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Mika Ojakangas

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What is This?
Michel Foucault and the enigmatic origins of bio-politics and governmentality

Mika Ojakangas
University of Jyväskylä, Finland

Abstract
Even a superficial look at the classical ideas and practices of government of populations makes it immediately apparent that there is a peculiarity in Foucault's genealogy of western bio-politics and governmentality. According to Foucault, western governmental rationality can be traced back to the Judeo-Christian tradition in general and to the Christian ideology and practice of the pastorate in particular. In this article, my purpose is to show that Christianity was not the prelude to what Foucault calls governmentality but rather marked a rupture in the development that started in classical Greece and Rome and continued in early modern Europe. With the rise of Christianity, the majority of these classical practices, including negative eugenics and even family policies, either faded into the background or they were rejected outright.

Keywords
biopolitics, classical political thought, early Christianity, Michel Foucault, governmentality, pastoral power

Corresponding author:
Professor Mika Ojakangas, Department of Social Sciences and Philosophy, University of Jyväskylä, PO Box 35, Jyväskylä, FI-40014, Finland
Email: mika.ojakangas@helsinki.fi
Introduction

Michel Foucault’s studies on the government of populations, combining his reflections on bio-power, bio-politics and governmentality, are well known and it is difficult to add a new perspective on the huge amount of secondary literature on this subject. Yet it seems to me that there is still a blind spot in this literature, especially in relation to the origins of bio-political governmentality. Foucault himself suggested that the origins of bio-power, at least the origins of the government of individuals and populations, can be found in Hebrew texts and early Christian practices, especially in the concept and practice of the pastorate. To the extent that Foucault conceived the modern welfare state as a locus of contemporary bio-power, it is also understandable that he turned to early Christian ideas in order to disclose its origins: the ideology of the modern welfare state does include various themes that were characteristic of the early Christian churches, including the attitude towards the poor and the afflicted. We must take into account, however, that Foucault saw a connection between bio-political governmentality and modern eugenics as well – a practice that was not, as far as we know, in use in the Hebrew society and that was strictly forbidden by Christians from very early on. On the other hand, in ancient Sparta the quality of the population was strictly supervised by the state, eugenics being the major means of doing this. Plato and Aristotle were also of the opinion that a healthy state must practise eugenics, including not only infanticide but many other means of controlling and improving the ‘quality’ of the population. Strangely enough, however, Foucault remained silent on all these ancient practices and ideas. Instead of focusing on them, he opted for the Christian origin of the government of populations. The aim of this article is not to find out why Foucault decided to exclude Greek and Roman ideas and practices in his genealogical studies of bio-power and governmentality. Instead, the aim is to show that early Christian ideas and practices of the pastorate were not a prelude to what Foucault calls bio-power and governmentality, but marked a rupture in the history of governmental ideas and practices which originate in the Graeco-Roman world and continue in early modern Europe thanks to the revitalization of the classical heritage. At the end of the article, I argue that this reversal of origins calls into question Foucault’s return to Greek and Roman ethics in his quest for an anti-bio-political alternative to the modern life dominated by bio-politics.1

Christian pastorate and Graeco-Roman bio-politics

According to Foucault, the origin of the western bio-political apparatus, at least that branch of the apparatus Foucault calls the government of individuals and populations, lies in the Hebrew idea of the pastorate. What then is the pastorate? Foucault addresses this question by juxtaposing it with the Greek and Roman conceptions of power and
governance, claiming that it is something unknown in those traditions. First, Greek and Roman power was power over land, whereas the shepherd wields power over a flock. Second, the main task of the Greek political leader was to quieten hostilities and resolve conflicts within the city, whereas the purpose of the shepherd is to guide and lead his flock. Third, it was sufficient for the Greeks that there be a virtuous Greek lawgiver, like Solon, who, once he had resolved conflicts, could leave the city behind with laws enabling it to endure without him. Instead, the Hebraic idea of the shepherd-leader presupposes the immediate presence of the shepherd, who has only to disappear for the flock to be scattered. Fourth, while the aim of the Greek leader was to discover the common interest of the city, the task of the shepherd is to provide continuous material and spiritual welfare for each and every member of the flock. Fifth, the measure of success of the Greek leader was the glory he won by his decisions. By way of contrast, the measure of the shepherd’s success is the welfare of the flock: ‘Everything the shepherd does is geared to the good of his flock.’ This is his constant concern. When they sleep, he keeps watch:

