

## **Foucault's Problematization of Homosexuality: Towards an Aesthetics of Existence**

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### **Abstract**

Through problematization, Foucault bares the ethical teleology of homosexuality in friendship. In an interview, he describes friendship as a way of life. In parallel with his problematization of pleasure and the love of boys in the Greco-Roman technologies of the self, friendship could be more fully understood as a mode of cultivating the self in relation to a practice of truth between friends. According to Foucault, this cultivation or care of the self is at the same time a practice of freedom that defines an "aesthetics of existence." On the other hand, at present, friendship could become a practice of freedom through a resistance of the discourse of sexuality and the overcoming of homosexuality as a sexological concept. In this paper, an alternative way of looking at homosexuality in an ethical manner is thus construed with Foucault.

**Keywords:** Foucault, Homosexuality, Friendship, Care of the Self, Aesthetics of Existence

### **Introduction**

Michel Foucault's later works have been largely concentrated in working out what he calls the constitution of an ethical substance by the individual. Ethics, as he claims upon his retrieval of the Greco-Roman practices of the self, is an enterprise of *epimeleia heautou*, that is, the care or cultivation of the self. Contrary to what has become the customary textbook claim of the Greeks' primary preoccupation with knowledge, based on the Delphic oracle or Socratic maxim "Know thyself," Foucault installs the care of the self as the primary concern

which knowledge itself seeks to serve. Thus ethics is intimately tied to truth because to become ethical is a question of how the subject constitutes himself in a certain practice of truth. While the care of self maintains an ontological priority in ethics, the preponderance of the problem of the relationship with others is maintained by Foucault in as much as the self is inextricable from a network of relations. In other words, taking care of the self is incomprehensible outside the context of human relations. Thus, in this sense, the ethical problem is at the same time a political issue.

It is in this context of Foucault's later works that this paper seeks to answer the problem: "What is the ethical status of homosexuality?" This will be accomplished by drawing the connections between Foucault's analyses in an interview where he thematically addressed the questions surrounding homosexuality and his ideas in the three volumes of the *History of Sexuality* as well as his lectures in Berkeley. In the interview, Foucault discloses friendship as the ethical issue veiled by the discourse on sexuality. Friendship is widely discussed by Foucault, on the other hand, in *The Use of Pleasure* and *Care of the Self* within the general significance of the self's relation with others ordained towards the teleological aim for an aesthetics of existence.

The paper begins with a description of the method of "problematization", which Foucault employs to approach the issue of homosexuality and his problematization of homosexuality itself, from an interview titled "Friendship as a Way of Life" and the first volume of the *History of Sexuality*. Then a wider thematization of friendship follows as extracted within the broader horizon of Foucault's ethics. I will argue that based on Foucault's categorical description of friendship as a way of life, friendship then could also be subsumed within the finality of the ethical project towards an aesthetics of existence. I will reinforce this by exploring the ubiquity of friendship in Foucault's genealogy of the Greco-Roman technologies of the self, particularly showing the parallelism between Foucault's problematization of pleasure and the love of boys, which for the Greeks, is likewise ordained to friendship. The third part is a further amplification of the various ways whereby friendship becomes a mode of cultivating the self in relation to truth that stands between friends. The concluding part articulates an alternative way of looking at homosexuality in an ethical manner as worked out in the preceding discussions with Foucault.

## The Problematics of Homosexuality

Foucault's problematization of homosexuality in the interview "Friendship as a Way of Life" showcases the project centered on ethics which preoccupied him in the remaining years of his life. The method of problematization which Foucault attaches to ethics, or the "practice of living" as he traces and credits it to the Greeks, is "a process by which an aspect of reality, of one's world, one's experience, is brought into focus as a problem in need of a response."<sup>1</sup> Foucault makes this methodological consideration more explicit in what he claims to be performing as a historian of thought:

...the analysis of the way an unproblematic field of experience, or a set of practices, which were accepted without question, which were familiar and "silent," out of discussion, becomes a problem, raises discussion and debate, incites new reactions, and induces a crisis in the previously silent behavior, habits, practices, and institutions.<sup>2</sup>

Hence, through problematization one becomes concerned about a certain matter. In the words of Foucault, "people begin to take care of something ... they become anxious about this or that – for example, about madness, about crime, about sex, about themselves, or about truth."<sup>3</sup> Edward Mcgushin's rightfully simple interpretation of it is that: "this *caring-about-something* is a way of disclosing the world in light of a problem and is therefore a response to that problem."<sup>4</sup> This strongly suggests the intimate interplay of thought and practice immanent in "caring" as Foucault had in mind.

Thought is not what inhabits a certain conduct and gives it meaning; rather, it is what allows one to step back from this way of acting and reacting, to present it to oneself as an object of thought and to question it as to its meaning, its conditions and its goals. Thought is freedom in relation to what one does,

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<sup>1</sup> Edward F. Mcgushin, *Foucault's Askesis: An Introduction to the Philosophical Life* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 16.

