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FOUCAULT'S CARE OF SELF

A Response to Modern Technology

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Concerns over the proper relationship between us and technology continue to be at the forefront of modern minds. Our ever-increasing reliance on technology, especially throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, has only heightened the anxiety about the right way to incorporate technology into our daily lives. While we value the convenience that technology offers, we admit with regret how we rely on technology for far too many things including not only our intellectual needs, but also our relational and spiritual needs. But, we ask with a sigh, how can we survive without it? How can we participate in the modern world without staying connected through the latest technologies? We know that there are shortcomings that come from this way of life, but we have become so inundated by technology that we can no longer point them out; our numbness means that we can no longer discern between the harmful and healing effects of technology.

I believe that French philosopher Michel Foucault offers us a fresh way to approach modern technology through his understanding of a proper care of self. Toward the end of his life, Foucault grew increasingly attracted to the question of what kinds of technologies make up a care for the self. To answer this question, he traces the idea of "care of self" across history, beginning in Plato's *Alcibiades* and continuing to the modern era; at the advent of modernity, however, he discovers that the historic "care of self" is reduced to a "knowledge of self." Foucault criticizes this limited notion of care of self because it is based on a narrow understanding of subjectivity, where the human is characterized solely as an acquirer of knowledge. I will argue that the modern prioritizing of self-knowledge over self-care brings to light the way contemporary technology often undermines a holistic care of self by fueling our modern obsession with knowledge.

Some may criticize turning to Foucault to address issues in the philosophy of technology, because they see his work as unrelated to the concrete reality of present-day technology and as an ambiguous commentary at best. It is indeed true that, while Foucault explicitly employs technological language throughout his philosophy, it is not initially clear how this terminology applies to the use of technology in a more narrow sense. Moreover, it can also be conceded that the context for his technological references often appear rather "ambivalent," as Michael Behrent points out, such that we are unsure whether Foucault is advocating or criticizing technological usage (2013, p. 56). And yet, I believe that it is precisely his broad understanding of technology and his openness to the advantages and disadvantages

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of technology that allow him to speak into the use of modern technology in a unique way. Other scholars have also seen the great benefit in applying Foucault's thought to modern technology (Behrent 2013; Bergen and Verbeek 2021; Dorrestijn 2012; Feenberg 1991; Gerrie 2007; Hernández-Ramírez 2017; Ihde 1991; Jacobsen 2015; Matthewman 2011). Jim Gerrie has even argued that an "apt title for the field of Foucault's work might be that of the Philosophy of Technology" (2007, p. 1).

In this chapter, I will first demonstrate how Foucault's notion of "care of self" implies a fuller understanding of subjectivity that acknowledges the self as placed in a relation to technologies but also free to choose technologies to shape itself. Second, I will describe Foucault's account of the modern reduction of "care of self" to "knowledge of self" in order to expose many of the weaknesses found behind contemporary technologies. Third, I will consider how "care of self" helps distinguish between harmful and healing technological practices and how this leaves room for ways that modern technologies might contribute to a holistic care of self. I will be drawing mostly on Foucault's later works, especially his lectures at the Collège de France in early 1982 entitled *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* as well as his seminar at the University of Vermont in the fall of 1982 entitled *Technologies of the Self* (Foucault 2005, 1988a). Following Foucault's lead, I will be using the terms "care of self" and "self-care" interchangeably and "knowledge of self" and "self-knowledge" interchangeably.

Care of Self

After placing the notion of "care of self" in Foucault's writings in general, I will define technology of self and how this makes up a historical care of self as seen in Plato's *Alcibiades*. From there, I will argue that these analyses provide a rich understanding of a holistic care of self that embraces a full notion of subjectivity.

Care of Self in Foucault's Writings

In tracing the structures of psychology, madness, knowledge, language, punishment, power, and sexuality, Foucault may seem initially unconcerned with the human subject, and yet, as he later explores, the shifts in these structures are ultimately significant in the way they shape the subject. It is precisely the bracketing of the subject which allows him to expose just how the structures of history impact the subject and how the subject itself comes to be reciprocally constituted in dynamic relation to these forces. For this reason, the subject becomes more explicit in his later writings due to his increasing concern about the way "the individual constitutes and recognizes himself *qua* subject," as he writes in his second volume on sexuality (1990, p. 6). In looking back on his earlier work, he insists that the subject has always been central to his philosophy: "Thus, it is not power, but the subject, which is the general theme of my research" (1983b, p. 209). (For further discussion on the implied subject in Foucault, please see Venable 2022, pp. 182–184.)

