

The Glory of Nicocles: Foucault's Greeks & the Inegalitarian Underside of the Professional-managerial Class

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"I must have a kind of glory, which will survive me, and this glory cannot be dissociated from aesthetic value. So political power, glory, immortality, and beauty are all linked at a certain moment..."

Michel Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics", 265.

"And, although the universal juridicism of modern society seems to fix limits on the exercise of power, its universally widespread panopticism enables it to operate, on the underside of the law, a machinery that is both immense and minute, which supports, reinforces, multiplies the asymmetry of power ..."

Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 223.

1. Tensions in the late Foucault & Anomalies in his Reception

A strange thing confronts the critical reader of Michel Foucault's famous interviews on the "aesthetics of existence" he finds in the classical Greek ethicists. On the one hand, Foucault disavows any nostalgia for a past age, or narrative of some "fall" from a pristine beginning into the forms of modern disciplinary and biopower his 1970s works had examined (294-5): "no, I am not looking for an alternative" (256). He does not find the classical Greeks exemplary (259). The ethical practices of "care of the self" which he examines in the *History of Sexuality* volumes were, first of all, the province of a tiny male elite. "The Greek ethics of pleasure is linked to a virile society, to dissymmetry, exclusion of the other, an obsession with penetration, and a kind of threat of being dispossessed of you own energy, and so on. All that is quite disgusting!" (258) This was an ethics governed by the imperative "not to be a slave" (285). As such, it was political all the way up, or down. "The relation with politics is obvious" (293): tied to a deeply inegalitarian social order, one in which slaves and women were considered passive and incapable of a fully ethical life (285), and configured on the basis of a self-politicizing internalization of external relations of domination (one must master one's pleasures and drives, so as not to be enslaved by them). "Freedom for the Greeks signifies non-slavery The problem is already entirely political" (285). If this was an "aesthetics" of self-beautification, Foucault avows, it was also "both aesthetic and political, which were directly linked ... political power, glory, immortality, and beauty are all linked at a certain moment. That's the *mode d'assujettissement...*" (265). But this is bad, seemingly, in some moments in the interviews: "why couldn't everyone's life become a work of art?", Foucault for instance asks in an egalitarian voice (261).

On the other hand, when it comes to explaining why his late works nevertheless look to these "disgusting" Greeks, Foucault contradicts his more pro-egalitarian formulations distancing himself from the aristocratic ethics which form his principal subject, certainly in volume 2 of *History of Sexuality*. From a vision of the ethics of the Greek masters as political and unappealing, it is a question of seeing in them a counter-ideal to modern forms of "normalizing" which is at once apolitical and, as such, potentially liberating in some way, and for some addressee(s).

If Foucault is interested in the Greek "aesthetic of existence", he tells us in this vein, it is actually because it *was not* tied to any specific political forms: "I think we have to get rid of the idea of an analytic or necessary link between ethics and other social or economic structures" (261). The Greeks' ethics was "centered on a problem of personal choice, of the aesthetics of existence" at a kind of distance from all political structures: "the idea of a *bios* as a material for an aesthetic piece of art is something that fascinates me. The idea also can be a very strong structure of

existence, without any relation with the juridical per se, with an authoritarian system, with a disciplinary structure. All that is very interesting" (260). Whilst forms of knowledge were incorporated into this ethics, the ancient "care of the self" was also distant from "scientific knowledge" in anything like its modern, normalizing modalities (281). This was an ethics of freedom, "the mode in which individual freedom—or civic liberty, up to a point [sic.]—was reflected as an ethics" (284). At least (we suppose) for those capable of practicing it in the ancient world, "no one is obliged ... to behave in such a way as to be truthful to their wives, to not touch boys, and so on" (260). It was a "non-coercive" form of power of the self over the self (281-2). Unlike modern, post-Christian forms of ethics, it did not sever desire from pleasure. Its *telos* was simply "the beautiful existence, a good reputation ... the beauty or glory of existence" (266). Its later modern inspiration, as such, was not Jean-Paul Sartre, who appeals to an idea of authenticity which Foucault doubts, but the German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche (262).

But how could this Greek ethics at once be severed from all political existence, all authoritarian structures, *and* be predicated on slavery—that is, conceived as a project of a male elite interested in active "non-slavery", even to their own drives, and in beautifying themselves "to rule others" (266)? How could it be considered apolitical, "without any relation to" political structures, when the glorious beauty at issue directly involves how one relates to others, and is "already entirely political" (251); indeed, how "one commands others", "an art of governing", including over women and slaves in one's household (266, 287)? At the same time, how can Foucault at one moment decry the whole spectacle of such ethics as "disgusting", only to within two pages enter into long elaborations of this "disgusting" model as "fascinating", "useful" to analyze with a view to a contemporary ethics, a "practice of freedom", etc.? Foucault is a brilliant intellectual. So, we should be loath to assign such obvious contradictions to inattention or incompetence.

A further, equally obvious and fundamental tension nevertheless operates in terms of Foucault's periodization of ancient ethics. At issue is the ambivalent place occupied in his genealogy of ethics by the Hellenistic and Roman authors and schools of philosophy, led by the Stoics (4th century BCE-2nd century CE). Again, within these famous interviews alone, there are passages in which the Stoics are treated as wholly of one cloth with the authors of the classical period (6th-4th century BCE). It is hence the "Greco-Roman world" which we should contrast *en bloc* with the "Christian" world, for Foucault, when it comes to understanding how care of the self came in the West to be reconceived, after a certain moment, "as a form of self-love, a form of selfishness or self-interest in contradiction with the interest to be shown in

others ..." (284). The "concern with freedom was an essential and permanent problem for eight full centuries of ancient culture": again, *en bloc* (285).

On the other hand, Foucault stresses in these interviews, as in *History of Sexuality* and *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, that the care of the self of the Hellenistic and Roman periods cannot be read as wholly continuous with the classical age. (It will be the distinctions between the texts of these periods that divide *History of Sexuality* volume 2 from *History of Sexuality* volume 3). In Stoicism, Foucault will even say that "a kind of elision of pleasure" already begins, which the Christians and then moderns reframe and develop (268). Let's give here just one example of this important periodizing distinction, which is especially telling. Long before Immanuel Kant's universal, categorical imperative for right actions, Foucault notes, the *mode de assujettissement* of the Stoic ethics changes: "they move slowly from an idea of aesthetics of existence to the idea that we must do such and such a thing because we are rational beings" (264). Foucault illustrates by contrast with the "glory" of a figure like Nicocles (265). In Isocrates, this aristocratic "ruler of Cyprus" explains why he has been faithful to his wife:

Because I am the king, and because as someone who commands others, who rules others, I have to show that I am able to rule myself'. And you can see that this rule of faithfulness has nothing to do with universal and Stoic formulations: 'I have to be faithful to my wife because I am a human and rational being.' In the former case, it is because I am the king! (264).

We see this difference loud and clear. But we may also feel pulled in two directions by it. On the one hand, if we suppose that universal morality just is always "bad", normalizing, hostile to difference and intrusively coercive (which we might well do on the basis of Foucault's genealogical works), then Nicocles' glorious masterly self-avowal looks liberating. Nicocles is free from any symmetrical obligation to treat his wife or other Cypriots as equals. For his status as a ruler makes him "different" from anyone else in his polis--hierarchy is a form of difference and plurality. On the other hand, this decisionistic "because I am the King!" might strike some readers as irrational--indeed, as an especially brutal tautological expression of the groundless basis of what Foucault elsewhere calls "domination", over against "power". Foucault will profess himself, in the same interviews we are discussing, to be opposed to all such domination: that is, forms of power relation in which the different places and players in the "game" are non-reversible, as they surely are when it comes to a King like Nicocles (298-300). Foucault will even close the interview "The Ethics of the Concern for the Self as a Practice of Freedom" by almost identifying philosophy *itself*

with “that which calls into question domination at every level and in every form in which it exists ...” (300). Yet, the glory of Nicocles shines for Foucault, precisely as an expression of his liberating masterly difference from universal-juridical forms of subjectivation.