The shepherd acts, he works, he puts himself out, for those he nourishes and who are asleep. He watches over them. He pays attention to them all and scans each one of them. He’s got to know his flock as a whole, and in detail. Not only must he know where good pastures are, the season’s laws, and the order of things; he must also know each one’s particular needs. (Foucault, 2000a: 303)

Finally, the power of the shepherd is essentially sacrificial, not in the sense that one of the members of the flock is sacrificed so that the others can flourish but in the sense that the shepherd is continuously ready and willing to sacrifice himself for the sake of the flock: ‘The shepherd directs all his care towards others and never towards himself’ (Foucault, 2007: 128–9).

It is true that according to Foucault, these are merely themes that Hebraic texts associate with the metaphors of the shepherd and especially the Shepherd-God and his flock of people. Moreover, the ultimate purpose of the shepherd’s kindly care of the flock is not so much mundane happiness but the salvation of souls. In other words, Foucault does not claim that that is how political power was wielded in Hebrew society. However, what is important, especially from the perspective of modern governmentality, is that Foucault holds that Christianity gave these ideas ‘considerable importance’, both in theory and in practice (Foucault, 2000a: 303). Certainly, Foucault also maintains that the Christian pastorate is profoundly different from the Hebraic pastoral theme. However, the Christian pastorate is different because in Christianity this theme was intensified, institutionalized and transformed into an art of governing people: ‘What was only one theme in the Mosaic literature will now’, in the hands of the Christians, ‘become the keystone of the whole organization of the Church’ (Foucault, 2007: 152). Ultimately, Foucault asserts, ‘no civilization, no society has been as pastoral as the Christian societies’ (ibid.: 165). According to Foucault, it is that transformation which constitutes the background of what he calls governmental rationality within the modern state. It explains why the political power that is at work within the modern state as a legal framework of unity is, from the beginning of a state’s existence, accompanied by a power that can be called pastoral. Its role is not to threaten lives but to ‘ensure, sustain, and improve’ them, the
lives of ‘each and every one’. Its means are not law and violence but care, the care for the individual life:

Pastoral power is a power of care. It looks after the flock, it looks after the individuals of the flock, it sees to it that the sheep do not suffer, it goes in search of those that have strayed off course, and it treats those that are injured. (ibid.: 127)

There is a peculiarity in this Foucauldian genealogy: Foucault repeatedly asserts that modern bio-politics is essentially about the regulation and control of populations, including the regulatory control of birth rate, longevity, public health, housing, and so on (e.g. Foucault, 1990: 135–59). In these regulations, he also includes eugenics, asserting that the purification of the race, especially as it takes place in Nazism, constitutes an essential part of bio-politics. Indeed, the Nazi society, which aimed at controlling ‘the random element inherent in biological process’, was, according to him, a society which ‘generalized bio-power in an absolute sense’ (Foucault, 2003: 259–60). But why then does he trace the origin of bio-political concern for populations back to the Judeo-Christian tradition and does not say anything, for instance, about Plato’s well-known demographic and eugenic considerations in The Republic and The Laws? It is precisely in the Platonic texts, rather than in any passages of the New Testament, not to mention the writings of the Church Fathers, that we first encounter eugenic bio-politics in the western tradition. In the Republic (1997b: 459–60), Plato writes:

The best men must have sex with the best women as frequently as possible, while the opposite is true of the most inferior men and women, and, second, that if our herd [poimnion] is to be of the highest possible quality, the former’s offspring must be reared but not the latter’s. And this must all be brought about without being noticed by anyone except the rulers, so that our herd of guardians remains as free from dissension as possible.

