

# The paradigm of the Greeks— a Foucaultian interpretation of care

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## §1. Introduction

**M**ICHEL FOUCAULT IS A CHAMALEONIC AUTHOR, whose works have influenced a number of disciplines— from history to philosophy, social sciences, psychology and even medicine and health studies in general, Foucault’s approach to the relationship between knowledge, power and ethics— or how the production of discourses are intimately attached to the process of constitution and consolidation of institutions and the systems of practices in general as well as to the process of subjectivation— raised a new perspective on *how* to think and *how* to raise questions as well as how try to comprehend the historical *a priori* where each of them arises. For many commentators and critics of Foucault, his redefinition of power, which contested the hegemonic approach of conceiving power in an «essentialist» manner and proposed a conceptualization where power is conceived as set of relations<sup>1</sup>, was central to a shift of paradigm in the humanities. That is why some viewed Foucault’s return to the Antiquity and to the notions of care of the self, government of the self and *parrhesía*, among others, with a grain of suspicion and surprise. Why was Foucault, an author so well know for his critique of modernity and its fundamental institutions, suspending his archeological and genealogical enterprise and giving a series of lectures on the process of constitution of

<sup>1</sup>In *Discipline and Punish* Foucault says that power cannot be understood in terms of traditional social theory (such as Weber); instead, power must be understood as «a network of relations, constantly in tension, in activity, rather than a privilege that one might possess... this power is not exercised simply an an obligation or a prohibition on those who “do not have it”; it invests them is transmitted by them and through them; it exerts pressure upon them, just as they themselves, in their struggle against it, resist the grip it has on them». (Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1995), 26—27.

<sup>2</sup>Michel Foucault, «The Subject and Power», *Critical Inquiry* 8:4 (1982),778

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subjectivity across different schools in Antiquity, exploring the original meaning of philosophy as *art of living* or way of life? As Foucault said in «The subject and Power, it is not power but the subject which is the general theme of my research».<sup>2</sup> And although an inattentive reader may see with surprise Foucault's last writings, as the author himself tells us in «The Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom», power relations are now to be understood

as means by which individuals try to conduct, to determine the behavior of others. The problem is not to try to dissolve them in the utopia of a perfectly transparent communication (with Habermas) but to give one's self the rules of law, the techniques of management, and also the ethics, the ethos, the practice of the self, which would allow these games of power to be played with a minimum of domination.<sup>3</sup>

If Foucault's previous works— such as *Discipline and Punish* (1976)— have culminated in the idea that subjectivity is always a product of disciplinary techniques and/or normalizing techniques<sup>4</sup>, it didn't mean, however, that freedom didn't exist nor that individual autonomy was an illusion or a mere output of institutional conditioning. Indeed, as Foucault well puts in «The Subject and Power» power relations are possible because freedom exists. Still, one might ask: to what extent is freedom actualized? What is the relationship between individual freedom and social and political conditioning? Is it possible to escape the normalizing society? How does freedom relate to power, resistance and truth?

Deleuze pointed in a similar manner to this apparent tension in Foucault's work. In Alcalá's words

<sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault, «The Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom: An interview with Michael Foucault on 20th January 1984», *The Final Foucault*, (1998).18, my italics.

<sup>4</sup> Here I am considering the distinction between the paradigm of the nation—state (between the XVI and XVIII centuries) where disciplinary tactics are fundamental to maintain a well ordered society and the paradigm of bio politics where populations became the object of State's attention and concern, developing specific *norms* to that aim. These norms did not intend to replace the existing disciplinary techniques across the social field, but they added another layer of meaning through the redefinition of politics, where the concept of governmentality acquires a crucial role. Foucault develops this line of inquiry in the last chapter of «History of Sexuality» (vol.1). For a detailed discussion on the relationship between bio politics and governmentality see Nunes da Costa, *Democratic Despotisms* (2022).

the question inevitably arises: how to cross the line, how to find in the power that is constitutive of truth a power of the truth that is not already a truth of power, that is to say, a truth that is derived from the transversal lines of resistance and not from the lines that are integral to power? (...) Foucault found the answer to this question in the processes of subjectivation, as power of the truth or third axis that differs equally from the axes of power and knowledge, to the extent that it constitutes an outside common to both. In this regard, Deleuze understands that the very operation of subjectivation is the direction of the force that is man upon himself, self—government or *fold* of the force that constitutes a Self that evades both power relations and the formations of knowledge that are a function of them. It is both the stratum and the strategy because it consists of an interiorization or a fold of the outside that clearly differs both from the interiority commonly attributed to the subject and from the mere exteriority of the world of the senses.<sup>5</sup>

As Alcalá points out, Deleuze considered that the Greek paradigm provided a new horizon where Foucault could rethink power relations since the subject acquired a special and independent status<sup>6</sup>. In Deleuze's words

this is what the Greeks did: they folded force, even though it still remained force. They made it relate back to itself. Far from ignoring interiority, individuality or subjectivity they *invented* the subject, but only as a derivative or the product of a 'subjectivation'. They discovered the 'aesthetic existence' —the doubling or relation with oneself, the facultative rule of free man.<sup>7</sup>

Without entering in the specificities of Deleuze's philosophy and concepts, what is important to notice here is that for Foucault «a dimension of subjectivity derived from power and knowledge without being dependent on them».<sup>8</sup>

Therefore, «just as power— relations can be affirmed only by being carried out, so the relation to oneself, which bends these power relations, can be established only by being carried out».<sup>9</sup> Therefore, in the last Foucault<sup>10</sup>, the

<sup>6</sup> Francisco Alcalá, «Of the Processes of Subjectivation as a Subspecies of the Event: the Deleuzian Reading of the Later Foucault» (2018), 5.