Our uneasy sense of this gaping contradiction hardly diminishes when, two pages after adducing Nicocles’ declaration of his own independence in “On the Genealogy of Ethics”, Foucault stresses that the form of “mastery of oneself” of a “Nicocles or Alcibiades” is contrasted with the Stoic interpellation of individuals as “rational beings” precisely in its being far more *non-reciprocal or hierarchical*.

I think the difference is that in the classical perspective, to be master of oneself meant, firstly, taking into account only oneself and not the others, because to be master of oneself meant that you were able to rule others. So, mastery of oneself was directly related to a dissymmetrical relation to others. You should be master of yourself in a sense of activity, dissymmetry, and nonreciprocity ... (267)

By contrast, when it comes to the Stoic *mode de assujettissement*, with its almost proto-modern, proto-juridical universalism and implication in the natural law tradition:

You have to be master of yourself because you are a rational being. And in this master of yourself, you are related to other people, who are masters of themselves. And this new kind of relation to the other is much less nonreciprocal than before. (267)

So again, we want to ask: if Foucault really wishes for forms of power “games” which are as open as possible (300), in which people can reverse their places as often and diversely as possible (this being the usual, broadly “new Left” reception of his work (298)), shouldn’t he be attracted to the more reciprocal form of care of the self in the Stoics amongst the ancients, as against the aristocratic self-aestheticizing of Nicocles or Alcibiades? Why then is it the latter “exercise of freedom” which is most strongly, unequivocally counterposed with the putatively negative, restrictive, and universalizing forms of Christian care of the self and then modern power in his work?

Could Foucault be on the one hand committed to opposing asymmetrical domination, yet, on the other, precisely attracted to such nonreciprocal forms of ethics, in which the masters at least could still enjoy a freedom denied to others, unobligated to treat them with norms of reciprocity? Indeed, is one thing in play in

these famous later Foucauldian texts a representation of the openly hierarchical kinds of ethics celebrated amongst the intellectuals by the sophists, but soon questioned by Socrates and the post-Socratic philosophers; now presented as an exercise in “difference”, in order to appeal to the new Left sensibilities of Foucault’s readers--when here, it is a “difference” between masters and slaves closer to Friedrich Nietzsche’s self-avowed “aristocratic radicalism”² than to any egalitarian Leftist position? And could “difference” thereby be operating in this later Foucauldian work as an oblique apologia for forms of domination, based in a contentiously selective reading of ancient ideas, attracted exactly *least* to those dimensions of Hellenistic and Roman ideas which ground later socio-ethical advances towards egalitarian social forms?

This essay will take Foucault’s own egalitarian disavowals opposing “domination”, and his plaintive “why can’t everyone” (make their life a work of art), at face value--albeit accepting the cost that his interviews admit of clear and problematic inconsistencies. What I find more interesting is how Foucault himself is, at different times, *so open* about the inegalitarian political realities of the Greek ethics he is presenting as a practice of freedom. Nevertheless, readily reassured by the disavowals mentioned, Foucault’s readers regularly omit these political avowals in Foucault’s interviews, and indeed, within his dedicated texts on the Greeks and Romans. So, in a recent review of a critical book on the later Foucault, we read without blinking:

In Greco-Roman antiquity, forms of subjectification have ‘scattered origins’ (93) and engaging in them is a matter of ‘personal choice’ (93). However, unlike their modern counterparts, *they are not entangled within generalized mechanisms of domination*. This makes them ‘practices of freedom’ (93). In contrast, *modern practices of ethical personhood suppress freedom ...*³

Does the author here mean that ancient slavery is not a “generalized mechanism of domination”, which does not “suppress freedom”, and if so, by what oblique, highly selective political measure are we being asked to judge? Does s/he mean that relations between masters and wives in which the former could pursue extramarital relations denied to the latter, who could in addition not participate in political life, be a citizen, and more, were not relations of domination, even on Foucaultian grounds? The only possible, charitable reading is that the “not ... generalized” means to differentiate the aristocratic masters, unsubject to slavery, from their chattels: the oppression is not “generalized”, since the masters are the ones exacting it on the others. In other words, the slaves seem not to be considered in such readings of Foucault; as little in such readings of Foucault on the Greeks as they were by the Greek masters themselves, of whom Foucault writes when he

examines a text like Xenophon's *Oeconomicus*. This simply flies in the face of how clear-sighted Foucault was about all of this:

Freedom for the Greeks signifies non-slavery ... the problem is already entirely political. It is political in that non-slavery to others is a condition: *a slave has no ethics*. Freedom is thus inherently political. (286)

The main target of this paper, from here on, will hence be Foucault's reception as a figure who is often cited as a definitive place-marker and icon of the "new Left": that is, a set of progressive ideas and forces in which putatively egalitarian concerns for culture, race, gender, and sexuality, have supplanted older socialist concerns for political economics, class, labor, and relations of production. The remainder of the paper will argue two things. Firstly (part 2), it will show that Foucault's reading of the Greek and Roman philosophers is deeply selective, and highly inegalitarian and aristocratic. Foucault not only registers the deep inegalitarianism of earlier Greek texts, *qua* historian, but positions precisely these texts (as against the more egalitarian ideas of the Socratic, Hellenistic and Roman philosophers) as potential sources for a new ethics of "freedom" in ways which are hermeneutically, as well as ethico-politically, deeply contentious. Secondly (part 3), I'll argue that the fact that Foucault's radical aristocratism in these later texts, including the most openly inegalitarian passages, have largely been passed over in silence by his commentators both reflects and shows the uneasy inegalitarian underside of today's new Left, whose predominant carriers hail not from the working classes, but from what Barbara and John Ehrenreich and others call the professional-managerial class (PMC).⁴

Our contention here is this. Many progressive or new Left readers very readily pass over the darker passages in Foucault's texts, all avowals of "hermeneutics of suspicion" aside. This is because the great majority of them, as credentialled members of the PMC, share a lived, ongoing experience of professionalized, hierarchized, and individualized labor, to which forms of solidary, as against paternalistic, actions in defense of egalitarian causes, are actually deeply distant and deeply foreign. Accordingly, PMC defenses of progressive non-economic causes (what Nancy Fraser calls "progressive neoliberalism"⁵) conceal a deeply inegalitarian, meritocratic underside which also explains the progressive loss of the old link between nominally Leftist political parties ("New Labor") and the working classes in the US, UK, Australasia, and elsewhere. Professional scholars can so largely "read over" without concern the clearly inegalitarian positions in Foucault (and of course, in a far blunter thinker like Nietzsche), since egalitarianism is no longer a primary value

for them. Instead, their ideological “common sense” is one in which the professional-managerial values of difference, creativity, singularity, becoming, expressivity, and a glorious excellence which Foucault locates in the classical elites predominate.

2. Foucault's Radically Aristocratic Greeks (or “Socrates, re-meet Callicles!”)

Foucault's return to the Greeks in his last work was not the product of his giving way to a sudden antiquarian urge, unrelated to his wider intellectual trajectory. In the important Introduction to *History of Sexuality II*, wherein Foucault reflected on his apparent change of subject matter, he tells us that he was moved by a “curiosity” to “get free of oneself” (HS II, 8). He wanted to discover “if one can think differently than one thinks and perceive differently than one sees”; even to “free thought from what it silently thinks, and enable it to think differently” (HS II, 9).⁶ In particular, Foucault aims to locate a conception of sexuality and subjectivity which could provide a counterpoint, and possible exit, from the modern, normalizing, and biopolitical conception of sexuality, whose antecedents lie in the forms of “confessional” and “pastoral power” established in the Christian heritage (cf. HS II, 20-24, 30-31, 62).