<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, ed. by Joseph Pearson (Los Angeles, California: Semiotext, 2001), 74.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Mcgushin, *Foucault's Askesis*, 16.

the motion by which one detaches oneself from it, establishes it as an object and reflects on it as a problem"<sup>5</sup>

Problematization in other words is an emancipative activity where one scrutinizes a present state of affairs and opens up possibilities of becoming<sup>6</sup> (different). As in Todd May's similar description: "problematization does open the door to a power that creates subjectivity."<sup>7</sup> May's remark allows for an interpretation of Foucault's philosophy where an individual is rendered more active in the formation of its subjectivity. Furthermore, problematization could also be rightly rendered as a diagnostic practice. Mcgushin describes the Foucauldian practice of philosophy as "diagnostician of the present,"<sup>8</sup> a description that fairly accounts for the connection of Foucault's method of genealogy<sup>9</sup> in *Discipline and Punish* and in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* with his later works on ethics. Conceived as diagnostics, Foucault's preceding analyses of disciplinary power, knowledge and bio-politics may already be considered as problematizations that relaxes power's hold upon the subject, diminish oppression and salvage the subject from total bankruptcy.

In the interview, Foucault incisively opens up the ethical issue of friendship which was eclipsed by the strategic discourses of sexuality particularly encapsulated in homosexuality. Here the problematization of homosexuality can be read side by side with the diagnostics which Foucault undertakes in *The History of Sexuality*. By identifying friendship as the real problem of homosexuality, Foucault actually opens up and makes more explicit the resistance to the repressive discourses of sexuality. In the interview, Foucault says:

The more it is written by young people the more it concerns young people. But the problem is not to make room for one age group alongside another but to find out what can be done in relation to the quasi identification between homosexuality

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Mcgushin, *Foucault's Askesis*, 16.

<sup>6</sup> I am using the term "becoming" in the Deleuzian sense of a "continual production of difference immanent within the constitution of events, whether physical or otherwise." Adrian Parr, *The Deleuze Dictionary* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 26.

<sup>7</sup> Todd May, *The Philosophy of Michel Foucault* (Bucks: Acumen Publishing Limited, 2006), 106.

<sup>8</sup> Mcgushin, *Foucault's Askesis*, xiv.

<sup>9</sup> "Genealogy is the tracing of the history of an institution or a practice by asking which forces have taken hold of it, active or reactive ones." May, *The Philosophy of Michel Foucault*, 64.

and the love among young people. Another thing to distrust is the tendency to relate the question of homosexuality to the problem of "Who am I?" and "What is the secret of my desire?" Perhaps it would be better to ask oneself, "What relations, through homosexuality, can be established, invented, multiplied, and modulated?" The problem is not to discover in oneself the truth of one's sex, but, rather, to use one's sexuality henceforth to arrive at a multiplicity of relationships. And, no doubt, that's the real reason why homosexuality is not a form of desire but something desirable. Therefore, we have to work at becoming homosexuals and not be obstinate in recognizing that we are. The development toward which the problem of homosexuality tends is the one of friendship.<sup>10</sup>

In the *History of Sexuality*, Foucault declares that homosexuality is a nineteenth-century construct arising from the proliferation of the discourses on sexuality:

This new persecution of the peripheral sexualities entailed an incorporation of perversions and a new specification of individuals. As defined by the ancient civil or canonical codes, sodomy was a category of forbidden acts; their perpetrator was nothing more than the juridical subject of them. The nineteenth century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology. Nothing that went into his total composition was unaffected by his sexuality. It was everywhere present in him: at the root of all his actions because it was their insidious and indefinitely active principle; written immodestly on his face and body because it was a secret that always gave itself away. It was consubstantial with him, less as a habitual sin than as a singular nature. We must not forget that the psychological, psychiatric, medical category of homosexuality was constituted from the moment it was characterized – Westphal's famous article of 1870 on "contrary sexual sensations" can stand as its date of birth – less by a type of sexual relations than by a certain quality of sexual sensibility, a certain way of inverting the masculine and

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<sup>10</sup> Michel Foucault, "Friendship as a Way of Life" in *Ethics Subjectivity and Truth The Essential Works of Michel Foucault Volume 1*, Edited by Paul Rabinow (New York: The New Press, 1994), 135-136.

the feminine in oneself. Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species.<sup>11</sup>

Foucault exposes that the sexuality of the homosexual became the primary and substantial form of his intelligibility in as much as it is the truth produced and designated to him by the *scientia sexualis*. The strategic discourses on procreation and population relegated individuals who manifest the newly specified psychological traits into homosexuals whose very identities were made identical to it. Homosexuality is a power-knowledge construct that constituted the destinies of individuals who bear it either secretly or in the open. In other words, the sexuality of the homosexual controls his very life. Foucault alludes to the Faustian pact “instilled in us by the deployment of sexuality”<sup>12</sup> where sex exercises absolute power over us in return for the truth and sovereignty of sex. What the deployment of sexuality actually instilled in us is the desire for sex which Foucault clarifies as “the desire to have it, to have access to it, to discover it, to liberate it, to articulate it in discourse, to formulate it in truth,”<sup>13</sup> or in other words, the will to knowledge about sex. But this desirability itself is the very trap which produced the illusion of freedom where in fact one is actually rendered bereft of life itself. Vitality is extracted out from life, and the capacity of experiencing pleasure is numbed by this will to knowledge.

