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Truth, Responsibility and the Ordinary in Ancient and Modern Perfectionism

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> "What I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think. This rule, equally arduous in actual and in intellectual life, may serve for the whole distinction between greatness and meanness."
>
> R. W. Emerson, *Self-Reliance*

I. Ancient Perfectionism

"All That Concerns Me" is My Everyday Life

1   My central argument in this paper will be that moral perfectionism cannot be understood in its radical philosophical, ethical and political dimensions unless we trace its tradition back to the ancient Greek conception of philosophy as a way of life. Hence, to begin, I will argue that the Emersonian maxim quoted above, "what I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think,"[1] far from being simply a Romantic, self-centered claim of the uniqueness and value of the individual, constitutes on the contrary the reactivation of a more ancient principle, which resides at the very basis of the Western philosophical tradition. Ancient philosophy is in fact entirely traversed by the imperative of separating carefully what *does* concern us, because it is in our power, from what does *not*, precisely because it is not in our power. It is the well-known ancient struggle of man against the unpredictability of Fate *(Tyche)*, which takes the form of a series of typical couples of opposites – soul *versus* body, inward goods *versus* outward goods, knowledge *versus* opinion, wise man *versus* common man, etc. The purpose of these pairs of opposites is clear: defining, within the framework of human life, a space that is separate from the dominance of Fate, in which man can consequently find his 'truth' (what is *essential* to him), his autonomy and his freedom – in a word, the place of human happiness. Ancient

philosophy, then, is a matter of what *matters*, a matter of knowing what matters for me and being able to construct my conduct and life on this basis.

2   This fundamental feature of ancient philosophy is particularly evident in Stoic philosophy, founded – as it is well known – on a preliminary distinction between what is in our power and what is not. A *theoretical* distinction that the Stoics translate immediately into a *practical* rule: what matters for us, because it is in our power, is only moral good or evil – that is, *doing* the (moral) good and *avoiding to do* the (moral) evil. Everything else, strictly speaking, does not matter for us (because it is not in our power), and so it must be considered *indifferent*. The opening chapter of the *Manual* of Epictetus is very explicit on this:

> Of things, some are in our power, and others are not. In our power are: discernment, impulse to act, desire, aversion and, in a word, whatever are our own acts. Not in our power are the body, property, reputation, public offices and, in a word, whatever are not our own acts. And the things in our power are by nature free, not subject to restraint, nor hindrance; but the things not in our power are weak, slavish, subject to restraint, in the control of others. Remember then that if you think the things which are by nature slavish to be free, and the things which are in the power of others to be your own, you will be hindered in your action, you will lament, you will be disturbed, you will blame both gods and men. On the contrary, if you think that only which is your own to be your own, and if you think that what is another's, as it really is, belongs to another, no man will ever compel you, no man will hinder you, you will never blame anyone, you will accuse no one, you will do nothing against your will, no one will harm you, you will have no enemy – for you will not suffer any harm.[2]

3   Manifestly, it is not just a matter of theoretical knowledge. On the contrary, Stoic philosophy incites men to learn and memorize a set of essential principles, which aim to govern in detail the *practice* of their everyday life. Therefore, these rational principles of behaviour do not have to remain at the level of *logos*, of pure discourse, but rather (to use Michel Foucault's words) they have to be "subjectivated" through a series of specific "ascetic techniques,"[3] in order to make them coincide with the *ethos* of the subject – that is, in order to orient his practical conduct.[4] Hence, following Pierre Hadot, we shall conceive ancient philosophy essentially as a choice and a way of life, rather than a theoretical discourse. Or better, in ancient philosophy, theoretical discourse is never considered an end in itself, but it is always clearly and decidedly put in the service of practice, i.e. of a certain way of living and being.[5] Ancient philosophy is "an exercise of the thought, will, and the totality of one's being," it is "a method of spiritual progress," which demands "a radical conversion and transformation of the individual's way of being." Its goal is the achievement of a definite *existential* state: wisdom.[6] Following these suggestions, in the first lecture of *L'herméneutique du sujet*, Foucault defines 'spirituality' (as opposed to 'philosophy') as "the search, practice and experience through which the subject carries out the necessary transformations on himself in order to have access to the truth"[7] or, as he says in an later interview, to have access to a certain *mode of being*.[8] Hence, Foucault speaks of 'spirituality' when it is the life of man – not in its biological sense *(zoé)*, but rather in its ethical, political and social sense *(bios)* – that becomes the main object of his care *(epimeleia)*, as well as the real stake *(enjeu)* of his work of *transformation* and *transfiguration* practiced on himself.

4   This is why the ancient philosopher is someone who, despite what other people think and do (and ergo, despite the risk of being considered odd), *does not miss* the importance of his everyday life. On the contrary, he cares for his life – for every single, low and apparently

meaningless detail of it – because his life is precisely what concerns him, what *matters* for him, what deserves all his *attention* and ethical work. As Emerson says, the (arduous) application of this distinction between what concerns me and what the people think allows us to discriminate "between greatness and meanness," that is, between philosophers – who take seriously the fundamental question of ancient ethics, "How ought I to live?"[9] – and other people, who fail to notice the importance and practical consequences of such a question. This rule, according to Emerson, is so arduous to apply because "it is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion," as it is easy "in solitude to live after our own"; but "the great man" is only "he who *in the midst of the crowd* keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude"[10] – a solitude that, consequently, "must not be mechanical, but spiritual, that is, must be elevation."[11] In other words, and to bring this rule to its utmost consequences: since the social virtue most requested is conformity, "whoso would be a man, must be a nonconformist."[12] Which is also the coherent conclusion of ancient philosophy understood as 'spirituality' (i.e. a way of life), as Foucault clearly shows in his 1984 lectures at the Collège de France, dedicated to the figure of Socrates and, later, to ancient Cynicism.

