

# Self-care, self-knowledge and self-transformation On the trail of Michel Foucault's Advice to Athletes

Karen Joisten

University of Kaiserslautern (Germany)

*joisten@rhrk.uni-kl.de*

## Abstract

The subject of concern for oneself, which is inseparably connected with self-knowledge and enables a self-transformation of the human being, is extremely important in the Western tradition from ancient times to the present. In his book "The Hermeneutics of the Subject" Michel Foucault meticulously elaborates this complex of themes. In doing so, he also occasionally makes references to the athlete, the "athletic concentration", the wrestler and the so-called "paraskeue". The thesis of the contribution is that Olympism and the Olympic idea has its origin in this philosophical strand, in which philosophy is not pure theory, but theory in the service of human self-transformation.

## Keywords

Self-care, self-knowledge, the Olympic idea, the athlete, the art of living.

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## Introduction

The theme of 'self-care', which is inseparably linked to that of self-knowledge, is of central relevance in Western tradition. If we follow the arguments of Michel Foucault, as he presented them in his extensive volume on "Hermeneutics of the Subject"<sup>1</sup>, this thematic field is first found in Plato's dialogue "Alcibiades"<sup>2</sup> and extends through Hellenism far into Christianity. Especially René Descartes, but also Immanuel Kant, ushered in a radical change, as a new system of truth emerged. Whilst in the philosophy prior to Descartes the subject was primarily changed by working on itself, with Descartes the subject can remain 'stable' to a certain extent: it needs not undergo a transformation, since it is - as it is - capable of knowing the truth out of itself.

Admittedly, his lecture reading is anything but an easy read; Foucault meticulously examines a wealth of primary texts, at the highest level of reflection, covering the aforementioned period from Plato to Descartes, in order to show the transformation of the intrinsic relationship from self-care to self-knowledge that can be found in the tradition of Plato, in the Hellenistic period and in Christianity. For in each of these stages a specific concept of self-care would emerge, in which the education and formation of the self is interpreted in an original and unique way.

## Intention

The intention of this article is not to reconstruct these positions. Rather, the intention is to take up some of the references scattered throughout the book that refer to sport in antiquity: that is, to the athlete, the "athletic concentration", the wrestler and the so-called "paraskeue". In this way it may become clear that sport is to be situated in the context of self-care, self-knowledge and self-transformation. Indeed - and this is the thesis - that Olympism and the Olympic idea have their origin in this philosophical discipline, since they aim at the transformation and reorientation of the human being who, through this transformation of self, can first and foremost take on the appropriate care for their fellow human beings.

1 Michel Foucault: *Hermeneutik des Subjekts. Vorlesungen am Collège de France 1981/82*. Aus dem Französischen von Ulrike Bokelmann. Frankfurt am Main 2009. In the following, quotations from this writing are given in continuous text with HS in brackets. Own translations from the German.

2 The dialogue "Alcibiades" was most probably not written by Plato, but by one of his students.

In addition - and this too seems to me to be highly relevant - there is the fact that a different ethos can be produced by this, namely one whose truth relates to praxis. Frédéric Gros, in “Situating the Lectures”, at the end of the book “Hermeneutics of the Subject”, succinctly characterized Foucault’s efforts to describe this so-called “ethopoietic” truth. According to Gros, it is a “truth that can be read more from the chain of completed actions and corporal position than from the mystery of consciousness or from the cabinet of professional philosophies.” (HS, p. 645) From this perspective, the Olympic Idea is an Olympic theory of self-care, tried and proven in praxis by aiming at and attempting to implement the transformation of individuals and communities in diverse cultures and countries.

### **Three Basic Models and the Olympic Idea**

Foucault sees three basic forms present in the tradition of self-care and self-knowledge, which from a historical perspective can be described as Platonic, Hellenistic and Christian. From a content-related perspective, following Foucault, the Platonic model may be labelled a “memory model” and the Christian model an “exegetic model”. (Cf. HS, 319ff.) The Hellenistic model, which is represented by a multitude of different philosophical currents, such as the Stoic and Epicurean, and which is to be situated temporally between the two models mentioned previously (Platonic/memory model - Christian/exegetic model), receives special attention from Foucault. It differs from the Platonic model in that concern for the self is not synonymous with self-knowledge nor arises from it. And in contrast to the Christian model, it does not strive for self-exegesis or self-abandonment. Instead, it aims on the one hand at “strengthening and privileging the care for oneself, at least preserving its independence from self-knowledge”; and on the other hand it tends “on the contrary to set the self as a goal to be achieved” (HS, P. 320/1).

If we take this twofold objective seriously, we will already find ourselves in the heart of Olympism and its objectives with the Olympic idea in hand. The Olympic Idea is accompanied by an image of man that is holistically oriented and does not attribute

primacy to either the body or the spirit.<sup>3</sup> According to Pierre de Coubertin (1967), “man [namely, K.J.] consists not only of body and soul, that is, of two parts: he consists of three parts, body, mind and character; the formation of character does not happen through the mind: it happens above all with the help of the body” (P. 6/7). If, therefore, with Foucault, the primacy of the spirit/self-knowledge can be brought to the fore in the Platonic model, and asceticism and self-abandonment can be emphasized as the central perspective in the Christian model, it becomes possible in Olympism, as in the Hellenistic model, to aim at a concrete transformation of the human being in the concrete execution of his self-care and thereby to realize his self as the integral center of the triad ‘body, spirit and character’ in the best way possible.

