

## **Self-Cultivation and Self-Care: Ansell-Pearson and Foucault on the Value of Self-Knowledge and Philosophy as a Way of Life**

Quassim Cassam, University of Warwick

[This is the text of my response to a paper by given by Keith Ansell-Pearson at a symposium on *Self-Knowledge for Humans* (Oxford 2014) at Warwick in 2015]

-----

Keith Ansell-Pearson focuses on two main themes from my book *Self-Knowledge for Humans*. The first is my suggestion that philosophy should be prepared to engage with what I call ‘substantial’ self-knowledge, and shouldn’t be exclusively concerned with mundane or ‘trivial’ self-knowledge. How you know you believe you are wearing socks is an interesting question but there is, or should be, more to the philosophy of self-knowledge than working out how we know our mental states. As Keith notes, the importance of substantial self-knowledge - knowledge of such things as one’s own values, character traits, and of what makes one happy - is an important theme in ancient philosophy, and in the work of later figures such as Spinoza, Nietzsche and Foucault. If Keith and I are right to deplore the neglect of substantial self-knowledge by many who write about self-knowledge these days then an obvious question is: how did this sad state of affairs come about? I will come back to this at the end.

The second theme from my book which Keith highlights is my account of the value of self-knowledge. It’s clear that many of us tend to think of self-knowledge, and in particular substantial self-knowledge, as worth having, pursuing, and even paying for. But what make self-knowledge valuable? I see its value as extrinsic rather than intrinsic, by which I mean that self-knowledge isn’t valuable for its own sake, without reference to anything else. It’s only valuable because, and to the extent that, it promotes other things we value. What I call ‘low road’ accounts say that self-knowledge is valuable because it promotes well-being: by and large, having self-knowledge makes one’s life go better than not having it. In contrast,

what I call ‘high road’ accounts explain the value of self-knowledge by reference to abstract, high-sounding ideals such as unity and authenticity. I favour taking the low road because I’m suspicious of the value of such high ideals and because I doubt that a life that is low on substantial self-knowledge couldn’t be authentic.

In his comments, Keith sketches an approach to the value of self-knowledge which I didn’t consider in my book and I want to start by examining this approach. The key notion in this context is that of *self-cultivation*. Here is what Keith says about it:

I take it that the basic principle of the school of self-cultivation is not to discover one’s inner and perhaps hidden true and authentic self, but rather to become and fashion a self, one that is equal to the events that befall one in a life. This is what Foucault calls ‘care of the self’ and which he takes over from Socrates and the Stoic likes of Epictetus.

On this view, the philosophy of self-knowledge is bound up with the task of self-cultivation: ‘the project amounts to philosophy not as an abstract, theoretical discipline but as a *way of life*’. I will say more about the notion of self-cultivation below, but I’m interested in the idea of tying self-knowledge to self-cultivation in the way that Keith describes.

As I understand it, Keith’s question for me is whether my worries over the wisdom of high road arguments would apply to explanations of the value of self-knowledge by reference to ‘the values and virtues of self-cultivation’. In other words: suppose we explain the value of self-knowledge by reference to its role in self-cultivation, and think of this as a ‘high road’ story about the value of self-knowledge. Would I want to object to this story in the way that I object to other high road explanations of the value of self-knowledge? If not, then I should concede that there is nothing wrong to high road explanations *per se*, even if the explanations I discuss in my book are objectionable for the reasons I give.

Before tackling this question head-on I'd like to get clearer about Keith's proposal by raising a few questions of my own:

1. What is self-cultivation?
2. What is the point or purpose of self-cultivation?
3. How is self-cultivation achieved?
4. What is the relationship between self-cultivation and self-knowledge?
5. Is the argument from self-cultivation a 'high road' or a 'low road' account of the value of self-knowledge?

Starting with 1, the thing to notice is that self-cultivation is, first and foremost, not so much about *knowing* the self as about *fashioning* the self. Self-constitution rather than self-discovery is the central aim, and the emphasis in this account is on the *practical* rather than the *theoretical* dimension of the project of self-cultivation. Self-cultivation isn't primarily about *knowing* oneself but *preparing* oneself to negotiate the challenges and demands of life. It is a kind of self-training whose point or purposes is care of the self. This is Keith's answer to 2, and he helpfully contrasts the ancient philosophy of self-care with the Christian morality of self-renunciation. For the ancients, 'philosophy is not simply about knowledge but about living a certain kind of life and being a certain kind of subject. Knowledge is pursued to the extent that it aids this mode of life and taking care of self'. Far from being an exercise in 'moral dandyism', self-care in the tradition that interests Keith is closer to a moral *obligation*.