It is often said that we have been incapable of imagining any new pleasures. We have at least invented a different kind of pleasure: pleasure in the truth of pleasure, the pleasure of knowing that truth, of discovering and exposing it, the fascination of seeing it and telling it, of captivating and capturing others by it, of confiding it in secret, of luring it out in the open—the specific pleasure of the true discourse on pleasure.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction*, Translated by Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 42-43.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

This critique of sexuality forms part of Foucault's polemic against the bankruptcy of disciplinary power. Its exposure to daylight opens up possibilities of resistance. The irresistible desire to know the truth about sex, which has led to the deployment of sexuality and within which homosexuality is made intelligible, must be unveiled as the illusion that one must break away from. "The rallying point for the counterattack against the deployment of sexuality," Foucault admonishes, "ought not to be sex-desire, but bodies and pleasure."<sup>15</sup>

Under these preceding considerations, the trajectory of Foucault's problematization of homosexuality appears in a clearer view. In the interview, he insists that "homosexuality is not a form of desire." The commonplace treatment of homosexuality is its reduction to, and as if nothing more than, the attraction or desire for each other between two men that eventually gets entangled with various other discourses such as immorality, abnormality, unnaturalness, and perversion. Foucault cautions us to be on guard from "the tendency to relate the question of homosexuality to the problem of "'Who am I?' and 'What is the secret of my desire?'" ; more so "the problem is not to discover in oneself the truth of one's sex." This is because they are all reactions that emanate from the discourse of sexuality itself. To encapsulate the problem into the truth of one's sex as something to be discovered, as a substantial or natural ground of one's being is already acquiescence to the identity specified by sexuality. Thus, even the standpoint of some people who fight for sexual freedom, where homosexuality is rallied as a natural phenomenon instead of a historical one and thereby worthy of insistence for institutional equality, is still actually operating in complicity with the deployment of sexuality.

What Foucault ruptures open in the problem of homosexuality is the very possibility of becoming which was eclipsed by sexuality – that is, friendship. Unlike the common notion of friendship nowadays proliferated in mainstream media by celebrity-personalities as a "state" where either one or both parties are expected to maintain sameness for the preservation of their relationship, Foucault describes friendship as "a relationship that is still formless," as something to be invented "from A to Z."<sup>16</sup> The main problem regarding sexuality is the problem about the creation or invention of a way of life. Foucault says,

A way of life can be shared among individuals of different age, status, and social activity. It can yield intense relations not resembling those that are institutionalized. It seems to me

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

<sup>16</sup> Foucault, "Friendship as a Way of Life," 136.

that a way of life can yield a culture and an ethics. To be "gay," I think, is not to identify with the psychological traits and the visible masks of the homosexual but to try to define and develop a way of life.<sup>17</sup>

Friendship, on which the problem of homosexuality is anchored, is an ethical issue. Sex-desire, as quoted above, is not the point for resistance but bodies and pleasures. Foucault writes this in the last chapter of *The History of Sexuality* where he seems to introduce the enterprise of ethics that will preoccupy the next volume on *The Use of Pleasure*. In the interview, Foucault in the same vein describes friendship as "the sum of everything through which they can give each other pleasure."<sup>18</sup>

The next part turns now to Foucault's analysis of the ancient practices where friendship as a way of life has been determined in various relations in the experience of pleasure.

### **Pleasure and Friendship in Ancient Technologies of the Self**

Foucault strongly recommends a return to, and getting in touch once more with our passions as a form of resistance to the will to knowledge and imposition of disciplinarity. And Foucault's analysis of ancient Greek and Greco-Roman models provides the concrete historical reinforcement. Pleasure today has become so nebulous in that it has been entangled with a lot of discourses from the religious to the secular. Unmasked, the experience of pleasure is the main target of swarming advertisements by capitalists to market their products and services. In ethico-religious institutions, pleasure is supposed to be policed and subscribed to a set of codes of behavior and prohibitions with the thought that it might run amok unless otherwise tamed. In short, pleasure is something to be either controlled (by the market) or disciplined (by institutions). In both cases, pleasure is treated as an impulse which has to be kept in check and/or utilized for instrumental purposes. A person in this setting can hardly be thought of as the source and subject of his own actions that produce pleasure. Foucault problematizes this notion of pleasure and opens up a wide array of possibilities of "experiencing" pleasure.