Throughout both of the extant later *History of Sexuality* volumes (that is, volumes 2 and 3 on the Greeks and Romans respectively), and also in the lectures from this period published after Foucault's death, he returns repeatedly to this decisive historical and axiological contrast. This contrast is between Greek (or sometimes “Greco-Roman”) ethics, depicted as (a) a practice of self-subjection involving the free “stylization” of one's life and actions, and hence, (b) responsive to the manifold differences between individuals, times of life, and genders; and Christian (then modern) sexual mores, which are depicted in axiological contrast as (a) “universal” and (b) “code-based”, hence all-levelling and insensitive to differences (HS II, 21, 23, 25, 26, 29-31, 31, 32, 53, 54, 59-60, 62, 89, 91, 106, 150, 169, 182, 200, 209, 210, & 251). It is the former, Greek conception of sexuality, an “aesthetics of existence”, which Foucault is interested in exploring, positioned as a less restrictive and “normalizing” form of ethics than the Christian and modern successor cultures' (HS II, 11-12, 89, 92, 104, 253).

Nevertheless, it is worth considering his presentation of Greek “care of the self” more critically, in particular to ask: *which* exactly are the forms of freedom or difference that Foucault is valorizing in *History of Sexuality II* and contemporary texts?

On one hand, as we saw in contemporary interviews, Foucault is clear in *History of Sexuality II* as well as the *Hermeneutics of the Subject* lectures on the

ancients, that we are mistaken if we imagine him attracted to a hypothetically apolitical ethic of “care of the self” which would not in some way implicate relations to others, and thereby the ancient sociopolitical context.⁷ As in the case of Nicocles, who we know exercised self-mastery exactly as a kind of glorious license to exercise mastery over others⁸, Foucault maintains that the classical aesthetics of existence which he finds especially appealing involves exercises of self-control which, exactly, enable the ethical subject to govern others. In Plato's *Alcibiades*, the care of the self proffered by Socrates to the young, highly politically ambitious Alcibiades is “tied to the exercise of power”⁹ or “the government of others”.¹⁰ Indeed,

this dialogue involved showing Alcibiades that he had to take care of himself. And you know why he had to take care of himself, in both senses of the question “why”? Both because he did not know what exactly was good for the city-state and in what the harmony of citizens consisted and, on the other hand, in order to be able to govern the city-state and take care of his fellow citizens properly, he had to take care of himself, therefore, in order to be able to take care of others.¹¹

But what is the appropriate way to “take care of others”, which others, when, and why? An unabashed anti-universalist, Foucault avows that “the search for a form of morality acceptable to everybody in the sense that everyone should submit to it, strikes me as catastrophic”.¹² What this means is that the way the classical Greek master related to other male property-owning masters would appropriately vary from how he related to tradespersons, merchants, his wife, or his slaves. It is a question of difference here, albeit vertical political differences implicating basic inequalities in power. Indeed, as we again saw in his interviews, Foucault highlights how the Greek master's relation to his own desires and pleasures was modelled on forms of political relation. “Self-mastery and the mastery of others were regarded as having the same form” in the classical Greek texts, Foucault writes that,

since one was expected to govern oneself in the same manner as one governed one's household and played one's role in the city, it followed that the development of personal virtues, of *enkrateia* in particular, was not essentially different from the development *that enabled one to rise above other citizens to a position of leadership* (HS II, 75 [italics ours]).

We'll return to this putative ambition behind all Greek accounts of *enkrateia*, including in the Socratic tradition. The point for the moment is that political relations

to others are inseparable from the ethics Foucault draws out from the classical masters. Indeed, he stresses that such political relations were determinative at the conceptual level, in shaping how such self-care is conceived:

The effort that the individual was urged to bring to bear on himself, the necessary asceticism, had the form of a battle to be fought, a victory to be won in establishing a dominion of self over self, *modeled after domestic or political authority* (HS II, 91-92[italics ours]).

So, what kind of domestic and political authority had this shaping linguistic or conceptual role? Once again, and once we put aside as far as possible any preconception about what we are reading, Foucault does not mince words. The Greek household was “political”, insofar as it enshrined the rule of the male master over the woman-wife (HS II, 84). The complex was one of “ethical virility” (HS II, 83). The relation of man to wife was “[a]n inequality of free beings, therefore, but one that is permanent and based on a natural difference” (HS II, 177) —that is, a form of domination based on a naturalizing ideology of male difference and superiority. This ideology accepted, for example, the freedom of the male to pursue extramarital relations, limited only by his self-mastery, which was denied to the female. As Foucault clarifies, “while the wife belonged to the husband, the husband belonged to himself” (HS II, 147).

As for the directly political authority he sees at play in the ancient *poleis*, it has to be said that, despite the dating of his key source texts, Foucault's account remains remarkably silent concerning the democratic reforms which had reshaped many Greek cities, including Athens, since the 6th century BCE —this being one feature of classical culture which more typically inspires progressive treatments of the classical world. The freedom which the ancient practitioners of the aesthetics of the self could practice in choosing how to stylize their existence was predicated on fundamental inequalities of “status”. It involved both subjective mastery of the self, and objective political domination over others.¹³ As Foucault writes,

this freedom was more than a non-enslavement, more than an emancipation that would make the individual independent of any exterior or interior constraint; in its full, positive form, it was a power that one brought to bear on oneself *in the power that one exercised over others*. In fact, the person who, *owing to his status*, was under the authority of others was not expected to find the principle of his moderation within himself; *it would be enough for him to obey the orders and instructions he was given*. This is what Plato explains in

regard to the craftsman: what is degrading in his case is that the best part of the soul "is naturally weak and cannot rule the animals within but pampers them and can learn nothing but ways to flatter them"; now, what should be done so that this man might be governed by a reasonable principle, 'similar to that which rules the best man'? *The only solution is to place him under the authority of this superior man: 'he must be enslaved to the best man, who has a divine ruler within himself.* (HS II, 80 [italics ours])

It might be hard to imagine a more directly political passage, concerning relations of domination, in a philosopher than this. The best that can be said in Foucault's defence by a reader on the Left is that he must be just reporting the Greeks' opinions, when he might have preferably made clearer his own distance from the naturalizations of slavery he is reporting here. But Foucault's subject position is contentious. What is at issue in the lifestyle of the classical masters, Foucault tells us, is a set of status rankings rooted in an "ontological order",

a way of life whose moral value did not depend either on one's being in conformity with a code of behaviour, or on an effort of purification [Christian and post-Christian possibilities], but on certain formal principles in the use of pleasures, in the way one distributed them, *in the limits one observed, in the hierarchy one respected* [sic.] ... such a life was committed to *the maintenance and reproduction of an ontological order*, moreover, it took on the brilliance of a beauty that was revealed *to those able to behold it* or keep its memory present in mind. (HS II, 89 [italics ours])

Now, if all of this was an inevitable, incontestable reading of Greek culture and philosophy, then that would be one thing. One cannot rightly blame an historian of past cultures for reporting truly their normative shortcomings, relative to our present values. The real issue is that Foucault's account of the Greeks is far from historically or hermeneutically incontestable. It involves a series of selections from the archives which flatten out decisive differences, led by that between post-Socratic philosophy and sophistry, aligned with aristocratic values. These selections all, without exception, also push against a recognition of the universalising, egalitarian dimensions within the same philosophy—precisely those aspects of philosophical care of the self which, as we commented above, we would expect a thinker of the Left to be attracted to.