It is important to note that the actual phrase "care of self" was used for Foucault's third volume on sexuality titled, *The Care of Self* (*Le Souci de soi*), published in 1984 just before his death (Foucault 1988b). However, this book does not describe the notion of care of self in general, but rather applies it to particular sexual practices during Roman times. Foucault appears to have been gathering material for a book on the more general notion of care of self as is evidenced by his 1982 lectures. In an interview in April of 1983 at Berkeley, Foucault discusses this future book:

> Reading Seneca, Plutarch, and all those people, I have discovered that there were a very great number of problems about the self, the ethics of the self, the technology of the self, and I had the idea of writing a book composed of a set of separate studies, papers about such and such aspects of ancient, pagan technology of the self.
>
> *(Foucault 1983a, p. 230)*

He further states that this book would focus explicitly on care of self: it would be something "separate from the sex series" and "composed of different papers about the self—for instance, a commentary on Plato's *Alcibiades* in which you find the first elaboration of the notion of *epimeleia heautou*, 'care of self'" (1983a, p. 231). Unfortunately, Foucault died before completing this book, so we must look to the themes of care of self in his published writings as well as his explicit discussion of it in his later lectures.

Defining Technology of Self

In these later works and lectures, Foucault describes care of self as something that is made up of technologies of the self; the types of technologies chosen indicate the particular style of caring for the self. The English word "technology" can be represented by both the French "*technologie*" and "*technique*," and Foucault uses these terms interchangeably, as Behrent details at length (2013, pp. 58–60). Foucault draws on the notion of the Greek *techne*, meaning an art or craft, and views technology/technique as the art, craft, method, or practice by which an individual constructs himself or herself; these technologies are not self-created but are found in the relation of the individual to society. Foucault states: "These practices are nevertheless not something invented by the individual himself. They are models that he finds in his culture and are proposed, suggested, imposed upon him by his culture, his society, and his social group" (1997, p. 291). Technologies can vary in their impact on the individual—some are presented merely as proposals or suggestions, while others can place a heavy strain on the individual—but in each case, the individual always has the choice of whether or not to take up the models in the practical construction of the self.

These technologies can manifest intangibly, as seen in social norms or behavior guidelines, but also be substantiated materially, as seen in types of machines or tools. In *Technologies of the Self*, Foucault lists four types of technology that we can identify in human society: first, technologies of production as shown in the transformation or manufacturing of things; second, technologies of sign systems as shown in language and symbols; third, technologies of power as shown in the domination and objectification of individuals; and fourth, technologies of self as shown in transformation of bodies, souls, thoughts, behaviors of individuals for particular life goals (1988a, p. 18). The first two are fairly straight-forward and Foucault does not spend much time on them: technologies of production can be seen in any kind of making of things, such as the creation of factories for production of goods, and technologies of signs can be seen in any development of language, such as the changes in the French language over time.

The third type, the technologies of power and domination, is a central theme in Foucault's work. In *Discipline and Punish*, for example, he uses the word "*technique*" more than any other place in his writings (Kelly 2013, p. 512; see also Behrent 2013, pp. 84–87). Here he describes the political technology of the Panopticon prison which enables constant surveillance of the prisoners by a central guard booth; the material architecture of the building manifests in the immaterial ways that bodies and souls are controlled. Foucault writes that this technology "is a way of making power relations function in a function," meaning that

the mechanism of the building exerts power over the prisoners from the inside functions of the institution (1997, p. 207). An example of the fourth type of technology, technology of self, can be seen in his final volume on sexuality. Here he writes of the medieval Christian practice of virginity which took up the bodily practices of the early church, such as types of clothing worn and rules of conduct, but placed them in a larger narrative of spiritual marriage resulting in the "development of very complex technologies of the self" for monastic life (2021, pp. 188–189).

All of these types of technologies are interconnected and "hardly ever function separately," as Foucault insists (1988a, p. 18). As a result of this overlap, he adds provocatively that all technologies must have a "certain type of domination" in them. We may want to resist this claim at first because it appears to make technology into something that *determines* the shape of the individual or society and gives little regard to human freedom. Foucault actually confesses that he has perhaps "insisted too much on the technology of domination and power" and desires to emphasize the importance of human freedom (p. 19). One way that we overcome this problem is by seeing that "domination" does not always mean one person or one group controlling an individual, but can also indicate the way an individual controls the self; Foucault speaks of this as the "technologies of individual domination, a history of how an individual acts upon himself, in the technology of self" (p. 19). In fact, it is the coming together of techniques of domination and self that we find the deep notion of subjectivity, the self-constitution of the subject. "The individual-subject," as Frédéric Gros accurately states, "only ever emerges at the intersection of a technique of domination and a technique of the self" (Gros 2005, p. 526).