Commenting on the translation of the French plural term *plaisirs* (originally used by Foucault) into the singular English term "pleasure"

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 137-138.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.



in *The Use of Pleasure*, Carvalho writes that it obscures the important point that for the Greeks, "pleasure was not a single substantive impulse but an array of affects felt across the various domains and sub-domains of the life of the body, the institution of marriage, the relations between men and boys and the pursuit of the truth. In each of these domains, there was a form of problematization, a set of difficulties and proposed resolutions of those difficulties, associated with the use of pleasures in that domain."<sup>19</sup> Carvalho's remark is noteworthy because for Foucault, pleasure is related to an aesthetics of existence, where a subject's use of it is valued not according to conformity with a code of behavior or goal of purification, but according to the "intensity of its practice"<sup>20</sup> under one's control of modulation. By "aesthetics of existence" Foucault refers to the "intentional and voluntary actions by which men not only set themselves rules of conduct, but also seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being, and to make their life into an oeuvre that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria."<sup>21</sup> The use of pleasure then is performed within the context of a "practice of liberty," not in the traditional sense of free will, but towards the creation of a life fashioned and governed by oneself. According to Foucault, pleasure was problematized by the Greeks as an ethical issue thus, its ethical determination relies heavily on the relation that a subject has to himself. In the analysis of *aphrodisia*, or "acts, gestures, and contacts that produce a certain form of pleasure"<sup>22</sup> whether it be regarding food, drinks or sexual activity, the question raised is whether how one must make use of nature's endowments. The "right use" of pleasure or *chresis* is valued by the Greeks according to Foucault in cognizance of nature's tendency to be excessive. Moderation, as Aristotle taught in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, is a virtue in so far as one is able to act rationally in between excessive and deficient passions. Or in today's expression, one acts in his right mind or proper senses. However, Foucault perceives moderation more as a radical and self-constitutive technique. This is particularly evident in his statement that

...moderation could not take the form of an obedience to a system of laws or a codification of behaviors; nor could it

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<sup>19</sup> John M. Carvalho, "For the Love of Boys" in *Foucault Studies* 17: 218, April 2014.

<sup>20</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure: Volume 2 of The History of Sexuality*, Translated by Robert Hurley (New York: Vntage Books, 1990), 44.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 10-11.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

serve as a principle for nullifying pleasures; it was an art, a practice of pleasures that was capable of self-limitation through the use of those pleasure...<sup>23</sup>

Pleasure then is not perceived as an evil that must be purged, or the satisfaction of which leads one to sin. It is rather something very natural as a need shared by everyone. But the right use of pleasure requires one's being able to act according to the temporal order in nature and also based on one's unique status held in the society. Thus, the use of pleasure in no way can simply be judged on contemporary moral yardstick as selfish because it is at the same time a determination of an ethico-political performance where one could either showcase excellence (*arête*), "to be outstanding among others"<sup>24</sup> in Alexander Nehamas' rendering or, if one does not perform well, exhibit *hamartia*, which H.D.F. Kitto translates as "failure to hit the right mark."<sup>25</sup>

Moderation nonetheless cannot be done "unless one is capable of opposing, resisting, and subduing"<sup>26</sup> natural forces. "In the domain of pleasures," Foucault writes, "virtue was not conceived as a state of integrity, but as a relationship of domination, a relation of mastery ... In other words, to form oneself as a virtuous and moderate subject in the use he makes of pleasures, the individual has to construct a relationship with the self that is of the 'domination-submission,' 'command-obedience,' 'mastery-docility' type (and not, as will be the case in Christian spirituality, a relationship of the 'elucidation-renunciation,' 'decipherment-purification' type).<sup>27</sup> In these lines, there is a clearly emphasized intensification of the subject's sovereignty over his actions and a contradistinction to the later Christian moral principles of self-renunciation. For the Greeks, this active form of self-mastery is called *enkrateia*. In contrast to the control society of the present, the Greeks according to Foucault, aimed at domination in the area of desires and pleasures.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>24</sup> Alexander Nehamas, *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 78.

<sup>25</sup> Kitto, H.D.F. Kitto, *The Greeks* (Baltimore, Maryland: Penguin Books, 1965), 170-171.

<sup>26</sup> Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 66.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>28</sup> "Enkrateia is characterized more by an active form of self-mastery, which enables one to resist or struggle, and to achieve domination in the area of desires and pleasures." *Ibid.*, 64.