### **The athlete and “athletic concentration”**

Now, noting Foucault’s references to the athlete and so-called “athletic concentration”, especially in the course of his examination of the Hellenistic model, we may not overlook the fact that Foucault does not conduct comprehensive and systematic considerations in the field of sport, but asserts aspects that are relevant for self-care.

In his lecture of 10 February 1982 Foucault refers to a Demetrius text quoted in Seneca’s treatise “De beneficiis”, written in the early days of the empire. In this text Demetrius begins by emphasizing “that one must have the model, the image of the athlete in mind”. (HS, p. 290) Why - one may ask - is this image so important? The answer is astonishing: by holding the image of the athlete in one’s inner eye, one realizes that it is a question of concentrating on the essential, which goes hand in hand with a habitualization. A good athlete distinguishes himself by concentrating on the gestures that “are actually and most frequently used in combat. And these few gestures must be so intimate and so familiar that they are always available and that you can fall back on them as soon as the opportunity arises” (HS, P. 290/1).

Therefore, if an individual - like the athlete - tries to focus especially on acquiring such knowledge that they really need

3 More details can be found in my essays: Der Mensch im Spiegel der “Olympischen Idee”. Philosophische Anmerkungen zum Denken Pierre de Coubertins, in: Olympischer Dreiklang: Werte –Geschichte – Zeitgeist. Ed. v. M. Messing et al. Kassel 2004, pp. 21-34. - Olympische Idee - Olympische Spiele: sportethische Herausforderung oder antiker Restposten? Ein Plädoyer für die Kraft des Geschichtlichen im Hier und Jetzt. In: Wacker, Christian, Wassong, Stephan, Camps y Wiland (Ed.): Olympic & Paralympic Discourses. Olympische & Paralympische Diskurse. Kassel 2017, pp. 159-186.

and that is worth knowing, they prepare for life's struggles with the appropriate theoretical tools. Even if it may seem strange at first sight, Foucault suggests that something like a "usefulness criterion" emerges here, since the model of the athlete helps a person to separate the wheat from the chaff, so to speak. Having grasped in the care for one's self what is needed in terms of knowledge, acquiring and finally possessing it, there follows "a change in the subject's mode of being" (HS, P. 297).

### **The wrestler and the so-called "paraskeue"**

From here it is only a small step to arrive at a model understanding of the wrestler and the so-called "paraskeue", which Foucault also develops on the basis of a text by Demetrius, as transmitted by Seneca in the above-mentioned "De beneficiis". Here, too, the exemplary is present in a sporting context: the human existence that wants to reach wisdom in life can be compared to that of a wrestler (cf. HS, p. 394). Considering the good wrestler, it becomes clear to us that it is a matter of "preparing oneself for whatever obstacles may stand in our way, for whatever we may encounter" and thus "to be stronger or at least not to be weaker" than the things that may happen to one (HS, p. 394 and 395).

Thus, the example of the wrestler shows us how to strengthen ourselves in the face of crises, strokes of fate and all the unpredictability of life, so as not to be defeated by them and ultimately fail: "The art of wrestling consists simply in being ready, to be alert and composed, that is, not to be knocked down, not to be weaker than all the blows that are given to us by circumstance or by others" (HS, P. 395).

The Greek word "paraskeue", which may be termed "instructio" in Latin, refers to the tools or equipment needed to protect and to reach the self. It is something like a repertoire of movements, "the athletic training of the wise man", which helps people to prepare themselves as well as possible for life's challenges. Therefore, to get through the experiences of life with a positive attitude to oneself, a person has in the wrestler the model of how this can be achieved through goal-oriented training.

## Outlook

The purpose of this contribution cannot be to draw similarities and differences between the model of the athlete presented by Foucault through an interpretation of Demetrius and the model of the athlete as it is portrayed in the context of Olympism. However, it seems to me to be important that we pay attention to consistency as both models express concepts of the art of living, which ultimately aim at self-care, self-knowledge and self-transformation.

In our time such an interpretation is more relevant than ever. For the strand of wisdom in which these models have their place has been eclipsed by an instrumental strand of knowledge, whereby the self-forming and self-transformation of the human being has ultimately been pushed out of sight. Thus, as Frédéric Gros succinctly formulates in “Situating the Lectures” at the end of “Hermeneutics of the Subject”, “the subject of right action in antiquity [...] has, in modernity, been replaced by the subject of true knowledge”. (HS, P. 638)

If Olympism and the Olympic Idea are to survive in the 21st century, this traditional concept of self-care must be brought forward and the Olympic movement and education must be located within it. It may then become evident that with their help it is possible, in spite of the functional rationality of technical narrow-mindedness in almost all areas of life, to stand up for a concept of man that is about him and his self.

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## **Author**

**Karen Joisten** is Full Professor of Philosophy at the University of Kaiserslautern, Germany. She has been appointed to the ethic committees at her home university and at the University of Saarland. Her main research fields are phenomenology, narrative philosophy and applied ethics. She is widely published on the national and international level. Since 2020 she has been teaching sport and ethics at the international study programme M.A. Olympic Studies.