Thus, when we examine the technologies of self, we are able to see the unique way that a human individual is transformed into a self-possessed subject. It is the technologies of self, as Foucault states, that

> permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.
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> *(1988a, p. 18)*

Andrew Feenberg provides an excellent description of how the individual is found in the midst of a variety of technologies, manifesting in both material and immaterial ways, by which to construct the self:

> According to Foucault, power/knowledge is a web of social forces and tensions in which everyone is caught as both subject and object. This web is constructed around techniques, some of them materialized in machines, architecture, or other devices, others embodied in standardized forms of behavior that do not so much coerce and suppress the individuals as guide them toward the most productive use of their bodies.
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> *(1991, p. 71)*

Often coming from a source of power and knowledge, these techniques create a web or "matrix," as Foucault calls it, of relations where all individuals are placed (Foucault 1988a, p. 18). And yet, even though these technologies are already there, they are not necessarily forcing individuals to be shaped in a particular way, but rather serve as guides to the construction of the self and can be oriented toward a particular goal by an individual.

To fully define technology of self, we need to return to the beginnings of care of self (*epimeleia heautou*) in Plato's *Alcibiades*. (While *epimeleia heautou* first appears in *Alcibiades*, Foucault is careful to document the way the notion grew from practices preceding it; Foucault 2005, pp. 46–51.) Here we discover how the technologies of self are directed toward one specific goal, care of self, and Foucault suggests three themes in *Alcibiades* which describe a full care of self. First, care of self is necessary in order for a successful political life. To help Alcibiades begin a prosperous political career, Socrates offers him philosophical love; this is the first step in caring for the self, as Foucault writes: "The intersection of political ambition and philosophical love is 'taking care of oneself'" (1988a, p. 24). Socrates has to first convince Alcibiades "that if he really wanted to fulfill his political ambition… then first of all he had to pay a bit of attention to himself" (2005, 419).

The second theme displays how care of self can help correct defective education. After Alcibiades finally admits to Socrates that he is in a rather bleak place both morally and politically due to his education, Socrates replies to him: "But don't lose heart. If you were fifty when you realized it, then it would be hard for you to cultivate yourself [*epimelêthênai sautou*], but now you're just the right age to see it" (Plato 1997, p. 585, line 127e). The Greek verb, *epimelêthênai*, and the Greek noun, *epimeleia*, is a compound of the verb "to attend to" (*melô*) and the prefix "upon" (*epi*), meaning that the cultivating or caring is always directed or oriented upon something. This type of caring is not simply a state of mind, but is found in intentional action; it is a "real activity and not just an attitude" demonstrating that care of self requires the participation of the whole person (Foucault 1988a, p. 24). By starting now, Alcibiades can correct his education if he engages his entire self in his intentional activity.

The emphasis on the whole person leads us to the third theme of care of self, which is the most important aspect for Socrates: care of self allows one to know oneself, to have a deeper knowledge of one's soul. This caring for the soul, however, is not a kind of maintenance of something, as if it were an object, but expresses itself in the "care of the activity" itself (Foucault 1988a, p. 25). The holistic activity envisioned here involves choosing the right technologies of self that will help the soul thrive.

Pursuit of Proper Care of Self

With this definition of technology of self and the description of care of self found in Plato's *Alcibiades*, I will now introduce what I am calling a "holistic care of self" that can be gleaned from these reflections. Drawing on Foucault's three themes from *Alcibiades*, we find that care of self must include many facets of the human experience: the thread of social and political community (first theme), the thread of education including both intellectual as well as physical training (second theme), and the thread of contemplation or spiritual exercises (third theme). Each of these threads is woven together to create an activity of care for the person as a whole.

This holistic care of self is ultimately motivated by an aesthetic concern, a desire to create the self as a work of art. Technologies of self can be called "arts of existence," as Foucault puts it, defining them as:

> 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.
>
> *(Foucault 1988b, pp. 10–11)*

Humans are motivated not only to regulate their lives, but to transform their lives into something beautiful; when seeking after a proper care of self, we choose technologies that we hope will sculpt our lives into a pleasing and delightful shape. We are not creating out of nothing, as Mark G.E. Kelly explains well: "Self-constituting of subject is not the subject producing itself out of thin air… but rather shaping what is already there" (2013, p. 514). Subjectivity, then, must understood aesthetically where we constitute ourselves by drawing on the given historical practices and conditions that are already placed in front of us.