But to put oneself into, and remain within the axis of struggle, resistance and domination of pleasures is neither something endowed by nature, nor achieved by an individual overnight, nor is it a divine providential gift. Self-mastery is incumbent upon one's own effort and thus, is never an easy task. In this vein, the Greeks according to Foucault puts premium on practices (*techne*) of the self, the finality of which, is no other than self-domination. These practices are referred to by the Greeks as ascesis, or *askesis* which may take in different forms such as "training, meditation, tests of thinking, examination of conscience and control of representations."<sup>29</sup> Later in Christianity, asceticism became associated with the purging of pleasures and renunciation of self. But for the Greeks, *askesis* remained a worldly enterprise of attending to oneself in order to perform well in matters that concern his existence. Hence, *askesis* is associated with the most basic requirement of becoming ethical — *epimeleia heautou*.

This *epimeleia heautou*, care of the self, which was a precondition that had to be met before one was qualified to attend to the affairs of others or lead them, included not only the need to know (to know the things one does not know, to know that one is ignorant, to know one's own nature), but to attend effectively to the self, and to exercise and transform oneself.<sup>30</sup>

Before a further exposition of the care of self which is central to Foucault's ethics, it is beneficial to review the import of the problematization of pleasure and its value to one's becoming ethical as Foucault analyzes it among the Greeks. When Foucault declares "bodies and pleasures" as the rallying point for resistance of the deployment of sexuality, he was then referring to the very material through which an individual can constitute himself as an ethical subject. The use that one makes of pleasure from the standpoint of self-mastery gained through ascetic practice is a liberating practice. Pleasure, as it were, makes possible one's individual becoming through the practice of asceticism. Asceticism "not in the sense of a morality of renunciation but as an exercise of the self on the self by which one attempts to develop and transform oneself, and to attain to a certain mode of being,"<sup>31</sup> or in other words – freedom. As Foucault adds, "for

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>31</sup> Michel Foucault, "The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom" in *Ethics Subjectivity and Truth: The Essential Works of Michel*

what is ethics, if not the practice of freedom, the conscious practice of freedom?"<sup>32</sup>

Based on these preceding considerations, Foucault's diagnostics of homosexuality as a biopolitical discourse of *scientia sexualis* skewed from the ethical concern of friendship can now be properly understood in parallelism with his analysis of *erotics*. For the Greeks, the pleasure that derives from the love of boys is not an object for censorship, prohibition or conformity to rigid universal or religious laws, because just like the other activities that produce pleasure, it is likewise a potent material for becoming ethical.

The Greeks did not see love for one's own sex and love for the other sex as opposites, as two exclusive choices, two radically different types of behavior. The dividing lines did not follow that kind of boundary. What distinguished a moderate, self-possessed man from one given to pleasures was, from the viewpoint of ethics, much more important than what differentiated, among themselves, the categories of pleasures that invited the greatest devotion.<sup>33</sup>

To desire a man or a woman is a function of the appetite endowed by nature hence "relations between young boys and men were deemed completely natural."<sup>34</sup> The strategy of need, timeliness and status comes into play in this particular form of relation. While it was not a problem to delight in boys, to be amorous to someone who has way passed the aesthetic requirement and desirability of boyhood would be distasteful. On the part of the young boy, "to be an object of pleasure and to acknowledge oneself as such constituted a major difficulty"<sup>35</sup> because it was at variance with the "relationship that he was expected to establish with himself in order to become a free man, master of himself and capable of prevailing over others."<sup>36</sup> The ethical challenge is therefore more intense in the budding man. It is in this crucial stage where self-mastery has to be exhibited in view of the status that he will later take as an adult citizen, citizenship which the Greeks regarded as an enterprise of free men. So the boy must not

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*Foucault* Volume 1, Edited by Paul Rabinow (New York: The New Press, 1994), 282.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 284.

<sup>33</sup> Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 187.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

identify himself with being an object of pleasure and imprudently accept whatever favors offered to him by lovers. Foucault writes, "by not yielding, not submitting, remaining the strongest, triumphing over suitors and lovers through one's resistance, one's firmness, one's moderation (*sophrosyne*) the young man proves his excellence in the sphere of love relations."<sup>37</sup> The sexual relation between a boy and a man is problematized within a decisive moment (*kairos*) or right time and conditions for it to take place in the boy's transition to a wider political status. Foucault explains:

Sexual relations thus demanded particular behaviors on the part of both partners. A consequence of the fact that the boy could not identify with the part he had to play; he was supposed to refuse, resist, flee, escape. He was also supposed to make his consent, if he finally gave it, subject to conditions relating to the man to whom he yielded (his merit, his status, his virtue) and to the benefit he could expect to gain from him (a benefit that was rather shameful if it was only a question of money, but honorable if it involved training for manhood, social connections for the future, or a lasting friendship).<sup>38</sup>

The finality of sexual relation is clearly not to simply satisfy one's desires or wantonly bathe each other with pleasure that sex brings, but to substantiate it in an ethical and political mold. Once again, the use of pleasure determines the becoming-moral of an individual. Pleasure that is associated with *erotics* is natural, and temporary in so far as its indulgence can only be conditioned by the youthful season of boyhood. Hence, one must rule over them and ordain its "use" towards which its fleeting nature will be rendered with a noble finality. This finality is no other than friendship which is identified as that which provides "indestructibility"<sup>39</sup> in the way men "continue to love their mutual affection and enjoy it down to old age."<sup>40</sup>

