

## From the Classical Self to the Modern Subject

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## Christian Mastery of Self

- Christians were uncertain about the origin of their thoughts: from God or Satan?
- They assimilated the moral asceticism of the pagans (e.g., regarding sexuality)
- There was no imposition of asceticism on a tolerant paganism

## Taking Care of One's Self

- Greek: *epimelei heautou*, working on or being concerned with something
- Prominent in Greco-Roman culture 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C. to 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D.
- Implies attention, knowledge, technique
- Working on one's self requires selecting the relevant aspects of scientific knowledge

## Existential Choice

- Hellenistic ascetics chose the course of mastery of themselves
- "People decide for themselves whether to care for themselves"
- Their choices give their lives a certain value
- The idea that the principal work of art is one's own existence has vanished

## Stoics and Epicureans

- The Epicureans were concerned with general knowledge
- This allows one to master the passions better
- The Stoics were concerned with mastery of the self, and made knowledge secondary
- Epictetus: is x something I can master?

## Modern Self-Absorption

- The modern obsession with the self is diametrically opposed to the ancient practice of self-care
- The ancient practice was overturned by Christianity, which viewed the self as something to be renounced
- The California cult of the self epitomizes modern self-absorption
- It aims at discovery of what one's self truly is

## Writing and the Self

- In ancient Greece, people began to keep notebooks for personal and administrative use
- These enabled them to manage themselves as if it were an enterprise
- The notebooks encouraged an ideal of perfect self-management
- They were not confessional, but contained materials for the constitution of the self

## Self-Constitution

- One way to understand self-contemplation is in terms of symbolizing ourselves
- But this is not enough to constitute the self
- The self is constituted through real practices
- “There is a technology of the constitution of the self which cuts across symbolic systems while using them”

## Austerity

- Among the Greeks, the Pythagoreans and neo-Platonists advocated purity
- These philosophies influenced Christianity’s advocacy of purity
- The model is virginity, which is a form of integrity
- Christianity requires self-examination because desire always lurks and must be renounced
- This is contrasted with the Greco-Roman theme of temperance, which requires self-domination

## Why Do We Enjoy Self-Analysis?

- It may be that it took a long time to overcome the painfulness of self-analysis
- This practice must be examined in its concrete historical forms
- They are often invisible and linked to techniques of directing others
- In education, the teacher manages others and directs them in self-management

## Dissipating the Shadows

- There seems to be a precedent in Plato of self-contemplation as search for truth
- For Plato, the soul contemplates itself in another soul, like a mirror
- This allows the self to grasp its mode of being
- But this is not confessional or historical

## The Revival of the Culture of the Self

- In Christianity, care of self was transferred into the pastoral role of care of others
- In the Renaissance, there was a revolt against the surrender of self-care
- The autonomy of the culture of the self reappeared
- The idea that one’s life can be a work of art emerges in idea of the hero as work of art

## The Modern Self

- Descartes is responsible for the way moderns see themselves
- The Greeks had made self-transformation a prerequisite of knowledge
- This was perpetuated until Descartes allowed that any subject can have knowledge
- All that is required is evidence: I can be immoral and know the truth

## The Universal Self

- Kant tried to re-calibrate the relation between the ethical and knowing self
- He did this through the “universal subject,” which constitutes itself through its conformity to universal rules
- This provides a new alternative to the ancient way of constituting one’s self through transforming exercises
- It is also an alternative to the Christian model of self-discovery