With the emphasis on *self*, we may be concerned that this does not include a care for others. But in fact, there is a relation with others that is necessarily included in the holistic care of self in two ways. First, one of the purposes of caring for the self is so that Alcibiades can be successful in politics; in other words, the fruit of caring for the self will be seen in one's relationships with citizens and political leaders. Second, embedded in care of self we find the technology of *parrhêsia*, or truth-telling; it is a "frankness, open-heartedness, openness of thought" (Foucault 2005, p. 169). As Foucault argues, this idea of *parrhêsia* can be traced across history demonstrating that there has historically been an emphasis on telling the truth to yourself and to others included in care of self. (Although Foucault introduces this in *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, he explores it even further in his lectures the following year, *The Government of Self and Others*.) The practice of *parrhêsia* displays a link between care of the self and care of the city; in other words, when one takes part in telling the truth about the self, it will not only affect the self but the city as well. (See, for example, Foucault's discussion on the relationship between Ion's identity and the city of Athens; 2010, pp. 97–100 and the link between the fate of Pericles and the city; pp. 175–177.) The ideas of self-care and truth-telling are then "complementary practices" where, as Gerald Posselt puts it, they are "neither detachable from each other nor reducible to each other" (2021, pp. 4, 9). A holistic care of self, then, will be beneficial to others in that the proper care of self overflows onto the care of others; the best care of self will be the best care of others.

In this first section, we found that a technology of the self is a kind of method or tool, material or immaterial, positive or negative, used to constitute a self. Through awareness of being placed in a matrix of social and historical forces, individuals gain the freedom to take up technologies and shape their lives according to a particular goal. Care of self, then, contains various technologies of the self and, in order for individuals to practice a holistic care of self, they must seek out healthy technologies of self which address the social, political, bodily, intellectual, and spiritual facets of human experience.

The Reduction of Care of Self to Knowledge of Self

Care of self emerges in *Alcibiades* and is carried on through the Greco-Roman age and into the Christian era. After *Alcibiades*, Foucault traces a line of continued emphasis on care of self throughout the next millennium and argues that care of self "permeates all Greek, Hellenistic, and Roman philosophy, as well as Christian spirituality, up to the fourth and fifth centuries A.D" (Foucault 2005, p. 11). In his 1982 lectures, Foucault goes through a series of examples from pagan Greco-Roman practices to early Christian practices to demonstrate this continued stress on the care of the self. During the Middle Ages, the idea of care of self slowly undergoes structural changes but Foucault does not give us an in-depth analysis past the fifth century. (This historical project will hopefully be continued by others in an effort to see what kind of care of self arises during this time.) Rather, after "leaping over several centuries," Foucault turns to the seventeenth century to see the radical break that has occurred in the understanding of care of self (Foucault 2005, p. 17). In the seventeenth century,

Foucault argues that care of self becomes eclipsed by knowledge of self; now, we only care about the thread of knowledge and have lost the other threads of care. In this section, we will look at this shift by first defining knowledge of self and then describing Foucault's two reasons for why care of self has been reduced to knowledge of self.

The concept of self-knowledge finds its roots in the Delphic proverb of "Know thyself" (*gnôthi seauton*) which was inscribed in temples of Apollo and was frequently employed by Socrates. Arising out of this Socratic context, knowledge of self is a kind of activity by which a person learns who he or she is through varying technologies of the self. Historically speaking, self-knowledge focuses on the way the mind accesses truth in order to reveal knowledge of the self through various technologies of the self. When understood as one part of the care of the self, the mind's pursuit of self-knowledge is a healthy and proper activity. The problems arise when self-knowledge is seen as the sole access to truth, and all other aspects of care of self are ignored. The human, as a result, is perceived only as a thinking mind, and truth is seen only as abstract knowledge, which leaves behind other ways that the human can access truth, such as through the body, the soul, and the socio-political environment.

Although these problems do not come to the surface until the modern era, Foucault argues that there are seeds in *Alcibiades* which privilege self-knowledge over a more general care of self. It is these Platonic seeds, for Foucault, that eventually sprout in the modern era which limit care of self to knowledge of self:

> The dialogue of the *Alcibiades* shows… the specifically Platonic 'covering up' of the *epimeleia heautou* by the *gnôthi seauton* (of the care of the self by knowledge of self). Self-knowledge, the requirement 'know yourself' completely covers up and occupies the entire space opened by the requirement 'take care of yourself.'
>
> *(2005, p. 419)*

Following Foucault, we will identify a shift that takes place outwardly in morality, but arises from an inward philosophical change; this is what ultimately brings about the honoring of knowledge of self over care of self in modernity. (Some have argued that Foucault's interpretation of *Alcibiades* is not expansive enough; see Joosse 2015.)