On the (Perfectionist) Relation Between Words and Deeds

5   Plato's *Laches* is the fundamental text to consider if we want to understand how Socrates' philosophical discourse, his practice of truth-telling *(parrhesia)*, can be combined with his effort to care for the meanest details of his everyday life. In fact, the "style of life," the "form that we give to life," constitute the essential object of Socratic *parrhesia*:[13] as Nicias explains, in the *Laches*, Socrates' interlocutor is always "led by the Socratic *logos* into 'giving an account' *(didonai logon)* of 'himself, of the manner in which he now spends his days, and of the kind of life he has lived hitherto'."[14] 'Giving an account' of ourselves means, then, 'giving an account' of the way we live and, in order to do it, "submitting" our life "to a touchstone, to a test *(épreuve)* which enables us to distinguish the good we have done from the evil we have done, in the course of our existence."[15] In this way, it is possible to examine and determine the true nature of the relation between words *(logoi)* and life *(bios)*, since Socrates asks his interlocutor to demonstrate precisely whether he is able to show the harmony between the rational discourse he uses and the way in which he lives. Here, the touchstone *(basanos)* to test such a harmony, i.e. "the degree of accord between a person's life and its principle of intelligibility,"[16] is not constituted by the *homologia* understood as agreement between the discourses *(logoi)* of two or more interlocutors – as in the *Gorgias*.[17] The *basanos* is rather represented by Socrates himself, who manifests through his way of living a perfectly harmonic relation, a perfect *homologia* , between his words and his deeds:

> Socrates is able to use rational, ethically valuable, fine, and beautiful discourse; but unlike the sophist, he can use *parrhesia* and speak freely because what he says accords exactly with what he thinks, and what he thinks accords exactly with what he does.[18]

6   We are confronted, here, with a *twofold* principle of harmony: Socrates is fully responsible for his words and his deeds, because *both* accord perfectly with what he thinks. Hence, the way of life emerges in Socratic *parrhesia* as something we have to take care of, but which we have to submit, during the entire course of our existence, to a test, to a touch-stone that enables us to discriminate between good and evil. Indeed, the principle of *homologia* exposed in the *Laches* is based on the "harmony," on the "symphony"[19] – established

within the (practical) framework of a style of life – between *logos* and *ethos*, *logos* and *bios.* This harmony constitutes also the sign, the mark that makes Socrates' *parrhesia* possible, allowing him to speak frankly and to *call into question* the existence, the way of life of his fellow citizens – that is to say: this harmony between *logos* and *ethos* has a value which is, at the same time, ethical and political. It is not by chance that, during an interview at Berkeley, Foucault claims that what interests him, what *matters* for him, is "politics as an ethics" – as an *ethos*, a way of life.

> I do not conclude from this that one may say just anything within the order of theory, but, on the contrary, that a demanding, prudent, 'experimental' attitude is necessary; at every moment, step by step, one must confront what one is thinking and saying with what one is doing, with what one is. [...] The key to the personal politic attitude of a philosopher is not to be sought in his ideas, as if it could be deduced from them, but rather in his philosophy-as-life, in his philosophical life, his *ethos*.[20]

7 To sum up, the ancient paradigm of (ethical and political) responsibility consists in the endless work of oneself on oneself, in the endless task of forging a harmonic relation between the words we ordinarily use and our everyday life – and Socrates is the key figure that embodies this paradigm. In particular, according to Foucault, the *Laches* is to be considered the starting point of "a whole philosophical practice and activity, and Cynicism is obviously the main example of it."[21] However, as I have already shown elsewhere,[22] the Cynic philosopher radicalizes the Socratic relation between *logos* and *bios*, and builds up his life in the form of a paradoxical transfiguration of the traditional philosophical life – that is, in the form of a "life other" *(vie autre)*, which continuously *calls into question* the lives of others, using the weapon of a scandalous *ethos*, instead of a *parrhesiastic* discourse.[23] Thus, with Cynicism the 'nonconformist side' of the Socratic principle of harmony breaks out, and the philosophical life fully becomes a "manifestation of the truth."[24] This manifestation of the truth is not abstract, it does not take place in the realm of pure theory, but rather within the everyday life of the Cynic philosopher, through his ordinary choices and the way he dresses and speaks:

> To live philosophically is to show the truth through the *ethos* (the way one lives), the way one reacts (to a situation, a scene, when confronted with a particular situation), and obviously the doctrine one teaches; it is to show the truth in all these aspects and through these vehicles (*ethos* of the scene, *kairos* of the situation, and doctrine).[25]

8 However, in order to transfigure his life into such a manifestation of the truth *(alèthurgie)*, in order to denounce and attack the common life of conformity and transform it into a "true life" *(vraie vie)*, the Cynic philosopher has to undertake an endless ethical practice on himself, on his words and deeds, on every single detail of his way of life. Hence, the Cynic manifestation of the truth is nothing more – but nothing less! – than a courageous, scandalous and public manifestation of his (extra)ordinary way of life. Through this ethical work, the Cynic philosopher learns how to assume his ordinary gestures and words, even the smallest and apparently meaningless ones, as the real object of his attention and care. In this way, he builds up his everyday life as a touchstone for the lives of others, who claim the same theoretical principles *(logoi)*, but do not allow them to forge (and be embodied in) their very *ethos.*

> [Cynicism] transforms the form of existence in an essential condition of truth-telling. It transforms the form of existence in the reducing practice *(pratique réductrice)* which will leave room for truth-telling. It finally transforms the form of

existence in a way of showing, in the gestures, in the body, in the way of dressing, in the way of behaving *(se conduire)* and living, truth itself.[26]

9   Thus, with Cynicism, we really come across the paradigm of a radical form of *resistance*. The Cynic philosopher, in fact, does not limit himself to the valorisation of his everyday life and the (consequent) reversal of common values; on the contrary, he builds up his everyday life as a "militant" practice of opposition to the existing established power. He transfigures the everyday of his life, he makes it the site of perpetual risk (the risk of truth-telling, or truth-*living*) and the core of his radical criticism of every form of social conformity. As Foucault says baldly, Cynic (true) life is a form of "explicit, voluntary and constant aggression towards humanity in general," aiming "to change it," to change its "moral attitude (its *ethos*)" but, at the same time, to change also "its habits, its customs, its ways of living."[27] It is an aggression towards society (and world) as they are, in order to give rise to a society (and a world) "other." Cynicism is then the matrix of a form of life that does not aim merely "to show what the world is in its truth," but rather "to show that the world will not reach its truth, will not transfigure and become other to attain what it is in its truth, unless through a change, a complete alteration – that is, the change and complete alteration in the relation of oneself with oneself."[28]

10   Indeed, as Foucault claims in *La vie des hommes infâmes*,[29] if we must consider our everyday life *important*, it is precisely because it constitutes the main field of struggle – always uncertain and unsteady – between "power relations" and "practices of resistance." In other words, ancient perfectionism shows us something still relevant: our everyday life *matters* not only in an ethical, but also in a political sense, and the work of oneself on oneself, applied even to the meanest details of the ordinary dimension of our words and deeds, really forms the fundamental core of every social and political practice of resistance that aims to be effective.