<sup>6</sup> Deleuze, *Foucault* (1988), 100

<sup>7</sup> Deleuze, *Foucault*. 101, my italics.

<sup>8</sup> idem

<sup>9</sup> Deleuze, *Foucault*, 102.

<sup>10</sup> This expression refers to the last period of Foucault where he returns to the Greeks and to the notion of the care of the self. For interpretations on this see *The Final Foucault*, edited by James Bernauer and David Rasmussen (1987). See also Álvarez, Jorge Yágüez, *El Último Foucault — voluntad de verdad y subjetividad*, Madrid: Editorial Biblioteca Nova, 2013.

main concept which regulates the triangulation of constitution of subjectivity, exercise of power and techniques of veridiction is the concept of 'care of the self'. It is through an intensive immersion in the historical reminiscences of the Antiquity, since Socrates throughout the Hellenist and Roman period, that Foucault will find a resolution to what many considered a tension in his thought.<sup>11</sup> Caring for oneself gives one's self an ethics and a practice of freedom, i.e., by rethinking and reimagining new forms of subjectivity, one strengthens one's capacity for purposeful self—making. An aesthetics of existence, concept which echoes the several schools of Antiquity, represents a way through which it becomes possible to imagine oneself in a different light, through a conscious commitment to certain practices or techniques, escaping and/or by transforming the kind of existing relationships<sup>12</sup>.

In the last courses Foucault gave at Collège de France between 1982 and 1984<sup>13</sup>, Foucault's purpose was to identify the ways in which this subject was related to a set of practices that mirrored the historical *a priori* of late Antiquity. In the first section of this article our goal is to offer a characterisation of the experience of care in this historical period, with a specific focus on Socrates.

<sup>11</sup> The care of the self points to a recognition of one's starting point — our biological nature — as well as one's purpose — becoming a virtuous person. Of course, one needs to define what is virtue and why is it a human purpose. The gap between birth and death is filled with a progressive set of conscious choices that reinforce the historical *a priori* where one's existence is necessarily attached to those of others, for instance, friends, masters and the city/ community. The techniques of the care of the self combine a spiritual aspect along with physical ones. The spirit, or the soul, is necessarily linked to the existence of the body. A virtuous existence, a good life, is that where the subject constitutes himself in a harmonious, holistic way, recognising the integrality of one's being as well as one's condition of being with and for others. Under this light it will become clear in this section that for the Greeks the body is as important as the soul.

<sup>12</sup> We could explore how Foucault position himself regarding the tradition of the Enlightenment and Modernity, however it would go beyond the scope of this article. Nevertheless, it is worth pointing out that Foucault's return to the Greeks allows him to explore a new formulation of individual autonomy and freedom. Exploring the idea of what kind of philosophical ethos is possible today, Costa says that «The *ethos* starts with the rejection of the 'blackmail' of enlightenment, i.e., of thinking that reason or dialectics regulate history. In order to answer the question what are we Foucault proposes to make a historical ontology of ourselves. His point is to transform the critique conducted in the form of a necessary limitation into a practical necessity that takes the form of a possible transgression/crossing over». (Costa, M.N. *Redefining Individuality*, (2011),177)

<sup>13</sup> *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* (1981); *The Government of Self and Others: Lectures at the College de France*, (1982—1983); *The Courage of Truth* (1983—1984)

## § 2. The (non) place of Socrates and the Task of Philosophy

Socrates' *Apology* portrays Socrates trial in 399 B.C.E., after the end of the Peloponnesian war between Athens and Sparta (431—404). After the surrender of Athens, the Spartans chose a group of 30 citizens to dismantle Athenian democratic government, replacing it with a return to the «ancient laws». Courts were used to purge the city of their opponents and to reconstruct political authority according to a new paradigm. While Socrates didn't go into exile, the Thirty looked at him with suspicion. However, in 403 democracy had been restored and in 399 Socrates was brought to trial under the charges of impiety.<sup>14</sup>

Plato's text is a reconstruction of Socrates' defense. The trial happened outdoors, like a great spectacle; the jury was composed of probably 500 or 501 jurors, who were chosen every year by lottery (*dikasts*). Each side had the same amount of time to present their evidences and arguments, after which the jury would deliberate and determine the guilt or innocence of the defendant.

Socrates was a peculiar individual; he did not present sharp and abstract portrays of cosmogonic speculation; instead, he inverted the perspective from the outside inwards. His question was not about the «world». His question was «how should I live?» By shifting our attention from physics and metaphysics to the subject Socrates «invents» philosophy as we «know» it.<sup>15</sup> This, of course, had a cost, for Socrates' attitude was seen as a direct contestation to the *status quo* and to the foundations of Greek civilisation. Under this light, Socrates, the «missing philosopher», creates philosophy within the absolute tension between the freedom to think, to speak and to act and the necessity imposed by politics. In this context, only courage can explain the commitment to freedom, or to put it differently, only freedom can manifest itself as a radical courage to truth. As Hannah Arendt puts it and making her words our own: «Ever since Socrates trial, that is, ever since the polis tried the philosopher, there has been a conflict between politics and philosophy that I'm attempting to understand».<sup>16</sup> Socrates

<sup>14</sup> See Miller, P, *Apology of Socrates: A Commentary*, (2010) 20.