Beginning in the realm of morality, Foucault argues that the modern age brought about a paradox between self-care and asceticism. This clash between a focus on the self and the renunciation of the self results in care of self losing its positive quality and being dismissed as selfish or retreating:

> Thus, we have the paradox of a precept of care of the self which signifies for us [in the modern age] either egoism or withdrawal, but which for centuries was rather a positive principle that was the matrix for extremely strict moralities.
>
> *(Foucault 2005, p. 13)*

Today, we interpret care of self according to one of two extremes: either we see it as self-absorption, because the focus is only on our own self-interests, or self-denial, because we have to give up all kinds of bodily pleasures. Both of these seem unpalatable to the modern person and so instead of basing morality on care of self, as in the past, we now found morality on the obedience of external laws, as opposed to inner laws of the self (1988a, p. 22).

This moral change is derived from the philosophical shift that takes place in philosophy; this philosophical change is "much more fundamental than these paradoxes of the history of morality" (Foucault 2005, p. 14). In particular, the Cartesian moment marks a decisive

break from the previous way of doing philosophy and places all the significance on a thinking mind. The phrase, "the Cartesian moment," is rather cliché—or, as Foucault puts it, it is "a bad, purely conventional phrase"—and yet, it does provide a helpful point in time in which to identify this philosophical shift. Speaking in broad terms, Foucault summarizes: "The 'Cartesian moment'… functioned in two ways… by philosophically requalifying the *gnôthi seauton* (know yourself), and by discrediting the *epimeleia heautou* (care of the self)" (2005, p. 14). Care of self becomes discredited because there is no longer a place for spiritual practices of the subject, but only for theoretical practices. Foucault writes that the Cartesian moment "made the 'know yourself' into a fundamental means of access to truth" (p. 14). Foucault is careful to clarify that such a change does not take place at a single point, but through a gradual movement away from spirituality and then is formalized in the Cartesian moment (p. 26).

The themes of holistic self-care have been overlooked in our traditional approaches to history, because of this modern fixation on self-knowledge. We have forgotten the themes that began with the Greeks which did not equate self-knowledge with self-care:

> There has been an inversion between the hierarchy of the two principles of antiquity, "Take care of yourself" and "Know thyself." In Greco-Roman culture knowledge of oneself appeared as the consequence of taking care of yourself. In the modern world, knowledge of oneself constitutes the fundamental principle.
>
> *(Foucault 1988a, p. 22)*

To combat this inaccurate understanding of history, we must uncover the full historical sense of care of self. Foucault concludes his 1982 lectures with the following:

> What I have wanted to show in this year's course is… that the historical tradition… has always privileged the *gnôthi seauton*, self-knowledge, as the guiding thread for all analyses of these problems of the subject… By only considering the *gnôthi seauton* in and for itself alone we are in danger of establishing a false continuity and of installing a factitious history that would display a sort of continuous development of knowledge of self.
>
> *(2005, p. 461)*

In our interpretation of history, we use the idea of self-knowledge as the guide by which to analyze the practices and technologies of Western tradition. But in so doing, we create a false narrative of history that misses the way humans were cared for as bodily creatures situated in relation to society, not just thinking minds.

Ultimately, Foucault desires to reveal the lost narrative of holistic care of self which has been overlooked in the modern age:

> We allow an… undeveloped theory of subject to run behind it all… The principle of *gnôthi seauton* is not autonomous in Greek thought. And I do not think we can understand either its specific meaning or history if we do not take into account this permanent relation between knowledge of self and care of the self in ancient thought. Care of the self… is not just a knowledge.
>
> *(p. 461)*

This kind of analysis is clearly part of Foucault's main project: to expose the missing gaps, the missing threads of history and the hidden structures behind the construction of individuals

and societies. If we see only a history which privileges self-knowledge, we will lose the undeveloped strain of self-care which has run beneath it, and thus have a limited notion of the human.

To summarize this second section, we began by historically tracing the themes of self-care and self-knowledge and found that self-knowledge at its Greek origin used diverse technologies to gain access to truth in its care of self. Next, we located the source for the reduction of care of self to knowledge of self in an ideological shift in the spheres of morality and philosophy. Understanding this modern break from the holistic care of self will help us identify the motivations behind modern technology and its uses, which, as I will argue, uncritically continues this glorification of self-knowledge over self-care.