As several critics have noted³⁴, one consequence of Foucault's presentations of Greek thought is to position Greco-Roman *philosophical* texts on "care of the self"

alongside economic and medical discourses, as all cut from one periodised cloth (“the classical ... Hellenistic ... Roman” periods). This is to elide the extent to which the ancient philosophers--one thinks of Socrates pre-eminently--were considered *atopos*, strange, even fractious figures, whose teachings *exactly contested the widespread norms of the ancient cities and their ruling elites*.¹⁵ The confrontation between the beautiful, young aristocrat Alcibiades and the ugly, aging philosopher Socrates, with his *kiton* and indifference to popular opinion, has a kind of mythical valence here, underscored more by Plato's *Symposium* than by the *Alcibiades Major*. One also thinks of Socrates' showdown with the aggressive, radically aristocratic sophist Callicles who maintains that the best way of life involves the seizure of power, so the “real man” (*aner*) can dominate others.¹⁶

However, Foucault presents philosophical self-care in this period in *History of Sexuality II* as entirely continuous with the aristocratic preoccupations with beauty and the agonistic contest for power “in which the worth and brilliance of the young man must affirm itself through his superiority over others” (HS II, 209-210). This is highly hermeneutically questionable. So, in examining Demosthenes's *Erotic Essay*, Foucault writes:

This philosophy, whose content is not specified apart from a reference to the Socratic theme of *epimeleia heautou*, “care of the self”, and to the necessity, also Socratic, of combining knowledge and exercise (*episteme, meletê*)-this philosophy is *not presented as a guide for leading a different life, nor for abstaining from all the pleasures*. It is invoked by Demosthenes [in his *Erotic Essay*] as an indispensable complement of the other tests: “Reflect that ... of all things *the most irrational is to be ambitious for wealth, bodily strength, and such things*, and for their sake to submit to many tests ... but not to aim at the improvement of the mind, which has supervision over all other powers.” *What philosophy can show, in fact, is how to become “stronger than oneself” and when one has become so, it also enables one to prevail over others*. It is by nature a leadership principle [*principe de commandement*] since it alone is capable of directing thought ... It is clear that philosophy is an asset that is necessary for the young man's wise conduct; not, however, in order to guide him toward another form of life, *but to enable him to exercise self-mastery and to triumph over others in the difficult game of ordeals to be undergone and honour to be safeguarded*. (HS II, 211-212)

This is remarkable stuff, in which a philosophical critique of ambition as “most irrational” is *turned within two lines into an apologia for the ambitious pursuit of*

political superiority. Certainly, one way to package this would be to say that a “care for others” is at stake in this “difficult game of ordeals to be undergone” (HS II, 212).¹⁷ But one can also question how these and many other Foucauldian passages sit with his summaries of classical self-aesthetics which say *sans phrase* that such self-care “will be beneficial to others”, in ways we might hope for as liberal progressives.¹⁸ Philosophical care of the self is being presented by Foucault not as a means to question the pre-philosophical Hellenic *endoxa* according to which riches, beauty, strength, fame and power are the best things for human beings; an *endoxa* embraced in full by the sophists. The basic problem is that beauty, fame, “honour” or “good reputation”¹⁹, riches and power are the very things Socrates in the *Apology* (29d-e), no less, suggests Athenians should be ashamed of pursuing, in place of care for their souls, and the virtues.²⁰ It is not first the Stoics who criticise *philotimia*, the love of honour Foucault elevates here, as an empty goal predicated on attachment to an indifferent external good which makes us less, not more self-sufficient, and an irrational wish to be remembered by people one will never meet, and whom we may not even admire. Socrates surely paid scant attention to his “good reputation” amongst the Athenian elites, and paid for this philosophical position in 399 BCE.

By contrast, and it truly is a striking, wholly hermeneutically indefensible revision, Socratic-Platonic philosophy is presented by Foucault in his reading of Demosthenes as a kind of sophisticated “asset” the young man can use to moderate his passions, the better to succeed in the conventional game of pursuing wealth, beauty and honour against other, similarly-motivated aristocrats. Contra everything that we know for example that Pierre Hadot, one of Foucault’s inspirations, had argued, philosophy is not an alternative “form of life” (HS II, 212) marked out by *atopia*, and also certain vocational hazards for its Socratic practitioners. *Socrates, re-meet Thrasymachus and Callicles*, as it were.

Now, to his credit, Foucault does register problems with fitting both Plato and his inspiration, Socrates, into his radically aristocratic rereading of classical care of the self. On one hand, as Nietzsche and many others have seen, Platonism’s call for philosophers to discover the ontological order of the otherworldly ideas within the soul represents a clear antecedent of Christianity. On the other hand, when asked about how the care of the self in “the Greeks” implicated “the well-being of others” in “Ethics of the Concern for the Self”²¹, Foucault equivocates, introducing here a rightful distinction between the philosopher and the “free man” which it is fair to say he nevertheless does not pursue elsewhere in his texts on classical Greek self-care. It is true that Socrates “is the man who cares about others”²², we are now told. But this exactly distinguishes “the case of the philosopher” from the “free man”. So here is

Foucault, in a passage which would suggest that Socrates was untimely, or not “Greek”:

But let me simply say that in the case of the free man [as against Socrates], I think the postulate of this whole morality was that a person who took proper care of himself would, by the same token, be able to conduct himself properly in relation to others and for others ... I don't think we can say that the Greek who cares for himself must first care for others. To my mind, this view only came later.²³

There is a fascinating moment in the “Ethics of Concern for the Self” interview when Foucault's remarks prompt his interviewer to straight-out ask whether this “care of the self” as Foucault presents it could “become a way of exercising power over others, in the sense of dominating others?”²⁴ Foucault's direct answer is “no”. For domination over others would only be possible for Greek thinkers if a master was not in control of himself. If you practice care of the self, and come to know what to desire and fear, you will know “ontologically” who you are, how to fulfil your roles, including to be a “master of a household”: in brief, “if you know all this, you cannot abuse your power over others. Thus, there is no danger”.²⁵

Amazingly, Foucault proposes that the very idea that domination by elites who lay claim to higher forms of ethical self-cultivation or natural superiority *could* be politically dangerous would only come “much later”. It would hail not from the democratizing reforms of many Greek *poleis* between the 6th and 4th centuries, predicated on the overthrow of tyrants in cities like Athens. It would come from that time “when love of self becomes suspect and comes to be perceived as one of the roots of various moral offences”: and we know that it is Christianity which Foucault intends.²⁶ But again, this is a strikingly contestable assessment, given not least that Foucault elsewhere himself recognizes that the figure of the tyrant is a powerful one in classical culture.²⁷ He was a powerful preoccupation amongst the philosophers, moreover, *precisely* as a “dangerous” figure. We can think paradigmatically of Alcibiades, a man whose brilliance and sense of his own greatness of soul, untamable even by a Socrates, led him to abuse his power over others, exiled first from Athens and then from Sparta. Certainly, the post-Socratic philosophers idealize the perfectly wise leader, who would have fully moderated their own wishes and fears. But they also realized, as Foucault professes not to recognize in this moment, that the achievement of this ideal is almost impossible given the human condition.²⁸ There will be a permanent danger if anyone is granted power to act beyond good and evil, that they will harm their subjects, striking first at their potential competitors

amongst the established elites, and then undermine themselves and the city itself.²⁹ For the Greek philosophers, when it came to the lures of power, “everything is dangerous”³⁰, to evoke another celebrated later Foucauldian rubric which seems somehow to lapse at decisive moments of his own presentation of the ancients.

3. Foucault Reception as PMC Touchstone

The deeply aristocratic shaping of Foucault's reading of ancient Greek ethics is hence hardly hidden under a bushel. It speaks out loudly and clearly in his celebrated texts. Indeed, these texts show how willing the French philosopher was to stretch classical sources, sometimes to the point of directly reversing their import (as with his citation from Demosthenes' *Erotic Essay* concerning the irrationality ambition). What is most striking is that he does this, again and again, not to promote their egalitarian dimensions, and the philosophers' criticisms of the pre-philosophical Hellenes' values, but *precisely to negate these dimensions*.³¹ Foucault's Greeks are radically aristocratic figures who practice a rhetorically militant form of self-control whose political analogues seem unmistakably hierarchical, and even brutal towards the lower orders.³² His philosophers, to the extent they are differentiated at all from non-intellectual “Greeks”, are indistinguishable from the sophists whose recommendations and practices of self-care are there, not to pursue a wisdom which might revalue pre-philosophical, aristocratic values, but to help “free men” “to rise above other citizens to a position of leadership” (HS II, 75).³³

We take it, therefore, that none of these points of criticism of Foucault's aristocratic-sophistic Greeks and Romans are esoteric. Neither do they require a highly specialized position within classics or ancient reception studies to certify.³⁴ Foucault must contradict basic Socratic positions, in presenting all classical thought as interested in training young aristocratic rulers interested in “political power, glory, immortality, and beauty”³⁵, as against wisdom and the cardinal Socratic-Platonic virtues (including justice). Foucault repeatedly presents openly inegalitarian texts and positions in the seemingly innocent guise of a commentator. Yet there is nearly everywhere a clear sympathy, which is shaped by his vindicating axiological motives for a genealogical return to the putatively non-universal, non-juridical, non-normalizing ethics of the classical masters.³⁶