<sup>15</sup> In the *Apology* Socrates says that the accusations against him were the following: «There is a clever men called Socrates who has theories about the heavens and has investigated everything below the earth, and can make the weaker argument defeat the stronger». (18b) This accusation implied the accusation of impiety, of not believing the gods. Socrates will show in his defense that he never spoke about these matters and that he respects the gods and gods wills.

<sup>16</sup> Hannah Arendt to Karl Jaspers, July 1, 1956, in *Hannah Arendt—Karl Jaspers Correspondence*, cd. Lotte Kohler and Hans Saner, trans. from the German by Robert and Rita Kimber (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York: 1992), pp.288—9. In James Colaico, *Socrates against Athens — Philosophy on Trial* (2001),.1.

represented the discomfort that had to be silenced: the apparent freedom of speech which characterised Athens was being replaced by a logic of fear and a regime of despotism, that placed the value of social order above the value of truth and freedom.<sup>17</sup>

Of course, one may say that Athenian democracy was not liberal in the modern understanding of the word, which is correct, given that individual rights were an invention of the XVII and XVIII century; however, the problem persists: what defines a good life and how is this good life intricately connected in the affairs of the world? How should we think about the relationship between ethics (in both an individual and collective level) and politics? What regulates (and what should regulate) the process of constitution of one's subjectivity and how is it connected with the others?

It is not our purpose here to offer a detailed account of Socrates' *Apology*. Our purpose is more modest; we want to identify the elements which will become central to Foucault's account of care of the self, starting by the relationship between the self (Socrates), the (moral and political) world and the Gods (transcendence/ spirituality). To understand this relationship means to be able to a) identify the regulative principle of action (of constituting oneself as subject); b) to clarify the hierarchy of goods, by clarifying the relationship between (legitimate) authority, duty and obedience (moral and political); c) to give oneself the task by identifying how to live. Let us dissect these ideas.

What is the regulative principle of action for Socrates? A commitment to truth. How is truth conceived? In order to answer this question we must recall two moments: first, the beginning of the *Apology* when Socrates says

What effect my accusers have upon you, gentlemen, I do not know, but for my own part I was almost carried away by them; their arguments were so convincing. On the other hand, scarcely a word of what they said was true. I was specially astonished at one of their many misrepresentations: the point where they told you that you must be careful not to let me deceive you, implying that I am a skilful speaker. I thought that it was peculiarly brazen of them to have the nerve to tell you this, only just before events must prove them wrong, when it becomes obvious that I have not the slightest skill as speaker—unless, of course, by a skilful speaker they mean one who speaks the truth. If that is what they mean, I would agree that I am an orator, and quite out of their class. (17a—b)

Listening to the accusation, Socrates almost forgot about himself, about who he was, but against the influences in Athenian society of speaking well and having

<sup>17</sup> In the final section we will see how this displacement is being repeated in contemporary times.

the language as important public and political tool, Socrates recovers his self—awareness through the guiding principle according to which he leads his life: Truth. Socrates introduces an ethical *parrhesía*, i.e., a duty to speak the truth to oneself (and to others) as reflection of a commitment one has with one's modes of self—constitution.<sup>18</sup> To speak the truth, the «whole truth» (17b), without embellishments or adorns, is what Socrates promises to the audience. In exchange he merely asks that the jury to disregard his way of speaking and focus on the justice of discourse. (18a) And until his last minute of defense Socrates, despite recognising the difficulty of the audience and the jurors to see the truth, he rises above himself and defends this possibility of superseding error and finding truth. Here, we clearly observe the designing of the relationship between truth—speech/*logos*—way of life. Socrates is truthful, he *tells* the truth in a direct, immediate way, and he *lives* the truth, i.e., according to justice and virtue. Second, truth emerges also in a historical and symbolic context. The Oracle has declared that Socrates was the wisest of men. But how could that be? Could gods lie (21b)? Let us recall that the Oracle was one of the foundational institutions of Greek civilisation; to contest its authority would mean to violate one of the most sacred principles. Socrates starts his incursion trying to confirm (or deny) the Oracle, so he goes to meet the individuals who are considered, by his society, as the wisest men: the politicians, the poets, the craftsmen. However, he realizes that although each one masters one specific area of knowledge of practice, that does not assure, by itself, wisdom.<sup>19</sup> Wisdom is something else. Wisdom cannot be reduced to specific knowledge. Socrates is the wisest man because he is the aware that he does not know; Socrates represents the maximum of human wisdom, the highest level of wisdom that we, as *humans*, may achieve. In this second account of truth, truth is *revealed* (in a proto—Heideggerian sense<sup>20</sup>): it shows itself in an enigmatic

<sup>18</sup> The concept of *parrhesía* is very important in Foucault's analysis, specially in his reflection of the role of truth in politics and in democracy in particular. We will not enter into detail in this article, however, it is pertinent to call the attention to this topic since already in the Greeks it becomes evident the tension and paradoxical relationship between the imperative of democratic equality (*isegoria* and *isenomia*) and the necessity of having an Other who is entitled and who has the right to speak the truth.

