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Foucault's Genealogical Reading of the *Alcibiades**

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ABSTRACT. One of Foucault's main objectives in the *Hermeneutics of the Subject* is to determine the extent to which the principle of the care of the self was key throughout the whole of Antiquity. Foucault attempts to trace the genealogy of this phenomenon because it constitutes one of the most fundamental moments in the historical and genealogical formation of the modern subject. According to Foucault, the fact that the *Alcibiades* presents a philosophical theory of the care of the self is what makes it a key moment in the philosophical history of such a concept. In Foucault's view, ἐαυτόν (129b, 130e) does not correspond to any specific content of the self but to the intrinsic reflexivity the reflexive pronoun points to, the constitutive fact that the self is first and foremost a relation to itself rather than a substance. The association of the *Alcibiades* with three other Platonic dialogues (the *Phaedo*, the *Symposium* and the *Republic*) regarding the topic of the primacy of self-knowledge over self-care produces a change in Foucault's understanding of the conception of the soul's nature, namely from a conception of the soul as an activity to a conception of it as a substance. The difference in meaning between θεῖον and ὁ θεός (133c) allows the existence of these two different readings of the nature of the soul in the *Alcibiades*. Foucault, however, takes them as being one and the same.

KEYWORDS: the *Alcibiades*, Foucault, Plato, self-care.

I. Introduction

Foucault's interpretation of the *Alcibiades* will be our main focus here. We are particularly interested in the experimental nature of Foucault's reading, his hidden moves and strategies, and conscious or un-

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conscious (voluntary or involuntary) conceptual shifts while interpreting the Platonic dialogue. This means that we will not be trying to determine Foucault's intentions in his reading of the *Alcibiades*, but rather the nature and characteristics of his reading inasmuch as this is manifested in the text itself of Foucault's 1981–1982 Collège de France lectures. So, in what is actually a very Foucauldian mode of analysis (Foucault 1969, Foucault 1971), Foucault's reading of the *Alcibiades* will be considered here as a text, a discourse, and the emphasis of our analysis will not be placed on the depth of this discourse but rather on its surface.

In this context, Foucault's lectures on *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* are decisive in two respects. First, this is where Foucault's longest, most detailed and systematic reading of the *Alcibiades* can be found.¹ Moreover, the fact that this is a series of lectures, an ongoing reading of the dialogue, an interpretation in the making, with its doubts and hesitations, corrections and mixture of broad and minute analysis, makes Foucault's interpretative moves, strategies, conceptual shifts, generalizations, imprecisions, and so forth, all the more visible.

II. Foucault's point of departure

In his 1981–1982 lectures, Foucault is interested in writing a history of the relations between the subject/subjectivity and truth (Foucault 2001a: 3–4). To this effect, he focuses on certain periods in the history of Western thought, in particular of ancient thought, in which key characteristics of these relations, as well as decisive changes in their fundamental nature, can be identified. The two main conceptual figures in Foucault's history are the “care of oneself” (ἐπιμέλεια ἑαυτοῦ, *souci de soi-même*) and the “know yourself” (γνῶθι σεαυτόν, *connais-toi toi-même*). The two concepts, both individually and in their mutual links, involve a relation between a subject/subjectivity and truth (Foucault 2001a: 4–5). According to Foucault, up to the Platonic *Alcibiades*, the relation between the care of the self and the know yourself, such as

¹ On Foucault's reading of the *Alcibiades*, see also Foucault 1988: 16–49, Foucault 2009: 145–162, 213–230, Foucault 2015: 81–109.

these two traditional imperatives were conceived in Greek thought and in the majority of Plato's dialogues, was shaped in such a way that the central, dominant, more universal imperative was that of the care of the self, while that of the know yourself was subordinated to it (Foucault 2001a: 6–7). As Foucault says, the know yourself was one of the forms, consequences or concrete applications of a general rule corresponding to the care of the self:

The *gnôthi seauton* ("know yourself") appears, quite clearly and again in a number of significant texts, within the more general framework of the *epimeleia heautou* ("care of oneself") as one of the forms, one of the consequences, as a sort of concrete, precise, and particular application of the general rule: You must attend to yourself, you must not forget yourself, you must take care of yourself.²

