Foucault, Cavell and the Government of Self and Others

On Truth-telling, Friendship and an Ethics of Democracy

Michel Foucault’s late exercises in historical philosophy introduce the concepts of ‘aesthetics of existence’, of ‘care of the self’ and of ‘*parrhesia*’ into contemporary ethical discourse and, more generally, the field of the government of self and others. But what motivates and justifies the claim that the practices denoted by these concepts have ethical significance *for us*? In this essay, we address this question in two ways. First, we identify the connection between Foucault’s turn to the ancient world and the work on modern biopolitical governance that, in different ways, characterises his earlier genealogical work, becoming explicit in *Discipline and Punish* and the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*. Second, we show how his late work – despite its incomplete character – offers resources for the articulation of an ethics of democracy construed not simply as a regime of rule but as a way of life. In relation to both of these issues, we argue that Foucault’s work can be brought into a productive dialogue with the seemingly distant work of Stanley Cavell and we attempt to show how Cavell’s reflections on moral perfectionism not only support Foucault’s motivation for turning to consider practices of care of the self in the ancient world but also supplement Foucault’s studies on the government of self and others in articulating an approach to an ethics of democracy.

*Ethics and the Danger of Biopolitical Governance*

Foucault’s turn to reflection on the ethics of care of the self as an aesthetics of existence and on *parrhesia* as an element of such an ethics form part of a complex – and unfinished – genealogy of the government of self and others in Western culture. Yet while the genealogical project is incomplete, the motivation to undertake it can, we think, be fairly precisely identified in relation to Foucault’s work up to, and including, the first volume of the *History of Sexuality* and addresses what we may term ‘the problem of *biopolitical* governance’. The fundamental problem with this mode of governance of self and others on Foucault’s account lies in its combination of two features. First, it has successfully established a hegemonic position asserting its own universal validity as *the* rational form of governance. Second, it instantiates and reproduces what Foucault refers to as ‘the paradox of the relations of capacity and power’, whereby the growth of capabilities rather than promoting autonomy is tied to an intensification of power relations.[[1]](#footnote-1) This combination is neatly summed up thus:

Bio-power spread under the banner of making people healthy and protecting them. Where there was resistance, or failure to achieve its stated aims, this was construed as further proof of the need to reinforce and extend the power of experts. A technical matrix was established. By definition there ought to be a way of solving any technical problem. Once this matrix was established, the spread of bio-power was assured, for there was nothing else to appeal to: any other standards could be shown to be abnormal or to present merely technical problems. We are promised normalization and happiness through science and law. When they fail, this only justifies the need for more of the same.[[2]](#footnote-2)

How, though, are we to understand Foucault’s argument that biopolitical government achieves hegemony and generates a paradox of the relation of capacities and power?

An initial move would be to note that if freedom can be generally and formally construed as the capacity to do, be or become x, it follows that an increase in capacities is an increase in freedom; however, it does not necessarily also follow that it is an increase in autonomy conceived as the leading of one’s own life. This claim can be explained thus: a given exercise of disciplinary power increases one’s capacities to realise (i.e., act according to) a social norm but while this denotes an increase in freedom, it does not denote an increase in autonomy insofar as it acts at the same time to form one’s subjectivity as a socially normalised agent. Subject-formation and normalization are here intrinsically intertwined. In one respect, this is unproblematic; since subjects are constituted through practices and becoming a competent subject means becoming able to perform various tasks in accordance with social norms (subject-formation requires learning to follow rules in Wittgenstein’s terms), then disciplinary practices (broadly conceived) are a necessary feature of the formation of competent subjects in any society. Acknowledging this point might lead one to the view that what is objectionable about biopolitical government is not that it involves disciplinary practices but rather that subjects who are already (formed as) competent and capable are further disciplined to conform to social norms rather than being able to determine their own norms of conduct within the limits of legitimate law. Autonomy, leading one’s own life, according to this response simply entails that the individual, rather than society, determines their own goals, so that if Foucault is right to draw attention to a problem with biopolitical government, it is simply that modern societies involve too much regulation of, and interference with, individual liberty, and we need to recalibrate this relationship. This response, although it represents an intelligible and recognizable response to features of modern society, misses the locus of Foucault’s objection.