<sup>19</sup> He says: «it seemed to me, as I pursued my investigation at the god's command, that the people with the greater reputations were almost entirely deficient, while others who were supposed to be their inferiors were such more noteworthy for their general good sense». (22a)

<sup>20</sup> In order to better understand Heidegger's conceptualisation of truth as revelation (*aletheia*) see «The question of Technology» (1954) and also «On the essence of Truth» (1943). In both texts Heidegger recovers the ancient concept of *aletheia* to enlighten the relationship between ourselves, as humans and freedom as truth and destiny. In Heidegger we find a similar commitment to that of Socrates, i.e., a commitment to have the courage to *speak* the truth and to *live* the truth. *Parrhesía* is a way of being through which the subject

way, which requires interpretation and *logos* and it is received not only as a message but as an *imperative* of conduct. This revelation represents in itself the affirmation of the priority of gods' commandments to human's commandments. This means that if there is conflict between the gods' orders and humans' orders, gods' orders ought to prevail. Socrates, as receptor of gods' revelation, has a duty to obey, even if that means to disobey the rules of men; in different words, human laws are prone to error and injustice and only the gods can assure the horizon of justice and truth necessary to envision a good life. Finally, this dynamics between revelation—truth—duty—obligation characterises already the (desired) path of how to live one's life. Obedience to the Gods, commitment to Truth, Courage to speak the Truth regardless of the (human) cost.

Socrates' disruptive character derived from a radical thesis, unwelcome and uncomfortable, namely, the thesis that ethics *must be* the foundation of politics. We are convinced that it is this dimension of Socrates that Foucault aims to recover, namely, the relationship between a *philosophical way of life* which implies an *ethos* that is the foundation for the development of common life in the *polis*. Socrates exemplifies the practice of caring for others, i.e., of conducting a process—through the *method* and *technique/exercise* of dialogue—through which, on the one hand, each subject discovers oneself; and, on the other hand, Socrates is the example of caring for oneself. «The care of the self», says Foucault, «was actually a precept of living that, in a general way, was very highly valued in Greece. (...) Attending to oneself is a privilege; it is the mark of a social superiority, as against those who must attend to others in order to serve them or attend to a trade in order to live».<sup>21</sup> The care of the self present in the Greeks, a care that is mainly an activity, a practice (even before becoming a philosophical principle) is a duty, a task, a technique. The care of the self is not a preparatory technique, a means to an end; it is the end itself, it is a way of living: «Now it becomes a matter of attending to oneself, for oneself: one should be, for oneself and throughout one's existence, one's own object».<sup>22</sup>

Pierre Hadot was probably one of the contemporary authors who best captured the historical *a priori* of Antiquity and the nuanced differences and similarities across schools, and Foucault was engaged in «intense, if sometimes

constitutes himself as such. As Foucault also says in *The Government of the Self and Others*, *parrhesía* does not produce a codified effect; it announces non specified risks. (2013, 62) *Parrhesía* is an event which creates a fracture in the common space, destabilizing existing (power) relations. Therefore, it is essentially subversive in character.

<sup>21</sup> Michel Foucault, *Ethics Subjectivity and Truth*, (1997),.95

<sup>22</sup> Foucault, *Ethics Subjectivity and Truth*, 96

submerged, intellectual exchange» with him<sup>23</sup>. Indeed, it is important to strengthen that Foucault's interpretation of ethics in Antiquity was not a lonely movement; several other scholars — like Pierre Hadot, Georges Dumézil or Paul Veyne—were embedded in the task of trying to understand its texts and the historical period as such. In *Philosophy as a way of Life* Hadot says that «(...) to be a philosopher implies a rupture with what the skeptics called *bios*, that is, daily life (...)»<sup>24</sup> and while different schools<sup>25</sup> had different dogmas and techniques, all shared the same commitment:

But above all every school practices exercises designed to ensure spiritual progress toward the ideal state of wisdom, exercises of reason that will be, for the soul, analogous to the athlete's training or to the application of a medical cure. Generally, they consist, above all, of self—control and meditation. Self—control is fundamentally being attentive to oneself: an unrelaxing vigilance for the Stoics, the renunciation of unnecessary desires for the Epicureans. It always involves an effort of will, thus faith in moral freedom and the possibility of self—improvement; an acute moral consciousness honed by spiritual direction and the practice of examining one's conscience; and lastly, the kind of practical exercises described with such remarkable precision particularly by Plutarch: controlling one's anger, curiosity, speech, or love of riches, beginning by working on what is easiest in order gradually to acquire a firm and stable character.<sup>26</sup>

As Hadot points out, in Antiquity, theory and practice were always together— theory was never considered as an end in itself; it was put in service to practice. The spiritual exercises<sup>27</sup>, which Foucault will call techniques of the self, have

<sup>23</sup> Davidson, A., «Ethics as Ascetics: Foucault, the History of Ethics, and Ancient Thought». in *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*, (2005) 124

<sup>24</sup> Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault* (1995), 56

<sup>25</sup> «The dogmas and methodological principles of each school are not open to discussion. In this period, to philosophize is to choose a school, convert to its way of life, and accept its dogmas. This is why the core of the fundamental dogmas and rules of life for Platonism, Aristotelianism, Stoicism, and Epicureanism remained unchanged throughout antiquity. Even the scientists of antiquity always were affiliated with a philosophical school: the development of their mathematical and astronomical theorems changed nothing of the fundamental principles of the school to which they claimed allegiance..» (Hadot, *Philosophy as way of life*, .60)

<sup>26</sup> *Philosophy as way of Life*, 58.

