

## The Teacher's Gift of Sacrifice as the Art of the Self

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### INTRODUCTION

One of the great discoveries that Michel Foucault makes in his later work — the work that reflects his turn to ethics — is that the precept of “care of the self” maintained a privileged status over the Delphic principle of “know thyself” in ancient Greek philosophy. He thus interprets ancient philosophy as an “aesthetics of existence” and a mode of self-formation, rather than what we have come to know philosophy as, mainly through its modern incarnation: theoretical systematizing.<sup>1</sup> The figure of Socrates plays an important role in Foucault’s development of this interpretation. Primarily through his reading of both the *Apology* and the *Alcibiades Major* of Plato, Foucault presents Socrates as the master of the “care of the self” — the exemplary teacher who calls upon his fellow citizens to concern themselves with themselves.

In this famous passage from the *Apology*, Plato has Socrates account for his peculiar teaching activity in the following way:

I shall do this to everyone I meet, young or old, foreigner or fellow-citizen; but especially to you my fellow citizens, inasmuch as you are closer to me in kinship. This, I do assure you, is what my God commands; and it is my belief that no greater good has ever befallen you in this city than my service to my God; for I spend all my time going about trying to persuade you, young and old, to make your first and chief concern not your bodies nor for your possessions, but for the highest welfare of your souls.<sup>2</sup>

Foucault’s reading of this specific passage identifies three ways in which Socrates understands himself as the teacher of the philosophical life — which is to say, the life devoted to self-care.<sup>3</sup> First, Socrates understands his teaching to be a response to a divine calling. “This activity of encouraging others to care for themselves is Socrates’ activity,” Foucault writes. “But it is an activity entrusted to him by the gods. In acting this way Socrates does no more than carry out an order, perform a function or occupy a post determined for him by the gods.”<sup>4</sup>

Second, Socrates justifies his peculiar teaching activity by claiming that it is a fulfillment of his civic duty — his teaching is a response to an illness or crisis within the *polis*, an illness that threatens the welfare of Athens. This is what Socrates means when he claims that “no greater good has ever befallen this city.” Socrates therefore understands his teaching as a form of public service.

The third way in which Socrates justifies his teaching activity is through the implication that his teaching is a gift that does not demand a reward. Regarding this implication, Foucault says the following: “If Socrates cares for others, then this obviously means that he will not care for himself, or at any rate, that in caring for others he will neglect a range of other activities that are generally thought to be self-interested, profitable, and advantageous.”<sup>5</sup>

Here, in this third aspect of Socrates’ teaching activity, Foucault identifies the problem that emerges when we consider the relationship between the philosophical

life — the life devoted to the practice of self-care — and the teaching life, which is the life devoted to tending to the care that others have for themselves. Foucault suggests:

Thus the problem arises of the relation between “caring for oneself” encouraged by the philosopher, and what caring for himself, or maybe sacrificing himself, must represent for the philosopher, that is to say, the problem, consequently, of the position occupied by the master in this matter of “caring for oneself.”<sup>6</sup>

The question that I would like to take up throughout this essay is whether there is a distinction — and, if so, what sort of distinction is it — between Socrates the *teacher* of the philosophical life and Socrates the *philosopher*, where the philosopher is one who practices care of the self. To phrase the question in another way: does Socrates actually practice care of the self through his teaching, or does the practice of teaching require Socrates to abandon the practice of care of the self? Furthermore, how might Foucault’s elaboration of the theme of self-care in ancient philosophy inform our own understanding of the practice of teaching?

#### THE PROBLEM OF SACRIFICE IN TEACHING

To begin to address these questions, I would like to return briefly to the earlier passage from Plato’s *Apology* in order to flesh out the problem of sacrifice in teaching. I would like to suggest that the portrait of Socrates in this passage provides us with one of the richest and most time-honored images of teaching as a moral endeavor. In many respects, this portrait still resonates with many who teach, or wish to teach, today. Stated generally, many people understand teaching to be a moral endeavor when those who teach respond to a calling — higher, civic, or both — by attending to the welfare of others. We may say, then, that the account that Socrates gives to justify his own teaching activity in the *Apology* is the moral inheritance of teachers today.