To bring this objection into focus, we can start by noticing that biopolitical government does not merely involve the widespread deployment of disciplinary practices but also a specific way of understanding the relationship between truth and the government of self and others (according to which access to truth is understood as taking the form of knowledge and only knowledge) combined with a focus on man as a living being (on the processes of biology, society, economy, etc.). In this respect, it is a condition of good government of self and of others that it is epistemically well-founded in terms of the human sciences and, thus, conceives of the task of developing capabilities in terms of biological, psychological, sociological and economic norms. The problem – to return to the paradox of the relation of capacities and power – is then that epistemically well-founded governmental technologies for developing the capacities of an individual or population involve, at the same time, forms of discipline, individual or collective, and processes of normalization. It is in this context that we should read Foucault’s well-known remark that:

We are in the society of the teacher-judge, the doctor-judge, the educator-judge, the 'social-worker'-judge; it is on them that the universal reign on the normative is based; and each individual, wherever he may find himself, subjects to it his body, his gestures, his behaviour, his aptitudes, his achievements.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Hence, the key ethical question for Foucault: ‘how can the growth of capabilities be disconnected from the intensification of power relations?’[[4]](#footnote-4)

We can clarify this point further by noting that, on the one hand, as disciplinary practices becomes generalised across society, so too ‘the power of self-direction in carrying things out constituted by discipline becomes the model of the power to personally lead one’s life’[[5]](#footnote-5) (Menke, 2003: 207), while, on the other hand, with the increasing hegemony of the human sciences, the form of self-direction in carrying things out constituted by governing through knowledge of the normal becomes the model of the relationship of subjectivity and truth in leading one’s life. These processes are mutually reinforcing. Thus, as Menke points out in relation to the first:

Leading a self-determined life, then, means orienting one’s life like an activity leading to a goal. According to this idea, the difference between personally leading a life and disciplinary self-direction simply concerns the realized normative idea – its origin (it is determined by myself), its content (it concerns my good), and its scope (it refers to the whole of my life). But it does not concern the relation between norm and activity: … the normative orientation to one’s own good must lead to an ordering of goal or aims, so that leading one’s own life can be understood as an activity of realizing such goals or aims.

But insofar as the form of one’s relation to self is conceived in terms of the disciplinary model, then precisely because it construes the norm and efforts to realise it in teleological-instrumental terms, one’s agency is understood as an object of human scientific investigation and evaluation. At the same time, the increasing entrenchment of the relationship of subjectivity and truth conceived in terms of knowledge and, specifically, human scientific knowledge, supports a model of personally leading one’s life or being true to oneself in terms of human scientific knowledge of oneself and insofar as the form of one’s relation to self is understood in terms of this epistemic model, one’s agency is understood as a subject of disciplinary practices and processes of normalization. To the extent that one stands in the relationship to oneself composed of these two elements, biopolitical governance appears as *the* rational form of government of self and others. As Foucault comments:

Recent liberation movements suffer from the fact that they cannot find any principle on which to base the elaboration of a new ethics. They need an ethics but they cannot find any other ethics than an ethics founded on so-called scientific knowledge of what the self is, what desire is, what the unconscious is, and so on.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Foucault’s turn to the ethics of care of the self as an aesthetics of existence is motivated by his sense that it provides the basis of a mode of government of self and others that is different in kind to that of biopolitical rationalities of rule with regard to its understanding of both of these aspects of autonomy.

In contrast to the disciplinary model which construes autonomy as the self-disciplined subjection of self to a self-chosen norm, that is, the normalization of the individual according to self-determined norms, the ethics of care of the self conceives autonomy as standing in a relationship to oneself in which the norms in relation to which one acts cannot be specified independently and in advance of the activity itself (the activity of self-overcoming) and precisely because this ‘performance’ has ‘no concept for its determining ground’ (in Kant’s terms) gives expression to one’s individuality, that is, it is through one’s activity that one becomes (creates and discovers) what one is. This fundamentally Nietzschean account of autonomy[[7]](#footnote-7) stands in stark contrast to the self-determination view construed on the disciplinary model and it is this difference between the forms of relation to self, the attitudes towards oneself in one’s activity, which Foucault takes to be pivotal – attitudes which cannot simply be chosen but must be cultivated through practice. In adopting a teleological-instrumental attitude towards oneself, one conceives of, and acts on, oneself as an example. In adopting a processual-expressive attitude towards oneself, one conceives of, and acts on, oneself as an exemplar. In a slogan, we might say that Foucault’s distinction between the models provided by disciplinary practices and the care of the self is the difference between the normalisation of the individual (according to self- or other- determined norms) and the individualization of norms. At the same time, and in contrast to the model of the relationship of subjectivity and truth as one in which ‘knowledge itself and knowledge alone gives access to the truth’, that is, when the subject ‘can recognize the truth and have access to it in himself and solely through his activity of knowing, without anything else being demanded of him and without having to change or alter his being as subject’[[8]](#footnote-8), Foucault presents the ethics of care of the self as a model of the relationship of subjectivity and truth (linking what we have come to distinguish as philosophy and spirituality) in which the ‘truth is only given to the subject at a price that brings the subject’s being into play’:

For as he is, the subject is not capable of truth. … It follows that from this point of view there can be no truth without a conversion or a transformation of the subject … [and] once access to the truth has really been opened up, it produces [transfigurative] effects … effects of truth on the subject. … In short, I think we can say that in and of itself an act of knowledge could never give access to truth unless it was prepared, accompanied, doubled, and completed by a certain transformation of the subject; not of the individual, but of the subject himself in his being as subject.[[9]](#footnote-9)

These two aspects of autonomy as conceived in the ethics of care of the self are related in that it is through the aesthetic activity of becoming what one as transformation of the subject that the subject gains access to truth (self-knowledge) that transfigures the subject in their being as a subject.