The suggestion that Foucault himself was, at least in his final phase, a thinker closer to the neoliberal new Right than to any form of pro-egalitarian Leftism is not new. The last decades have seen welcome critical reflections on the political directions of Foucault's work, especially in light of his 1978-79 lecture series on neoliberalism (*The Birth of Biopolitics*) and late interviews.³⁷ In this light, the liminal

place of these lectures on German ordoliberalism and American neoliberalism is unquestionably significant, between the researches of the 1970s into forms of modern disciplinary and biopower, and the later works on ancient and Christian ethics.³⁸ For this reason, critics like Zamora, Behrent³⁹, and Rehmann⁴⁰ have suggested that it was Foucault's ambivalent, half-critical, half-fascinated engagement with neoliberalism as a form of governmentality that asks subjects to become "entrepreneurs of themselves" which paved the way into his later works on "care of the self" in Western pagan antiquity.⁴¹ More recently, in the context of the culture wars, Foucault's work has been nominated as decisive in shaping what Nancy Fraser has called "progressive neoliberalism".⁴² Mike Grimshaw, in a paper delivered at the 2021 Australasian Society for Continental Philosophy conference⁴³, argued in this vein that progressive identity politics looks back to Foucault's invitation in the 1978-79 lectures "to create liberal utopias, to think in a liberal mode, rather than presenting liberalism as a technical alternative to government".⁴⁴

Whatever Foucault's final subjective stance towards neoliberalism, there is a separate question surrounding how Foucault's late works on the Greeks have managed to be widely received by scholars in the neoliberal era: as either apolitical, or as speaking in some ways to contemporary progressive political prospects.⁴⁵ For this to be possible, it is clear that these commentators must be working with what can be called (in quasi-Foucauldian language) a certain "grid of hermeneutic visibility and invisibility" as they read the French thinker's texts. According to this grid, Foucault's claims concerning an aesthetics of existence, with its putative freedom and opposition to post-Christian normativity, are as it were legible and attract our approval. Commentators align the notion of an aesthetic self-cultivation, in which these ancient individuals made their lives into works of art, with progressive commitments to promoting the expression and self-assertion of a plurality of different individuals and groups hitherto marginalized in later modern societies. By contrast, Foucault's avowals of the deeply aristocratic dimension of this care of the self which was a practice of governing others, set within vertical hierarchies predicated on slavery and the domination of woman as an effective servant class, are in this grid invisible. Such passages must of course be read, since they are present in the source texts. But they are passed over, and almost never raised in dedicated commentaries—or else, they are presented as neutral reportage of the Greeks. Foucault's brief disavowals of his absence of nostalgia or wish to simply idealize the Greeks suffice here to parry any anxieties or criticisms that might arise about the political profile of these practitioners of freedom. Yet, as we've seen, these disavowals sit *very* uneasily both with the premises of Foucault's engagement with the Greeks, and his analyses of the ancient primary texts.⁴⁶

To propose such a grid of hermeneutic visibility to try to explain Foucault's reception is to work necessarily with an implicit conception of ideology. It is also to suggest that intellectuals and new Leftists are not immune from ideological interpellation, supported (as Althusser and others have argued) by their forms of lived experiences as professional intellectuals in neoliberal societies. "They do not know it, but they are doing it", is the operative idea here.⁴⁷ The institutional relations of power within which one finds oneself, and in which one's material interests are embedded, exert a powerful effect on shaping which ideas we each find spontaneously appealing, convincing, or even liberating, and which ideas we find distasteful, problematic, limiting or oppressive. At the same time, we will experience our selection of these ideas, from the inside, as reflecting only what is impartially right or true, in one adumbration of what Slovenian theorist Slavoj Žižek calls "ideological disidentification".⁴⁸

Way back in 1977, Barbara and John Ehrenreich posited the decisive status of a "professional managerial class" (PMC) within advanced capitalist societies.⁴⁹ They did so, exactly in their attempt to come to terms with:

(1) the largely 'middle class' roots of the New Left in the sixties and (2) the tensions that were emerging between that group and the old working class in the seventies, culminating in the political backlash that led to the election of Reagan.⁵⁰

This PMC is an in-between class, "distinct from both the 'working class', from the 'old' middle class of small business owners, as well as from the wealthy class of owners".⁵¹ In the Ehrenreich's classic definition, they are "salaried mental workers who do not own the means of production and whose major function in the social division of labour may be described broadly as the reproduction of capitalist culture and capitalist class relations".⁵² Like the working class, PMC subjects make their living predominantly by earning wages. They do not own the means of production, as classical capitalists do. At its lower end, the PMC includes relatively low-status professions like "registered nurses, welfare case workers, engineers in routine or inspection jobs".⁵³

Nevertheless, emerging at the turn of the 20th century with the advent of monopoly capitalism, the PMC also includes middle- and high-level managers charged by capitalists with running in a "scientific" or "superior" way the day-to-day workings of larger private corporations, peopling the public sector bureaucracies, and, today, our universities.⁵⁴ Importantly for us here, intellectuals also belong to the PMC, since this class includes "workers who are directly concerned with social control or with the production and propagation of ideology (eg: teachers, social workers, psychologists, entertainers, writers of advertising copy and advertising scripts, etc.)".⁵⁵ Indeed, an increasingly-extended right of passage through

universities and colleges became in the 20th century the increasingly-unavoidable training ground for more and more of the professions.

The vital thing, according to the Ehrenreichs, is that the in-between position of the PMC places its workers, despite their wage-earning credentials, in an “objectively antagonistic” relationship at once with the working class--those wage-earners who produce, clean, warehouse, or retail things--and the capitalist owners.⁵⁶ On the one hand, the PMC appropriates “the skills and culture once indigenous to the working class”.⁵⁷ More and more jobs become professions tied to credentialized “pathways” (to use a presently-favored managerial term) passing through at least fifteen or sixteen years of formal education. On the other hand, the PMC, notably including intellectuals, tend to look upon traditional capitalists, with their narrow self-interest and lack of credentialized, “scientific” or higher knowledge, as “vulgar” or “uncultured”. They are ethically beneath the foundational PMC commitments enshrining, at least officially, the search for truth, higher insight, public welfare, or (in the case of economists and the managerial elites), “efficiency”, “shareholder value”, etc.

Following the political backlash which enshrined neoliberal forms of governmentality after the 1970s economic crises in the US and elsewhere, the tensions came to a head within the PMC. Faced with wave after wave of privatization and deregulation facilitating the global transfer of risk downwards onto individuals, and of wealth upwards, would the PMC's denizens choose solidarity with other wage-earners or the capitalists who ultimately pick up the tab on the businesses and organizations which they work in and manage?

Even as more and more PMC professions like journalism, and more recently, academia, have undergone forms of re-proletarianization or “precarization” since the 1990s, overwhelmingly the PMC has allied itself with the capitalist class.⁵⁸ Within academia and more widely, forms of hostility to the vulgarity of the business elites remain, notably operative in forms of cultural pessimism and critiques of mass culture. But they do not easily lead to forms of politics which ally PMCers with those who work with their hands, whose understandings and material interests do not readily square with those of career professionals engaged in higher-status mental labor.

Instead, concerns for class and a politics of solidarity have receded before the rise of concerns with cultural politics--the home turf, as it were, of many workers in the PMC. Advocacy for any deep challenge to the marketisation of society, including solidary revolt in company with the workers, has been superseded by what is widely called “identity politics”. Support for hitherto-marginalized groups enables forms of well-intentioned, broadly left-liberal PMC intervention in conjunction with

governments, not-for-profits, corporates, and increasingly in the last decade, even banks and corporatized universities. The mixture of “contempt and paternalism” towards un- or semi-educated workers which the Ehrenreichs already saw in the PMC of the 1970s remains⁵⁹, especially if those workers, abandoned by the social democratic parties, embrace forms of reaction which promise to give voice to their anxiety and rage. The hostility against the PMC stoked as an out-of-touch “elite” “new class” amongst these lower strata, first by neoconservatives, then more widely by the global rightwing media meanwhile glows white hot, with an increasingly brown coloration.