<sup>27</sup> Hadot defines spiritual exercises in the following manner: «Spiritual exercises». The expression is a bit disconcerting for the contemporary reader. In the first place, it is no longer quite fashionable these days to use the word «spiritual». It is nevertheless necessary to use this term, I believe, because none of the other adjectives we could use — «psychic», «moral», «ethical», «intellectual», «of thought», «of the soul» — covers all the aspects of the reality we want to describe. Since, in these exercises, it is thought which, as it were, takes itself as its own subjectmatter, and seeks to modify itself, it would be possible for us to speak in terms of

profound implications on how we think about philosophy, on the one hand, and on how we think about ourselves—demanding awareness for the kind of desirable relationship between our thoughts, our words, our actions, our practices.

While the care of the self as duty assumes different shapes according to the ancient traditions—epicurean, platonic, stoics, etc. —Socrates is a paradigmatic example for he disrupts the concepts and correlative practices associated to social value and social recognition. Recognising that the supreme values are determined (or oriented) by the gods means that what we, as humans, generally value is not necessarily what is valuable according to the gods. This becomes more explicit when Socrates affirms that this self—given task of being occupied with himself happens within the horizon of detriment of other activities and pursuits, for instance, fame, glory, wealth. This has serious implications, for if the pursue of virtue ought to come before the pursuit of power, fame and glory, social recognition needs to be redefined according to a new lens, a new paradigm where truth plays a strategic and priority role. In living according to this imperative — of being truthful to oneself and of pursuing truth in one’s relationship to others —Socrates assumes the role of master, and, in more general terms, he represents the possibility of awakening of others. He embodies the care of the self as a kind of principle of agitation, of movement, of restlessness.

Within this framework Foucault argues that the maxim *gnothi seautón* is actually grounded in a previous imperative of *epiméleia heautón*. The experience and incorporation of the care is prior to that of knowledge. The imperative *epiméleia heautón* represents the «other side» of the history of philosophy; it permeates the historical development of our ideas although not being fully recognised for its importance. Foucault’s purpose is to rescue this imperative, even if enlightened by one’s own historical *a priori*; this rescue represents an invitation to think on how the incorporation and transformation of this

«thought exercises». Yet the word «thought» does not indicate clearly enough that imagination and sensibility play a very important role in these exercises. For the same reason, we cannot be satisfied with «intellectual exercises», although such intellectual factors as definition, division, ratiocination, reading, investigation, and rhetorical amplification play a large role in them. «Ethical exercises» is a rather tempting expression, since, as we shall see, the exercises in question contribute in a powerful way to the therapeutics of the passions, and have to do with the conduct of life. Yet, here again, this would be too limited a view of things. As we can glimpse through Friedmann’s text, these exercises in fact correspond to a transformation of our vision of the world, and to a metamorphosis of our personality. The word «spiritual» is quite apt to make us understand that these exercises are the result, not merely of thought, but of the individual’s entire psychism. Above all, the word «spiritual» reveals the true dimensions of these exercises. By means of them, the individual raises himself up to the life of the objective Spirit; that is to say, he re—places himself within the perspective of the Whole («Become eternal by transcending yourself»). (*Philosophy as way of life*, 82)

imperative in our lives could impact the way we live, the way we conceive ourselves as ethical and political subjects as well as the way we project our (political) communities. Today, just like in Socrates's time, this imperative has a disruptive character.

Socrates, the individual who embodied a godly mission, represented the rupture with the given order, not merely for the sake of breaking, overcoming or suspending the establishment, but ultimately, for the sake of reinventing a new order guided by more elevated principles (truth). That is why Hadot claims that Socrates was known as *atopos*, i.e., of someone who had no place in the common world. Because he was a philosopher, i.e., because he led a life moved by the love of wisdom, he was considered to be someone bizarre and dangerous, for he had a vital commitment to Truth.<sup>28</sup> Only truth should guide the process of perfecting of one's soul, which is intrinsically linked to the care of the body. Having Socrates as *example*, we may find in the experience of the care a fundamental break that opens the possibility for the philosophical activity; by placing the care of the self at the centre of one's existential task we are invited to reflect on the ethical and political implications of it. This experience is further enriched by an account of how other ancient schools conceived and practiced *care*.

### § 3. Defining Care in late Antiquity

What is care? Care should be understood as an experience, which is also a technique of transforming oneself, i.e., a technique that converges with the experience of self—transformation<sup>29</sup>. Consequently, Foucault argues that we must look at the intersections of subjectivity, power and truth, or differently put, when one looks at the processes of constitution of subjectivity it is virtually impossible to detach it from the study of governmentality<sup>30</sup>, i.e., of the creation

<sup>28</sup> On this respect Hadot tells us that Socrates had no place in the world of human affairs « (f)or wisdom, says Diotima in Plato's Symposium, is not a human state, it is a state of perfection of being and knowledge that can only be divine. It is the love of this wisdom, which is foreign to the world, that makes the philosopher a stranger in it». (*Philosophy as way of Life*, 57)

<sup>29</sup> Foucault, *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth*, 88.