The love of boys could not be morally honorable unless it comprised (as a result of the reasonable gifts and services of the lover and the reserved compliance of the beloved) the

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 210.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 224.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

elements that would form the basis of a transformation of this love into a definitive and socially valuable tie, that of *philia*.<sup>41</sup>

This transformation from the bond of love to the relation of friendship according to Foucault is an “ethically necessary and socially useful”<sup>42</sup> conversion, the latter being “more lasting, having no other limit than life itself; and it obliterated the dissymmetry that were implied in the erotic relation between man and adolescent.”<sup>43</sup>

Here then lies the background of Foucault’s problematization of homosexuality as something that tends to the issue of friendship. This does not mean, however, that Foucault equates the love for boys with homosexuality because in his own words, “homosexuality is plainly inadequate as a means of referring to an experience, forms of valuation, and a system of categorization so different from ours.”<sup>44</sup> What Foucault showed is a historical artifact of a way of problematizing an experience towards something which an agent could behold as his own aesthetic creation. Whatever semblance is left of the ancient Greeks’ *erotics* with what today is specified or identified as homosexuality, the problem of friendship persists as the *telos* of that form of relation. By this, friendship as an ethical problem becomes a quest for an aesthetics of existence which the remainder of this paper shall now turn to.

### **Towards an Aesthetics of Existence**

Friendship is at the end of the metamorphosis from pederastic relations. Because the pleasure from this love relation is doomed to disappear, the use of pleasure must then be oriented towards something more enduring guaranteed alone by friendship, or *philia*, “the affinity of character and mode of life, a sharing of thoughts and existence, mutual benevolence.”<sup>45</sup> Foucault cites that it is friendship at work in Xenophon’s portrayal of two lovers “who look into each other’s faces, converse, confide in one another, rejoice together or feel a common distress over successes and failures, and look after each other.”<sup>46</sup> All these descriptions even today are manifestly observable among friends regardless of gender. Moreover these shared activities

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 225.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 187.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

cannot be simply equated with sensuality, which today often colors dirty malicious minds once they witness it (especially) from lovers of the same sex. For the Greeks, the love for boys is a concrete and even a most challenging opportunity for ethical determination. The young boy who is to grow later as an adult and a citizen to carry tasks of political value can exercise early on his excellence via resistance, domination and self-mastery. The basic requirement for ethical determination mentioned above for one to attain this mastery of the self is the necessity to attend to oneself or *epimeleia heautou*. A clarification of this basic requirement would shed light on the role which a friend takes or performs in filial relationships.

The practice of caring for the self according to Foucault stands as the sole condition for an aesthetics of existence. But this is far from today's notion of selfishness or egoism which consists of locking oneself up from concern with others. On the other hand, to valorize the concern for others before oneself and insist on its primordially as some philosophers would do misses the point of the Greeks' ascetic practices.<sup>47</sup> Foucault explains:

The care of the self is ethical in itself; but it implies complex relationships with others insofar as this ethos of freedom is also a way of caring for others. This is why it is important for a free man who conducts himself as he should to be able to govern his wife, his children, his household; it is also the art of governing. Ethos also implies a relationship with others, insofar as the care of the self enables one to occupy his rightful position in the city, the community, or interpersonal relationships, whether as a magistrate or a friend. And the care of the self also implies a relationship with the other insofar as proper care of the self requires listening to the lessons of a master. One needs a guide, a counselor, a friend, someone who will be truthful with you. Thus, the problem of relationships with others is present throughout the development of the care of the self.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> "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. Care for others should not be put before the care of oneself. The care of the self is ethically prior in that the relationship with oneself is ontologically prior." Foucault, "The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom," 287.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

The attention that is rendered to the self in the various ascetic practices amounts to a cultivation of the self, or “an intensification of the relation to oneself by which one constituted oneself as the subject of one’s acts,”<sup>49</sup> and consequently, to an “intensification of social relations.”<sup>50</sup> This is why for the Greeks becoming ethical is at the same time a political labor.<sup>51</sup> The exercise of sovereignty over oneself which results into the outstanding administration of the duties emanating from his status is generally contributive to social cohesion. One may just recall the Platonic ideal of the philosopher-king who is capable above all to rule due to the judiciary and executive command of his reason over the other lower parts of his soul. Freedom, ethics and politics is knitted together by Foucault in the organizing principle of the care of the self. The following statements articulate this well,

In the case of the free man, 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. A city in which everybody took proper care of himself would be a city that functioned well and found in this the ethical principle of its permanence.<sup>52</sup>