Foucaultian Response to Modern Technology

Although Foucault is not generally known as a philosopher of technology, as mentioned at the beginning, there is a recent movement called "postphenomenology" which occasionally draws on his writings to discuss technology (Bergen and Verbeek 2021; Dorrestijn 2012; Ihde 1991). Postphenomenology "brings together the phenomenological approach and the ontological commitments of the American pragmatist tradition" and has a particular focus on issues related to modern technology (Rosenberg and Verbeek 2015, p. 1). Those in postphenomenology see their project as similar to Foucault's because they are pushing back against a stark distinction between the human and technology and are viewing the human, not as a fixed essence, but made-up of different sets of technologies. Steven Dorrestijn, for example, writes that because Foucault "argues against a fundamental dividing line between what is human and what is technical," we can discover an "ethics of technology" that acknowledges our hybrid being, our being that is composed of "human and technical aspects" (2012, pp. 234, 226). (There are many similarities between postphenomenology and another movement in the philosophy of technology called the Actor-Network Theory (ANT). Steven Matthewman makes a persuasive argument for a complementarity between Foucault and ANT on technology as well; 2011, pp. 116–120.)

There has been a prodigious amount of work done by those in the postphenomenology movement on the relations between humans and specific technologies; however, I believe that their approach sometimes misinterprets Foucault's understanding of the human and misses the important link between the technologies of self and care of self. For example, Dorrestijn specifically overlooks this connection in his article on Foucault when he writes that "technology is absent" in Foucault's later works of subjectivation and ethics (2012, p. 239). (There is an exception, however, in a recent article by postphenomenologists Rosenberg and Verbeek [2015], who apply the self-care of Foucault to the use of a to-do list app.) If we ignore the way that technologies can be oriented either toward a poor care of self or a proper care of self, then we no longer have a way of discerning what kinds of technologies contribute to human flourishing. Certainly, Foucault does not establish a fixed human essence, but he also assumes that there is a consciousness of the human already there that we can shape. This is why he emphasizes the importance of the subject in his work and "the way human being turns him- or herself into a subject" by taking what is already there and constructing it in a particular direction (Foucault 1983b, p. 208). Kelly writes, "[Foucault's] position is not that the existence of consciousness is historically variable. Rather, his position is that it is the way we relate to our consciousness that varies" (2013, p. 515). In contrast to the postphenomenologists, I will take seriously a full subjectivity that arises from Foucault's

care of self, which we established earlier, in order to discuss the way we relate to ourselves through contemporary technology.

To do so, I suggest referring to the following questions based on the three themes from *Alcibiades* when we assess modern technology: first, how does this technology contribute to my engagement in social and political community?; second, how does this technology contribute to my intellectual and physical education?; and third, how does this technology facilitate contemplation and spiritual disciplines? Due to the modern shift from self-care to self-knowledge, I will show that many modern technologies focus primarily on a reduced notion of intellectual education (second theme) while ignoring aspects in the first and third themes. This is seen in the way that access to knowledge is clearly mediated by modern technology such that our knowledge of world, knowledge of others, and knowledge of self are limited by our reliance on technology. After this critique of modern technology, I will then suggest that a more holistic understanding of self-care can, in turn, identify healthy ways of using technology by looking at two areas: physical wellness and spiritual wellness. I believe that by considering these specific themes of human experience and by placing humans in a web of technological relations, we can identify more accurately how technologies may bring about harm or healing.

As an aside, I will continue to use the term "knowledge" in this critical section, because it is the term used by Foucault and others in philosophy of technology. However, it is important to note that we are no longer using "knowledge" in its full sense, but have relegated it to something like gaining "information," as Esther Meek argues (2011, p. 8).

Critique of Modern Technology: Examples of Obsession with Self-Knowledge

Modern technologies are designed to help us obtain facts and data about the world. Internet access provides information instantly on almost any question related to history, geography, science, cooking, gardening, pet care, shopping, dating, parenting, and more. While this access to information offers many benefits both practically, in the way we learn about the world, and personally, in the way we can live in the world, we must consider ways that our encounter with the world will be limited if we believe that this is sufficient. All technology, in the broad sense of crafts or tools, has certain limitations, but in this section, we will be thinking in terms of technologies of the digital age, which often limit our access to the world to private consumption of information.