Turning to 3, Keith sees self-cultivation as involving a set of 'spiritual exercises' whose aim is to enable us to master ourselves and make us better able to cope with events over which we have little or no control. *Coping* rather than *transcendence* is the aim: the key to living well is to learn to cope with the world as it is without relying on belief in the after-life or some other form of metaphysical transcendence. The exercises include attending to the present moment, memorizing key principles, and the 'premeditation of death and of evils'.

Their aim is to ‘make happiness available to all, within this world, which is not then opposed to any superior world’. What is on offer, then, is what Keith describes as a ‘genuine release from a great deal of human unhappiness’.

Before moving on to the last two questions, I’d like to make a couple of observations about the story so far. Suppose it turns out that self-knowledge is somehow implicated in self-cultivation, and derives its value from the value of self-cultivation. But self-cultivation is worthwhile because it is necessary for self-care, and self-care is about ‘making happiness available to all’. In that case, it’s hard to avoid thinking that the value of self-knowledge derives, at least in part, from its happiness-enabling role. If this is right then when Keith asks whether my objections to high road explanations of the value of self-knowledge also apply to his account, the answer is simple: my objections don’t apply to his account because what he is in fact offering when he discusses the role of self-knowledge in relation to self-cultivation and self-care is a ‘low road’ rather than a ‘high road’ explanation: self-knowledge matters because self-cultivation matters, and self-cultivation matters because it promotes happiness or well-being.

My second interim observation about Keith’s account concerns the role of fatalism and self-denial in his story. The picture he paints is of individuals who are buffeted by events, many of them unpleasant, over which they have no control, and the aim of self-cultivation is to develop what are essentially *coping* strategies. The key to coping, on this view, is to be ‘fatalistic with respect to the external world’, at least with respect to what has happened to us in the past and what is happening to us now. What is more, the suggested coping strategies are largely individualistic – they are all about what we can do as individuals to cope with life – and some of the spiritual exercises Keith describes are almost Gandhian in their emphasis on self-denial. Gandhi would certainly have recognized and approved of the advice to accustom the body to cold, heat, thirst, hunger, hardness of bed and abstinence.

I don't know how much of this Keith endorses but I find both the picture of the problem and the picture of the solution problematic. First, I wonder whether the story Keith tells is right about what is and is not in our power or under our own control. In our power, he claims, are opinion, impulse, desire and aversion. Things not in our power include our body, our possession and our reputations. I would say that many of us have greater control over the latter than over the former. Second, with respect to external factors over which we have little control, the emphasis on self-denial seems misplaced in circumstances of great injustice or inequality. In these circumstances, one might think that Gandhian self-denial will not be the appropriate response. Radical change rather than fatalistic acceptance should be the aim, and conditions over which one has no control as an individual might conceivably be changeable by joint action in the political sphere. Sometimes it is not the *self* that needs to be 'fashioned' but the social and political *world* that the self inhabits.

No doubt there is much more to be said about all this but I need to move on to what I take to be the key question for present purposes, and that is question 4 concerning the link – if any- between self-knowledge and self-cultivation. I can see three views, and find traces of all three in Keith's discussion:

*The Identity View:* self-knowledge *is* self-cultivation: to know yourself is to cultivate yourself, and this is the point of what Keith describes as the 'ancient teaching on self-knowledge *as* self-cultivation' (my emphasis).

*The Linking View:* self-knowledge and self-cultivation are different things but linked in the following way: substantial self-knowledge is necessary for self-cultivation, and makes self-cultivation possible. The reverse may or may not be true.

*The Replacement View:* self-knowledge and self-cultivation are different things, neither requires the other, and philosophy should concern itself with self-cultivation *rather than* self-knowledge.