<sup>30</sup> In the essay Governmentality Foucault characterizes the historical *a priori* shift from Machiavelli to modernity, with the introduction of the concept of «art of governin». He argues that the new paradigm became visible not only through the promotion of a new understanding of power but also through the development and application of new techniques, which still define us today. Foucault retrieves Guillaume de La Perriere's definition of government: Government is the right disposition of *things*, arranged as to lead to

of disciplines and practices which constitute the general framework of action (and thought). By placing the emphasis on these simultaneous and complementary processes it also becomes clear that, from a theoretical point of view, it makes no sense to talk of «power» in an essentialist manner. Says Foucault that «what defines a relationship of power is that it is a mode of action that does not act directly and immediately on others. Instead, *it acts upon their actions*»<sup>31</sup>. (Human) action is by definition the exercise of power upon other(s). A conception of power as result of human action embodied in institutions is rejected. In this context, power cannot be analysed from a strictly political perspective reflecting a foundational subject. Instead, «one must *analyse institutions from the standpoint of power relations, rather than vice versa*, and that the fundamental point of anchorage of the relationships, even if they are embodied and crystallized in an institution, is to be found *outside* the institution»<sup>32</sup>. What is this *outside*? The individual subject. This means that by shifting our attention from a foundational approach to the recognition of interdependence of phenomena, one is open for the potential *reversal*, resistance and/or struggle<sup>33</sup>. It becomes clearer why the recovery of the care of the self allows Foucault to explore the particular processes through which one constitutes and invents oneself *qua subject*.

To care for oneself means a) to experience oneself; b) to consciously apply a set of techniques to oneself; c) to commit oneself to one's transformation; d) to

a convenient end. (*Power*, 208 my italics). While Machiavelli's government targeted the territory on one hand, and its inhabitants, on the other, in La Perriere's text government becomes a question of *disposition of things*. Foucault reads this passage as marking the transformation in the notion of government — from this point on government has to do with the complex relation between men and things, *where the things are men in their relations*. Men become objects and territory and property become variables (instead of reference). The disposition of things follows a determinate plan to arrive at a maximization of the «common good», in order to arrive at convenient ends to each of the things to be governed. This new form of government opens the space for a new concept of power, where to govern becomes an *art*, because it has to do with strategies, tactics, probabilities, composition and articulation between different elements that until then were not present, or if they were, could easily be subsumed under larger categories.

<sup>31</sup> Michel Foucault, *Power*, (2000), 340, my italics.

<sup>32</sup> Foucault, *Power*, 343, my italics.

<sup>33</sup> As Foucault says: «every power relationship implies, at least in *120*potential, a strategy for struggle, in which the two forces are not superimposed, do not lose their specific nature, or do not finally become confused. Each constitutes for the other a kind of *permanent limit, a point of possible reversal*» (*Power*, 346, my italics)

relate to oneself in a certain manner; e) to relate to others according to a specific and desired end and in a certain manner.<sup>34</sup>

In the specific course of *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, Foucault looks at the Hellenic and Roman culture, aiming at defining the techniques of living or techniques of existence. While it seems distant from our own time, this reflection is pertinent in order to reinforce the link between techniques of existence, or techniques of the self, and one's surrounding in its multiple aspects: the exercise of government, the conceptualization of power, the physical movements, displacements and adaptations of populations, among others. Through a dialogue with Plato's *Alcibiades* Foucault underlines how this care of the self is simultaneously a form of living and a mode of taking oneself as one's own object. He says:

(This task of self—transformation, led by Seneca, Plutarch and Epictetus) has no other end or outcome than to settle into oneself, to «take up residence in oneself» and to remain there. The final objective of the conversion to oneself is to establish a certain number of relations with oneself. These relations are sometimes conceived on the juridico—political model: to be sovereign over oneself, to exert a perfect mastery over oneself, to be completely «self—possessed»...<sup>35</sup>

While in *Alcibiades* the care of the self had initially a pedagogic purpose, i.e., as a training, a process of self—formation, in adulthood the task is somehow transformed. Foucault says that: first, it comes up as a critical function, i.e., «the practice of the self must enable one to get rid of all the bad habits, all the false opinions that one can get from the crowd or from bad teachers, but also from parents and associates. To “unlearn” is one of the important tasks of self—cultivation».<sup>36</sup>

This merges in a second function, that of struggle : «The individual must be given the weapons and the courage that will enable him to fight all his life». (idem) And finally, it has a third function, which is curative or therapeutic. One must remember that the original purpose of philosophy was the cure of the soul,

<sup>34</sup> Foucault puts it in a slightly different manner: «... through the putting in place, and the transformations in our culture, of relations with oneself”, with their technical armature and their knowledge effects. And in this way one could take up the question of governmentality from a different angle: the government of the self by oneself in its articulation with relations with others (such as one finds in pedagogy, behavior counseling, spiritual direction, the prescription of models for living, and so on) » (*Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth*, 88)

<sup>35</sup> *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth*, 96.

<sup>36</sup> *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth*, 97.

which means that philosophy and medicine were part of the same coin<sup>37</sup>. This leads us to the second part of our task, understanding *how* this care happens.

This project of (self) transformation is not made by the isolated self. It requires an—other, either a master, a teacher or a guide. This means that the task self—imposed is not actually self—imposed, it is a reflection of one's environment and it can only happen within a large scope of social relations where one is embedded. This social horizon originates different kinds of relationships: some, are strictly pedagogical, i.e., they have a purpose of educating in the art of self—cultivation (such as Epictetus), others, exist with the purpose of counseling; still others, like family relations or protection or even friendship, aim at guiding one's soul. As Foucault rightly acknowledges, there is no contemporary translation to the experience and ancient concept of friendship or love<sup>38</sup>. This becomes even clearer if one looks at Aristotle's description of friendship in *Nicomachean Ethics*. He says that the cultivation of the self imply a set of practices designated by the term *askesis*. The purpose of *askesis* is not to develop every single move or reaction, but instead to «learn only what will enable us to bear up against events that may occur; we must learn not to let ourselves be thrown by them, and not to let ourselves be overwhelmed by the emotions that may give rise to in ourselves». (Idem) What is that will enable us to be prepared for circumstances? *Logoi*, rational and true discourses. These are what allows one to face reality. What does this mean?