Moreover, if it happens that the most inferior men and women do have sex with each other and children are born to them, or if the child is defective, Plato advises (1997b: 460c) that they must be deported to some secret place: ‘The children of the inferior parents, or any child of the others that is born defective [anapēros], they [the officials appointed for the purpose] will hide in a secret [aporreτos] and unknown place, as is appropriate.’ We may speculate what this secret place would have been (aporreτos means something that is unfit to be spoken), but the point is that Foucault did not deal with Plato’s eugenic ideas in his studies on the origin of bio-power, not even in his genealogies of the government of populations. Neither did he say anything about the board of matrons that was supposed to superintend the conduct of married couples, the official register of births and deaths, or that ‘highest and most distinguished official’ whose job was to see to those measures by means of which the polis can ‘check propagation’ – all things Plato suggests in the Laws. Why was this? Was he ignorant of Plato? This is not the case. He knew Plato very well and he also deals quite extensively with Plato in his genealogy of governmentality in the lecture series ‘Security, Territory, Population’ he delivered in 1977–8 (Foucault, 2007). Yet the focus in this genealogy is solely on the shepherd as the ideal magistrate in the Platonic dialogues,
especially in *The Statesman*. Moreover, while he maintains that Plato’s view, especially in *The Statesman*, is eventually negative as regards the shepherd as the ideal type of the magistrate (ibid.: 2007: 140), he leaves the whole question of Platonic eugenics aside. He does so even though in *The Laws*, the shepherd is depicted as the ideal type of the magistrate, in addition to which this shepherd is supposed to ‘weed out the unhealthy and inferior stock’ (Plato, 1997a: 5.735), rather than, like the ideal Christian shepherd, taking care of ‘each and every one’.

Certainly, Foucault also knew his Aristotle, who in *Politics* gives advice for pregnant women on how they should care for their bodies and mothers on how they should rear their children, adding that there should be a law according to which infanticide should be performed for any children born with deformities – a practice that was widespread in the ancient world of the Greeks and Romans:

As to exposing or rearing the children born, let there be a law that no deformed child shall be reared; but on the ground of the number of children, if the regular customs hinder any of those born being exposed, there must be a limit fixed to the procreation of offspring, and if any people have a child as a result of intercourse in contravention of these regulations, abortion must be practiced on it before it has developed sensation and life; for the line between lawful and unlawful abortion will be marked by the fact of having sensation and being alive. (Aristotle, 1994: 7.1335b)

Furthermore, it is highly unlikely that Foucault conceived Platonic and Aristotelian texts as utopian and therefore something that could be overlooked while attempting to understand the actual course of history, since he certainly knew that they were not utopian. In Sparta, every newborn child was brought, according to Plutarch (*Lycurgus*), into the city hall to be examined by the elders of the tribes:

Offspring was not reared at the will of the father, but was taken and carried by him to a place called Lesche, where the elders of the tribes officially examined the infant, and if it was well-built and sturdy, they ordered the father to rear it, and assigned it one of the nine thousand lots of land; but if it was ill-born and deformed, they sent it to the so-called Apothetae, a chasm-like place at the foot of Mount Taygetus, in the conviction that the life of that which nature had not well equipped at the very beginning for health and strength, was of no advantage either to itself or the state. (Plutarch, 1914: 16.1–2)

In the Roman world, the law of infanticide can be found in the Twelve Tables: a child conspicuously deformed was to be immediately destroyed (*cito necatus insignis ad deformitatem puer esto*), as Cicero reports in *De legibus* (III.8). In *De ira* (1928b: I.15), Seneca also mentions this ancient but still ongoing Roman practice, asserting that it is not an unreasonable one: ‘We drown the weakling and the monstrosity. It is not passion, but reason, to separate the useless from the fit.’ Who then was a weakling, according to the Romans? One definition was given in his *Gynecology* (1956: II.10) by Soranus, a Greek physician from Ephesus who lived in the 2nd century AD. After the birth, according to him, the midwife should first take notice of whether the child is worth rearing or not, offering the following criteria: the mother must have spent her pregnancy
in good health; the child must have been born at the due time; when the child has been put on the ground it must immediately cry with proper vigour; it must be perfect in all its parts, members and senses; its ducts, the ears, the nose, the pharynx, urethra and anus must be free from obstruction; the natural function of each member should not be either sluggish or weak; the joints must bend and stretch; it has to have due size and shape and be properly sensitive in every respect. ‘And’, Soranus concludes, ‘by conditions contrary to those mentioned, the infant not worth rearing is recognized.’