What is perhaps most striking about Foucault’s turn to the ethics of the care of the self is not simply its contrast with, and opposition to, biopolitical ethics (and consequent avoidance of the paradox of the relation of capacity and power), but also that these two central and related dimensions of it also compose the core of Stanley Cavell’s understanding of moral perfectionism. First, the province of moral perfectionism is directed to that dimension of moral life that Foucault refers to as ethics. Commenting on the cinematic comedies of remarriage he addresses as illustrations of moral perfectionism, Cavell notes: 'The issues the principal pair in these films confront each other with are formulated less well by questions concerning what they ought to do, what it would be best or right for them to do, than by the question of how they shall live their lives, what kind of persons they aspire to be.'[[10]](#footnote-10) More particularly, Cavell explicates this dimension of moral life in terms of 'the aesthetic dimension of (moral) judgment', relating moral perfectionism to the (artistic) activity of self-formation that Foucault glosses with the thought that we 'should relate the kind of relation one has to oneself to a creative activity' and which he, like Cavell, relates to Nietzsche's understanding of autonomy as becoming what one is. Second, moral perfectionism, as Cavell presents it, directly links philosophy and spirituality in the same way as the ethics of care of the self in Foucault’s presentation of it. Cavell’s identification of moral perfectionism with Wittgenstein’s philosophical work is informed crucially by the sense that Wittgenstein’s mode of reflection ‘wishes to prevent understanding which is unaccompanied by inner change’[[11]](#footnote-11), while Cavell’s elucidation of Emerson’s thinking as exemplary of the attitude of moral perfectionism highlights the centrality of conversion and transfiguration to access to, and the effects of, truth.[[12]](#footnote-12) Crucially, this attitude – or relation to oneself - does not aim to eliminate the conflicting forces within the self (e.g., desires) but to govern them such that they serve ‘the objective of living or manifesting in one’s life an ethos of freedom’,[[13]](#footnote-13) where ‘the ethos of freedom in question is an agonal ethos, an ethos that celebrates freedom not, or not exclusively, as unobstructed or unopposed thinking and doing but as a triumph over conflicting and antagonistic forces within the self’[[14]](#footnote-14) although any such triumph is temporary in that Cavell, as Foucault, conceives of the *modern* mode of moral perfectionism as necessarily processual rather than teleological in character, that is, the activity of ‘becoming what one is’ does not have an endpoint in some perfect state of self-realization but, rather, is an ongoing process of struggle[[15]](#footnote-15) - as Foucault has it 'we are always in the position of beginning again'.[[16]](#footnote-16)

If this *prima facie* case that the ethics of care of the self and moral perfectionism are closely related can be made good, its significance is that Foucault’s and Cavell’s philosophical exercises take on a complementary character. On the one hand, Foucault’s work provides supporting historical depth to Cavell’s reflections in ways that help explicate Cavell’s arguments and exhibit their political – as well as ethical – salience for our contemporary condition.[[17]](#footnote-17) On the other hand, Cavell’s work helps to illustrate the range of resources available in modern culture which resist and subvert the relationship of government and truth through knowledge and knowledge alone, and to provide contemporary (fictional) exemplars of an ethics of care of the self that serve as guides ‘not for imitation but for following’ in working through the relationship between the ethics of care of the self and democracy as a way of life. Foucault’s untimely death meant that his reflections on the mode of government of self and others remained largely located in the ancient world and drawing out the import of these studies for a contemporary ethics of democracy as a way of life is by no means a straightforward task, but if Foucault’s engagements are complemented by Cavell’s work on moral perfectionism, it may be less difficult to discern the outlines of such an ethics. This is the task to which we now turn.