One of Foucault's main objectives in his lectures is to determine the extent to which the principle of the care of the self, in spite of its transformations in terms of meaning and practice, was key throughout the whole of Antiquity. For Foucault, this principle was characteristic of a particular epoch in the history of ancient thought, which he himself labelled the "culture of the self" (*culture de soi*). Foucault means the Hellenistic and Roman periods, which he tries to unify through the concept of culture of the self, in which the principle of the care of the self had grown to the point of a generalized cultural phenomenon (Foucault 2001a: 49).³ Foucault is attempting to trace the genealogy of this phenomenon, not simply because of its intrinsic value as a historical phenomenon, but first and foremost because it constitutes one of the most fundamental moments in the historical and genealogical formation of the modern subject/subjectivity.⁴ This identification of key phenomena for the constitution of our modern way of being or subjectivity is one of the central tasks of what Foucault calls "the history of

² Foucault 2005: 4–5 = Foucault 2001a: 6.

³ On the concept of culture of the self, see notably Foucault 1984b: 51–85.

⁴ The author's most extensive presentation of his conception of genealogy can be found in Foucault 2001b: 1004–1024. But see also Foucault 1984a: 9–19 for a discussion of the method of genealogy in connection to the project of a hermeneutics of desire.

thought” (*l’histoire de la pensée*), which is one of the phrases he employs when referring to his intellectual enterprise and methodology:

Having to care about oneself is not just a condition for gaining access to the philosophical life, in the strict and full sense of the term. You will see, I will try to show you, how generally speaking the principle that one must take care of oneself became the principle of all rational conduct in all forms of active life that would truly conform to the principle of moral rationality. Throughout the long summer of Hellenistic and Roman thought, the exhortation to care for oneself became so widespread that it became, I think, a truly general cultural phenomenon. What I would like to show you, what I would like to speak about this year, is this history that made this general cultural phenomenon (this exhortation, this general acceptance of the principle that one should take care of oneself) both a general cultural phenomenon peculiar to Hellenistic and Roman society (anyway, to its elite), and at the same time an event in thought. It seems to me that the stake, the challenge for any history of thought, is precisely that of grasping when a cultural phenomenon of a determinate scale actually constitutes within the history of thought a decisive moment that is still significant for our modern mode of being subjects.⁵

III. Foucault’s analysis of the *Alcibiades*

A. Introduction to the reading of the dialogue

Foucault begins his reading of the *Alcibiades* by distinguishing three key moments in the philosophical history of the care of the self: the Socratic-Platonic moment, the golden age of the culture of the self, and the transition from pagan to Christian asceticism (Foucault 2001a: 12, 13, 32). Of course, the *Alcibiades*, in spite of the suspicions as to its authorship, belongs to the Socratic-Platonic moment:

The first moment: Socratic-Platonic. Basically, then, the text I would like to refer to is the analysis, the theory itself of the care of the self; the extended theory developed in the second part, the conclusion, of the dialogue called *Alcibiades*.⁶

⁵ Foucault 2005: 9 = Foucault 2001a: 11.

⁶ Foucault 2005: 31 = Foucault 2001a: 32. See also Foucault 2001a: 46.

The *Alcibiades* is, therefore, placed by Foucault at the very beginning of the philosophical history of the care of the self. Foucault's analysis of the *Alcibiades* concentrates on the second half of the dialogue, which is where a philosophical theory of the care of the self occurs in the conversation between Socrates and Alcibiades. According to Foucault, the fact that the *Alcibiades* presents a philosophical theory of the care of the self is what makes it a key moment in the philosophical history of the care of the self, for the *Alcibiades* is not simply a dialogue belonging to the Socratic-Platonic moment of the care of the self but the most decisive element in such a moment. Although the precept of the care of the self occurs in several other dialogues attributed to Plato, it is in the *Alcibiades* that it makes its very first appearance within the framework of a philosophical reflexion (Foucault 2001a: 37). As Foucault points out, the care of the self – more precisely, the precept that “one ought to take care of oneself” (ἐπιμελεῖσθαι ἑαυτοῦ, *il faut s'occuper de soi-même*) – was an old maxim of ancient Greek wisdom, a Lacedaemonian maxim of general currency (that is to say, with no particular philosophical meaning attached to it), the practice of which depended on the political, economical and social privileges of the elite in Sparta (Foucault 2001a: 32–33). Foucault maintains that the *Alcibiades* addresses the question of the care of the self on the basis of this cultural tradition, but does so in order to propose a different understanding of this question. In Foucault's view, the very point of departure of the *Alcibiades* corresponds to an attempt to re-ask and reformulate the traditional, Lacedaemonian question of the care of the self. Instead of presupposing a political, economical and social superiority, which would make the practice of the precept of the care of the self possible, the *Alcibiades* proposes that this practice should be the very presupposition, the fundamental principle for a political community to be able to adequately function in the first place. In other words, unlike the Spartans, who considered the activity of the care of the self to be a privilege deriving from a social condition and status, the *Alcibiades* presents an alternative understanding of the care of the self, according to which its very activation is placed at the center of a transformation