Early Christians against Graeco-Roman bio-politics

The late Roman eugenics, based on the principle of *paterfamilias*, was certainly not similar to the Spartan, Platonic and Aristotelian state eugenics, because eugenics in Rome was entirely a private affair during the late days of the republic and it remained so in the empire. Yet it was not forbidden by the law either in Greek society or in Rome: at least it was legal to expose one’s child and if the infant died as a result of *expositio*, it had not been legally killed by the family. This is not to say that there was no criticism of *expositio* in the pagan classical world. A middle Stoic philosopher, Musonius Rufus, for instance, criticized the practice of infanticide and exposure, implying that it was contrary to nature (see Harris, 1994: 15; Cameron, 1932: 110), but what is more important here is that they were Christians who launched a rigorous campaign against the ancient but ongoing practice of eugenics, be it private or public. We find this critical attitude in Athenagoras’ *Supplicatio* (35.6), Clemens of Alexandria’s *Stromata* (II.18), and Origen’s *Contra Celsum* (VIII.55) among many others. Lactantius’ remarks in his *Divine Institutes* (1886: 5.15) are illustrative. First, he makes the comment about people ‘who either strangle their own children or, if they are too pious for that, expose them’. Although this reveals that Lactantius differentiates murder and exposure, he immediately asserts that people cannot be thought of as innocent if they are offering up their own children, since it is very likely that they would end up in brothels or slavery. In fact, Justin Martyr in his *First Apology* (1886: 27) had already criticized the practice: ‘We have been taught that it is wicked to expose even newly born children, first, because we see that almost all those who are exposed (not only girls, but boys) are raised in prostitution.’

To be sure, Augustus’ legislation, which offered privileges to married people and provided rewards to families that had children, suggests that the abandonment of children, especially if not deformed, was not unproblematic in political terms, but the most vehement criticism nevertheless came from Christian and, more broadly speaking, Judeo-Christian circles. I say from the Judeo-Christian, because Philo of Alexandria was the first who launched a full-blown attack on the practice. In *The Special Laws* (1993: 3.114–16), he writes quite extensively about infanticide and the habit of exposing unwanted children, asserting that these are utterly barbarous practices, exposure even more than infanticide because those children are cruelly eaten by the beasts and birds: ‘Therefore, Moses has utterly prohibited the exposure of children, by a tacit prohibition.’ That this was not the attitude of the Romans is confirmed by Tacitus who in his *History* (5.5) writes that among the Jews it is a crime to kill any newborn infant, mentioning simultaneously that such an attitude was something extraordinary. Hence, Tacitus would
have perhaps been surprised if he had known that this extraordinary attitude became a norm under Theodosius who made Christianity the official religion of the empire. The Theodosian code (XI.27) from AD 375 made infanticide a crime.

Another widespread and usually approved practice in the pagan world which became a target of the Christian authors from the very beginning of Christianity was abortion (see Gray, 2001: 313–37). According to Aristotle, for instance, if the legal limit fixed for the procreation of offspring is exceeded, abortion must be practised, whereas the *Apocalypse of Peter* (1993: 8) declares that women who ‘have caused their children to be born untimely’ are buried up to their necks in a pit of excrement near a great flame in hell while the aborted children sit nearby crying to God, with flashes of lightning going out from the children and piercing their mothers’ eyes. Roughly contemporaneous with the *Apocalypse* is the *Epistle of Barnabas* (19.5), in which the practice of abortion (*phthora*) is also prohibited. In his *Apology* (1886: 9), Tertullian writes that there is no difference between murder, infanticide and abortion, for it does not ‘matter whether you take away a life that is born, or destroy one that is coming to the birth’. Indeed, the majority of the early Fathers condemned abortion and the Council of Elvira finally confirmed this view in 305, calling for the excommunication of women committing abortion and declaring that they were not to be readmitted even on their deathbeds (Noonan, 1970: 14). Moreover, like the prohibition of infanticide, the negative attitude towards abortion was shared by certain Jewish authors during the formative years of the empire. The background of the Jewish discussion was of course the biblical command to ‘be fruitful and multiply’ (Genesis 1:28) as it frequently was in the Christian texts as well, but this demographic injunction was not the only rationale for the prohibition. In *Contra Apionem* (II.25), Josephus tells us that the law orders all the offspring to be brought up, and forbids women either to cause abortion or to do away with the foetus: a woman who commits abortion is a murderer of her child, because she destroys a living creature.