The sense of PMC superiority, a pathos of distance over non-tertiary educated workers is rooted above all in the lived experience of professionalization: that is, the formal requirements that for anyone to work in a given field, they should receive a specialized education, closed to others, and conferring access to forms of recondite technical knowledges (from engineering to professional philosophy). As Barbara Ehrenreich writes in *Fear of Falling*, this process of professionalization starting in the late 19th century made sense for mental laborers, as “above all, a way to restrict entry to existing occupations”⁶⁰, limiting competitions for their roles:

In every field, professionalization was presented as a reform, a bold new measure aimed at replacing guesswork and tradition with science and rationality. But it was also an economic strategy, linked, as historian Samuel Haber has written, with ‘the ‘art of rising in life,’ with upward mobility’. Through professionalization, the middle class sought to carve out an occupational niche that would be closed both to the poor and to those who were merely rich.⁶¹

Now, there is an old tension, recognized by Plato, between the creation of technical experts and the valorization of political democracy or anything like a universal franchise, let alone workplace democracy. The livelihood of PMCs depends precisely on their possessing forms of knowledge, certified on the basis of higher educational experiences, closed to “the many”, “the mob”, “the crowd” of unenlightened non-professionals. Within their workplaces, even within the practice of scientific experiments, professions encode technical rank orderings between workers. As Jeff Schmidt has commented, these more closely resemble hierarchical military organizations than those of egalitarian, participatory democracies.⁶² “Professionalism” as a lived ideology enshrines meritocracy and competition, on one hand, coupled with a willingness to accept relationships of deference and subordination, and to play by established rules in order to advance in the hierarchy,

on the other.⁶³ The professional must be able, on the basis of her/his technical mastery, to as it were fill a blank page, see a client, treat a patient, write a journal article, etc., Their professional status enshrines their independent responsibility for following a sanctified “professional code” or codes of ethics, explicit and implicit. In this sense, an internalized sense of one’s creativity and autonomy--or even, with intellectuals, of being somehow ‘outside the system’ that they work within--is deeply engraved within the PMC vocational identity. With that said, the gravest sin for the professional is “incompetence” or “unprofessionalism”, which can include overly creative bending of established rules, or overly independent challenges to sanctified authorities. As Schmidt again writes in *Disciplined Minds*:

Just as professionals engage in playpen creativity, innovating within the safe confines of an assigned ideology, so too they engage in playpen critical thinking. Their work involves judging whether or not the ideas of others are in line with the favored outlook, but does not involve developing their own, independent point of view. Hence professionals tend to be what might be called ‘book review’ critical, which is intellectually and politically safe because it doesn’t involve developing or taking a stand for an independent outlook.⁶⁴

Managers, at the top end of the PMC, always exist at a minimum distance from those they manage. Increasingly, the MBA differentiates managerial elites from middle- and lower-ranked professionals, as lower-paid professions are casualized or “flexibilized”. The dramatic rise in the number of super-wealthy wage-earners in the last neoliberal decades shows that managers’ primary loyalty will always typically be to owners and shareholders, in whose name they exercise their managerialist arts⁶⁵, as against their own workforces.⁶⁶ It is in any event unsurprising that, whilst polls suggest that professionals are consistently more liberal than non-PMC cohorts on what Schmidt calls “distant social issues”, “such as civil liberties, personal morality and cultural issues”, our class is deeply conservative, if not timidly obedient, “on attitudes in the workplace, where both professionals and nonprofessionals exert their greatest influence on society”.⁶⁷ This is what makes white collar unions so notoriously weak, even faced with mass layoffs, as in the recent pandemic within the higher education sector of different nations. PMCers’ positions and identities as professionals, after all, depend on the hierarchical norms and codified systems of competitive, hierarchical credentialization, which give form to their offices, chairs, and professional good names. “While professionals are tolerant of distant social criticism, they have little tolerance for anyone who tries to provoke a debate about the politics that guide their own work”⁶⁸; one thinks here especially of growing faculty

opposition to student rebellions on campus by the end of the 1970s in the US.⁶⁹ PMCers are invested materially in maintaining the established socioeconomic order that enables their professional ascent, and which would be threatened by any too radical social reform touching the economic fundamentals of the present dispensations. As Schmidt explains,

When I speak of professionals as uncritical and ideologically obedient, I am referring not to their opinions on distant social issues, but rather the attitudes they display at work and in their work, where their conservatism shows up in its biggest and most socially significant way. And I am referring to their attitudes toward immediate nonworkplace issues, which are issues that raise questions about the merit or strength of the larger system—questions that professionals are usually quick to play down⁷⁰

If, as Foucault himself might have suggested, we hence step back from our own status as PMC intellectuals, working within increasingly for-profit universities in neoliberal corporatized societies, the question of how to conceive the reception of the work of a figure like Michel Foucault takes on very different visages than those which we are used to. This reception in turn can be seen to cast light on the changed class-basis of the “Left” after the 1960s, too often overlooked by critics, or deliberately overplayed by Rightwing mantras about “cultural Marxism”. Foucault’s attraction for his PMC audiences will consist precisely in how he allows professional intellectuals, scornful of mass society and capitalism, a sense of radical intellectual revolt which redirects this revolt away from forms of collective solidarity, based in appeals to egalitarian values which contradict their professional lifeworld and experience. To the charge that we are politically withdrawn, and that academia is increasingly marginalized, one can respond that power is everywhere; what matters first of all is to take care of oneself, to make oneself worthy of governing others, and being recognized as excellent by one’s peers.

Foucault’s last work on the Greeks and Romans, which we’ve examined here, with its appeal to making oneself into an outstanding work of art, to be “visible” for others worthy of witnessing the spectacle⁷¹, also speaks to our own PMC histories of credentialization and competition for scarce positions and honors--that investment in “human capital” whose conception in Gary Becker Foucault appreciated.⁷² As PMC professionals or managers, we have been engaged in an enforced work of cultivating ourselves from middle school through higher degrees, into forms of ongoing on-the-job vocational training or reskilling, “lifelong education”, etc.

Foucault's uncomfortable stress on the radically aristocratic dimensions of the texts he selects in his work especially on the Greeks, meanwhile, is a step too far to be comfortably avowed or credited. It too openly contradicts the PMC sense of philanthropic liberalism whose presently-predominant expression is progressive neoliberalism and identity politics. With that said, and this is what is perhaps most revealing, Foucault's clear attraction to ancient elitist self-care exactly for the liberating difference it allows between vertically hierarchized groups, assigning the government of the many to a privileged Nicoclean few who adorn their rule with aesthetic self-mastery, *do not render Foucault's texts any the less attractive for the great majority of his tertiary educated readers*. The most openly inegalitarian passages are seldom mentioned, although they must be often read. They are nearly never discussed in commentaries, presumably for the damage they do to the idea of a progressive Foucault: an idea that Foucault himself, by the end, was arguably increasingly skeptical about.⁷³

So, we are tempted in closing to go further, and to give voice to an even more "unprofessional" idea, grounded loosely in the normalizing would-be science, psychoanalysis. Could it be that precisely the open, then prudently disavowed inegalitarianism and elitism of the last Foucault's ethics gives voice to what we might call the dark inegalitarian underside of PMC progressivism--we do not avow it, but we are doing it? At its best, as we know, this elitism issues into forms of philanthropic, targeted interventions within⁷⁴ the neoliberal architecture to assist particular groups in their projects of self-actualization and claims to equal dignity. But at its worst, does it not give shape to a lasting contempt for the others (still a great many, including from the traditional working class) within our societies unable or uninterested to undertake the path of self-credentializing that forms us as professionals? And is this not a deeply ideological stance which moreover actively mitigates against the recreation of a solidary Left faced with the continuing global redistribution of wealth and power upwards since the mid-1970s?⁷⁵

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Notes

¹ Michel Foucault, "The Ethics of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom", in *Ethics*, 294-5. Here and in what follows, due to frequency of citation in section 1, page references to this interview (281-302) and "The Genealogy of Ethics" (255-281) in the same collection (*Ethics. Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954-1984, volume 1*, ed. Paul Rabinow) are in brackets in the text.