of this privilege into a capacity to govern others, to take care of others in political terms (Foucault 2001a: 32–38). In Foucault’s perspective, the political context and motivation of the *Alcibiades* are key to understanding its philosophical dimension, its philosophical re-assessment of the traditional precept of the care of the self, as well as the structure of the dialogue as a whole, in particular the fundamental subdivision of its second half into the two questions “what is the self?” (*qu’est-ce que c’est que le soi ?*) and “what is the care of the self?” (*qu’est-ce que c’est que le souci ?*), which is where, according to Foucault, the principles of the care of the self and the know yourself most intersect, and which will be the prime focus of Foucault’s interest in the *Alcibiades* text itself (Foucault 2001a: 39–40, 51, 67).

B. Analysis of the second half of the *Alcibiades* (127e ff.)

1. *What is the self?*

At the beginning of his analysis of the question “what is the self?”, Foucault insists that, although there is a first occurrence of the know yourself in 124b, this is unimportant in terms of the meaning of the *Alcibiades* as a whole, while the appearance of the precept in 129a is key in the organization of the entire dialogue, since it refers to the prior and necessary knowledge of that which Alcibiades ought to take care of, should he really intend to follow the imperative of the care of the self, namely his own self (Foucault 2001a: 52).

In his treatment of the question concerning the identity or definition of the self in the *Alcibiades*, Foucault first addresses a formal, methodological problem, which has to do with the very delimitation of that which the self is not. In other words, before giving an answer to the question “what is the self?”, one should first pause over the adequate formulation of the question and its intention. One should, so to speak, first draw the lines between that which the question aims at and that which is outside its field of inquiry (Foucault 2001a: 51). According to Foucault’s interpretation of the *Alcibiades*, what is at stake in the formula “to take care of oneself” (ἐπιμελεῖσθαι ἑαυτοῦ, *se soucier*

de soi-même) is the meaning of the “oneself” (ἐαυτοῦ, *soi-même*). This is made clear by another formula in the dialogue, which establishes the connection between the precept of the care of the self and that of the know yourself, namely the imperative “know yourself” (γινῶναι ἐαυτόν, *il faut se connaître soi-même*)⁷. In Foucault's view, this ἐαυτόν does not correspond to any specific content of the self (such as its faculties, passions, mortality or immortality, and so forth)⁸ but to the intrinsic reflexivity the reflexive pronoun points to, the constitutive fact that the self is first and foremost a relation to itself, the subject and the object of the activity of the care of the self:

One should *gnônai heauton*, the text says. I think we should be clear about this second use of, this second reference to, the Delphic oracle. It is certainly not a question of Socrates saying: Okay, you must know what you are, your abilities, your passions, whether you are mortal or immortal, etcetera. It is certainly not this. In a way it is a methodological and formal question, but one that is, I think, absolutely fundamental in the development of the text: one must know what this *heauton* is, what this “oneself” is. Not, then: “What kind of animal are you, what is your nature, how are you composed?” but: “[What is] this relation, what is designated by this reflective pronoun *heauton*, what is this element which is the same on both the subject side and the object side?” You have to take care of yourself: It is you who takes care; and then you take care of something which is the same thing as yourself, [the same thing] as the subject who “takes care”, this is your self as object.⁹

Foucault finds that this idea is restated in the phrase αὐτὸ ταῦτό at 129b, which he presents as referring to the identical element that is both the subject and the object of the care of the self:

Moreover, the text says it very clearly: we must know what is *auto to auto*. What is this identical element present as it were on both sides of the care: subject of the care and object of the care?¹⁰

⁷ Foucault 2001a: 51–52.

⁸ Foucault 2001a: 53–54.

⁹ Foucault 2005: 52–53 = Foucault 2001a: 52.

¹⁰ Foucault 2005: 53 = Foucault 2001a: 52.

