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Encountering the “Ecopolis”: Foucault’s *Epimeleia Heautou* and Environmental Relations

Introduction

Frédéric Gros, the editor of Michel Foucault’s 1981-1982 lectures, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, remarks that the last years of Foucault’s life (from 1980 to 1984) were “a period of amazing acceleration, of a sudden proliferation of problematics.” “Never,” he pronounces, “has what Deleuze called the speed of thought been so palpable as in these hundreds of pages, versions, and rewritings, almost without deletion” (Gros 2005: 517). Marking a crucial shift in the focus of Foucault’s thought after a long career of describing systems of power, in this particular series of lectures Foucault lets the figure of the subject appear “no longer [as] constituted [by]” but rather as “constituting itself *through* well-ordered practices” (Gros 2005: 513, italics in the original). My interest in this paper is to examine Foucault’s late lectures on the Ancient Greek practices of *epimeleia heautou*, or techniques of “care of the self” and their relationship—the way in which they re-encounter—the themes of biopolitics, governmentality and discipline in his earlier work. In addition, I am interested in how his ideas pertaining to care of the self constitute productive ground for an *environmental* ethics—an ethics of relating to the spaces that surround and sustain us.

Foucault’s concept of “care” is—perhaps not as it might seem upon first hearing—far from a solipsistic exercise; rather, it is constituted by attitudes, practices, and actions that are fundamentally relational, or, “shot through with the presence of the Other” (Gros 2005: 537). My emphasis in this paper is on the “politics” of “care”, namely, on Foucault’s provocative reading of the nature of the relationship between the self as *apart* from, and the self as a *participant* in a polis, or a political sphere. While, for Foucault, the polis was a political space comprised of human subjects, I am interested in how this polis can be more broadly conceived, and how Foucault’s ideas can be extended to non-human subjects, spatialities, and perhaps even temporalities—other species, other spaces such as ecosystems, habitats, landscapes, as well as succeeding generations, or what we might call the “ecopolis” as a whole.¹ In other words, while

¹ The term “ecopolis” is typically used to mean a city (polis) that is environmentally sustainable (or ecological). The popular, academic and professional use of this term ranges from describing existing cities that are making strides to become more ecologically sustainable (Downton 2009) to blueprints for non-existent (or not-yet-existent) cities that offer a utopian/dystopian vision for a city to come once our current cities are no longer habitable. The Lilypad, “a floating ecopolis for climatic refugees” by Belgian architect Vincent Callebaut is one example of the latter (Knight 2008). My use of the term, “ecopolis,”

the environment is certainly a highly *politicized* space, how might we think about ourselves and our environment as together constituting a *political sphere* in which the environment is not simply what surrounds us but is itself a part of a less anthropocentric and more pluralistic and sustainable polis?

In *Discourses of the Environment*, one of the few texts that deals in a sustained manner with Foucault and environmental issues, Éric Darier discusses the instances in Foucault’s work in which he directly addresses the environment, or more specifically, the ecological movement. He cites Foucault’s observation that:

[T]here has been an ecological movement—which is furthermore very ancient and is not only a twentieth-century phenomenon—which has often been in one sense, in hostile relationship with science or at least with a technology guaranteed in terms of truth. But in fact, ecology also spoke a language of truth. It was in the name of knowledge concerning nature, the equilibrium of the processes of living things, and so forth, that one could level the criticism. (Foucault quoted in Darier 1998: 4)

Darier remarks that apart from the above quote, Foucault “never [addresses] the environmental issue directly, or the ecological crisis as such” (4). He adds that Foucault apparently “‘detested nature,’ and preferred ‘visiting churches and museums’” (6). He cites the following amusing anecdote from Didier Éribon’s biography of Foucault:

Éribon’s biography recounts a car trip through the Italian Alps that Foucault took with a colleague, Jacqueline Verdeaux, which revealed his attitude to nature. “[Verdeaux] remembers ... that Foucault detested nature. Whenever she showed him some magnificent landscape—a lake sparkling in the sunlight—he made a great show of walking off toward the road, saying, ‘My back is turned to it.’” (6)

Despite Foucault’s best efforts to “turn his back” to nature, I argue that his thought has, in fact, much to offer environmental ethics and politics.