*Truth-telling, Friendship and Democracy as a Way of Life*

We begin by highlighting three constitutive dimensions of the attitude – the kind of practical relation to self - with which we are concerned. First, commitment to truthfulness is integral to this attitude. As Foucault notes, and Cavell endorses[[18]](#footnote-18), the Delphic injunction to know oneself gains its sense and justification within the framework of caring for oneself. Second, this attitude encompasses one’s relations to others:

To the extent, always important, that I am what I am because of my relations with others and my participation (or my resistance to participation in) shared practices, institutions, and activities, I cannot know who or what I am, hence cannot care for myself, without close attention and responsiveness to others and to arrangements that I share with them.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Third, standing in this kind of relationship to oneself is not something that one can do independent of others acting as exemplars for one. This concerns, first and foremost, one’s coming to cultivate this attitude towards one’s own activity through one’s encounter with another who comes to stand as an exemplar for one (as a model ‘not for imitation but for following’ in Kant’s terms) by disclosing to us our own attainable but unattained self and, hence, both awakening a sense of shame in us concerning our present constitution and inspiring us to transform that constitution. Cavell cites Emerson on this point: “Truly speaking, it is not instruction, but provocation, that I can receive from another soul.”[[20]](#footnote-20)

The classic example of such an exemplar is Socrates, where what is notable about Socrates as an exemplar is that his practices of the ethics of care of the self is composed in large part of the effort to ‘provoke’ others to care for themselves (hence, Socrates self-description as a gnat or horsefly that in biting animals makes them restless) through a certain kind of truthfulness, a practice of philosophical *parrhesia*. On Foucault’s account, Socrates’ linking of care of the self and *parrhesia* (which Foucault takes as marking the emergence of what he will call ‘the critical attitude’) can be seen clearly in Plato’s *Laches* in which Socrates inquires into the relationship of *bios* and *logos* in the accounts offered by his interlocutors: ‘Socrates in inquiring into the way that *logos* gives form to a person’s style of life; for he is interesting in discovering whether there is a harmonic relation between the two. … Socrates’ role, then, is to ask for a rational accounting of a person’s life.’[[21]](#footnote-21) Here Socrates serves as a ‘touchstone’[[22]](#footnote-22) who determines ‘the true nature of the relation between *logos* and *bios* of those who come into contact with him.’[[23]](#footnote-23) The distinctive feature of this form of *parrhesia* is that its aim is ‘to convince someone that he must take care of himself and of others; and this means that he must *change his life*.’[[24]](#footnote-24) This kind of *parrhesiastic* practice is, thus, concerned not simply with self-knowledge but, more generally, with becoming intelligible to oneself through a form of critical testing of oneself by way of engagement with someone – typically a friend[[25]](#footnote-25) - who acts a *parrhesiastes*, a theme central to Cavell’s reflections on moral perfectionism in the Hollywood comedy of re-marriage.

Let us begin with two points concerning Cavell’s account of the comedy of re-marriage. The first is that, on Cavell's account, 'marriage is an allegory in these films of what philosophers since Aristotle have thought about under the title of friendship, what it is that gives value to personal relationships, and this is a signature topic of perfectionism.'[[26]](#footnote-26) Friendship is a 'signature topic' of moral perfectionism because Cavell sees the process of coming to stand to oneself in the self-relation that comprises freedom as one that is accomplished or brought about through the agency of a friend (the attraction of an exemplar). The second is the centrality of conversation and the idea (drawn from Milton) of 'a meet and happy conversation'[[27]](#footnote-27) as a mode of association, a form of life that expresses the ideal of marriage (and democratic society). In our view, we can read the comedy of re-marriage as transposing the classical relationship of older friend (e.g., Socrates) and younger friend (e.g., Plato) acts as parrhesiates in cultivating the attitude of care of the self in the younger friend onto the male and female ex-partners of a marriage such that the dialogic interactions that structure the development of the films involve a mode of encounter in which the ex-husband (as older friend) acts to test the relationship of *bios* and *logos* in the ex-wife subject to this truth-telling in order that she may change (convert) her relationship to herself, become intelligible to herself.

Consider in this regard Cavell's analysis of *The Philadelphia Story*. Cavell argues that the encounter within this film manifests an engagement with perfectionism because it addresses the issue of Tracy Lord's intelligibility to herself, the relationship between *bios* and *logos* in terms of the question of whether she desires what she protests she desires (to marry George). Thus the topic raised here is one that Foucault finds central to Hellenistic culture, namely, self-delusion (that we are unable to know exactly what we are) which Plutarch suggests arises from a form of self-love [*philautia*] that serves as the ground of a persistent (and flattering) illusion about what we are.[[28]](#footnote-28) Moreover, the film follows Plutarch in proposing that coming to an honest response to this question of what she desires, overcoming this state of self-delusion concerning what one is, requires the agency and perceptions of a true friend (C.K. Dexter Haven) and underscores the point that coming to see Dexter as a true friend (exemplar) leads Tracy to acknowledge the truth of the rebukes that he has directed to her and to change her relationship to herself, to overcome the confusion within her relationship to her desires, such that she becomes intelligible to herself. We note that in Cavell’s reading, he describes Dexter as therapist and philosopher.[[29]](#footnote-29) With these descriptions, Cavell wishes to draw attention to three features of Dexter’s role. By referring to Dexter as ‘a true therapist of some kind’, Cavell is highlighting Dexter’s (pedagogic) practice:

Dexter’s refusal to interfere with events, anyway with people’s interpretations of events (as if always aware that a liberating interpretation must be arrived at for oneself) is expressed in his typical response to those who offer interpretations of *him*, either to toss their words back to them (George: “I suppose you pretend not to believe it?” Dexter: “Yes I pretend not to”); or to use his characteristic two- or three-syllable invitation to his accusers to think again, asking “Do I?” (have a lot of cheek); “Wasn’t I?” (at the party); or “Am I, Red?” (namely, loving the invasion of her privacy).[[30]](#footnote-30)

By referring to Dexter as (making a claim to the status of) philosopher, Cavell is emphasizing his ‘demand to determine for himself what is truly important and what is not’,[[31]](#footnote-31) where this refers to the fact that Dexter’s mind (in contrast to that of George) is not subject to public opinion concerning what is important.[[32]](#footnote-32) The main point that we want to make concerning this analysis is that the features that Cavell highlights are precisely those that are drawn together in the figure of the *parrhesiastes* whose integrity and steadiness of mind distinguish him from the flatterer and whose activity takes the form of a critical provocation[[33]](#footnote-33) designed to bring the one subject to it to change her relationship to herself by bring her to see for herself the need for such conversion.[[34]](#footnote-34)

A central feature of this focus is that it makes the point that the conditions of a successful marriage require a certain mode of relationship, a relationship in which care of the self is intrinsically bound to care of the other in the form of a meet and happy conversation which exhibits the virtues of ‘listening, the responsiveness to difference, the willingness for change’.[[35]](#footnote-35) Cavell makes this clear by focusing on comedies of *re-*marriage, where the common thread is ‘that the bond of marriage has become unrecognisable or invisible...projecting the idea that what constitutes marriage lies not...outside of marriage...but in the willingness for marriage itself, for repeating the acknowledgement of the fact of it, as if all genuine marriage is remarriage’.[[36]](#footnote-36) It is Cavell’s contention that such a bond speaks to us of democratic relationships, our willingness for our democratic community to continue, calling into being our acknowledgement of the relationship of care between fellow citizens and our willingness for that relationship to continue to exist in the face of whatever is to come, for the legitimacy of marriage is provided neither by law, sexuality, progeny nor any other factor beyond the simple willingness for the journey to continue recognised in the couple’s ‘mutual willingness for remarriage’.[[37]](#footnote-37) Within such a relationship there is a need for interaction manifest in a ‘readiness for exchange’ found in John Milton’s aforementioned tract on divorce, where the conversation of marriage ‘is indispensably one of words, but not confined to words’.[[38]](#footnote-38) Cavell’s analogy between re-marriage and the democratic relationship emphasises the importance we should accord to the care of others as citizens, that is, as those with whom politically one lives one life. So in this genre, Cavell emphasises that ‘the fate of the marriage bond...is meant to epitomise the fate of the democratic social bond...the *linking of fates* that underlies....Milton’s argument’.[[39]](#footnote-39) If successful marriage requires that each partner’s care of the self is intrinsically related to care of the other and gives rise to cares and obligations deriving from this relationship, the same is true of successful democratic life, Cavell contends. Each citizen’s care of the self is intrinsically bound to care of the other as citizen which means, first and foremost, acknowledging them as free and equal members of society.

The implications of this contention emerge most clearly in Cavell’s criticism of Rawls – and do so in a way that connects directly to Foucault’s rejection of a focus on the state in favour of a focus on the wider field of government. Cavell’s concern is that Rawls’ theory of justice reduces the relationship between democratic subjects to a matter of cooperation between citizens construed as bearers of an office[[40]](#footnote-40) whose responsibilities are fixed by determinate rules, thereby overlooking the dimension of responsiveness to others that emerges when we reflect on citizenship as a constitutive dimension of our ethical lives. In seeking to proportion consent to , and responsibility for, our society to the extent that it complies with principles of justice, Rawls’ account, Cavell argues, misses the ethical significance of consent as implicating us in all the graces and disgraces of our society, thereby shackling our individual capacity for mutual responsiveness.[[41]](#footnote-41) In thinking about relations between democratic citizens as perpetual conversation, Cavell in contrast emphasises the unavoidable commitment between such citizens, to recognise the constitutive requirement of responsive, mutual engagement in an ongoing collective project. The importance of moral perfectionism in its political dimension is thus claimed to be that it is integral to sustaining democratic life.