In the same vein, the love of boys practiced as a way of life is ordained towards ethics. In the third volume of *The History of Sexuality* it is described by Foucault as “an upward movement that enables man to escape from immediate necessities, the acquisition and transmission of knowledge through the intense forms and secret ties of friendship.”<sup>53</sup> In retrospect, the boy has to be “selective” in his associations and in a way “use” his youth for noble ends, mindful of his fate as a future citizen. The inordinate use of pleasure would only prove detrimental to his end. Thus, the best choice of “lover” or “friend” is of the essence. As quoted above, the proper care that he could do at the moment of his youth is to listen to the lessons of a master who could at the same time serve as guide, counselor and friend, qualified further as someone who will be truthful to him. This

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<sup>49</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Care of the Self: Volume 3 of The History of Sexuality*, Translated by Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 41.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>51</sup> “*Epimileia* implies labor.” *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>52</sup> Foucault, “The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom,” 287.

<sup>53</sup> Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, 218.



amounts to saying that a *parrhesiastes*, or "one who speaks the truth" is the best man to "enroll" oneself in. The man who could perform *parrhesia* or free/fearless speech, is one whose life is characterized by harmony in relation to truth. In summary,

*parrhesia* is a verbal activity in which a speaker expresses his personal relationship to truth, and risks his life because he recognizes truth-telling as a duty to improve or help other people (as well as himself). In *parrhesia*, the speaker uses his freedom and chooses frankness instead of persuasion, truth instead of falsehood or silence, the risk of death instead of life and security, criticism instead of flattery, and moral duty instead of self-interest and moral apathy.<sup>54</sup>

In his lectures at Berkeley, Foucault tells a history of the practice of *parrhesia* in the ancient Greco-Roman world. The notion of care of the self nonetheless remains a central unifying theme. The practice of *parrhesia* in human relationships namely, community life, public life and personal relationships, as well as *parrhesia* in techniques of examination namely, solitary self-examination, self-diagnosis and self-testing, all fall under the heading of care of the self. And the role of the friend is found ubiquitous in these various practices.

If the *parrhesiastes* is the best guide to listen to, it is tantamount to saying that the philosopher is the best friend that one could have. This is highlighted by Foucault in the person of Socrates to whom in fact, in one passage, he traces the injunction "care of self":

In its critical aspect — and I mean critical in a broad sense — philosophy is that which calls into question domination at every level and in every form in which it exists, whether political, economic, sexual, institutional, or what have you. To a certain extent, this critical function of philosophy derives from the Socratic injunction "Take care of yourself," in other words, "Make freedom your foundation, through the mastery of yourself."<sup>55</sup>

In *The Use of Pleasure*, philosophy is already cited by Foucault as an "asset that is necessary for the young man's wise conduct."<sup>56</sup> And the function that it serves is not to train him towards a specific form of

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<sup>54</sup> Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, 19-20.

<sup>55</sup> Foucault, "The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom," 300-301.

<sup>56</sup> Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 212.

life but “to enable him to exercise self-mastery and to triumph over others in the difficult game of ordeals to be undergone and honor to be safeguarded.”<sup>57</sup> Foucault does not muster out the age-old philosophical dictum “know thyself” in his emphasis of the “care of the self.” Rather, he amplifies the active interplay between truth and the subject. Care presupposes knowledge of the self,<sup>58</sup> and enables the self to govern himself with that knowledge where he becomes the subject of his own deliberate acts. This active relation between truth and the subject manifests in the life of the *parrhesiastes*. Being able to speak the truth fearlessly as a matter of duty requires a “Dorian harmony between *logos* and *bios*.”<sup>59</sup> This makes Socrates a philosophical *parrhesiastes* par excellence, so that even Nicias and Laches who, despite being both military veterans, would still refer to Socrates and solicit his ideas on the best kind education when they were consulted by two elderly men who wanted to provide their sons with such.<sup>60</sup> In Socrates, the *parrhesiastes*, master, and friend converge in one person.

In personal relationships, the friend also takes the role of a *parrhesiastes* which Foucault reads in Plutarch. The question of the need for a friend is first raised, and then points to the fact that there is in man a domineering tendency for self-love or *philautia* which is the cause of self-delusion. A friend who could act as a *parrhesiastes* could help one rid himself of *philautia*. Self-delusion due to self-love particularly poses more concern because unlike ignorance which can be overcome, it disables an individual to both know that he does not know, and know exactly his state. This then adds a further challenge in distinguishing the real *parrhesiastes* from a flatterer. Foucault writes,

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<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> “Taking care of oneself requires knowing [connaître] oneself. Care of the self is, of course, knowledge [connaissance] of the self—this is the Socratic-Platonic aspect—but also knowledge of a number of rules of acceptable conduct or of principles that are both truths and prescriptions. To take care of the self is to equip oneself with these truths: this is where ethics is linked to the game of truth.” Foucault, “The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom,” 285.