'Truth' as an Event and a Practice

11   Before considering modern perfectionism, however, we might ask what *kind* of truth we are facing, when we consider ancient philosophy in its perfectionist task of ethical self-transformation and radical struggle against conformity. According to Foucault, in fact, it is possible to identify a significant *rupture* that took place between ancient and modern conceptions of truth:

> It would be interesting to compare Greek *parrhesia* with the modern (Cartesian) conception of evidence. For since Descartes, the coincidence between belief and truth is obtained in a certain (mental) evidential experience. For the Greeks, however, the coincidence between belief and truth does not take place in a (mental) experience, but in a *verbal activity*, namely, *parrhesia*.[30]

12   Since the epistemological model of *evidence* plays a fundamental (and founding) role within the framework of modern philosophical inquiry, these words mean also that, according to Foucault, there is a *discontinuity* between ancient and modern conceptions of philosophy itself. Stanley Cavell expresses almost the same idea when he writes that "after a millennium or so in which philosophy, as established in Greece, carried on the idea of philosophy as a way of life, constituted in view of the (perfectionist) task of caring for the self," there has been "another millennium or so in which philosophy has seemed prepared to discard this piece of its mission."[31] We can find a very similar historical description also in the works of Hadot, in particular where he marks the difference between "philosophical discourse" and "philosophy." According to him, the essential

turning point of this history is represented by Medieval Scholasticism and by the inclusion of philosophy in the *cursus studiorum* of the (recently born) universities: as a result of such an inclusion, in fact, philosophy becomes an institutional discipline to be taught, locked-up in the realm of theoretical abstraction, without any connection with what it has been in the ancient world – namely, a concrete attitude, an actual choice of existence, an ascetic work of self-transformation, a way of seeing the world and acting in it.[32] To use (again) a Foucauldian vocabulary, after Scholasticism and the "Cartesian moment," philosophy – which, in the ancient world, had always been linked with the task of 'spirituality' – accepted and adopted the epistemological structure of science, claiming that the subject can have access to truth through a simple act of knowledge, which no longer has to do with his mode of being.[33] Thus, the epistemological truth became *the* model for philosophical truth-telling, which in turn became a truthtelling on science – "telling the truth of truth" *(dire-vrai du vrai)* – more and more detached from ordinary language and everyday life, and from the ethical techniques that ancient philosophers used to shape (and transfigure) them.[34]

13   Indeed, in ancient world, truth was closer to a model that Foucault calls "truth-event," as opposed precisely to "truth-demonstration" – that is, to the modern epistemological conception of truth. Whereas the latter is "ubiquitous" (the question of truth is a question it is *always* possible to pose, and in relation to *everything*) and "universally accessible" (because, in principle, "no one is exclusively qualified" and no one is *a priori* disqualified "to state the truth"),[35] the former is a "dispersed, discontinuous, interrupted truth which will only speak or appear from time to time, where it wishes to, in certain places" – a truth which has "its favorable moments, its propitious places, its privileged agents and bearers." In other words, it is a truth that *emerges* as an "event."[36]

> We have, then, two series in the Western history of truth. The series of constant, constituted, demonstrated, discovered truth, and then a different series of the truth which does not belong to the order of what is, but to the order of what happens, a truth, therefore, which is not given in the form of discovery, but in the form of the event.[37]

14   As we have seen, according to Foucault, the ancient conception of truth cannot be associated with any particular mental state of the subject – and, therefore, it is not a truth- demonstration. It is rather conceived as an event, emerging from the agreement among the *logoi* of different interlocutors (Plato's *Gorgias*), or from the harmony established and *concretely* showed, by an individual, between his *logos* and his *ethos* (Socratic *parrhesia*), or – directly and paradoxically – from the way of life itself (Cynicism). Anyhow, if we consider ancient philosophy in the light of our perfectionist work on ourselves and our ordinary words and life, it becomes manifest that, in such a framework, truth is not an epistemological concept based on the modern criterion of evidence, but an ethical *practice* which takes place in the course of human experience. Indeed, in ancient Greece, to be a philosopher means to give *importance* to everyday life and to pay *attention* to the details of common language and behaviour, in order to actively transform oneself and one's relationship to others and to the world. Moreover, such an ethico-political transformation of the self marks a sharp distinction between philosophical life and the lives of other people, since it can be achieved only through a series of specific techniques that we may call 'techniques of the ordinary' – in order to emphasize that they take *ordinary* language and life of man as the essential object of their philosophical gaze and work of transfiguration.[38]

15   As we have already observed, this way of conceiving truth and practicing philosophy has been somehow put aside in modern times. Nevertheless, in what follows I will argue that the attention to the ordinary and to truth as a practice has *survived* in the form of a hidden tradition, and it has been *renewed* during the last two centuries, primarily but not exclusively thanks to the transcendental American philosophy of Emerson and Thoreau.

II. Modern Perfectionism

The Struggle against Conformity

16   The fundamental question of ancient ethics significantly re-emerges at the beginning of Emerson's essay *Fate*, and thus it attests a (renewed) perfectionist will *not to miss* the importance of the practical question of our way of life:

> To me [...] the question of the times resolved itself into a practical question of the conduct of life. How shall I live?[39]

17   Indeed, for modern (as for ancient) perfectionism, each moral choice concerns the *kind of life* we are willing to live and the meaning and value we are ready to attribute to it. Besides, this is not the sole element of continuity: the theme of criticism, of the struggle against social customs and conformity, which is at the core of ancient (Socratic and Cynic) perfectionism, also plays a central role within the framework of modern perfectionism. In fact, as Emerson shows in *Self-Reliance*, conformity is still perceived as one of the main obstacles along the path of perfectionism, precisely since it prevents the individual to be self-reliant and to undertake the quest for his better or higher self. According to Emerson,

> [s]ociety is a joint-stock company, in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater. The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion.[40]
> This is why, as already quoted, whoso would be a man, must be a *nonconformist* – that is, he must believe his own thought and, above all, he must believe that what is true for him in his *private* heart is true *for all men*.[41]
> Here, in this demanding claim that our own private 'voice,' if it is expressed on the basis of self-reliance, should become a public (and even a universal) voice, it is possible to find the eminently *political* dimension of Emersonian perfectionism.[42]
> To one in the state Emerson names self-reliance, every word urged from one in the state of conformity causes chagrin, violates the expression of our nature by pressing upon us an empty voice, hence would deprive us of participation in the conversation of justice.[43]