² "The term 'aristocratic radicalism' that you use is very good. Let it be said without offending anyone, it is the most intelligent word I've read so far about myself." Nietzsche to Georg Brandes. *Briefwechsel*. III, 5, 206.

³ Soghu, "[Mitchell Dean](#) and [Daniel Zamora](#), *The Last Man Takes LSD: Foucault and the End of Revolution*".

⁴ Barbara & John Ehrenreich, "The Professional-Managerial Class" and "The New Left and the Professional-Managerial Class".

⁵ See Fraser & Sunkara, *The Old Is Dying and the New Cannot Be Born. From Progressive Neoliberalism to Trump and Beyond*.

⁶ Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure. History of Sexuality, volume 2*, 8, 9. In this section, due to the frequency of citation of this text, page references for this text are placed in brackets in the text, as "HS II, [the page number]".

⁷ See esp. in *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 32-36, 135, 172-176, 192-198.

⁸ Foucault, "Genealogy of Ethics", 264-65.

⁹ Foucault, *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 36.

¹⁰ Foucault, *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 39, 135; *Care of the Self. History of Sexuality, Volume 3*, 84.

¹¹ Foucault, *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 174.

¹² Foucault, at *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 543

¹³ It is striking that, when it comes to the "strategies" involved in making oneself a subject of the *Aphrodisia*, the third is directly sociopolitical: a strategy of status (HS II, 59-62) in which Foucault's celebration of the "multitude" of different possibilities present in the Greek world ("everything was a matter of adjustment, circumstance, and personal position") spans "children, women, slaves, as well as the inferior majority" as some of the relevant differences, in contrast to the "few people who are best by nature and by education" (HS II, 61-62). One difference between these strata is of course that only the latter group qualifies for the care of the self licensed by this "strategy of status".

¹⁴ Vegetti, "Foucault et les anciens", 925–32; Pradeau, "Le sujet ancien d'une éthique modern. À propos des exercices spirituels anciens dans *l'Histoire de la sexualité* de Michel Foucault", 131-154.

¹⁵ See esp. Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 56-57; Davidson, "Ethics as Aesthetics", 132.

¹⁶ See Plato, *Gorgias*, 484d-491d. Cf. Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 59-60 for a praise of Callicles versus Socratic "dialectic", positioned as a "reactive" practice.

¹⁷ See succeeding note.

¹⁸ Foucault, "Ethics of Concern for the Self", 291. Often Foucault uses this formulation of "care for others" which can of course cover an entire range of behaviours, from dominating over them to treating them with reciprocity". The specifications of who is caring for whom, with what telos, are the Foucaultian questions which need to be asked by critical readers. See Foucault, *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 176-77, 192-198.

¹⁹ Foucault, "Genealogy of Ethics", 265.

²⁰ So readers can be in no doubt, here is the key text, Socrates responding in the *Apology* itself to an Athenian who he imagines offering him the choice of release from prison, at the price of ceasing to philosophise:

"Most excellent man, are you who are a citizen of Athens, the greatest of cities and the most famous for wisdom and power, not ashamed to care for the acquisition of wealth and for reputation and honor, when you neither care nor take thought for wisdom and truth and the perfection of your soul?" And if any of you argues the point, and says he does care, I shall not let him go at once, nor shall I go away, but I shall question and examine and cross-examine him ... For I go about doing nothing else than urging you, young and old, not to care for your persons or your property more than for the perfection of your souls, or even so much; and I tell you that virtue does not come from money, but from virtue comes money and all other good things to man, both to the individual and to the state." (*Apology*, 29d-30b)

²¹ Foucault, "Ethics of Concern for Self", 287.

²² Foucault, "Ethics of Concern for Self", 287.

²³ Foucault, "Ethics of Concern for Self", 287.

²⁴ Foucault, "Ethics of Concern for Self", 288.

²⁵ Foucault, "Ethics of Concern for Self", 288.

²⁶ Foucault, "Ethics of Concern for Self", 288.

²⁷ But it is notable that the case Foucault sees raised against this figure by the philosopher is only prudential (as Aristotle points out, others tend to despise being governed by a figure who cannot control his own impulses), as against that contesting the injustice of extra-legal government by the strongest (HS II, 81-82). Put simply: the entire vista in which Socrates's relationship to Alcibiades would represent a failed attempt to fundamentally revalue the young aristocrat's sense of values, so that he could cease craving the submission, attention and applause of others, instead attending to that justice which he promises Socrates will preoccupy him at the dialogue's end (cf. Foucault, *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 174), disappears in *History of Sexuality II*. This is also the entire Socratic-Platonic vista in which, between the hyper-competitive "agonistic" search for a brilliant ascendancy over rivals and an "entirely different" form of life of the philosophers, there might appear the figure of the just, philosophically-chastened leader.

²⁸ The *locus classicus* here is books VI-VII of Plato's *Republic*, which examine first the obstacles preventing many gifted youths becoming philosophers, and second, the best ways to educate future rulers, given precisely these manifold ethical, psychological, and political difficulties.

²⁹ Compare on the dangers of the tyrant, a ruler bound only by his own present or absent care of the self, see Plato's *Republic* IX, 571a-580a; Aristotle, *Politics*, 313a-315b; and Xenophon, *Hiero, or the Tyrant*.

³⁰ Foucault, "Genealogy of Ethics", 256.

³¹ To illustrate further: when Foucault gets to the Stoics, whilst he can appreciate their technologies of self, he has to balk before passages like those in Marcus in which "care of the self" is again and again subordinated to the value of service to others and the human community, in order to make his claim that "all is lost if you begin with the care of others" (HS, 198). Cf. for examples Marcus Aurelius: "Each being must act in conformity with its constitution. By their constitution, the other beings are made for rational beings ... and rational beings are made for one another. The primary constituent in the makeup of human beings is therefore the tendency to act for the common good" (*Meds.* VII, 55). Far from anything being lost by other-directed actions, therefore: "Each of your actions which is not related either distantly or immediately to an end which serves the common good tears life apart, and prevents it from being one. It is a seditious act, as when, within a nation, someone separates his party from the concordant union of all citizens" (*Meds.* IX, 23, 2). Once again, Foucault's reading here is a misreading predicated on significant omissions from his source texts, not simply a "creative interpretation". For further passages contradicting Foucault on care of the others, asserting its primacy in Stoic ethics, see Marcus Aurelius, *Meds.*, II, 23; III, 29, 2; III, 41, 1; IV 3, 4; VII, 13; VII, 55; VIII, 2; IX, 6; X, 26; XI, 18, 1-2.

³² Given that such an aristocratic, hierarchical conception of politics is determinative of the way care of the self was conceived in the classical Greeks, we should not be surprised that *History of Sexuality II* presents the struggle for self-mastery within the classical aesthetics of the self in strikingly "polemical", as well as political, terms (HS II, 69). To take care of oneself on this model is a bellicose, even violent affair: "an active struggle for self-mastery" (HS II, 63-64); a "domination of oneself" (HS II, 65) involving a "combative attitude to the pleasures" (HS II, 66); a "setting oneself against" one's pleasures, "not giving in to" them, "resisting their assaults", "not letting oneself be overcome by them", "defeating them and being defeated by them"; "being armed and equipped" against them; engaging in a "battle to be fought, a victory to be won in establishing a dominion of self" (HS II, 91), in which *enkrateia* becomes "as mastery and victory" over oneself (HS II, 69), and the virtue of moderation (*sophrosunē*) a further "relationship of domination, a relation of mastery" over self (HS II, 70); one less of inner harmony than of "domination-submission, command-obedience, mastery-docility" (HS II, 70) wherein, through an "agonistic relationship" to their own potentially effeminizing passions (HS II, 68-69, 85, 190), the male masters would become "stronger than oneself", and thereby licensed to rule women, children, and slaves according to inegalitarian forms of justice, unbound by universalising legal restrictions (HS II, 68, 178-18, 211-212).