But before we become settled cozily in such a notion of the moral in teaching, we might do well to draw our attention to the potential problems that emerge from Foucault’s reading of Socrates’ account. First, if the teacher is characterized as the one who cares for others, then who cares for the teacher? You will notice that the gods’ command does not call upon Socrates to attend to his own soul, but instead only commands Socrates to care for others. A set of questions emerges here. Why and how does it come about that Socrates must occupy this unique position between the divine and the city? The gods care for Athens *through* Socrates — which is to say that only through the care that Socrates gives to his fellow citizens can we know that the gods care for the Athenians.

But do the gods also care for Socrates in the same way and to the same extent that they care for the city? Why is it that the gods do not command that the citizens must, in turn, attend to Socrates’ welfare? A side note, but one connected to what we are discussing here, is the interesting fact that, after the guilty verdict is passed down, Socrates claims that he merits a reward, instead of a punishment, for his service to the city. The reward that he proposes is the city’s free maintenance of his teaching activity, a proposal that, of course, is rejected outright by the jury.<sup>7</sup>

But Socrates' teaching activity does not consist simply in attending to the welfare of others' souls. Instead, his teaching — his mode of care — is to persuade others to “make [their] first and chief concern not [their] bodies or for [their] possessions, but for the highest welfare of [their] souls.” So, to be even more precise, then, we must pose a second question: If the teacher is characterized as the one who cares about the care that others have for themselves, then must the teacher sacrifice his own self-care in order to teach?

In the passage from the *Apology*, Socrates suggests that he spends “all his time” encouraging others to care for themselves. What are we to make of this? If Socrates does indeed spend “all his time” attending to the care that others have for themselves, then he has no time for himself.<sup>8</sup> But even if this is just hyperbole — this gift of spending all his time — Socrates still makes it apparent in the *Apology* that in order to perform his divine and civic mission he must renounce a whole series of activities and rewards that would be considered not only advantageous but quite natural for the ordinary citizen. In fact, it is this mode of sacrifice, Socrates declares, that gives evidence to the possibility that his teaching is indeed a divine gift. Socrates has never taken a fee from anyone for his care. He has neglected his family and allowed them to endure humiliation. Indeed, he even suggests that he has not gotten any enjoyment from having “busied myself all the time on your behalf.”<sup>9</sup> The ultimate proof that his teaching is a divine gift to the Athenians, says Socrates, is his poverty: “The witness that I can offer to prove the truth of my statement is, I think, a convincing one — my poverty.”<sup>10</sup> Poverty is a sign that verifies the truth of Socrates' being. Poverty is both worn and practiced by Socrates.

Now if we examine carefully the mode of sacrifice that Socrates takes up in order to fulfill his mission, it bears a strong resemblance to the practice of self-care that Socrates encourages his fellow citizens to make their chief concern. In other words, in the same way that Socrates attempts to persuade others to take care of themselves — that is, to concern themselves not with their bodies or their possessions, but with their souls — he also seems to carry out his own teaching activity. Socrates' renunciation of enjoyment, a political career, income, and his time, as well as his renunciation of a variety of other civic advantages, is the price that he must pay to carry out his teaching activity. It is here that we begin to see how the teaching life and the philosophical life might become reconciled. For Foucault, one of the defining moments of ancient philosophy — insofar as ancient philosophy reflects an event and a distinct form of thought — is the dimension of “spirituality” through which the self performs an ascetics of the self in order to become ready for truth. For Foucault, spirituality is that dimension which refers to the “researches, practices, and experiences, which may be purifications, ascetic exercises, renunciations, conversions of looking, modifications of existence, etc., which are not for knowledge but for the subject, for the subject's very being, the price to be paid for access to the truth.”<sup>11</sup>

If these sorts of renunciations are the price that Socrates must pay in order to carry out his teaching activity, can they also be the price that Socrates must pay to carry out his own practice of self-care — which is to say, his own practice of

being a philosopher? We are led, then, to consider a third question that problematizes Socrates' teaching activity: Does the teacher present us with the (im)possibility of a paradox: sacrificing one's own self-care for the purpose of caring for others is precisely the teacher's mode of attending to the highest welfare of his own soul?