We can situate Cavell’s criticism of Rawls quite precisely in terms of the distinction to which Foucault draws attention in his reflections on *parrhesia* between two orders of problems for democratic rule which he specifies in terms of the notions of *politeia* and *dunasteia*. Problems of *politeia* pertain to ‘the constitution, the framework, which defines the status of citizens, their rights, how decisions are taken, how leaders are chosen, and so on’, where these problems ‘have their own form, they imply a certain type of analysis, and they have given rise, they are at the point of origin of a whole form of reflection on the nature of law, the organisation of society, and what the State should be.’[[42]](#footnote-42) Problems of *dunasteia* address ‘the problem of the political game, of its rules and instruments, and the individual who engages in it’, where these problems ‘are political problems in the strict sense, … of the practice of the political game, and of the political game as a field of experience with its own rules and normativity, of the political game as experience inasmuch as it is indexed to truth-telling and involves a certain relationship to oneself and to others for its players.’[[43]](#footnote-43) Cavell’s critique of Rawls’ is essentially that he focuses on the problem of *politeia* and imagines that the problem of a just democratic society can be wholly dealt with in this manner, whereby missing the importance of also addressing what Foucault terms the problem of *dunasteia*. Significantly, by providing an analytical framework within which to locate Cavell’s criticism, Foucault’s discussion also draws us back to truth-telling in that he argues that the place of *parrhesia* ‘is defined and guaranteed by the *politeia*’ but that the exercise of *parrhesia* ’the truth-telling of the political man, is what ensures the appropriate game of politics.’[[44]](#footnote-44)

But what is the form of democratic *parrhesia*? We may say that *parrhesia* as a dimension of the ethics of care of the self is characterised by a specific relation of subjectivity and truth in which involves a double commitment of the speaker with himself:

On the one hand, the subject in *parrhesia* says: This is the truth. He says that he really thinks this truth, and in this she binds himself to the statement and to its content. But he also makes a pact in saying: I am the person who has spoken this truth; I therefore bind myself to the act of stating it and take on the risk of all its consequences.[[45]](#footnote-45)

This is a free act of speaking freely that thereby asserts the freedom of the speaker and, hence, also their responsibility – and acknowledgment of their responsibility - for their words. With this in mind, let us turn to democratic *parrhesia*.

We can start by noting that, in relation to Periclean democracy, Foucault identifies the constitution of democratic *parrhesia* as having four elements: a formal condition: democracy as the equality and freedom to speak of each, a *de facto* condition: the ascendency of some (those who actually govern), a truth condition: the linkage of the power of the discourse of those who govern to truth-telling,and a moral condition: the courage to speak truthfully within the agon.[[46]](#footnote-46) These elements persist as elements of modern democracy but the structure of representative government requires that we distinguish at least two types of relations of democratic *parrhesia*, that of citizen-citizen and that of citizen-governor. Cavell’s cinematic investigations of comedies of re-marriage have focused on the former of these relations – on democratic citizenship as akin to a form of friendship in we assume the courage to speak truthfully to others *as equals* and risk their rebuff. But Foucault’s analysis also points to the need for an ethics of democracy to extend beyond *parrhesia* as a mode of mutual responsiveness between citizens to address relations of citizens and those who actually govern at any point in time – the politicians, state officials, lobbyists, etc. who compose what we may call ‘the political class’. In extending the analytical framework of an ethics of democracy in this direction, Foucault alerts us to the importance of asking what the conditions and stakes of *parrhesia* are for citizens speaking truth to power but also for the members of the political class in speaking frankly to citizens (or, indeed, to each other) publically. In asking this question, Foucault directs the attention of an ethics of democracy to the features of contemporary democratic society that obstruct the practices of democratic *parrhesia* that are necessary for a democracy to sustain itself as way of political life.

*Conclusion*

There is an important tradition of moral perfectionism in relation to modern democracy. As James Conant notes:

Many a theorist of democracy has discerned within "the democratic movement" a tendency to suppress democracy's capacity for criticism from within - a pressure to collapse into (what de Toqueville called) "a tyranny of the majority." John Adams, Matthew Arnold, William James, Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton, John Stuart Mill, Alexis de Toqueville (not to mention Emerson and Thoreau) all dread that debasement of democracy that both Mill and Emerson refer to as "the despotism of conformity". There is a perfectionist strain within the tradition of democratic thought that takes it as a matter of urgent concern that the antiperfectionist tendencies latent within the democratic movement be kept from eroding democracy's resources for criticism from within - where the pressure of such criticism is taken to be essential to democracy's capacity to remain faithful to its own aspirations. Each of the theorists listed above emphasizes that democracy can flourish only if its citizens cultivate - rather than disdain - those virtues which were formerly the sole perogative of aristocracy (such as independence of mind, disregard for fashion, eccentricty of conduct).[[47]](#footnote-47)

What is notable about this tradition, within which Cavell writes and which he extends, is that it sustains a form of relation to self and others that Foucault characterises as the ethics of care of the self and which offers a counter to the biopolitical mode of government of self and others that Foucault takes to be dominant in contemporary society. In other words, contemporary democratic governance is distinguished from classical democracy not merely by its structural features but also by its mode of governmentality. In providing an account of democratic parrhesia as an expression of an ethics of care of the self, Foucault is making visible, and taking sides in, the contest between the ways of conceiving the relations of subjectivity, truth and power exhibited in democratic *parrhesia* and the power of experts legitimated in and through the biopolitical matrix.