Foucault maintains that, just as in several other Platonic dialogues (for example, *Apology* 29e, *Cratylus* 440c and *Phaedo* 107c), so also in the *Alcibiades* the “soul” (ψυχή, *l'âme*) is that which one ought to take care of (132c: ψυχῆς ἐπιμελητέον, *il faut s'occuper de son âme*), the difference between the *Alcibiades* and the other dialogues being that in the former the soul is conceived in a distinct fashion, namely by resorting to the notion of use (that is, the notion corresponding to the Greek χρήσις/χρηῖσθαι, *se servir de*).¹¹

The peculiarity of the conception of the soul in the *Alcibiades* results from the effort to isolate the entity it consists in, so much so that the soul is depicted in its irreducibility to any other entity, be it language, tools, the body or whatever. Besides distinguishing itself from such entities, the soul is that which uses them, and it is this use (of language, instruments, the body and its organs, and so forth) that characterizes the soul as a subject, as being fundamentally an activity, that of χρήσις/χρηῖσθαι:

So you see that when Plato (or Socrates) employs this notion of *chrêsthai/chrêsis* in order to identify what this *heauton* is (and what is subject to it) in the expression “taking care of oneself”, in actual fact he does not want to designate an instrumental relationship of the soul to the rest of the world or to the body, but rather the subject’s singular, transcendent position, as it were, with regard to what surrounds him, to the objects available to him, but also to other people with whom he has a relationship, to his body itself, and finally to himself. We can say that when Plato employs this notion of *chrêsis* in order to seek the self one must take care of, it is not at all the soul-substance he discovers, but rather the soul-subject.¹²

This conception of the soul, Foucault claims, has nothing to do with the bodily imprisoned soul of the *Phaedo*, the conception of the soul as a winged chariot in the *Phaedrus* and the understanding in the *Republic* of the soul as a hierarchical structure one ought to harmonize (Foucault 2001a: 55).

¹¹ Foucault 2001a: 55–57. The passage in which Plato discusses this notion in connection with the question of the identity of the self is *Alcibiades* 129b–130c.

¹² Foucault 2005: 56–57 = Foucault 2001a: 55.

2. What does care mean?

Let us now turn to Foucault's treatment of that which is for him the second main question of the *Alcibiades*: what does care mean? Foucault's analysis of the dialogue's second main question will be shorter than his analysis of the first one. For, according to him, the second question's articulation is more simple than that of the first. As Foucault indicates, the second main question in the dialogue gets a clear-cut answer: the care of the self amounts to self-knowledge (Foucault 2001a: 65).

At this point, Foucault maintains that the *Alcibiades* repeats a tendency of a series of other Platonic dialogues, such as the *Phaedo*, the *Symposium* and others, in which preexistent technologies of the care of the self are reorganized and subordinated to the principle of self-knowledge (Foucault 2001a: 66). It is worth noting that unlike what he did in his comparison of the *Alcibiades* with the *Phaedo*, the *Symposium* and the *Republic* as to the nature of the soul (these dialogues, in Foucault's perspective, conceive the soul as a soul-substance, while the *Alcibiades* conceives it as a soul-subject) Foucault now connects the *Alcibiades* with these dialogues in terms of the subordination of the care of the self to self-knowledge. This is an indication of the important change that is about to take place in Foucault's reading of the *Alcibiades*, namely when he turns to the analysis of the third occurrence of the know yourself in *Alcibiades* 132c, which is the moment in Foucault's lectures when he shifts from an understanding of the soul as a soul-subject to an understanding of it as a soul-substance. The association of the *Alcibiades* with the other three dialogues regarding the topic of the primacy of self-knowledge over self-care produces a change in Foucault's understanding of the conception of the soul's nature as presented in the *Alcibiades*, for the primacy of self-knowledge over self-care can only be completely fulfilled if the soul is no longer conceived as being essentially an activity, namely the activity of self-care in its many, existential forms. This, of course, is not to say that the shift in Foucault's reading of the *Alcibiades* does not find any justification in the text, at least as Foucault and the Platonic tradition see it.