18   Likewise, Emerson claims that our "genuine" action – the action undertaken on the basis of self-reliance – will explain itself and our other genuine actions, but that, on the contrary, our conformity "explains nothing."[44] Hence, our genuine *action* is supposed to operate a transition from the realm of private intelligibility to a universal dimension. We are not so far from Socratic *parrhesia*, which courageously claims its truth by relying on the harmony established between Socrates' thoughts and his words and deeds. In Socrates too the main question is the question of *expression*, of finding our voice in the public, political conversation – not the conversation of Athens' democratic assembly of citizens, but the *ordinary*, *everyday* conversation of justice, which represents the true political dimension of the *poli*.[45] Socratic *parrhesia*, as we have seen, aims to criticize conformity and to *awaken* the interlocutor to the necessity of finding his personal (non-mimetic) voice within democratic conversation, of caring for himself and of practicing

virtue – as a result of an actual exercise of attention towards ordinary language and everyday life. According to Cavell, the aim of *Self-Reliance* is the same: Emerson's writing constitutes an *analogon* of Socrates' truth-telling, since it aspires to fight against "society's demand for conformity," through the expression of a person's thought as "the imperative to an incessant conversion or refiguration of society's incessant demands for his consent – his conforming himself – to its doings." This is why Emerson's writing too has to be "the object of aversion to society's consciousness."[46] Or better, on the one hand, it must be the outset of an ethical conversion and transformation, *courageously*[47] operated on ourselves and our life, since "we must become averse to this conformity, which means convert away from it, which means transform our conformity, as if we are to be born (again)."[48] On the other, it must function as the propellant for a real *revolution*, for a transfiguration of others, of society and the entire world, which is very close to Cynic revolution (as Foucault describes it):

> It is easy to see that a greater self-reliance must work *a revolution in all the offices and relations of men*; in their religion; in their education; in their pursuits; their modes of living; their association; in their property; in their speculative views.[49]

19   Emerson's self-reliance is an attitude all at once ethical *and* political, which does not consist in the (unlikely) discovery of 'the self' as the ultimate place for us to rest and feel safe, but rather in the *creation* of a *new relation* of ourselves to ourselves, the others and the entire world. This attitude is exercised through the attention to the words of our ordinary life,[50] through the importance we must recognize in them and, consequently, through a "self-transformation" that aims to attain "the further or higher self of each" (an infinite, never concluded task).[51] At the same time, this attitude is traversed by the contrast between imitation (conformity) and the exercise of individuality. "Insist on yourself; never imitate"[52] is, indeed, the essential corollary of Emersonian self-reliance. This is why it is perhaps possible to consider the work of John Stuart Mill as a part of the modern *perfectionist* tradition – and I am thinking especially of *On Liberty*'s third chapter, centered, as it is well known, on individuality, originality and even eccentricity as fundamental ingredients of human happiness. In fact, according to Mill, "unity of opinion, unless resulting from the fullest and freest comparison of opposite opinion, is not desirable, and diversity not an evil, but a good." This diversity must function not only at the level of opinions, but also and above all in relation to our everyday life:

> As it is useful that while mankind are imperfect there should be different opinions, so it is that there should be *different experiments of living*; that free scope should be given to *varieties of character*, short of injury to others; and that the worth of *different modes of life* should be proved practically, when anyone thinks fit to try them.[53]

20   For, where the rule of conduct is not the person's own character, but social traditions or customs, "there is wanting one of the principal ingredients of human happiness, and quite the chief ingredient of individual and social progress." Thus, against the "yoke" of conformity, we must always encourage the free development of individuality, and a wider exercise of spontaneity and originality: in a society where a very limited (and fixed) set of accepted models of life exists, indeed, people "should do absolutely nothing but copy one another" – and, according to Mill (and to Emerson), "he who lets the world, or his own portion of it, choose his plan of life for him has no need of any other faculty than the ape-like one of imitation." On the contrary, "he who chooses his plan for himself employs all his faculties": he beautifies and perfects himself, since human nature "is not a machine to be built after a model, and set to do exactly the work prescribed to it, but a tree, which

requires to grow and develop itself on all sides, according to the tendency of the inward forces which make it a living thing."[54] Consequently, there is no reason that "all human existence should be constructed on some one or some small number of patterns," but rather – Mill argues – "different people should be allowed to lead different lives," since a person's *own* mode of laying out his existence is the best, "not because it is the best in itself, but because it is his own mode."[55] Therefore, in a sense, "the mere example of non-conformity, the mere refusal to bend the knee to custom, is itself a service," also if it does not propose a better way of living, but merely a different one.

21   Precisely because the tyranny of opinion is such as to make eccentricity a reproach, it is desirable, in order to break through that tyranny, that people should be eccentric. Eccentricity has always abounded when and where strength of character has abounded; and the amount of eccentricity in a society has generally been proportional to the amount of genius, mental vigour, and moral courage it contained. That so few now *dare to be eccentric* marks the chief danger of the time.[56]

22   Hence, exercising individuality means *daring* to take our way of life itself as the object of a positive transformation, in order to find our voice and engage ourselves in a (perfectionist) effort of self-improvement. Moreover, as in the case of Cynicism, this effort of self-improvement and transformation is not 'individualistic' – if we mean, by this word, 'selfish,' 'narcissistic.' On the contrary, it has essentially to do with other people and with the possibility of building up something like a new "shared" world[57] – since it is the weapon we must use to fight against social conformity, and endlessly call into question the others, their empty words and their lives of quiet desperation. This is why the "philosophical mission" of Mill's writing, as in the case of Emerson's, is precisely "to *awaken* us to the question he poses,"[58] that is to say: it is a *critical* mission, very close to the older Cynic one. Indeed, according to Emerson, the fundamental task of thinking is the reversal of our way of life and the perpetual *struggle* with (and within) the present, characterized by the tension between society "as it stands" and society "as it may become."[59] Such a twofold ethico-political "pattern of disappointment and desire" is considered by Cavell as one of (or perhaps *the*) essential feature of moral perfectionism:

> The very conception of a divided self and a doubled world, providing a perspective of judgement upon the world as it is, measured against the world as it may be, tends to express disappointment with the world as it is, as the scene of human activity and prospects, and perhaps to lodge the demand or desire for a reform or transfiguration of the world.[60]

Exemplarity, Responsibility and the Ordinary

23   This struggle for the ethical transfiguration of oneself, which acquires at once a social and political dimension and which has ancient Cynicism as its (theoretical and practical) matrix, can also be discovered at work in some of the most important European revolutionary movements, or more precisely – as Foucault claims in *Le courage de la vérité* – in modern "militancy" *(militantisme)*, understood as a specific form of life.[61] In particular, the figure of the Spanish anarchist Buenaventura Durruti, among others, can help us to analyse more deeply this close relation between (personal) ethical subjectivation and the emergence of a shared movement of resistance that aims to transform society and the world *concretely*.