Not all the pagan authors were for abortion either. At least, as Aristotle has stated, early abortion was preferable to late, a view that was subscribed to by the ancient medical writers such as Soranus, Oribasius and Paul of Aegina (see Riddle, 1994: 23). Yet the pagan rationale against abortion was usually different. Whereas the Jews and the Christians announced that abortion was a crime because of the absolute value of human life, since ‘man’ was created in the image of God, the Hellenistic and Roman authors maintained that abortion, if the child was healthy, was a crime against state and society: the foetus needed to be protected for economic and military reasons (see Schiff, 2002: 16). Therefore, given the restricted influence of Judaism on the Roman mentality, it was not before the rise of Christianity that life as such, the pure fact of being alive, even if only in a womb, became an absolute value in the tradition of the West. To be sure, abortion did not come to an end with the rise of Christianity – and it is highly probable that it was still a common practice in the late middle ages, not even severely punished. Besides, not all the early Fathers were absolutely against abortion and Aquinas still maintained that abortion before the foetus begins to move is not murder because such a foetus lacks a soul. Finally, the Christian valuation of mere living can also be regarded as bio-politics, but what is noteworthy here is that this bio-politics was, like the modern bio-politics, hardly an endeavour to modify the life-processes of populations, not at least consciously.
Christianity, governmentality and the police

It is highly improbable and, indeed, impossible that Foucault would have been ignorant of these ancient ideas and practices – practices that no serious historian of the ancient world denies entirely, even though they may disagree about their degree of generality (see Harris, 1982: 114–16; Boswell, 1984). Therefore, the basic reason why Foucault did not deal with Spartan, Platonic, or Aristotelian eugenics, not to mention the widespread practice of infanticide of deformed children, in his analyses of the origins of bio-politics must lie somewhere else, especially when we take into account that the early Christians, these alleged originators of bio-politics, steadfastly opposed all forms of eugenics. What then is the reason for this silence? If modern eugenics is bio-politics, as Foucault stresses, did he conceive it as entirely different from the ancient eugenics, be it public or private? Did Foucault suggest that we cannot identify modern eugenics with the ancient eugenics because modern eugenics does not derive from the Platonic ideas of selection but from the Christian politics of universal care for individuals? If this is the case, I believe Foucault was fundamentally wrong. Yet I do not believe this is the case. We must, therefore, pose a second question: if the Christian universal pastorate is the origin of bio-power, is modern eugenics, including negative eugenics, then a perversion of the pastorate and, more precisely, does it signify a return of sovereign power in the immanence of pastoral bio-power? I believe this is closer to Foucault’s opinion, since he sees modern societies as characterized by what he calls a ‘demonic combination’ of bio-power and sovereign power (Foucault, 2000a: 311). For bio-power, as Foucault writes, death is the ‘object of taboo’ (Foucault, 2003: 246), whereas sovereign power is based on the threat of death and the right to kill. Hence, they are mutually exclusive forms of power, the one based on the notions of life and care and the other on the notions of death and killing. As Foucault stresses, however, modern bio-political societies have combined these two forms of power and have done so through the logic of racism, which makes killing acceptable in bio-political societies in which death has become the object of taboo. Racism legitimizes killing, because killing of some individuals fortifies the life of those who are living:

The more inferior species die out, the more abnormal individuals are eliminated, the fewer degenerates there will be in the species as a whole, and the more I – as species rather than individual – can live, the stronger I will be, the more vigorous I will be. I will be able to proliferate. (ibid.: 255)

However, why do we need the Christian idea of the pastorate here? What does it add to the Platonic speculations in The Laws (1997a: 5.735–6)? Plato asserts that the unhealthy and inferior stock must be weeded out in order for the healthy to prosper: ‘He knows’, Plato says referring to the official taking charge of the purity of the people, ‘that otherwise he would have to waste endless effort on sickly and refractory beasts, degenerate by nature and ruined by incompetent breeding.’ The ‘inferior stock’ or the ‘unprivileged’ are ‘to be regarded as a disease [noseëma] that has developed in the body politic’ and if this disease is not cured, the whole body politic will be in ruins. In other words, if we can decipher a demonic combination of the sovereign power to kill and the bio-
power of care in Plato’s text, what is the role of the Christian pastorate in the whole configuration?