Foucault and the “Care of the Self”

Over the course of the 1981-1982 lectures, Foucault’s focus is on working through a history of the relationship between the subject and truth, tracing in particular the shift in emphasis in the history of philosophy from the precept “care of the self” (*epimeleia heautou*) at the heart of Greek philosophical thought, to the post-Cartesian focus on the rule “know thyself” (*gnothi seauton*). According to Foucault, the Delphic prescription to “know thyself” that was isolated and made central in the Western conception of the relation between truth and subjectivity was

does not refer to an actual or virtual ecologically sustainable city; rather, I use the term “ecopolis” to refer to the ancient Greek notion of the “polis” as a political sphere that includes not only human subjects and the “human-made” space of, for example, the city, but also non-human “subjects” and spaces, or what we call “the environment” or “nature.”

only one aspect of an entire set of spiritual practices of care of the self in ancient Greece and Rome. Foucault’s interest during the 1981-1982 academic year was in re-reading the “dominant way of reading the history of ancient philosophy” by restoring emphasis on “care of the self” (Davidson 2005: xix). His aim was to return to ancient philosophical texts to reveal the Greek precept “care of the self” as the “general framework” under which “the rule ‘know yourself’ must be placed” (2005: xx).

What, one might ask, is at stake in such a restoration of emphasis on the care of the self? According to Foucault, a renewed focus on care of the self prompts us to look for “the principle for the analysis of the different forms of knowledge of the self” in “the different forms of the *epimeleia heautou*” (Foucault 2005: 462). Crucial for Foucault was that the approach to self-knowledge through the practices of care of the self in antiquity was fundamentally a *spiritual* practice; that is, “the philosophical question of ‘how to have access to truth’” and the “practice of spirituality (of the necessary transformations in the very being of the subject which will allow access to the truth)” were always linked (2005: 17). In other words, Foucault argues that in antiquity neither truth, nor the subject existed without one another as pre-formed object or subject; rather, a subject gained access to truth through the practices of care of the self—practices that required self-transformation.

The event in thought that Foucault calls the “Cartesian moment” is what marks the break between the practices of the care of the self and what he calls “the modern age of the relations between subject and truth”:

[W]e can say that we enter the modern age (I mean, the history of truth enters its modern period) when it is assumed that what gives access to the truth, the condition for the subject’s access to the truth, is knowledge (*connaissance*) and knowledge alone ... without anything else being demanded of him and without his having to alter or change in any way his being as subject. (2005: 17, italics in the original)

Implied in Foucault’s reminder, in his repeated emphasis on care of the self, is not only a call to return to a particular way of knowing, but also to a particular way of being.

The term “practice” carries a particular significance. The care of the self was, for the ancient Greeks and for the Romans—and is, for Foucault—a set of practices; it is something worked on, something repeated and rehearsed, something requiring deliberate attention and effort. While the English translation of the Greek *epimeleia* as “care” has a somewhat “soft” connotation, *epimeleia* from the Greek *melete* means “exercise” or “meditation” and connotes a “care” for the self (*heautou*) that suggests a practice requiring work, repetition, attention, and effort of body and mind. Indeed, in Plato’s *Alcibiades*, one of the key texts to which Foucault refers, *epimeleia heauton* is translated as “taking pains over the self.” Foucault’s own French translation, “*soucie pour le soi*,” seems more faithful to this original meaning—*soucie* means “care,” but with a somewhat more “serious” connotation, “care” as in “concern” or even “worry.” For the Greeks

and, accordingly, for Foucault, “care of the self” involved a series of practices—meditations, or exercises—concerning (or, with concern for) the self.

The “care of the self” not only demands an effort on the part of the subject as “the price to be paid for access to the truth” but also “for the subject’s very being” (2005: 15). When one asks, “What is at stake, then, in the care of the self?” the dual implication of the question is not only “What is to be gained?” but also “What is risked?” (the answer to both implied questions: not only “knowledge” but also way of “being”). Care of the self is a philosophical practice that, as what Foucault called a properly *spiritual* endeavor, not only promises access to truth and a way of being, but also requires one to risk what one thinks true, and thus, what one is.² Care of the self then, is a *self-critical* endeavor.³ After all, as Foucault asks provocatively, “What is philosophy... if it is not the critical work of thought on itself?”

Foucault makes a couple of important points about the sets of practices that constitute “care of the self.” First, he reminds us that the “*epimeleia heautou* is an attitude towards the self, others, and the world” (2005: 11). The “care of the self” is thus not, contrary to how it might sound, a set of practices that happen in isolation from others. Rather, it is a way of being with oneself that is at the same time concerned with one’s relations *with* others. Second, the *epimeleia heautou* are, as exercises or meditations, a “certain form of attention, of looking ... towards ‘oneself’”: “The care of the self implies a certain way of attending to what we think and what takes place in our thought” (2005: 11). Foucault is careful to point out, however, that *melete* has a “very different meaning from what we today call ‘meditation’” (2005: 356). *Melete* or *meletan* is a kind of meditation that is an exercise, or something that in his words involves “not so much thinking about the thing itself as practicing the thing we are thinking about” (2005: 357). It is an exercise that does not develop in the direction of exegesis at all, but involves, instead:

² Davidson describes “care of the self” as a different way of thinking that requires a “losing one’s way for the subject of knowledge ... for the price of self-transformation” (Davidson 2005: xxviii).