In bringing the work of Cavell into dialogue with Foucault’s reflections, we have sought to show how their investigations complement each other and jointly provide the resources for articulating an approach to an ethics of democracy which avoids the dangers of an exclusive focus on problems of *politeia* at the expense of *dunasteia* without addressing this limitation through recourse to ‘so-called scientific knowledge of what the self is, what desire is, what the unconscious is, and so on.’ In doing this we have suggested that taken together, the work of Foucault and Cavell is of use to us today, elaborating how the Foucauldian concepts of *parrhesia* and care of the self are of ethical significance for us in the deepening and strengthening of everyday democratic life. Finally, we have used Cavell to underline the pressing need that emerges from Foucault’s work, for an ethics of democracy that incorporates consideration of the conditions and stakes of such democracy in the future.

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1. The problem that Foucault takes himself to confront here is formally isomorphic with the problem that Nietzsche took himself to face in which morality (in the sense Nietzsche targets) successfully presents itself as the rational form of ethics and yet undermines the conditions – and prospects - of human autonomy and flourishing. We can express this formal relationship by saying that what Foucault is undertaking is the project of the re-evaluation of the government of self and others. Such a project has two necessary steps. The first involves demonstrating the possibility of such a re-evaluation by providing a genealogy of biopolitical governance which decentres it within the broader historical field of the government of self and others. The second involves demonstrating the need for such a re-evaluation by showing that this mode of government poses a danger that can be overcome. Our focus is primarily on the second of these steps and we will approach it by providing a reconstruction of Foucault’s reasons for taking biopolitical forms of governance to represent a danger that can be overcome. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1982; 196 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Foucault, 1977: 304 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Foucault, 1997: 317 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Menke, 2003: 207 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Foucault, 1984: 343 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See Owen 2007 on Nietzsche and Owen 2006 on the relation of this Nietzsche view to Foucualt. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Foucault, 2005: 17 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Foucault, 2005: 16 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Cavell, 2004: 11 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Cavell, 1969: 72 cited in Davidson 2005: xxvi. See also Davidson 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See Cavell, 1990: xxxii and Foucault, 2005: 135-7. This feature is perhaps most clearly apparent in Cavell’s treatment of moral perfectionism in those Hollywood films that he refers to as ‘comedies of re-marriage’ in which it becomes clear that moral perfectionism, like the ethics of care of the self, addresses ‘what used to be called the state of one’s soul’ in that it is specifically concerned with one’s intelligibility to oneself as a (moral) agent. It focuses on what Foucault commenting on the care of the self refers to as the relation of *bios* and *logos*. This is manifest in the central significance of the theme of conversion and the figure of the friend in Cavell’s treatment of these films and of moral perfectionism more generally to which we return in the next section [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Flathman, 2003: 19 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Flathman, 2003: 21 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Cavell, 1990: xxxiv [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Foucault, 1997: 317. While Cavell acknowledges certain Christian texts as examples of engagement with moral perfectionism, he opposes Emersonian Perfectionism to the teleological variant of moral perfectionism advanced within the Christian tradition. I'll address this issue further in the following section but it is perhaps worth noting that Cavell's acknowledgment of a Christian mode of moral perfectionism and his rejection of that mode as incompatible with the commitment to autonomy that is a constitutive feature of our modernity exhibits the same structural relationship to Christianity found in Foucault's acknowledgment of a Christian mode of the ethics of the care of the self and his rejection of that mode from the perspective of the ethos of modernity as articulating, in its religious and secular variants, a threat to the principle of autonomy. In this respect, both Foucault and Cavell align themselves with the Greek and Roman view of the ethics of care of the self as an aesthetics of existence (that re-emerges in Romanticism and in Nietzsche) against the Christian view of the ethics of care of the self as the renunciation and transcendence of the self. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. As a brief illustration of how Foucault’s genealogical work can help to understand Cavell’s reflections on moral perfectionism, we can note moral perfectionism is not presented by Cavell as ‘a competing theory of the moral life’ (as we imagine deontological and consequentialist theories to be) but rather, as ‘something like a dimension or tradition of the moral life that spans the course of Western thought and concerns what used to be called the state of one’s soul, a dimension that places tremendous burdens on personal relationships and on the possibility or necessity of the transforming of oneself and of one’s society’. We can explicate the precision of Cavell’s apparent equivocation in the statement ‘something like a dimension or tradition of the moral life’ by reference to Foucault’s reflections on ethics. It is like a dimension in that, as Foucault points out: ‘There is no specific moral action that does not refer to a unified moral conduct; no moral conduct that does not call for a forming of oneself as an ethical subject; and no forming of the ethical subject without “modes of subjectivation” and an “ascetics” or “practices of the self” that support them.’ It is like a tradition because, as Foucault notes, it has come to the fore relative to the ‘moral code’ dimension of morality at various points in the course of the Western history of morality. As Foucault’s historical studies demonstrate, our ethical lives involve both reference to moral rules and ethical relations to self, and it is the case that these elements ‘may develop in relative independence from one another’, while different forms of ethical life may exhibit different relations to these two features. Thus, and here Foucault has in mind post-Reformation Europe, ‘in certain moralities the main emphasis is placed on the code, on its systematicity, its richness, its capacity to adjust to every possible case and to embrace every type of behavior’ such that ‘the subjectivation occurs basically in a quasi-juridical form, where the ethical subject refers his conduct to a law, or set of laws, to which he must submit at the risk of committing offenses that make him liable to punishment.’ By contrast, and here Foucault is thinking of Greek, Roman and early Christian examples, other moralities place the main emphasis on ‘the forms of relations with the self, on the methods and techniques by which he works them out, on the exercises by which he makes himself an object to be known, and on the practices that enable him to transform his own mode of being’ and, in these cases, ‘the system of codes and rules of behaviour may be rather rudimentary.’ It is, however, moralities of this second kind that the quasi-juridical picture of morality fails to enable us to grasp and it does so in virtue of its failure to acknowledge its own status as an artefact of the prevalence of the first type of morality in post-Reformation Europe. The grip of this quasi-juridical picture of morality is one important source of the decoupling of philosophy and spirituality that Foucault and Cavell are concerned to address and which helps explicate what Cavell laments as the marginalisation of figures such as Emerson and Thoreau from modern philosophical discourse. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Cavell, 2004: 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Flathman, 2003: 29 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Cavell, 1990: 37-8 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Foucault, 2005: 97 [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. ‘The role is characterised in the text as that of a “*basanos*” … which *tests* the degree of accord between a person’s life and its principle of intelligibility or *logos* … The Greek word *basanos* refers to a “touchstone”, i.e., a black stone which is used to test the genuineness of gold by examining the streak left on the stone when “touched” by the gold in question.’ Foucault, 2001: 97. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Foucault, 2005: 97-8 [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Foucault, 2005: 106 [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. The centrality of friendship to this theme is one stressed by Foucault in his discussion of Plutarch where the true friend who can act as a *parrhesiates* is distinguished by (1) integrity – the harmony of his words and deeds (which is why Laches identifies Socrates as able to play this role) and (2) steadiness of mind (in contrast to that inconstancy that betrays too much reliance on the views of current interlocutors or fashions in social opinion). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Cavell, 2004: 15 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Cavell, 1981: 146 [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Foucault, 2001: 134-7 [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Cavell, 1981: 139 & 150 respectively. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Cavell, 1981: 139 [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Cavell, 1981: 150 [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Cavell, 1981: 145-6 [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Dexter’s provocation involve two modes of speech that can be found in the tradition of parrhesia: first, a free-speaking frankness (the original sense of parrhesia) and, second, a mode of, or variant on, Socratic irony. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Another useful illustration of this relationship from Cavell’s re-marriage comedies is found in the drama of Lucy and Jerry in *The Awful Truth.* In the final scene of the film Jerry admits that Lucy has helped him to see that he needed to change his ways and as a consequence he wants their relationship to continue. However, although it will continue in the usual sense, this moment marks it as a re-marriage, for the return to the relationship simultaneously involves starting afresh, as it incorporate Jerry’s new self. He expresses this to his wife through the following: ‘You’re still the same, only I’ve been a fool. Well, I’m not now. So, as long as I’m different, don’t you think things could be the same again? Only a little different?’ (cited in Cavell, 1981, p.258). For a full analysis of *The Philadelphia Story* in relation to Foucault, see Owen 2006. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Cavell, 2004, p.174 [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Cavell, 1990, pp.103-4 [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Cavell, 1981: 142 [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Cavell, 1990, p.104 [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Cavell, 1981, p.193 (italics added). [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. See Mulhall, 1997 for more on this. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. For a more detailed examination of this argument see Woodford (2010) which looks at the relationship between Rawls’ work and post-structuralist thought as well as Mulhall (1997), Owen (1999) and Woodford (2011) which lay out the debate between Cavell and Rawls, and its implications, in more detail. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Foucault, 2010: 158-9 [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Foucault, 2010: 158-9 [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Foucault, 2010: 159 [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Foucault, 2010: 64-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Foucault, 2010: 173-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Conant, 2001: 227-8 [↑](#footnote-ref-47)