<sup>59</sup> “Of the four kinds of Greek harmony, the Dorian mode is courageous ... It describes the harmony between word and deed in Socrates’ life ... This harmonic accord also distinguishes Socrates from a sophist ... Socrates is able to use rational, ethically valuable, fine, and beautiful discourse; but unlike the sophists, he can use *parrhesia* and speak freely because what he says accords exactly with what he thinks, and what he thinks accords exactly with what he does. Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, 100-101.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 92-95.

"It is difficult to *recognize* and to *accept* a *parrhesiastes*. For not only is it difficult to distinguish a true *parrhesiastes* from a flatterer; because of our *philautia* we are also not *interested* in recognizing a *parrhesiastes*."<sup>61</sup> Hence, Plutarch gives two criteria on how to recognize an authentic one: first is the already mentioned harmony between words and deeds exemplified by Socrates, "the conformity between what the real truth-teller says with how he behaves,"<sup>62</sup> and the second is "the permanence, the continuity, the stability and steadiness of the true *parrhesiastes*, the true friend, regarding his choices, his opinions, and his thoughts."<sup>63</sup> Foucault also calls the second criterion "steadiness of mind."<sup>64</sup> The friend as a *parrhesiastes* is further cited by Foucault in the Epicurean schools where the philosopher acts as a "spiritual guide" for other people. Philodemus refers to the practice of "salvation by one another"<sup>65</sup> or in Foucault's words, "mutual confession"<sup>66</sup> where the philosopher who exercises sovereignty over himself helps others to gain salvation, not in the sense of an afterlife but "access to a good, beautiful, and happy life."<sup>67</sup> Foucault continues that,

In one's own salvation, other members of the Epicurean community [The Garden] have a decisive role to play as necessary agents enabling one to discover the truth about oneself, and in helping one to gain access to a happy life. Hence, the very important emphasis on friendship in the Epicurean groups.<sup>68</sup>

In addition to the list where Plutarch is already included, Foucault also observes that in "Seneca, and the traditions which derives from Socrates, the *parrhesiastes* always needs to be a friend ... the friendship relation was always at the root of the parrhesiastic game."<sup>69</sup> In the *Care of the Self*, Seneca, Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius are mentioned by Foucault as recommending self-examination as mode of cultivating the self where a friend takes the role of a confidant.

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<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 140-141.

There are also the talks that one has with a confidant, with friends, with a guide or director. Add to this the correspondence in which one reveals the state of one's soul, solicits advice, gives advice to anyone who needs it—which for that matter constitutes a beneficial exercise for the giver, who is called the preceptor, because he thereby re-actualizes it for himself.<sup>70</sup>

Friendship in these many textual and historical artifacts is presented by Foucault as an ethical enterprise where the cultivation of oneself is linked to the relation one assumes with others in the community. As an ethical enterprise, friendship is geared towards an aesthetics of existence which launches from the basic labor of caring for the self. What remains to be enunciated is the idea of friendship as it is now an issue for us in the present and problematized by Foucault in the beginning of this paper as the ethical issue of homosexuality.

## Conclusion

In the concluding remarks of his lectures on *Fearless Speech*, Foucault says that problematization is “always a kind of creation.”<sup>71</sup> This is semantically charged with the practice and experience of freedom in the very activity of critique. With the model of the Greeks’ problematizations of aspects of their experience so that they could constitute themselves as subjects of their own acts, the problematization of homosexuality likewise banners the flag of liberation. Tom Roach’s claim is precise when he writes that, “one such important insight from Foucault’s late work concerns the delinking of sexuality and truth in friendship and the consequent relinking of self-knowledge and self-transformation.”<sup>72</sup> Foucault’s critique of homosexuality as a problem of friendship strikes a shattering blow to the disciplinary and biopolitical discourse of sexuality and ignites the engine of becoming, of creation. In his description of friendship in the interview as “a relationship that is formless” and “which has to be invented from A to Z,” Foucault salvages friendship from discourses that would otherwise arrest its becoming from one’s own canvass.

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<sup>70</sup> Foucault, *The Care of the Self*, 51.

<sup>71</sup> Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, 173.

<sup>72</sup> Tom Roach, *Friendship as a Way of Life: Foucault, AIDS, and the Politics of Shared Estrangement* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012), 10.

Borrowing Roach's words that "If, for Foucault, the becoming of homosexuality is friendship, it is because friendship is always a becoming"<sup>73</sup> The deployment of sexuality is the present discourse from which friendship must be wrenched away in order for an aesthetics of existence or a mode of existence between friends could be fashioned. Hence, I again concur with Roach that "such friendship only comes into being when homosexuality as a sexological concept is annihilated."<sup>74</sup> With "homosexuality" overcome, friendship is then left on the friends' invention and reinvention in a way of life that is lived according to their initiatives and resistance from multifarious forces and "technologies" of imposition and docility. Friendship is each other's responsibility because it is a work in progress towards an aesthetics of existence.

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 15.

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