Firstly, it means that we need true discourses that account for the nature of the things we are in touch with, in the world. Second, these true discourses are triggered once a situation arises; they are like a *pharmacon*, i.e., a medicine that helps us deal with the contingencies of existence. This medicine is provided by the texts and teachings one received and was capable of interiorizing and appropriating.<sup>39</sup> What are the techniques that allow these appropriations? Initially, the technique of listening. Knowing how to listen when the master speaks (for example, Socrates); it has to do with the posture, to being attentive,

<sup>37</sup> This aspect is also reinforced throughout Pierre Hadot's works. He says that philosophy is a therapeutic of passions and each school has its own therapeutic method. The goal is to transform individuals — in how they see and perceive the world as well as how they perceive themselves. (*Philosophy as way of life*,.83)

<sup>38</sup> *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth*, 99.

<sup>39</sup> Foucault says: «In a practice such as this, one does not rediscover a truth hidden deep within oneself through an impulse of recollection; one internalizes accepted texts through a more and more thorough appropriation» (*Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth*,101)

to being focused on what is being said. As Hadot points out, attention (*prosoche*) is a fundamentally spiritual attitude:

It is a continuous vigilance and presence of mind, self consciousness which never sleeps, and a constant tension of the spirit. Thanks to this attitude, the philosopher is fully aware of what he does at each instant, and he wills his actions fully. Thanks to his spiritual vigilance, the Stoic always has at hand (*procheiron*) the fundamental rule of life: that is, the distinction between what depends on us and what does not.<sup>40</sup>

Secondly, the technique of writing, i.e., taking personal notes, reflections, *hupomnemata*. Thirdly, the technique of self—reflection, in the sense of working one's memory. The purpose of these techniques is to consolidate the relationship between truth and subject. One must be prepared for the future's ills<sup>41</sup>. In order to enlighten this, Foucault uses Seneca's example—he imagined the worst possible thing it could happen and take the worst as always certain. Seneca imagined a fire that destroyed the town of Lyons. The purpose is not to suffer beforehand, but instead to «neutralize the future and the evil».<sup>42</sup> At the same time, it also aims at testing «the individual's independence relative to the external world».(idem) By doing this one gains control of «representations», and articulates theory and practices. A good example concerns the question of death. Epictetus tells his students to imagine that someone's son is dead. If it is beyond our power, it cannot be an evil. A meditation on death is simultaneously a training for death. In Seneca as well it becomes clear that:

What accounts for the particular value of the death meditation is not just the fact that it anticipates what is generally held to be the greatest misfortune; it is just that it enables one to convince oneself that death is not an evil; it offers the possibility of looking back, in advance as it were, on one's life. By thinking of oneself as being

<sup>40</sup> *Philosophy as way of life*, 85.

<sup>41</sup> Hadot says: «The exercise of meditation allows us to be ready at the moment when an unexpected — and perhaps dramatic — circumstance occurs. In the exercise called *praemeditatio malorum*, we are to represent to ourselves poverty, suffering, and death. We must confront life's difficulties face to face, remembering that they are not evils, since they do not depend on us. This is why we must engrave striking maxims in our memory, so that, when the time comes, they can help us accept such events, which are, after all, part of the course of nature; we will thus have these maxims and sentences "at hand." What we need are persuasive formulae or arguments (*epilogismoï*), which we can repeat to ourselves in difficult circumstances, so as to check movements of fear, anger, or sadness ».(Idem)

<sup>42</sup> *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth*, 103

about to die, one can judge each action that one is performing in terms of its own value.<sup>43</sup>

The question of death is an important one, because it represents the nodal point where the meaning of life and that which lives appears more vividly. Indeed, one could see death as the natural development and unfolding of life, of *bios*. But how should death be approached? As an end, as a necessity, as a liberation? Curiously, while in this previously mentioned context death appears as a reference according to which one may value life, in another course, *Courage to Truth*, Foucault rectifies an also common interpretation of the time where death would ultimately be seen as a liberation from a natural, biological condition, limitative by its own terms. However, against this general background, commenting a intriguing passage of *Fédon*, retakes Dumézil's interpretation that for Plato, and Socrates, life—*bios*—was not a problem to solve, a limitation, but instead, it was a condition for one's development and individual progress as a good, virtuous person. Here, we observe the recovery of the idea of a practice and discipline that is applied simultaneously to the body as well as to the soul and that becomes visible in the maxims of caring for oneself and caring for others.<sup>44</sup> Care is unveiled as a fundamental ontological experience of *being in the world*. Care is a primary condition for the exercise of a power (acting upon others) as well as for one's awareness of the constitution of one's own subjectivity. In order to fulfill one's purpose one must care for oneself; however, as mentioned in the previous section, it is worth strengthening that the several techniques of care vary according to one's community or school, i.e., some value more the dietetics exercises; others value more the meditation on death as technique that allows the true recognition (and constitution) of the value and purpose of one's life (like Seneca), still others engage in a type of care for one's soul with study and practice (as Socrates), which is a *conditio sine qua non* to care for others. It is not my intention to account for the similarities and differences between these several modes of conceiving and practicing *care*; instead, I want to pay attention to some aspects exemplified by Socrates that find resonance in other schools, and that reveal the abyss between the ancient models of care and the contemporary ones.