³ Foucault likens this endeavour to a form of therapy. He notes that *therapeuein* means three things in Greek:

Therapeuein means, of course, to perform medical action whose purpose is to cure or treat. However, *therapeuein* is also the activity of the servant who obeys his master. Finally, *therapeuein* is to worship (*rendre un culte*). Now, *therapeuein heautou* means at the same time to give medical care to oneself, to be one’s own servant, and to devote oneself to oneself. (Foucault 2005: 98)

Further expanding on the comparison between therapeutic and philosophical activity, Foucault, referring to Epictetus’s description of his (Stoic) philosophy school, explains that:

A philosophy school is an *iatreion* (a clinic). You should not walk out of the philosophy school in pleasure, but in pain. Because you do not come to the philosophy school because you are well and in good health. One comes with a dislocated shoulder, another with an abscess, a third with a fistula, and another has a headache. (Foucault 2005: 100)

appropriating [a thought] and being so profoundly convinced of it that we both believe it to be true and can also repeat it constantly and immediately whenever the need or opportunity arises ... in such a way that we have it, you remember *prokheiron* (ready at hand), consequently making it a principle of action. (2005: 357)

For Foucault, then, the care of the self is a kind of self-critical, self-reflective, self-transformative stance toward oneself and one’s relations to others that is not a way of thinking as opposed to a form of action, but rather, a way of thinking that is itself a practice, an exercise, or an activity that serves also to guide subsequent action.

Care of the Self and the Environment

My interest in the practices of care of the self and environmental ethics and politics is concerned with *whether* or *how* environmentalist practices, or, more accurately, *what kinds* of environmentalist practices—techniques that put environmental ethics into practice—might be considered forms of care of the self. People who make environmentally friendly choices in various aspects of their daily lives often articulate their decisions, for example, to eat in certain ways, to travel in certain ways, to heat their home in certain ways, or spend their time in certain ways, in terms of both how such decisions impact their own lives and how such decisions impact the environment. However, thinking of these choices in terms of the care of the self would mean that these two motivators are in a sense one and the same—that is to say, that exercising care of the self necessarily means caring for the environment and vice versa (or caring for the environment becomes a self-interested activity).⁴

Darier’s main critique in his application of the concepts of biopower, governmentality and space in Foucault’s earlier work to environmental concerns is to warn against an environmental ethic that reinstates an anthropocentric and normalizing environmentalism. He argues that trying to behave “on behalf” of the environment becomes simply another way of imposing human order on the natural world (Darier 1999: 24). Although Foucault does not himself speak specifically to human relations with non-human entities, I contend that the ethical principles underlying his later

⁴ At the same time, of course, it is critical to note that, as I have argued elsewhere (Hroch 2009), many “environmentally friendly” eating, travel, and energy use practices, for instance, remain oriented around and delimited by individual consumptive decisions. It is striking that many so-called environmentally friendly practices that operate through environmentally conscious consumption do more to mediate our affect (by turning us into guilt-free “eco-consumers”) than to significantly alter our potentially and actually destructive material environmental effects. Practices that focus on, for instance, “buying green” remain firmly rooted within a system and logic of free market capitalism, consumer choice and consumption that has far-reaching environmental costs. Indeed, the individual subject as the locus of responsibility for the practice of politics is a notion that is contested by critics of neoliberalism (McNay 2009) and “advanced” liberal governance (Rose 2006) including of course by Foucault himself (2008). According to Rose, advanced liberalism “does not seek to govern through ‘society,’ but through the regulated choices of individual citizens, now construed as subjects of choices and aspirations to self-actualization and fulfillment” (Rose 2006: 147).

work on the ethics of care, if extended to include the realm of human as well as non-human actors, avoids the problems Darier identifies by reconceptualizing what constitutes ethics, and indeed ethical modes of relations. For Foucault, a critical part of care of the self (a part that although I will not explicate here, Foucault does emphasize in his lectures) is the recognition of one’s *role* in relation to the wider political sphere. This sphere, in my argument, includes the environment. Thus, to recognize our role in such a sphere—in an ecopolis—would be to recognize that although we are human, the environment upon which we rely both is and is not, and that, at the same time, we need not necessarily “get outside” of our own anthropocentric concern for ourselves as humans in order to care for that which is “not us.” In fact, I would argue that to properly recognize our role as humans would be to recognize the inter-connectedness of ourselves to other things, that is to recognize that our existence is bound up with the existence of various others. And to then behave in accordance with our role as humans dependent upon human and non-human entities, we must be as concerned about non-human entities as we are about ourselves. When our human subjectivity is deconstructed in this way, a so-called selfless consideration of the environment is inseparable from a so-called selfish expression of self-care.