Of these three views I find the first the hardest to understand. I can see how you might think that fashioning or cultivating a self enables you to know yourself, and that self-knowledge is, in this sense, active and not purely theoretical. This would be to represent self-knowledge as a kind of “maker’s knowledge”, and while I don’t myself see self-knowledge in these terms I can at least understand the thesis. But I’m not sure how self-knowledge can actually *be* self-cultivation. Self-cultivation, as Keith understands it, is all about preparing oneself to face the challenges that life throws up, and while the exercises by means of which the self fashions itself might conceivably *presuppose* self-knowledge, I do not see how they can *amount to* or *constitute* self-knowledge. Self-knowledge is a *cognitive* achievement but fashioning a self that is equal to the events that befall one in a life is not, in my view, a cognitive achievement.

The idea that self-cultivation presupposes self-knowledge points to the Linking View, which I would argue is the most promising positive account of the relationship between self-knowledge and self-cultivation. Consider, for example, knowledge of what lies in our power and knowledge of the sources of our own unhappiness. Keith rightly describes these as forms of *substantial* self-knowledge, and it’s not implausible that a person who has these and other forms of substantial self-knowledge is better equipped to cope with the stresses and strains of life than a person who is self-ignorant in these respects. For example, taking care of yourself means removing sources of discontent from your life and how can you set about doing that if you don’t know what those sources of discontent are? Imagine being someone who finds it a ghastly ordeal to give talks and answer questions in public. Assuming, not uncontroversially, that your aversion to giving talks is unalterable, self-care in these circumstances might be thought to require the taking of steps to avoid giving talks as far as possible. However, you are more likely to avoid giving talks if you are willing and able to acknowledge to yourself you own aversion. To do that you need to *know* your aversion and that looks like a piece of non-trivial self-knowledge.

Although this line of thinking has some plausibility, it faces the objection that it over-intellectualizes self-care and self-cultivation. The person who hates giving talks might take steps to avoid giving talks, and thereby remove one source of unhappiness in his life, just because giving talks does in fact make him miserable. If his aversion to giving talks causes him to avoid giving talks then he has in this sense taken care of himself regardless of whether he has a reflective understanding of his own aversion. Maybe he just finds himself declining invitations but confabulates his reasons for doing so. So the question is this: why must you *know* what makes you unhappy in order for you avoid what makes you unhappy? Knowing that giving talks makes you unhappy is an intellectual achievement that requires reflection on the sources of your own unhappiness. But why think that such reflection is strictly necessary for the purposes of self-cultivation and self-care? No doubt you can't be said to be avoiding giving talks *with the aim* of removing a source of discontent from your life unless you realize that giving talks *is* a source of discontent, but it's not obvious that self-cultivation and self-care have to be reflective in this sense.

If I'm right about this then my question for Keith is this: does he endorse the Linking View and, if so, is that because his conception of self-cultivation is more reflective than the one I've just been sketching? Imagine a person who does some or all of the spiritual exercises Keith describes and who is thereby better able to cope with the life events that befall him. It would be possible to take the view that this isn't self-cultivation in the sense that Keith has in mind unless the exercises are reflectively grounded. For them to be reflectively grounded is for them to be undertaken with a reflective understanding of their role. You don't just do the spiritual exercises without any understanding of their point, any more than people typically do specific physical exercises without any understanding of their point. Self-protection is the point of the spiritual exercises, and you wouldn't be able to understand their self-protective role without self-knowledge. It is because you *know* the things that make you unhappy that

you take steps to avoid them, like the reluctant speaker. Again, the parallel with physical exercise is instructive: you don't exercise because being physically inert makes you put on weight but because you know, or at least believe, that being physically inert makes you fat.

On this conception, self-cultivation does indeed require self-knowledge, just as the Linking View says, but this should come as no surprise because self-knowledge has been built into self-cultivation. The reflective self-cultivation that is now at issue is *knowing* self-cultivation, and the necessary conditions of knowing self-cultivation include substantial self-knowledge. However, this is in no way a threat to the position taken in *Self-Knowledge for Humans* since, as I've already indicated, this defence of the value of self-knowledge is in my terms a 'low road' defence, and none the worse for that: self-knowledge is valuable because it promotes well-being. In my book I say too little about exactly *how* self-knowledge promotes well-being, and Keith deepens my accounts at this point: well-being requires self-care, self-care requires self-cultivation, which in turn requires self-knowledge. The worry about all of this is that you can have well-being without self-care or, at any rate, without the kind of self-care that depends on reflective self-cultivation. Even so, self-knowledge might still be thought to *promote* well-being by enabling more reflective varieties of self-cultivation and self-care than would otherwise be possible.