Perhaps the solution to this dilemma can be found in Foucault’s theoretical terminology. Until now, I have claimed that Foucault regards the Christian pastorate as the origin of both bio-power and governmentality. If we examine Foucault’s accounts of pastoral power, however, the genealogical link between it and bio-power is far from being as strong as between it and governmentality. In *Security, Territory, Population*, in which we find the most extensive analysis of pastoral power in Foucault’s *oeuvre*, in fact, the term ‘bio-power’ is conspicuously absent. It is governmentality and not bio-power, strictly speaking, that is the outcome of Christian pastoral power: ‘The pastorate seems to me to sketch out, or is the prelude to what I have called governmentality as this is deployed from the sixteenth century’ (Foucault, 2007: 184). What then, according to Foucault, is the difference between governmentality and bio-power? While bio-power is power over the life-processes of individuals and populations, governmentality relates to those political technologies by means of which power, be it bio-power or not, has been exercised in the West since the 17th century. Hence, it is possible that Foucault’s analyses of the Christian pastorate relate exclusively to these technologies and therefore have no relation to bio-power at all, that is to say, to a historical form of power which has assumed ‘responsibility for the life processes’ and which has undertaken ‘to control and modify them’ (Foucault, 1990: 142). Foucault’s genealogy of governmentality, especially those examples he gives on the development of governmental technologies during the 17th and the 18th centuries, makes it immediately evident, however, that almost every one of them is closer to the Platonic and Aristotelian concerns than any early Christian texts on the pastorate.

According to Foucault, early modern governmentality culminates in two ideas: the ‘reason of state’ and the ‘police’. Now, as we know, the reason of state was a doctrine that was vehemently attacked by the pious Christians of the day and I am relatively convinced, although Foucault does not say so explicitly, that his intention was not to suggest that the Christian pastorate precedes this particular doctrine. It is much more probable that he meant the police, that is to say, a governmental technology peculiar to the state which aims at controlling and regulating the lives of individuals and populations. Yet again, if we take a closer look at the objectives this governmental technology had, it is hard to find any similarities between the Christian pastorate and this technology, except the theme of morality, which was not of course absent from the Greek and the Roman considerations either. For, as Foucault says (e.g. 2007: 311–28), in a given territory, the police aims at controlling the birth rate, childcare, mortality, education, health, immigration, circulation of commodities and manufactured goods, the morals of individuals, their occupational capabilities, their safety and even their happiness.