In what follows, I would like to focus on this question in greater detail. What is at stake, I believe, is a richer and clearer understanding of the ethics of teaching. If we consider the ethics of teaching to be that domain which seeks to understand that which makes the activity of teaching worthwhile for the teacher, and not solely that which makes the activity of teaching worthwhile for the student<sup>12</sup> — the latter being the domain that I take to be the morals of teaching — then the problem that Socrates presents us with is the relationship between sacrifice and flourishing. In other words, how is it that teaching — which we have seen is so tied up with modes of sacrifice — can actually be a way in which one practices self-care?

#### THE NIETZSCHEAN CRITIQUE

Our greatest critic of this idea of an ethics — or a flourishing — grounded in modes of sacrifice is Friedrich Nietzsche, and, in particular, the third essay of his *On the Genealogy of Morals*, which tells the story of the emergence of an ethics of self-abnegation and self-denial, an ethics marked throughout history by three great "slogans": poverty, humility, and chastity.<sup>13</sup> Nietzsche intentionally calls these "slogans" rather than "virtues," because there cannot be, in Nietzsche's view, anything virtuous about denying our predatory and strong impulses. Rather than suffering the humiliation and pain of ungratified and unrecognized impulses, we humans — that is to say, the weakest among us humans, the "failures from the start, downtrodden, crushed" — have posited the ascetic ideal, which proclaims that the highest order of human life is that which denies life (*OGM*, 122).

Throughout the third essay of the *Genealogy*, Nietzsche portrays a variety of actual manifestations of the ascetic ideal, ranging from the music of Richard Wagner to the aesthetics of Immanuel Kant, and from Jesus Christ to Nicolaus Copernicus. For Nietzsche, each of these figures has perpetuated the ascetic ideal: redemption consists only in the absence of suffering, which is not to be found here in this life, but in the life hereafter. After all, what is asceticism — whether in its mystical appearance (as in, for example, early Christian monasticism), its philosophical appearance (as in the Stoics of the Roman Empire), or its capitalist appearance (as Max Weber shows us in his study of the Protestant work ethic) — but the practice of life as a turning of the self away from the self and toward a state of redemption as the absence of suffering? Nietzsche describes these modes of asceticism that celebrate the "blessings of work" and "mechanical activity" as "a mode of fixed life once and for all, fully occupied time, a certain permission, indeed training for 'impersonality,' for self-forgetfulness, for 'incuria sui'" (*OGM*, 134). (The latter phrase, from the Latin, means "lack of care of self.") In short, the self that turns the self away from the self — the self that turns its care and attention away from its impulses and desires, which is to say its "life" — this is the ethical subject as cast by the ascetic ideal.

But from where do we get our pleasures? How do we cure ourselves of the depression that must result from this turning away? Here is Nietzsche's diagnosis:

The most common form in which pleasure is thus prescribed as a curative is that of the pleasure of *giving* pleasure (doing good, giving, relieving, helping, encouraging, consoling, praising, rewarding); by prescribing "love of neighbor," the ascetic priest prescribes fundamentally an excitement of the strongest, most life-affirming drive, even if in the most cautious doses — namely, of the *will to power*. The happiness of "slight superiority," involved in all doing good, being useful, helping, and rewarding, is the most effective means of consolation for the physiologically inhibited, and widely employed by them when they are well advised: otherwise they hurt one another, obedient of course, to the same basic instinct. (*OGM*, 135, emphasis in original)

Let us now turn back to the Socrates of the *Apology*, and the notion of the teacher that we saw there, in the light of this passage. Socrates, recall, has done good. He has fixed his life once and for all by giving all of his time to his fellow citizens — he has helped, encouraged, consoled, praised, and rewarded them. He has done this not for glory or recognition or reward — he has done this not for himself. In fact, he has forgotten himself — after all, look at his poverty! — so that he could tend to the care that others have for themselves. He is miserable, yes. But he is also consoled with the happiness of the slight superiority of having benefited his city. Then again, perhaps this sense of superiority is not so slight; recall that Socrates describes himself and his service as the *greatest* good that has ever befallen Athens. For Nietzsche, this form of happiness is the necessary result of Socrates having denied himself — it is the consolation for the physiologically inhibited. Here, readers of Plato's *Symposium* will recall Alcibiades' speech, which gives testimony to Socrates' chastity by referencing his steadfast rejection of Alcibiades' erotic advances. For Plato, obedience to our most base impulses leads us away from the Good. It also leads us away from ourselves. This is why Socrates' teaching consists of persuading others to care for themselves by turning to their souls and not to their possessions or their bodies.