Although there are traces of the Linking View in Keith's discussion, it could be that I have misunderstood him and that what he actually has in mind is much more radical, namely, the Replacement View. This view is suggested by the passage I quoted earlier in which Keith says that the basic principle of the school of self-cultivation is *not* to discover one's inner and perhaps hidden true self but *rather* to fashion a self that is equal to the events that befall one in a life. According to the Replacement View, self-cultivation should replace self-knowledge as our central concern as philosophers, which means conceiving of philosophy as a 'way of life' rather than 'an abstract, theoretical discipline'. Philosophy embodies wisdom but its role

is therapeutic and the wisdom it embodies is practical rather than theoretical: it ‘enables the individual to negotiate the most demanding and challenging questions of what it is to exist’. It makes us *be* in a different way, and if done well offers ‘a genuine release from a great deal of human unhappiness’. By concentrating on self-knowledge rather than self-cultivation, so the argument goes, philosophy has lost sight of its therapeutic role.

I see the attractions of the Replacement View but I have three reservations. The first is that this view can’t jettison self-knowledge if, as the Linking View claims, self-cultivation presupposes self-knowledge, that is, if recognition of our own foibles and limitations plays a key role in preparing us to meet the challenges of life. So instead of talking about a concern with self-cultivation *replacing* a concern with self-knowledge perhaps it would be better to think in terms of a shift in emphasis. Self-knowledge remains of philosophical interest but only in the service of self-cultivation. Self-knowledge is to be studied and pursued not for its own sake but rather to the extent that it helps us to live a certain kind of life and to take care of ourselves. I take it that this is what Keith has in mind when he says that he favors a certain conception of the philosophy of self-knowledge in which ‘it is bound up with the task(s) of self-cultivation’.

My second reservation concerns the ability of philosophy to help us live more contented lives and offer a genuine release from human unhappiness. Can philosophy really do that? Is there any evidence that philosophy promotes the happiness or well-being of those who do it, let alone the happiness or well-being of anyone else? I must say that I have my doubts about this. I suspect that quite the reverse is true and that philosophical reflection is singularly ill-equipped to deliver the benefits promised by the ancients. Of course this could be a reflection of the way philosophy is done today but I don’t think we can rule out the possibility that we will need to look elsewhere if self-care is our concern. This brings me to my final reservation, which is that if we take the Replacement View seriously then it’s not

clear why we wouldn't be better off reading self-help books than philosophical texts. For example, the advice not to worry about what does not reside in one's own control, which is one of 'spiritual exercises' listed by Keith, seems fair enough but there doesn't seem anything particularly *philosophical* about it. Perhaps this worry will seem less serious once one gives up the idea that philosophy is an abstract theoretical discipline but I find this idea harder to give up than Keith does.

Where does this leave my idea that philosophers of self-knowledge should have more to say about substantial self-knowledge? The key questions about substantial self-knowledge are abstract, theoretical questions. For example, what are the means by which substantial self-knowledge is possible and what are the obstacles to its acquisition? As I argue in my book, the answers to these questions are far from obvious once one abandons crude behaviourist models of substantial self-knowledge. I suggest that substantial self-knowledge matters in a practical or even a moral sense, but the extent to which this is so is a philosophical question that calls for empirically informed reflection rather than a distinctive mode of being or way of living. So perhaps the difference between Keith's position and mine is this: I see the *having* of substantial self-knowledge as potentially beneficial, but want to distinguish sharply the possibly genuine benefits of having substantial self-knowledge from the possibly illusory benefits of *philosophizing* about self-knowledge. For Keith there is no such separation, and the philosophy of self-knowledge has the potential to do as much for human well-being as self-knowledge itself. This is where we part company. But on one point we are in complete agreement: the recent philosophical obsession with trivial self-knowledge, though in a way understandable on its own terms, perfectly illustrates the narrowness of focus that blights so much philosophical writing.

x