Instead, almost all these issues can be found in Plato’s *Laws* and Aristotle’s *Politics*, including birth rate, childcare, education, health, mortality, immigration, the circulation of commodities and the production of goods, not to mention happiness which is, as Aristotle maintains, the very *telos* of government. Moreover, although the aim of the Christian pastorate was, as Foucault says, to control every aspect of the individual life, we have to take into account that the life at stake was the life of the monk in a monastery, not the life of the citizen of the Roman Empire. In other words, the
pastorate was not supposed to be a political technology of Christians, whereas when we read Plato, it is precisely the citizens of the polis that must be constantly watched over by the political shepherd: ‘Nothing, so far as possible, shall be left uncontrolled [aphroureōtos]’, as he writes in *The Laws* (1997a: 6.760a). Indeed, we can find many other issues and objectives that were characteristic of the early modern governmental technologies of the police in plenty of Greek and Roman authors from Xenophon’s *Oeconomicus* to Cicero’s *De legibus* and beyond, but hardly in the writings of the Church Fathers. Censors, as Cicero writes in *De legibus* (III.7), should keep count of the number of citizens, their age, children, families and property; they should look after the temples, roads, aqueducts, public finance and taxation; they should control the mores of the people, and so on and so forth, thus neatly summarizing the tasks of the real censors of Rome up to the end of the Roman republic after which this office was reserved to the emperors (see Mommsen, 1887–8: 358–459; Suolahti, 1963: 25–66). Furthermore, when the first cameral chairs – chairs of *Polizeiwissenschaft* – were founded at universities in Germany in the 18th century, the aim was to prepare the future chamber officers for tasks that have nothing to do with Christian pastors, but a great deal with the Roman censors, including the census, tax collection, financial administration, administration of traffic, censorship of mores, and so on. This was the message of von Justi, too, nowadays the best-known of the German police scientists of the 18th century, and the author whose writings Foucault most thoroughly analysed in his studies on the police and the *Polizeiwissenschaft* (see Foucault, 1988, 2000a). According to von Justi, there must be censors in each well-governed state. They are the defenders of the laws, the maintainers of virtue and good morals, the promoters of skill, of the arts and of science, but they also must, like the Roman censors, have power to suspend or depose and imprison any member of the government who is guilty of treasonable or corrupting practices (see Small, 2001: 360–1). Hence, the enigma why Foucault wanted to trace bio-politics and especially governmentality to the Judeo-Christian tradition remains, even though it has become apparent that both modern bio-power and the police as a technology of governmentality have much more in common with the Greek and the Roman mentality and reality than the Christian. Did Foucault make an error of judgment? Did he consider the theme of the ‘lost sheep’ (‘care for individual life’) as so important for modern governmentality that it overrules all the pagan materials, both speculative and historical, bearing witness to the existence of the governmental rationalities similar to the modern ones in the classical world? Foucault does not provide us with an answer. Yet one thing is quite certain. If Christianity introduces something new in this configuration, it is the strict prohibition of negative eugenics – and rather than making a contribution to the classical governmental rationalities and practices, Christianity marked a point of their gradual deterioration until the reinvention of the classical culture during the Renaissance and early modern Europe. It is possible that there is a connection between the Christian theme of pastoral care (agape/caritas) and the early modern ideology of the police, whose duty was to take care of populations, but the means and the aims of the early modern police were not Christian but classical. Conversely, there may be a connection between the Judeo-Christian command ‘be fruitful and multiply’ and the aims of the police, because at least some representatives of the *Polizeiwissenschaft*, such as von
Justi, favoured unlimited growth of population for the sake of the prosperity of the state. By the same token, however, it must be borne in mind that we cannot find such a notion – prosperity qua increase of population – in the early Christian texts, but we do find this rationale in many Roman speculations concerning the government of the state and, as is well known, Augustus’ lex Julia de maritandis ordinibus passed in 18 BCE, which created a system of legal rewards for married parents with children and penalties for the unwed and childless, criminalized marriages between free men and ‘dubious’ women, and so on, in order to strengthen the empire, both in terms of its public mores and the number of people (see Garney and Saller, 1987: 126–47). Furthermore, although the strictness of these laws was ameliorated during the first years of the Common Era, what is noteworthy here is that nearly all these laws were replaced under Constantine and the later Christian emperors – and even those that were not, fell into disuse (see Lefkowitch and Fant, 1992: 102). Hence, here again we see, not a Christian concern for the quality of the population, but the Christian conviction that one should not try to control such quality, not at least by a conscious population policy.

