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The Care of the Self versus the Ethics of Desire: Two Diagrams of the Production of Subjectivity (and of the Subject’s Relation to Truth) (Foucault versus Lacan)

2.1 Introductory remarks: desire contra ethics?

With the ‘discovery’ of the unconscious, and the introduction of desire into questions of an individual’s motivation, Freud in one fell swoop renders all previous accounts of ethics, and thus of the subject, partial.\(^1\) Bluntly put, psychoanalysis demonstrated explicitly for the first time, that there is something else that determines our behaviour up and beyond (or indeed, below) the ‘good,’ whether it be our own, someone else’s, the good of society/humanity, or ‘the good’ in a more general and abstract sense.\(^2\) It is this revolution in ethical thought that is the subject of Jacques Lacan’s seminar on *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (cited in references as *EP*), a revolution that is also a redefinition inasmuch as the latter is then not to do with the good at all, at least not in the above sense, and also not to do with what Lacan calls ‘the service of goods’ (that includes the accumulation of wealth, commodities and so forth), but with that very desire – unpredictable, non-productive and unconscious – that will necessarily upset any such moral position. It is also this that marks psychoanalysis with tragedy insofar as such desire, in operating *contra* this good (and especially the good of the individual), is also a being towards death.

The goal of Lacanian analysis – if it can be said to have one – is then less a ‘cure’ or the production of a healthy productive individual (that is, the building up of the ego and the making of a ‘good’ person) than the assumption of what might be called the subject of the unconscious that can only take place via the dismantlement of the various imaginary identifications that led to the former, including the various ethical ones (precisely about being a good person and so forth). This is not an ethics

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S. O’Sullivan, *On the Production of Subjectivity*  
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of the individual at all, at least not of the conscious subject, rather, it is
an ethics concerned with that impersonal desire that the former masks
and which, for Lacan, constitutes the very truth of our being. It is, we
might say, an ethics turned upside down.

In this second chapter I want to excavate further this strange notion
of ethics, and the concepts of desire and truth that it implies, via a com-
mentary on the concluding session of Lacan’s seminar. I am especially
interested in how the deployment of these concepts implies a particular
kind of subject, or, we might say, a particular production of subjectiv-
ity. As a foil to this I will be comparing the latter with Michel Foucault’s
ideas about ethics as they are laid out in the introductory lectures of The
Hermeneutics of the Subject (cited in references as H) (with some asides to
Foucault’s interviews on his late work and especially ‘On the Genealogy
of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress’ (from the collection Ethics:
Subjectivity and Truth [cited in references as EST], pp. 253–80). If it is
Lacan more than any other post-Freudian who sharpens and accelerates
the challenge implied by psychoanalysis for ethics, then it is Foucault
who takes up the further critical project of excavating an alternative
tradition of ethics – the ‘Care of the Self’ (the epimeleia heautou) – first
practised by the ancient Greeks, but which Foucault argues is directly
relevant to our own ethical situation in the contemporary world.
I am specifically interested here in whether this particular ethical pro-
gramme, which in some senses is pitched against Lacan’s subject of
desire, might itself be understood as a form of ‘the good’ in Lacan’s
terms. Is Foucault’s ‘Care of the Self’ part of that ethical tradition that
Lacan undermines, or does it in fact involve a different understanding
of ethics that brings it closer to the psychoanalytic programme itself?
Following this evaluation I will also be concerned with the specifically
constructive nature of Foucault’s ‘Care of the Self’, and, explicitly in
Section 2.3, with Foucault’s notion of spirituality – or simply the idea
that access to truth must involve a prior preparation by the subject who
is then, in turn, transformed by that very truth.

There are major differences between my two archives, not least the
one positioning desire as central, the other pleasure, but there are also,
as I have just intimated, important resonances. Indeed, an immedi-
ate similarity is that both were intended specifically as oral discourses
(being delivered as ‘seminars’). Both were open to all, and in both, I
would argue, we see thought in action with the working out of the
possibilities for a contemporary ethics (albeit this is often done via
various historical analyses). A second resonance is that both attend to
the relation one has with oneself contra any external power (Lacan) or