24   As it is known, Durruti was one of the protagonists of the Catalan revolt and the conquest of Barcelona; more generally he is considered the real anarchic "hero" of the Spanish civil

war. He was not an intellectual, but a metal-worker who did not write anything, who did not leave (almost) anything material after his death. Therefore, in his (peculiar) biography of Durruti, Hans Magnus Enzensberger states clearly that we are confronted with the task of reconstructing the life of a man "whose patrimony consisted in 'a change of underwear, two guns, a binoculars and a pair of sunglasses'."[62] That is to say, Durruti's life did not express itself in the accumulation of material things, but rather in his *deeds* – and, as a direct consequence, for others, it became 'exemplary.'[63] Indeed, if so many Spanish workers followed and spontaneously obeyed Durruti, this was precisely because he did *construct* and *present* his (ordinary) life in the form of an example – of an exemplary life. As the Italian socialist Carlo Rosselli writes, the revolutionary hero is neither chief nor myth, but rather a man who tries to help the work of social renewal "through the exemplary renewal of himself."[64] It is not by chance, then, that we are assured that Durruti "lived a life absolutely *consonant* with his principles," that he "lived for what he believed" (in fact, "his ideas were not a hobby for him; on the contrary, he wanted to *translate* them into action"), and that we must not look for his "heroism" within the pages of newspapers, but rather "in his *everyday life*."[65] For all these reasons, people considered him as the embodiment of that "faith in a new society" which was deeply rooted in their hearts too[66] – in short, they recognized in him, in his words and life, their own "rejected thoughts."[67]

25   Therefore, through this notion of exemplarity,[68] we can concretely link the perfectionist transformation of ourselves and our everyday life to the struggle aiming to change and transfigure others, society and the entire world. In the construction of his life as an exemplary life, in fact, Durruti did not suggest that the same construction was useless for others, he did not prevent others from *experiencing* such a (personal and always unique) ethical transformation. On the contrary, he emphasized its necessity and *urgency*, its value as a preliminary step for every further perfectionist effort of revolution: the first struggle we have to combat is the struggle *within* ourselves, because "no one has the reason for this revolution if *each of us* has not."[69] Indeed, the function of the exemplary and (extra)ordinary life of Durruti was *to show* (rather than 'to teach') *practically* that nothing is necessary as such, nothing is 'natural' in human society, and that everything is important – every ordinary word and gesture has an ethical and political value. Durruti assumed the responsibility for his words and deeds precisely through the creation of an (already Socratic) harmony between thoughts, words and life[70] – and in this harmony resides, ultimately, his exemplarity. The construction of a shared world (of struggle, of resistance) and the perfectionist transformation of ourselves are then nothing but the two sides of the same coin:

> Huge amounts of money passed by the hands of Durruti, and nevertheless I used to repair his shoe soles with patches, because he did not have enough money to bring them to the cobbler. [...] We used to go to his house, and he was often wearing an apron, to peel the potatoes: his wife was working. [...] The next day, he took his gun and came down in the street, to face a world of social repression.[71]

26   Paying attention to the *everyday* of our words and lives allows us to return to an *ordinary* that is not the place of final rest, of absolute peace, but rather that has to be conceived as a propellant for the perfectionist transformation of ourselves, society and the entire world. Such an attention can produce, evidently, different consequences, and encourage different kinds of conduct – but it is essentially the same attention exercised by Thoreau in refusing to pay his poll taxes to a government that still accepted slavery and was waging war on Mexico. Indeed, in his famous essay on *Civil Disobedience*,[72] Thoreau makes

it plain that his act of resistance is rooted in his capability to pay attention to the details of ordinary life, and in his will not to miss their ethico-political value. In a democracy (it could be said), we can easily use many other *legal* methods to express our dissent and try to change things; but this easiness is only an illusion.[73] We need to *see* that every word we speak and every action we accomplish *compromises* us, and so requires always a *choice* – since, through it, we daily express our consent or dissent to our democratic government. It is not a matter of seeing something hidden, but rather of being able to see what is under our eyes, what is so difficult to perceive precisely because of its plainness:

> We have long known that the role of philosophy is not to discover what is hidden, but to render visible what precisely is visible, which is to say, to make appear what is so close, so immediate, so intimately tied to ourselves that, as a consequence, we do not perceive it.[74]

27   This capability to see what is visible, i.e. to pay attention to it, is not natural, but rather a competence to be acquired through a specific education. Therefore, a work of ethical (re)construction of ourselves and reshaping of our lives turns out to be necessary to meet an ordinary which always precedes us, but can never be *directly* grasped. It is "a *task* to come to see the world as it is."[75] Such a task, such work on ourselves, leaves room for the emergence of the ordinary as an event (as something important for us, something that *matters*) and, consequently, for experience itself – for our possibility of *having* an experience.[76] What is at stake here is the construction of an 'ethics of the ordinary,' which is only the other face of a "politics of the ordinary."[77] Indeed, for Thoreau, it is a question of (political) responsibility: he cannot accept that *his* government acts unjustly, he feels compromised, since in a democracy *each of us* is responsible for each decision of our government – ergo, *each of us* must always keep the possibility to express dissent open and alive.[78]

> [I]n an encounter over justice, there are sides, or positions, and while there may in the moment be nothing to do, and nothing further to say, there is still something to show: say consent or dissent. Responsibility remains a task of responsiveness.[79]

28   Responsibility (and disobedience) remains a task of responsiveness through which Thoreau tries to find his voice – since "finding my voice consists not in finding an agreement with *everybody*, but in making a claim *(revendication)*."[80] But responsibility (and disobedience) is also a matter of way of life. Indeed, as it clearly emerges in his essay, it is not (only) his conscience that Thoreau opposes to his government, but rather – and directly – his life itself. He asks: "*How does it become a man* to behave toward this American government today?" As we can see, such a question concerns essentially *the kind of man* one wants to be, and the kind of man Thoreau wants to be – he claims – *cannot* be "associated" to a government which is "the *slave's* government also."[81] Hence, as a result of this question, which I take to be *the* perfectionist question of *Civil Disobedience*, a renewed and higher ideal of democracy emerges: 'democracy' does not mean to vote, when we have to, for what we think is right, and then leave the task of managing it to the majority. On the contrary, 'democracy' means to *take care* of the right, to be "vitally concerned that that right should prevail," since "even voting *for the right* is *doing* nothing for it."[82] Therefore, "the mission of perfectionism generally, in a world of false (and false calls for) democracy, is the discovery of the possibility of democracy, which to exist has recurrently to be (re)discovered."[83] It is through the touchstone of *this* 'democratic' *way of life* that the actions of our democratic government have to be tested, as Thoreau claims clearly: injustice can be considered a part of "the necessary friction of the machine of government," but "if it is of such a nature that it requires you to be the agent of injustice

to another, then, I say, break the law. Let *your life* be a counter friction to stop the machine. What I have to do is to see, at any rate, that I do not lend myself to the wrong which I condemn."[84]