An understanding of care of the self that is expanded to include the environment in its sphere of ethics may lead us to think differently about what constitutes biopolitics. Remarking on Foucault’s earlier work, especially in *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France* 1978-9, David Macey describes biopolitics as “Foucault’s term for the attempts made by governments to rationalize the problems posed by the physical existence of the population namely health, hygiene, birth-rates, longevity, and race” (Macey 2002: 43). In other words, biopolitics is the way organizations in power exercise this power through the regulation of bodies and life functions of populations. If we take seriously Foucault’s work at the end of his career, I suggest that his articulation of biopolitics is not limited to a definition of the biopolitical as government measurement and conduct of the life functions of the body. Rather, in his later work, the political sphere is understood also as a field of power relations in which people’s connection to their own living bodies and other living and non-living (but life-sustaining) things constitute a realm in which biopower is distributed across various actors and entities. This understanding of biopolitics as biopower, it strikes me, better accounts for the field of relations that Foucault himself later describes in which people are not simply controlled by other people, but rather, one in which forces and flows are recognized as circulating among humans, non-humans, and non-living things alike.

Following Foucault’s work on care of the self, governmentality should likewise be understood more complexly, not simply as the ways in which persons are governed or “subjectified” by the state but rather, how persons govern themselves, and thereby how “a human being turns him- or herself into a subject” (Foucault 1988: 3). In a similar vein, the concept of discipline is rearticulated in terms of care of the self, moving from an understanding of discipline as the ways in which persons are subject to disciplinary powers toward an understanding of discipline as

practices of self-governance, self-discipline, or self-care through which one constitutes oneself and at the same time relates meaningfully with others.⁵ As Gros explains, the care of the self is

therefore shot through with the presence of the Other: the other as the guide of one’s life, the other as the correspondent to whom one writes and before whom one takes stock of oneself, the other as helpful friend, benevolent relative. (2005: 537)

Indeed, as Foucault emphasized in a file of notes entitled “Government of the self and others” found after his death, the care of the self is not “*a requirement of solitude, but a real social practice,*” an “*intensifier of social relations*” (Gros 2005: 537, italics in the original). Or, as Foucault also put it elsewhere, “Being occupied with oneself and political activities are linked [in Plato’s *Alcibiades I*]” (Foucault 1988: 26).⁶

Although Foucault himself pays little attention to non-humans and non-living things in his examination of the care of the self, I have argued that the ethics and politics he outlines in this work has important implications for rethinking ethical and political relations not only within a human polis but also if we extend them to what I have referred to as the ecopolis. Foucault’s late work is thus exceedingly relevant to emerging concerns regarding the meaning of citizenship and the roles and responsibilities of a global citizen in a world of 21st-century (city-exceeding, and indeed, nation-exceeding) environmental concerns.

As my research progresses, I will explore everyday environmental practices as personal practices that are political, and also political practices that are personal. Practices as mundane as “environmentally-friendly” ways of eating, managing waste, using energy, or traveling are in fact quite complex—and also not entirely unproblematic. These require constant self-reflexivity, a thinking through of one’s relationship to other humans, non-humans, and other-others, and, the constant potential risk of self-transformation—of having to revise what one does in accordance with what one knows. It seems that following an ethic of care has the potential to avoid prescriptive, moralistic, unreflexive environmentally ethical norms by instead proposing an ongoing, active, contextual, open-to-transformation re-evaluation and re-negotiation of the relationship of the self to the things that sustain it.

⁵ Far from generating inactivity, the care of the self makes us act as, where, and when we ought. Far from isolating us from the human community, it appears rather as that which connects us to it most exactly ... the subject discovered in the care of the self is quite the opposite of an isolated individual: he is a citizen of the world. (Foucault 2005: 538)

⁶ According to Socrates, to know oneself one must know both one’s body, one’s sexuality, and how to participate in the sociopolitical world. This positive relationship between techniques of the self and that which is not self-teachers, the city (or the sociopolitical realm), and the cosmos—is a persistent theme of Western philosophizing.” (Foucault 1988: 55)

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