Indeed, this experience of care, as primary ontological condition that opens up this philosophical activity as it is exemplified by Socrates collides in many senses with the ways in which we conceive of Philosophy as discipline today. It is particularly revealing the ways in which the two models (ancient and

<sup>43</sup> *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth*, 105.

<sup>44</sup> See second hour of class of February 15, 1984.

contemporary) conceive truth as well as how truth and subjectivity are related and how (or if) they mutually constitute each other. In the beginning of *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, Foucault argues that one can identify a break between spirituality and philosophy with the «cartesian moment». Spirituality «postulates that the truth is never given to the subject by right»<sup>45</sup>, i.e., the subject does not have access to truth through a mere act of knowing. Truth is presented to the subject only after the subject has transformed itself into something other, i.e., it requires a self—transformation, «for, as he is, the subject is not capable of truth». (idem) Under this light, truth manifests itself in the process of *conversion* of one's subjectivity, either through *eros*, or through *askesis*. Consequently, truth produces certain effects on the subject, a «tranquility of the soul». Descartes, on the other hand, epitomises a process where truth is fully disconnected from spirituality; instead, «it is assumed that what gives access to the truth, the condition for the subject's access to the truth, is knowledge and knowledge alone».<sup>46</sup>

Hannah Arendt offers a complementary perspective on this topic. In *The Human Condition* she argues that Modernity (understood as the advent of scientific revolutions), shifted to a logic where truth became progressively equated to truthfulness, and reality become replaced by reliability<sup>47</sup>. The cartesian *cogito*, equated with *doubt*, assumes the central place from which philosophy is redefined.<sup>48</sup> From Modernity onwards, truth requires verification, therefore it acquires a provisional status; we observe the consolidation of a new historical *a priori* where the concept of progress frames our collective imaginary, which Arendt also calls as a moment of loss of faith.

How did this shift from spirituality to certainty affect us until today? What was the price we had to pay, in terms of constitution of subjectivities as well as collective imagination, by shifting our conceptualisation and practices of care from a paradigm where truth was not only central but also the regulative ideal for

<sup>45</sup> Michel Foucault, *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, (2005), 15

<sup>46</sup> Foucault, *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 17.

<sup>47</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (2020) 346

<sup>48</sup> «Whatever the state of reality and truth as it is given to the senses and reason, no one can doubt his doubt and be uncertain as to whether he doubts or not». The famous *ergo sum* (“ergo sum” (“*ergo cogito*, therefore I am”)) does not rule out some self—certainty of thought as, if that were so, thought would have acquired a new thought, and a new meaning for man — , but it was a simple generalization of a *dubito ergo sum*. In other words, from the mere logical certainty that when I doubt something I remain conscious of a process of doubting in my consciousness, Descartes concluded that these processes that go on in man's mind are endowed with certainty of their own and that they can be the object of investigation in the introspection».(Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (2020) 346—347).

self—transformation to a paradigm where truth is postulated as an outsider to which one has access by an act of knowing, i.e., by the correct use of rational faculties?

#### § 4. Concluding Remarks

A return to the Greeks, via Foucault's insights, helps us to put into perspective our concepts and practices of care, specially in what concerns the relationship between knowledge and care of oneself and of others. Clearly, we came a long way from Antiquity's perception of oneself as human, in its biological and spiritual dimension. The shift brought by Descartes, under Foucault's account, which, in my perspective, became exacerbated in idealist philosophy, namely, Kant and Hegel, partially explains the need in the XIX century, to retrieve the self as source of value. One can read the movement of Romanticism as this conscious attempt to ground the ethical foundation in the subject as such, individual, private, and not in the universal criteria established by reason. Let us recall the symbolic role of Thoreau in shifting our attention from external laws to internal consciousness, introducing what would become one of the central political concepts of the XX century, namely, civil disobedience, but also Nietzsche who radically criticised the limits of the project of modernity and democracy, even if he was still committed to this project in the sense of human emancipation.<sup>49</sup>

The shifts brought the XX and specially the XXI century, namely, the political shifts of democratisation in large scale in the West, and the moral shifts in resigning oneself to the total impossibility of proving the existence of a moral intuition in human beings, led to a scenario where little by little, the experience, the conceptualisation as well as the role of care became detached from any reference to truth, to values or even to spirituality (in the ancient sense). While it is not my place here to offer an account of these displacements of central axes of thought, practice and political imagination, this article had the goal of providing a larger framework of the experience of care, necessary to situate ourselves and to question what kind of ethics is possible today and what role care plays in it.

<sup>49</sup> See Thoreau, (1849). *On the Duty of Civil disobedience*. See also Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*.(2007)

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### The paradigm of the Greeks — A Foucaultian interpretation of care

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Following *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, a course Foucault gave at Collège de France in 1982, the goal of this paper is to clarify the understanding of the care of the self in late Antiquity. In order to do so, the paper is divided in two sections: In the first section, I explore the elements advanced by the *Apology of Socrates* and Foucault's interpretation, namely, the relationship between truth, care of the self, care of others, techniques of the self, morals and politics. In the second section, I look for a deeper characterization of the care, as primary ontological condition that opens up to a philosophical activity that, in many senses, collides with the ways in which we conceive of Philosophy as discipline today. I conclude by showing why Foucault's return to the ancients is still relevant today, since through his lenses one arrives at a better place in order to imagine and delineate new techniques of the self.

**Keywords:** Care · Courage · Democracy · Foucault · Truth.

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