29 Here again we can see the legacy of the ancient (perfectionist) idea of the harmony to be established between what we say and what we do, between *logos* and *ethos*. In other words, Thoreau is saying that, if it is necessary to find our voice within the democratic discourse and to claim our *personal* voice *publicly*, we must always remember that this voice can never be dissociated from the *practicing* of what we claim within the framework of our everyday life:

> The question of democracy is really the question of voice. I must have a voice in my history, and I must recognize myself in what my society says or shows and therefore, somehow, give it my voice, accept that it speaks in my name. Disobedience is the necessary solution when there is *dissonance*: I do not hear myself any longer, in a discourse that sounds false – an experience that each of us can daily have.[85]

30 The question of democracy, then, is the question of the (harmonic or dissonant) relation between my voice and political discourse. And the perfectionist touchstone of this relation is represented by my capability of assuming the responsibility for *my* voice, which is possible only if I am able to establish a *homologia* between my voice and my everyday life – in order to *transfigure* the latter,[86] and make it the highest *practical* example of the correct *(true)* use of the former. In this way, I will no longer feel the temptation to speak by *quoting* the words of others, hiding behind *imitation*: "Man is timid and apologetic; he dares not say 'I think,' 'I am,' but quotes some saint or sage."[87] Conformity will be overcome only as a result of our ethical work on ourselves, which implies the establishment of a *critical* relation to others and the world (as it is). This is why, according to Cavell, civil disobedience is how Thoreau names the "power to demand the change of the world as a whole."[88]

III. Conclusion

31 I hope to have shown in this paper how modern perfectionism re-*invented* ancient perfectionism, through the re-activation of the imperative to pay attention to our ordinary words and everyday life (and to their harmonic relation), linked to a truth always meant as a practice. Indeed, in modern perfectionism too, truth does not represent the final and absolute goal of human destiny, nor it is placed within the (mental) framework of Cartesian evidence. On the contrary, like in ancient perfectionism, truth emerges from the practical relation we are able to establish between our words and our deeds: it is an *ethical*, rather than an epistemological truth – a truth-event that, to be grasped (if ever such a thing is possible), requires the endless task of the work of oneself on oneself. Hence, ancient and modern perfectionisms advocate the practice of a series of specific ethical techniques, in order not to miss the importance of our *ordinary* words and life.

32 Only within such a framework, I think, is the following claim by Emerson intelligible:

> This conformity makes [most men] *not false in a few particulars*, authors of a few lies, *but false in all particulars. Their every truth is not quite true.* Their two is not the real two, their four not the real four; so that every word they say chagrins us and we know not where to begin to set them right.[89]

33   Both Iris Murdoch and Cora Diamond stress the fundamental role played by the work of *attention* in our moral life, which is not "something that is switched off in between the occurrence of explicit moral choices," but rather "something that goes on continually." What is crucial is precisely "what happens in between such choices," and it is here, at this very level, that we can fully understand the importance of moral attention (and the risk of moral *in*attention), since "I can only choose within the world I can *see*, in the moral sense of 'see' which implies that clear vision is a result of moral imagination and moral effort."[90] When it is a matter of our moral life, to give importance to attention, and to *improvisation*, means to give importance to our capability of *seeing* the details, the particulars,[91] and "to struggle to make sense" of them. Indeed, moral thought does not take place "in a situation with fixed, given possibilities": on the contrary, through the work of attention and improvisation, through "the exercise of creative imagination," a moral agent discovers himself capable of transforming the situation he thought to be *necessary* in an *adventure* of personality.[92]

34   This is precisely what is at stake in (ancient and modern) moral perfectionism. The necessity of acquiring a specific competence, which enables us to see an ordinary always under our eyes, on the one hand, entails the transformation of our perception of things as a result of the exercise of our creative imagination; on the other, it indicates our need for someone who, thanks to *his* creative imagination, is able to *show us* things in a different light – like Socrates in the *Crito* (Diamond), but also like the Cynics, like Thoreau and Durruti, through their practical examples of *ordinary* resistance. In fact, though philosophy tries always *to break* with the ordinary understood as the (illusory) natural attitude of common sense, as the place of habits, prejudices and conformity *par excellence*,[93] such a rupture is never a mere refusal. It rather takes the (paradoxical) form of a *militant acceptance*, since the ordinary is the 'real' of philosophy *only when and if* it is transformed, transfigured by it, by its gaze and its practices.[94] The (perfectionist) philosopher always tries not to miss what *matters*, i.e. the ordinary dimension of his language and life; he tries to become *responsible* for it, assuming it as the real object of his reflection and action – a hard task, as we have seen, always traversed by the ambiguity and the uncanniness of the ordinary and, as a consequence, by the (necessary) menace of skepticism.[95]

35   Thus, the perfectionist philosopher establishes his relation to ordinary language and life as a relation of restlessness and alterity; and through the transformation of himself, of his way of seeing and saying the world, and of his conduct, he constantly aims to use the valorisation of the ordinary as the essential propellant for *a positive transfiguration* of the ordinary itself. This transfiguration takes the form of the creation of a higher self, of a new personal and social intelligibility, and of a world that is new and radically other.[96] It is what Cavell calls "the practice of the ordinary":

> Sharing the intuition that human existence stands in need not of reform but of reformation, of a change that has the structure of a transfiguration, Wittgenstein's insight is that the ordinary has, and alone has, the power to move the ordinary, to leave the human habitat habitable, the same transfigured.[97]

36   This is why moral perfectionism can be conceived and still practiced, today, as an ethics and politics of responsibility, of attention to and care for the ordinary, engaged in an "endless" but fully *human* struggle against skepticism – that is, against the temptation of "empty[ing] out *my* contribution to words, so that language itself, as if beyond me, exclusively takes over the responsibility for meaning."[98] Perfectionism, understood as an

ethicopolitical exercise of transfiguration of oneself, others and the entire world, aims to bring together and harmonize words and life: thus, it incites us to courageously and openly assume the responsibility for our words, in the double sense of meaning *and* doing what we say. It is this twofold challenge – difficult, experimental and always to be renewed – that characterizes "perfectionism's moral urgency" in both its ancient and its modern form:

> In Emerson's way of speaking, "one day" ("Each philosopher [...] has only done, as by a delegate, what one day I can do for myself") always also means today; the life he urgently speaks for is one he forever says is not to be postponed. It is today that you are to take the self on; today that you are to awaken and to consecrate yourself to culture, specifically, to domesticate it gradually, which means bring it home, as part, now, of your everyday life.[99]

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NOTES

1. Emerson (1841: 143).

2. Epictetus (1991: 11) (translation partially revised).

3. Foucault uses this expression to point at the "more or less coordinated set of exercises that are available, recommended and even obligatory, and anyway utilizable by individuals in a moral, philosophical and religious system in order to achieve a definitive spiritual objective," i.e. "a certain transformation, a certain transfiguration of themselves as subjects," (Foucault 1981-82: 398 (416-7)).