Foucault's brief interpretation of *Alcibiades* 132c–133c (where the

eye and mirror metaphors are presented) is nothing more than a summary or short paraphrase of the fundamental articulation of the passage, with a couple of important consequences for our characterization of Foucault's take on the dialogue as a whole (Foucault 2001a: 68–69). The eye and mirror metaphors are used in the *Alcibiades* with the purpose of more clearly explaining the way in which the soul can know itself. Just as an eye, when looking at itself in the mirror or in another eye of an absolutely identical nature, sees itself, so also the soul, when it directs its gaze towards something of an identical nature, is able to see itself. As Foucault says, the identity of nature between the soul and that which the soul gazes at, constitutes the very condition for the soul to be able to know itself. But there is another, most decisive point in the *Alcibiades* eye and mirror metaphors, namely that just as the eye, in order to be able to see itself, has to look at the very principle of its activity as an organ of vision, so also the soul, in order to know itself, should gaze towards the very principle of its activity, the activity of thinking and knowing, τὸ φρονεῖν and τὸ εἰδέναι (*la pensée, le savoir*), which is the divine element in the soul. In other words, in order to know itself, the soul should look at what is divine in it (Foucault 2001a: 68).

Foucault then addresses the unavoidable, controversial passage in 133c, in which the eye and mirror metaphors are extended to the point where a connection is established between self-knowledge and the knowledge of God. Just as the eye sees itself better by looking at a purer and brighter mirror, so also the soul will better see itself by gazing towards an element that is purer and brighter than the soul, namely God (Foucault 2001a: 69). This passage is suspect, not only because of its Neoplatonic or Christian tone, but also due to the fact that in the subsequent tradition it can only be found in a text by Eusebius of Caesarea (*Praeparatio Evangelica* 9.24). In this passage, which in editions of Plato's dialogues is usually bracketed by the editors of the *Alcibiades*,¹³ an important change occurs, namely a substitution of θεῖον (the divine element in the soul, *le divin*) for ὁ θεός (God, *dieu*), a substitu-

¹³ See, for example, Croiset 1920: 110. Denyer 2001: 78 does not include this passage in his version of the text.

tion Foucault does not pay attention to in terms of its importance for the change in the dialogue from a conception of the soul as a subject to an understanding of it as a substance. Foucault claims that, irrespective of its authenticity, the passage reflects the general movement of the dialogue towards the conception that self-knowledge is knowledge of the divine element in the soul or knowledge of God:

In fact, this passage is only cited in a text of Eusebius of Caesarea (*Préparation évangélique*), and because of this it is suspected of having been introduced by a Neo-Platonist, or Christian, or Platonist-Christian tradition. In any case, whether this text really is Plato's or was introduced afterwards and much later, and even if it takes to extremes what is thought to be Plato's own philosophy, it nevertheless seems to me that the general development of the text is quite clear independently of this passage, and even if one omits it. It makes knowledge of the divine condition of knowledge of the self. If we suppress this passage, leaving the rest of the dialogue so that we are more or less sure of its authenticity, then we have this principle: To care for the self one must know oneself; to know oneself one must look at oneself in an element that is the same as the self; in this element one must look at that which is the very source of thought and knowledge; this source is the divine element. To see oneself one must therefore look at oneself in the divine element: One must know the divine in order to see oneself.¹⁴

What is most interesting in this claim is that Foucault does not seem to be aware that he slides back and forth between two notions, $\theta\epsilon\acute{\iota}\omicron\nu$ and $\acute{o}\ \theta\epsilon\acute{o}\varsigma$, using them as if they were synonymous, when in fact they possess different meanings. The difference in meaning between $\theta\epsilon\acute{\iota}\omicron\nu$ and $\acute{o}\ \theta\epsilon\acute{o}\varsigma$ is precisely that which allows the existence of two different readings of the nature of the soul in the *Alcibiades*, which Foucault takes as being one and the same, namely the reading of the nature of the soul as being a subject and the reading of its nature as corresponding to a substance, to an entity that is characterized by the contemplation of God and consequently by its neglect of self-care in favour of self-knowledge. This demonstrates the extent to which Foucault's interpretation of the *Alcibiades* is determined by its very discursive chain or

¹⁴ Foucault 2005: 69–70 = Foucault 2001a: 69.

discursivity, in the sense that the approach in the course of Foucault's lectures of his analysis of the reception of the *Alcibiades* (particularly the Neoplatonic one) and of the tradition of the care of the self in the Hellenistic and Roman periods greatly influences the nature of his view on the *Alcibiades* as whole, which imperceptibly shifts as his analysis of the dialogue's text progresses and moves towards its end.

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