Thinking about a place, we may feel that we know a location after viewing online pictures and videos, and while this will tell us many things, it is not the same as an experience of being immersed in an environment. Browsing through pictures of the south island of New Zealand or even watching a documentary on the filming of *The Lord of the Rings* teaches us about the terrain of New Zealand. These give us visual pictures and information about the country, but it does not compare to taking a "tramp" (hike) on the trails near a glacier or skiing down the mountains. Once we glean the difference between seeing a place in a picture and fully knowing a place, we can gather the way technological experiences typically reduce our knowing to one aspect of human experience, the acquiring of knowledge through the limited sights and sounds presented in the media. Other ways of experiencing a place, that would perhaps give us an even deeper sense of it, have been eclipsed.

Reliance on information on the Internet for geography can have social consequences as seen in the growth of certain conspiracy theories. For example, due to easy distribution of information, there has been rise in the belief in a flat earth (Picheta 2019). As a result of

numerous blogs, YouTube videos, Facebook groups, and other media, more and more people are becoming believers that the earth is actually flat and that the photos and stories of a round earth are fabricated by world leaders. Although there are many reasons for this phenomenon, we find here an assumption that knowledge must come from "unbiased" online sources, resulting in a de-personalization of knowledge. The priority of technological sources pushes people to disregard other ways of learning about the world that would point to a spherical earth including physical experiences of star-gazing or watching boats disappear on the horizon or the direct testimonies from a community of scientists.

In less extreme ways, we may find that using digital texts to teach us about the world also caters to this over-emphasis on knowledge-gaining. The effect of reading a text digitally, as Philipp Rosemann elucidates, limits the experience to a silent visual experience; he writes, "A digital text speaks only to one of our five senses, vision; it cannot be touched or smelled like the pages of an old book" (2014, p. 9). An old book, for example, does not just give us information about the world, but can help us experience the world through the physical activity of reading. This is seen even more clearly in a liturgical manuscript which is designed to engage all five senses including the visual sense, with the sight of colored words; the auditory sense, with the words being read aloud; the olfactory sense, with the text being incensed prior to the reading; the tactile sense, with the feeling of textures and raised words on the page; and taste, both in the kissing of the book itself and with the eating of the bread after the reading (Venable 2021, p. 8). While the experience of reading a physical book will not always be this intense, the contrast helps us see the way modern technology imposes certain limits on our knowledge of the world.

In addition to modern technology mediating our knowledge of the world, technology also mediates our knowledge of others. We may assume that we "know" a person because we have read a Facebook profile or a questionnaire filled out on a dating website; this then defines the person according to the limiting structures of such technology rather than interactive life experiences. Text messages are another way to construct a person's identity based on technology; by deriving knowledge of a person from what he or she communicates in a text message, we cannot arrive at full idea of the character of the person. For example, a person may feel freer to express romantic feelings or a desire for a relational commitment in a text message, but may not have the confidence to follow through with such intentions in reality.

Even in video chats, while one can learn about the physical mannerisms and verbal style of a person, one cannot gain full knowledge of the other person's style of movement and, more importantly, style of life. In these interactions, there is, as Gabriel Marcel calls it, a lack of "presence" of the other which is something that goes beyond a mere knowledge of them (Marcel 2002, p. 33). This is seen in a contrast between the practice of a virtual liturgy and the practice of a full liturgy, as I explored in another article:

> When watching a virtual service, I can feel as if I am only a receiver: the liturgy is in front of me and I take from it what I can. My actions while watching the service do not impact or change the way the liturgy is performed. However, when I am present in my body with the other believers, my actions of singing, praying, raising my hands or kneeling can influence those around me just as those around me in turn inspire me.
>
> *(Venable 2021, p. 12)*

There is still a possibility of experiencing the presence of others and the presence of the divine through virtual technological means, but there is a certain richness and depth of experiencing the other that may be lost.

Both of the above two areas, knowledge of world and knowledge of others, are impacted by our modern obsession with knowledge of self, in as much as we are depending on technology to dictate what kind of world and what kind of people surrounds the self. With an over-dependence on these technologies, we allow technology to mediate the way that we come to know the self which is often done in private, divorced from a social environment. All of these practices of learning about the world—whether through online scenic pictures, geography blogs, or digital texts—and practices of learning about others—whether through social media profiles, text messaging, video chats, or virtual liturgies—are all part of the matrix of relations in which humans find themselves. Recognizing the structure of instrumentalized knowledge underlying the use of these modern technologies helps us see the possible harm that they can do to an individual in limiting one's understanding of self-care.