4. Cf. (*Ibid.*: 318 (334)). See also Foucault (1984b: 1532).

5. Cf. Hadot (1995: 271 (60)).

6. "La philosophie apparaissait ainsi comme un exercice de la pensée, de la volonté, de tout l'être, pour essayer de parvenir à un état, la sagesse, qui était d'ailleurs presque inaccessible à l'homme. La philosophie était une méthode de progrès spirituel qui exigeait une conversion radicale, une transformation radicale de la manière d'être," (*Ibid.*: 290 (265)).

7. Foucault (1981-82: 16 (15)).

8. Cf. Foucault (1984b: 1541).

9. Annas (1995: 27).

10. Emerson (1841: 143) (emphasis added).

11. *Ibid.*: 154.

12. *Ibid.*: 141.

13. Cf. Foucault (1984a: 134).

14. Foucault (1983a: 96).

15. Foucault (1984a: 134; my translation).

16. Foucault (1983a: 97).

17. Cf. Plato, *Gorgias*, 487E.

18. Foucault (1983a: 101).

19. Cf. Foucault (1984a: 138).

20. "Je n'en conclus pas qu'on peut dire n'importe quoi dans l'ordre de la théorie ; mais, au contraire, qu'il faut avoir une attitude exigeante, prudente, 'expérimentale'; il faut à chaque instant, pas à pas, confronter ce qu'on pense et ce qu'on dit à ce qu'on fait et ce qu'on est. [...] La clef de l'attitude politique personnelle d'un philosophe, ce n'est pas à ses idées qu'il faut la demander, comme si elle pouvait s'en déduire, c'est à sa philosophie, comme vie, c'est à sa vie philosophique, c'est à son *ethos*," (Foucault 1983b: 1404-5 (374-5)).

21. Foucault (1984a: 119; my translation).

22. Cf. Lorenzini (2008: 83-8; 2010b: 475-80).

23. Cf. Foucault (1984a: 226, 247-8).

24. Foucault (1982-83: 315 (343)).

25. "Vivre philosophiquement, c'est faire en sorte – par l'*ethos* (la manière dont on vit), la manière dont on réagit (à telle situation, dans telle ou telle scène, quand on est confronté à telle ou telle situation) et évidemment la doctrine que l'on enseigne – [de] montrer, sous tous ces aspects et par ces trois véhicules (l'*ethos* de la scène, le *kairos* de la situation et puis la doctrine), ce qu'est la vérité," (*Ibid.*: 316 (344)).

26. "[Le cynisme] fait de la forme de l'existence une condition essentielle pour le dire-vrai. Il fait de la forme de l'existence la pratique réductrice qui va laisser place au dire-vrai. Il fait enfin de la forme de l'existence une façon de rendre visible, dans les gestes, dans le corps, dans la manière de s'habiller, dans la manière de se conduire et de vivre, la vérité elle-même" (Foucault 1984a: 159; my translation).

27. "Le combat cynique est un combat, une agression explicite, volontaire et constante qui s'adresse à l'humanité en général, à l'humanité dans sa vie réelle avec comme horizon ou objectif de la changer, la changer dans son attitude morale (son *ethos*) mais, en même temps et par là-même, la changer dans ses habitudes, ses conventions, ses manières de vivre" (*Ibid.*: 258; my translation).

28. "[C]ette pratique de la vérité caractérisant la vie cynique n'a pas pour but simplement de dire et de montrer ce qu'est le monde en sa vérité. Mais elle a pour but, et pour but final, de montrer que le monde ne pourra rejoindre sa vérité, ne pourra se transfigurer et devenir autre pour rejoindre ce qu'il est dans sa vérité, qu'au prix d'un changement, d'une altération complète, le changement et l'altération complète dans le rapport qu'on a à soi," (*Ibid.*: 288-9; my translation). Stanley Cavell claims that Emerson and Nietzsche's moral perfectionism is characterized by "an expression of disgust with or a disdain for the present state of things so complete as to require not merely reform, but a call for a transformation of things, and before all a transformation of the self," (Cavell 1990: 46).

29. Cf. Foucault (1997: 248-9).

30. Foucault (1983a: 14).

31. Cavell (2004: 237).

32. Cf. Hadot (1995: 71-2, 297-9 (107-8, 270-1)).

33. Cf. Foucault (1981-82: 16-20 (15-19)). For a discussion of what I propose to call "Descartes function," see Lorenzini (2010a: 11-3).

34. Cf. Foucault (1982-83: 211 (228-9)).

35. Foucault (1973-74: 235-6 (236)).

36. *Ibid.*: 236-7 (236-7).

37. "L'on a donc deux séries dans l'histoire occidentale de la vérité. La série de la vérité découverte, constante, constituée, démontrée, et puis une autre série, qui est la série de la vérité qui n'est pas de l'ordre de ce qui est, mais qui est de l'ordre de ce qui arrive, une vérité, donc, non pas donnée dans la forme de la découverte mais dans la forme de l'événement" (*Ibid.*: 237 (237)).

38. Cf. Lorenzini (2010b: 486-7).

39. Emerson (1860: 346).

40. Emerson (1841: 141).

41. *Ibid.*: 138.

42. Cf. Laugier (2010: 77-93).

43. Cavell (1990: xxxvii).

44. Emerson (1841: 146).

45. Cf. Plato, *The Apology of Socrates*, 36B-E.

46. Cavell (1990: 37).

47. In modern perfectionism too, like in ancient perfectionism, we can find a sharp attention towards the *kairos* (the 'opportune moment'), linked to the practice of courageously taking a risk. In *Self-Reliance*, Emerson suggests that, in order to answer adequately to our "genius" when it calls us, we must be prepared to accept the risk of breaking with our conformist and familiar everyday – even to the point of risking to lose it forever. Hence, we must be prepared to risk *everything*, without any certainty for the future, without any certainty that what we are doing is something different from a mere whim: "I shun father and mother and wife and brother when my genius calls me. I would write on the lintels of the door-post, *Whim*. I hope it is somewhat better than whim at last, but we cannot spend the day in explanation" (Emerson 1841: 142). The

same sharp attention to the (perfectionist) *kairos* and to the risk rooted in it, can be found in Cavell's analysis of the comedies of remarriage and melodramas. I am deeply indebted to Arnold I. Davidson for pointing out this line of reflection.