Plato is certainly in Nietzsche's crosshairs throughout the third essay of the *Genealogy*. The problem, for Nietzsche, is that Plato has overestimated truth — as Nietzsche says, Plato, like every great man of science, has built a philosophy (and thus an ethics) that rests on the scientific foundation: "truth is inestimable and cannot be criticized" (*OGM*, 153). Truth, in the guise of the eternal forms, available to us by means of recollecting the immortal soul, is the reward for all of the blessings and self-sacrifice of philosophy. The comedy of this comedy, for Nietzsche, is that Plato's truth is otherworldly. The tragedy of this tragedy, according to Nietzsche, is that Socrates, like the ascetic priest in the passage above, has asked of his students — the young, the beautiful, and the strong of Athens — to turn away from their youth, their beauty, and their strength. He has asked them to give their greatest concern to their souls: to redirect their erotic energy toward Truth. And thus Nietzsche asks of his generation, as Foucault will ultimately ask of our generation: Why truth? Truth is the friend of the ascetic ideal. What we need, Nietzsche seems to suggest, are its antagonists. Where are the real enemies of the ascetic ideal?

According to Nietzsche, Plato had already sensed with great clarity the great enemy of the ascetic ideal in Book III of the *Republic*. This enemy, of course, is art:

Plato versus Homer: that is the complete, the genuine antagonism — there the sincerest advocate of the “beyond,” the greatest slanderer of life; here the instinctive deifier, the *golden nature*. To place himself in the service of the ascetic is therefore the most distinctive *corruption* of an artist that is at all possible; unhappily, also one of the most common forms of corruption, for nothing is more easily corrupted than an artist. (*OGM*, 154, emphasis in original)

#### CONCLUSION

So we have arrived at this tension, this clash, between Plato and Homer: philosophy and science, those positors of ascetic ideals, as the will to truth, and art, the “instinctive deifier,” the maker of the beautiful and sublime. Is it possible that we have nurtured the corruption of Socrates (and therefore of the teacher) by placing him in the service of ascetic ideals? What might we gain if we read Socrates (and thus the teacher) instead as an artist? If Socrates is not the sincerest advocate of the beyond — the greatest slanderer of life — but is instead the “instinctive deifier,” how might we understand the teacher, and thus understand the relationship between sacrifice and flourishing? In thinking of Socrates as an artist, we must be careful not to place his art in the service of the ascetic ideal. This is to say that, if we consider him as the maker of the beautiful, we cannot *only* think of him as the one who makes others (that is, students) into beautiful objects — we must think of him, too, as the one who also makes himself into a beautiful object.

And this is where Foucault’s ethics — his elaboration of ancient philosophy as the “aesthetics of existence” — comes into play. According to Foucault, ethical deliberation among the ancients revolved around concerns over the fashioning of a self, the manner in which one should live an entire life, and what sort of moral conduct was conducive to flourishing. Particular questions relating to specific moral events, such as the way one behaves in battle, or the way one relates to friends, provided ancient Greek ethics with the material — what Foucault calls the “ethical substance” — out of which individuals crafted their lives. The resolution of such particular questions — the kind of resolution that terminates in the “right” and “wrong” of such specific events — was never, for the ancients, an end-in-itself. Instead, the question of moral conduct was always weaved into the fabric of one’s entire existence.<sup>14</sup>