In sum, although I have presented merely a superficial sketch of the classical ideas and practices of government of populations here, I believe it suffices to establish that there is a peculiarity in Foucault’s genealogy of western governmentality in general and bio-politics in particular. Christianity was not the prelude to what Foucault calls governmentality but rather marked a rupture in the development that started in classical Greece and Rome and continued in early modern Europe. It was the renaissance of the classical culture and literature that made it feasible for early modern authors to introduce and develop political rationality revolving around the questions of good government and the control of populations, not the tradition of the Judeo-Christian pastorate. With the rise of Christianity, the majority of these classical ideas faded into the background if they were not outright rejected as in the case of eugenics and even that of the family policy of the Roman Empire. Surely the Christian Church made universal ‘care’ (agape/caritas) the core of its social teaching and introduced a variety of rules and restrictions on marriage. Yet neither this care nor the marriage rules and restrictions had much to do with those considerations we find in the 18th-century treatises of Polizeiwissenschaft. The political dimension of the pastoral care found its expression in caring for the poor and the afflicted, while the rules and restrictions concerning marriage were based on particular interpretations of biblical teachings, not on the calculations of power, prosperity, happiness, or the order of the city. Instead, the rationale of the police was based precisely on these calculations: ‘The name Policey comes from the Greek word polis, a city, and should mean the good ordering of cities and of their civic institutions’, von Justi writes in the first paragraph of his Grundsätze der Polizeywissenschaft [Principles of Policy Science], originally published in 1756, adding in the second paragraph that Policey most generally includes all measures in the internal affairs of the country through which the general means (Vermögen) of the state may be more permanently founded and increased, the energies (Kräfte) of the state better used, and in general the happiness of the community promoted. It is true that these are not entirely absent from the writings of the early Fathers, but there is nothing particularly Christian in these considerations. They originate in the governmental wisdom of the pre-Christian Graeco-Roman world.
Conclusion

In Foucault’s texts and interviews, we cannot find an explanation of his decision to focus on the Judeo-Christian instead of the Graeco-Roman heritage in his researches on the origins of bio-politics and governmentality. Perhaps this decision relates to his aversion to Christianity as an intolerant religion especially when it comes to different forms of sexual activity. Be this as it may, the reversal of origins suggested above calls into question the feasibility of Foucault’s return to the Greek and Roman ethics in his quest for an anti-bio-political alternative (‘art of existence’, ‘aesthetics of existence’, ‘care of the self’) to modern life dominated by bio-politics.

To be sure, Foucault (2000b: 256) explicitly denies that he was looking for an alternative for today’s bio-politics in the Graeco-Roman ethics. According to him, we can merely learn something from the ancient world – and although Foucault does maintain that this world teaches us that everyone’s life can become a work of art (ibid.: 261), this does not necessarily entail that we should imitate the ancient art of existence and the care of the self. It is also possible that the Graeco-Roman art of existence had no connection to the bio-political ideas and practices in Greek and Roman societies. Therefore, this ethics may indeed constitute an anti-bio-political alternative to the modern way of life governed by bio-political ideas and practices. At least we can learn something from it, something that gives us an opportunity to challenge modern bio-political rationalities. However, if it is an alternative to bio-political ideas and practices, it was such an alternative already in ancient societies. Moreover, if it was such an alternative, we should be able to explain why there were so many authors in the classical polis as well as in the Roman Republic and Empire who at the same time embraced both bio-politics of populations and the art of existence understood as the care of the self – Plato being perhaps the most prominent example. Was Plato inconsistent or was it plain to him that there is no contradiction between these two arts? I believe that the latter option is true and even that for him bio-politics of populations was the very condition of possibility of the care of the self. Without a careful regulation, control and education of the population, ‘the care of the soul and body’, Plato writes in the Laws (1997a: 5.743d–e), ‘will never develop into anything worth mentioning’.

My intention in this article has not been to defend some form of Christian ethics. My only intention has been to show that it is highly problematic to dismiss the Graeco-Roman origins of modern bio-politics and governmentality and to trace them back to early Christian ideas and practices. Early Christians were not very interested in controlling and regulating the lives of populations, let alone in order to increase the power and prosperity of the state. On the contrary, they were more interested in abolishing these controls and regulations, especially as they relate to the Graeco-Roman practice of eugenics.

Notes

1. I want to thank Sergei Prozorov for a suggestion to reflect Foucault’s late work on Graeco-Roman ethics in the context of the argument of this article.
2. On a detailed analysis of the sovereign power and bio-power, see Ojakangas (2005).
Bibliography


**Biographical note**

**Mika Ojakangas** is Professor of Political Thought at the Department of Social Sciences and Philosophy, University of Jyväskylä, Finland. He has published books and articles on political theology and late modern continental political thought. He is currently writing a book on the history of conscience in the western tradition.