48. Cavell (1990: 47). "Emerson's authorship enacts [...] a relationship with his reader of moral perfectionism in which the friend permits one to advance toward oneself, which may present itself, using another formulation of Emerson, as attaining our unattained self" (Cavell 1995: 202).

49. Emerson (1841: 157; emphasis added).

50. Cf. Cavell (1995: 193).

51. Cavell (1990: 53).

52. Emerson (1841: 160).

53. Mill (1859: 120; emphasis added).

54. *Ibid.*: 120-3. Here, Mill explicitly refers to the ancient "Greek ideal of self-development," (*Ibid.*: 127).

55. *Ibid.*: 128, 132-3.

56. *Ibid.*: 132 (emphasis added).

57. Cf. Halais (2008: 259).

58. Cavell (2004: 97).

59. *Ibid.*: 141.

60. *Ibid.*: 2.

61. Cf. Foucault (1984a: 169).

62. Enzensberger (1972: 14; my translation).

63. Cf. *Ibid.*: 257-60.

64. C. Rosselli (1935), "Quaderni di GL," n. 12, gennaio 1935, p. 7, cit. in Miglietti (2010: 163) (my translation).

65. Enzensberger (1972: 286, 289-92; my translation, emphasis added).

66. *Ibid.*: 86, 285 (my translation).

67. Emerson (1841: 139). Thus it is possible to say, following Nietzsche, that "the rare and most valuable exemplar" is not *another* person, but one's own "higher self," cf. Cavell (2004: 200).

68. Cf. Halais (2008: 137-63).

69. Cavell (1990: 55; emphasis added).

70. A harmony that has obviously nothing to do with the idea of truth as an improbable "correspondence" *(mise en correspondance)* of our thoughts or words with an external reality, cf. Laugier (2009: 172).

71. "Durch Durrutis Hände sind Millionen gegangen, und doch habe ich ihn die Brandsohlen seiner Schuhe zusammenflicken sehen, weil er kein Geld hatte, um sie zum Schuster zu geben. [...] Wenn man zu ihm kam, hatte er oft eine Schürze um, weil er gerade beim Kartoffelschälen war. Seine Frau arbeitete. [...] Am andern Tag nahm er die Pistole und ging auf die Straße, um es mit einer Welt der sozialen Repression aufzunehmen," F. Pellicer, cit. in Enzensberger (1972: 289; my translation).

72. Cf. Thoreau 1849.

73. "In a democracy the speaking of public thoughts is apt to seem, in its open possibility, the easiest way to speak; for Emerson it is the most necessary and the hardest" (Cavell 1990: 31).

74. "Il y a longtemps qu'on sait que le rôle de la philosophie n'est pas de découvrir ce qui est caché, mais de rendre visible ce qui précisément est visible, c'est-à-dire de faire apparaître ce qui est si proche, ce qui est si immédiat, ce qui est si intimement lié à nous-mêmes qu'à cause de cela nous ne le percevons pas" (Foucault 1978: 540-1; my translation). See also Cavell (2004: 33).

75. Murdoch (1970: 91).

76. On the relation between self-reliance, experience and education, see Laugier 2006.

77. Cf. Laugier (2010: 141-59).

78. Cf. Ogien & Laugier (2010: 28).

79. Cavell (1990: 25).

80. Laugier (2010: 89; my translation).

81. Thoreau (1849: 238; emphasis added).

82. *Ibid.*: 240.

83. Cavell (1990: 16-7).

84. Thoreau (1849: 243; emphasis added).

85. "La question de la démocratie est bien celle de la voix. Je dois avoir une voix dans mon histoire, et me reconnaître dans ce qui est dit ou montré par ma société, et ainsi, en quelque sorte, lui donner ma voix, accepter qu'elle parle en mon nom. La désobéissance est la solution qui s'impose lorsqu'il y a *dissonance*: je ne m'entends plus, dans un discours qui sonne faux, dont chacun de nous peut faire l'expérience quotidienne" (Laugier 2010: 90; my translation, emphasis added).

86. Cf. Hadot (1995: 342).

87. Emerson (1841: 151).

88. Cavell (1989: 115).

89. Emerson (1841: 144; emphasis added).

90. Murdoch (1970: 37).

91. Cf. Laugier (2010: 193-226).

92. Diamond (1991: 312-3).

93. Cf. Cavell (1989: 46); Hadot (1995: 381-2).

94. Cf. Lorenzini (2010b: 482-3).

95. "[I]t seem[s] to me [...] work for an ambitious philosophy to attempt to keep philosophy open to the threat or temptation to skepticism" (Cavell 1990: 35).

96. "Is the idea of a new world intelligible to mere philosophy? Philosophy can accept the existence of other worlds, of various similarities to our own, I mean to this one. But new? That at once seems to speak of something like a *break* with this one, or a transformation or conversion of it" (Cavell 1989: 94). "Perfectionism, as I think of it, is not a competing theory of the moral life, but something like a dimension or tradition of the moral life that spans the course of Western thought and concerns what used to be called the state of one's soul, a dimension that places tremendous burdens on personal relationships and on the possibility or necessity of the transforming of one- self and of one's society" (Cavell 1990: 2).

97. Cavell (1989: 46-7).

98. *Ibid.*: 57.

99. Cavell (1990: 54-5).

ABSTRACTS

The central argument of this paper is that moral perfectionism cannot be understood in its radical philosophical, ethical and political dimensions unless we trace its tradition back to the ancient Greek conception of philosophy as a way of life. Indeed, in ancient Greece, to be a philosopher meant to give importance to everyday life and to pay attention to the details of common language and behaviour, in order to actively transform oneself and one's relationship to others and to the world. Truth itself was conceived as an event emerging from the agreement among the logoi of different people, or from the harmony established by an individual between

his words and his deeds (e.g. Socrates, the Cynics). But this way of conceiving truth and practicing philosophy has been somehow put aside in modern times, and it has been renewed only during the last two centuries, primarily thanks to the transcendental American philosophy of Emerson and Thoreau. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to show how modern perfectionism re-invented ancient perfectionism, through the re-activation of the imperative to pay attention to our ordinary words and everyday life (and to their harmonic relation), linked to a truth always meant as a practice. My conclusion will be that moral perfectionism can be conceived and still practiced, today, as an ethics and politics of responsibility, i.e. of attention to and care for the ordinary.

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