethics during a particular period of time. This conflation in turn tends to lead to an assumption that care of the self must be present in any analysis of ethics or that ethics and care of the self are necessarily connected. Yet decoupling ethics from care of the self may produce interesting contemporary examples of new lifestyles that are yet to be acknowledged in a contemporary mobile world.

Footnotes


3 The original publication date in French precedes the publication date in English. See Scheurick & McKenzie (2005:862, Fnb 2).

4 See Davidson (1986:221) and Scheurich and McKenzie (2005).

5 See McPhail (1997); Aycock (1995); Hayter (2006); Peters (2003); White & Hunt (2000).


7 I use two translations of the same interview. See: *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth* (1994) and the final *foucault* (1988).

8 Foucault argues certain *technes* originally attributed to Christian ascetics originated in Greek ethics.


10 I have not read St Pierre’s unpublished thesis.

11 They also tend to equate ethics with care of self (2000:97).

References