Foucault sees in the ancients a tradition of ethical inquiry quite distinct from the sort of moral philosophy taken up by their modern inheritors. What Foucault sees behind modern moral philosophy is a formalist approach to moral conduct, one that fails to take into account the contextual factors of human values and interests, and replaces these factors with universal values and abstract principles. Foucault’s aim in unearthing ancient ethics is not to offer an alternative to live by. He appears adamant in saying that “you can’t find the solution of a problem in the solution of another problem raised at another moment by other people.”<sup>15</sup> His hope instead is that, through an analysis of Greco-Roman ethics, we can come to see how the practice of human freedom could be linked to a personal aesthetics of existence,

rather than being dependent upon the political and economic structures that un-  
 handedly prescribe for subjects the lives that they will live: "What strikes me,"  
 Foucault says, "is the fact that in our society, art has become something which is  
 related only to objects and not to individuals, or to life. That art is something which  
 is specialized or which is done by experts who are artists. But couldn't everyone's  
 life become a work of art?"<sup>16</sup> Foucault's message, then, is not that we should attempt  
 to live our lives as the Greeks or Romans once did because they practiced philosophy  
 as the aesthetics of existence. Instead, what is possible for us moderns today is to  
 practice the aesthetics of existence once again, but in our own way and for our own  
 reasons. By marking the difference between ancient ethics and modern morals,  
 Foucault goes a long way toward making such ethical practice possible.

How might the modes of sacrifice that Socrates takes up in order to teach — his  
 poverty, for example — be understood as ways in which the self becomes an object  
 of art? By recasting Socrates as an artist, I seek to reinterpret what "care of the self"  
 means. When one cares for the self in a rich and meaningful way, one is relating to  
 the self as an object — not as a distant object of knowledge, but as an intimate and  
 immediate object of art. In this way, the self is not something to be known: to be  
 probed, interpreted, and inquired into in order to ascertain the truth of the self.  
 Instead, the self is something to be formed, cultivated, worked upon, assayed,  
 written, and rewritten. We might understand Socrates' poverty, then, as a way in  
 which Socrates makes the self and his life into an aesthetic object. There is an  
 allusion to this idea in the *Symposium*, in the speech of Alcibiades, where the  
 drunken and spurned beloved compares the ragged sage, Socrates, to the Sileni  
 statue. Alcibiades says:

Look at him! Isn't he just like a statue of Silenus? You know the kind of statue I mean; you'll  
 find them in any shop in town. It's a Silenus sitting, his flute or his pipes in his hands, and  
 it's hollow. It's split right down the middle, and inside it's full of tiny statues of the gods.<sup>17</sup>

This comparison is a wonderful rendering of how Socrates' teaching activity  
 culminates in sacrifice. We are reminded of the Latinate roots of our English word  
 "sacrifice," *sacer* and *facer* — "*facer*" meaning "to make" and "*sacer*" meaning "the  
 sacred." Socrates' self-sacrifice is the work of making the self sacred. Socrates: "the  
 instinctive deifier."

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1. See, especially, Michel Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, vol. 3 of *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert  
 Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1986), 43–68; Michel Foucault, "Technologies of the Self," in  
*Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: New Press, 1997); and Michel Foucault,  
 "The Ethics of the Concern of the Self as a Practice of Freedom," in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed.  
 Paul Rabinow (New York: The New Press, 1997).

2. Plato, *Apology*, trans. Hugh Tredennick (Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1954), 30a.

3. Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981–1982*,  
 trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2005), 5–10.

4. *Ibid.*, 7.

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*

7. Plato *Apology* 36b–e.



8. Though it is well beyond the purview of my efforts here to consider, it should be pointed out that this problematic — though not the one specifically relevant to the teaching of Socrates — is developed by Jacques Derrida with his analysis of the concept of “the gift” in Western morality. See, especially, Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); and, Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).
9. Plato *Apology* 31a–c.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 15.
12. I am entirely indebted to Chris Higgins for this distinction. See Chris Higgins, “Teaching and the Good Life: A Critique of the Ascetic Ideal in Education,” *Educational Theory* 53, no. 2 (2003): 131–54.
13. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1969), 108. This work will be cited as *OGM* in the text for all subsequent references.
14. On these points, see, especially, Michel Foucault, “On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress,” in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984). Much of what Foucault has to say about ancient philosophy is in concert with the likes of the following: Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985); Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, trans. Michael Chase (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995); and Alexander Nehemas, *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).
15. Foucault, “On the Genealogy of Ethics,” 343.
16. *Ibid.*, 350.
17. Plato, *Symposium*, trans. Alexander Nehemas and Paul Woodruff (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett, 1989), 215b.