Hope for Modern Technology: Examples in the Use of Care of Self

Although modern technology is dominated by the drive to gain knowledge, is there a way in which modern technology could facilitate a care of self? Can we find any evidence of this in our current technological world? In this final section, I would like to mention two possible trends in technology which may encourage the movement toward greater care of self.

One of the facets of human experience generally excluded from technology is physical wellness, an element in the second theme of self-care, and yet there seems to be a growing number of technologies being created to address this. Beginning with the introduction of the Wii Fit games in 2007, video games have increasingly incorporated physical exercise into their design (Goodall 2020). During the pandemic, this phenomenon has only grown, with more video games created to encourage the use and exercise of the body (Strauss 2020).

The development of the Apple Watch is another example of a technology that has paid more attention to the care of the body. The watch contains ways of tracking how many steps one takes a day and how many calories one has burned; it also monitors one's heart rate and reminds one to stand up at least every hour. Surprisingly, one of the goals behind the creation of the Apple Watch was to pull people away from technology, as David Pierce reveals in his article, "iPhone Killer: The Secret History of the Apple Watch:"

> Our phones have become invasive. But what if you could engineer a reverse state of being? What if you could make a device that you wouldn't—couldn't—use for hours at a time?… You could change modern life. And so after three-plus decades of building devices that grab and hold our attention—the longer the better—Apple has decided that the way forward is to fight back. Apple, in large part, created our problem. And it thinks it can fix it with a square slab of metal and a Milanese loop strap.
>
> *(Pierce 2015)*

It's been almost seven years since the introduction of the Apple Watch and the verdict is still out whether or not it is distancing people from their devices. The interesting point, however, is that one of the goals in its creation was due to the realization of the need for technologies which focus on a more holistic self-care, the care of the body.

In addition to physical wellness, there are also modern technologies aimed at spiritual wellness, an important element in our third theme of care of self. Most recently, the creators of prayer apps for smart phones hope to encourage the spiritual discipline of prayer. These apps allow the user to choose a prayer from a list of different authors and topics and then be guided through an audio prayer with accompanying music. One prayer app called Abide, for

example, seeks to engage the human through many different senses: sight (reading the accompanying Scripture or devotional thought), sound (listening to the voice and music of the prayer), and even movement (closing eyes or kneeling). Furthermore, during Covid, there have been many technologies that have allowed virtual streaming of church services; although it is not the same as being there in person, as mentioned earlier, these services are for the purpose of promoting spiritual connection between members of a religious community.

By placing each of these technologies—exercise video games, smart watches, prayer apps, and online church—in the matrix of human experience, we will find that they are still limited in the way they care for the self and can be harmful if overly relied upon. And yet, in contrast to the motivations often found behind modern technology, these technologies offer possible healing to individuals and contribute to elements in a proper self-care.

As opposed to judging technology based on pragmatic criteria, as some postphenomenologists do, I believe that using an ethical understanding of self-care allows us to deeply discern the complex ways technologies influence our lives. In this limited set of examples, we saw that while a primary concern of modern technologies is securing knowledge about the world, others and the self, there are trends in recent technologies that at least appear to contribute to more holistic care of self in the areas of physical and spiritual wellness.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have seen how Foucault's analysis of care of self uncovers a fuller account of subjectivity that has been partially lost due to the radical alteration that has taken place in the modern age. Although a holistic care of self characterized both ancient and medieval technologies of self, the modern age reduced care of self to knowledge of self. Here we unearthed a dominant force behind the production of many contemporary technologies: an obsession with self-knowledge. We, as moderns, may feel that if we consume enough knowledge about our world and our friends through technology, then we will have full and satisfying lives, but, as we have seen from Foucault's analysis, this type of living can hardly be spoken of as flourishing. By drawing on a deeper sense of care of self, we can discern, for better or worse, the way technology impacts one's relation to others, as seen in the importance of the socio-political sphere, the body, as seen in one's physical training, and the soul, as seen in spiritual practices.

Unexpectedly, Foucault's lectures in the 1980s offer us a timely response to the technology of the twenty-first century. Rather than feeling overwhelmed by the way that technology has invaded our daily lives, we can apply Foucault's work in specific ways to evaluate our use of technology. First, we can heed his warning to examine and critique seriously those technologies of the self which limit the full expression of human experience. But second, we can be challenged not to dismiss modern technology in its entirety, but to discover technologies that are designed according to a fuller understanding of subjectivity and that promote a care of self which is holistic, aesthetic, and communal.

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