³³ Foucault, *Use of Pleasures*, 75

³⁴ This is a point worth making. One response of Foucaultian scholars to criticisms from Pradeu, Vegetti and Pierre Hadot is to position their response as that of "classicists", recondite but academic, unable to touch the presentist dimensions and directions of the last Foucault. See Thornton, "*Idolon Theatri*: Foucault and the Classicists"; Boyle, "Foucault Among the Classicists, Again". For criticisms of the accuracy of Foucault's characterizations of the Greeks, see Hadot, "A Dialogue Interrupted too Soon"; Cohen and Sailer, "Foucault on Sexuality in Greco-Roman Antiquity"; Cohen, *Law, Sexuality and Society*.

³⁵ Foucault, "Genealogy of Ethics", 265.

³⁶ See again Foucault, *Use of Pleasure*, 21, 23, 25, 26, 29-31, 31, 32, 53, 54, 59-60, 62, 89, 91, 106, 150, 169, 182, 200, 209, 210, & 251. Cf. Rehmann, *Deconstructing Postmodernist Nietzscheanism*, 277: "Foucault's

trajectory from a Greek-Roman ethics centred on techniques of the self to the 'pastoral' morality of Christianity, which was then developed further by modern power-knowledge combinations that engendered the 'normalization' of Western society, both moves within and fine-tunes Nietzsche's grand narrative stretching from an ancient ur-aristocratic 'pathos of distance' to its 'transvaluation' by the Judeo-Christian 'slave-revolt in morals', and from there to the ideologies of modern democracy (including its socialist and anarchistic derivatives). The parallelism already applies to Foucault's opposition between an ethics as an 'aesthetics of existence' and a morality of duties, which echoes Nietzsche's endeavour to overcome universal moral concepts (be they Christian or Kantian) by an ethics conceived of as an art of living, whereby one is capable of 'giving style' to one's character ..."

³⁷ See esp. the articles in Zamora ed., *Foucault and Neoliberalism*.

³⁸ Foucault, *Birth of Biopolitics*.

³⁹ Behrent, "Liberalism without Humanism: Michel Foucault and the Free-Market Creed, 1976–1979", in *Foucault and Neoliberalism*, 37-74; Amselle, "Michel Foucault and the Spiritualization of Philosophy", in *Foucault and Neoliberalism*, 167-177.

⁴⁰ Rehmann, *Deconstructing the Postmodernist Nietzscheanism*, 236-280.

⁴¹ See Rehmann, *Deconstructing Postmodernist Nietzscheanism*, 258-270 for a survey of the debate. See also "Neoliberalism, Governmentality, and Ethics".

⁴² See Fraser & Sunkara, *The Old Is Dying and the New Cannot Be Born. From Progressive Neoliberalism to Trump and Beyond*.

⁴³ Unpublished [March 2022], copy shared with the author/s.

⁴⁴ Foucault, *Birth of Biopolitics*, 219.

⁴⁵ See for examples of readings of Foucault on the Greeks in which these passages are not discussed, or else presented as unproblematic, with the author positioning themselves as commentator on Foucault, as against a critical engagement with his claims about the ancient texts: McGushin, *Foucault's Askesis: An Introduction to the Philosophical Life*; O'Leary, *Foucault and the Art of Living*; Mlichman and Rosenberg, "Michel Foucault: An Ethical Politics of Care of Self and Others"; Boyle, "Foucault Among the Classicists, Again"; Davidson, "Ethics as Ascetics: Foucault, the History of Ethics, and Ancient Thought", 123-148; Robinson, "Michel Foucault: Ethics". For dissenting views, emphasizing the "in-group" aristocratism of these later texts, see Rochlitz, "Esthétique de l'existence", in *Michel Foucault, philosophe*, 288–300; Schlesier, "Humaniora. Eine Kolumne", 817–23; Kammler, *Michel Foucault. Eine kritische Analyse seines Werks*; Rehmann, *Deconstructing Postmodernist Nietzscheanism*, 277-280.

⁴⁶ See 1 above, and Foucault, "Genealogy of Ethics", 258 & 261.

⁴⁷ See Žižek, "Introduction: The Spectre of Ideology", in *Mapping Ideology, Sublime Object of Ideology*, ch. 1.

⁴⁸ See Žižek, *Plague of Fantasies*, ch. 1 ("The Seven Veils of Fantasy").

⁴⁹ Barbara & John Ehrenreich, "The Professional-Managerial Class" and "The New Left and the Professional-Managerial Class".

⁵⁰ Barbara and John Ehrenreich, "Death of a Yuppie Dream", 3.

⁵¹ Barbara and John Ehrenreich, "Death of a Yuppie Dream", 3.

⁵² Barbara and John Ehrenreich, "Professional-Managerial Class", 13.

⁵³ Barbara and John Ehrenreich, "Professional-Managerial Class", 14.

⁵⁴ Barbara and John Ehrenreich, "Professional-Managerial Class", 14.

⁵⁵ Barbara and John Ehrenreich, "Professional-Managerial Class", 13.

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- ⁵⁶ Barbara and John Ehrenreich, "Professional-Managerial Class", 17.
- ⁵⁷ Barbara and John Ehrenreich, "Professional-Managerial Class", 17.
- ⁵⁸ See Frost, "The Characterless Opportunism of the Professional-Managerial Class"; Liu, *Virtue Hoarders*.
- ⁵⁹ Barbara and John Ehrenreich, "Professional-Managerial Class", 18.
- ⁶⁰ Barbara Ehrenreich, *Fear of Falling*, 79.
- ⁶¹ Barbara Ehrenreich, *Fear of Falling*, 78.
- ⁶² See Schmidt, *Disciplined Minds*, 116.
- ⁶³ In academic humanities and social sciences, increasingly marginalized in high-tech market societies, one permanent ideological temptation here is that of the "mandarin" which Kurt Ringer (in Ringer, *Decline of the German Mandarins*) identified as the principal reason why the German universities were so quickly "coordinated" after January 30, 1933. This ideological configuration scorns "mass society" as nihilistic, empty, uncultured, and materialistic, longing for a "spiritual revolution" in no way implicating economic or industrial factors.
- ⁶⁴ Schmidt, *Disciplined Minds*, 56.
- ⁶⁵ See Klikauer, *Managerialism – critique of an ideology*. Cf. Duménil & Lévy, "Neoliberal Managerial Capitalism", 71-89.
- ⁶⁶ Indeed, the growing salary differential between professors and managers in the university sector in countries like Australia suggests that the managerial elite is increasingly breaking loose from the professions its mode of neoliberal "public management" enables them to govern from a distance. See Sainsbury, "Australia's universities: bosses reel in \$1m-plus salaries, \$1bn profit on back of staff underpayment".
- ⁶⁷ Schmidt, *Disciplined Minds*, 23-24.
- ⁶⁸ Schmidt, *Disciplined Minds*, 23.
- ⁶⁹ See Ehrenreich, *Fear of Falling*, 57-67.
- ⁷⁰ Schmidt, *Disciplined Minds*, 23-24.
- ⁷¹ See Foucault, *Use of Pleasure*, 89.
- ⁷² See Rehmann, *Deconstructing Postmodernist Nietzscheanism*, 259-260; Newheiser, "Foucault, Gary Becker and the Critique of Neoliberalism", 3-21.
- ⁷³ See Rehmann, *Deconstructing Postmodernist Nietzscheanism*, 264-280.
- ⁷⁴ To assist targeted groups however typically requires public moneys, hence tax revenues, which rightwing neoliberals oppose, especially in regressive forms (pinned to income levels, capital gains, and the like); instead either proposing means to privatise social assistance or blame those in need ("the undeserving") in order to justify non-assistance or making such assistance conditional on certain requirements (for example, job search quotas, etc.).
- ⁷⁵ See Duménil & Lévy, "Neoliberal Managerial Capitalism".