Foucault’s idea of philosophy as ‘Care of the Self:’ Critical assessment and conflicting metaphilosophical views

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Abstract

The purpose of my study is to discuss the thesis according to which “ultimately, for Foucault, ancient philosophy can be comprehended, if not completely, then at least in several of its fundamental characteristics, as a vast project of inventing, defining, elaborating, and practicing a complex ‘care of the self’ (epimeleia heautou)” (McGushin). I will try to provide a critical assessment of the ethical ‘shift’ in Foucault’s texts, courses and interviews from his final years, arguing that the idea of philosophical practice seen as ‘care of the self’ was the major theme of his final project, a theme intended to carry out not only an important transformation in our understanding of the history of ethics and also of the history of subjectivity, but to inspire an ‘aesthetics of existence’ fitted for our times, a poetics of the self conceived as the only possible resistance to biopolitical normalization. In order to appraise Foucault’s interpretation of the ancient philosophy I will make special references to P. Hadot’s criticisms, but also to other contemporary commentators. More than this, I will try to explore the roots of the violent rejection, coming from many notable figures working in the field of academic philosophy, of Hadot’s or Foucault’s general ideas about philosophy. The heart of the matter is whether to consider philosophy as ultimately being not only a more or less sterile exercise in critical thinking, but a ‘way of life’ and a kind of ‘self-care’ that involves a repertoire of ethical and social practices whose goal is to favor the self-fashioning of individuals and/or a spiritual conversion of a sort. I will suggest that a complete rebuttal of this ancient vision of philosophy could be seen as a perfect illustration of the complex web of power/knowledge relations that structure the philosophical and cultural paradigm dominant nowadays, one that eventually reduces philosophy to nothing more than a kind of ‘scientific’ research.

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Assessing the place occupied by the theme of souci de soi in the general context of Foucault’s work may prove to be quite a controversial endeavor, given the fact that the intellectual and philosophical trajectory of the French thinker has been subject to various interpretations, including those coming from the author himself. “At each spiral of his research, Foucault has read the previous turn as in fact dealing with what the next one professed
to study” [1]. He reconsidered his earlier archaeologies of knowledge as being “about power all along,” but he also saw his genealogies of strategic power relations in the context of different coercive practices as ultimately having to do not with an analysis of power in itself, but with “a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects […]” Thus it is not power, but the subject, which is the general theme of my research,” claims Foucault in one of his most illuminating late texts [2]. And yet, in the introduction to the second volume of the History of Sexuality, published shortly before his death, Foucault states that his long-life interest was to isolate some elements for a “history of truth,” presenting the three stages of his work as dealing with the “games of truth” (jeux de verité) first regarded “in their interplay with one another,” then in their “interaction with power relations” and finally studied “in the relationship of the self with the self and the forming of oneself as a subject” [3].

I think it is important to acknowledge that the French thinker shared with Heidegger, probably the most influential silent source of his work, the strong rejection of a Cartesian subject understood as the original principle and the final ground for experience and action, at the same time maintaining a deep commitment to the idea of human freedom (thus distancing himself from Nietzsche, his major source of inspiration).1 In Foucault’s view, the subject is no longer an absolute point, the condition of possibility for all experience, but merely a kind of effect, a ‘folding’ (Deleuze), the result of a process that he calls subjectivation, involving a set of particular practices and techniques by which human beings come to recognize themselves as ‘subjects’ of knowledge, of power relations, but also of ethical relationships to the self, come to be tied to a distinct personal, social and cultural identity and, on this ground, articulate statements that are recognized as true in a given context. We could affirm that Foucault’s real concern was neither for the subject in the classic sense (Cartesian, Kantian, Husserlian, etc.), nor for the truth in the classic sense – whether we conceive it as a form of correspondence, coherence or as an original disclosure – but rather for the (historical) relationship between subjectivity and truth.2

This relationship is always considered to involve a set of practices, techniques, procedures, rituals, etc. having to do with the making of the truth and by the same movement with the subjectivation of individuals, by way of linking a particular kind of truth discourse to a particular kind of subject (the result of a specific mode of relating to itself). In short, the field of analysis for Foucault’s entire work concerns the different alternatives, illustrated by the history of culture and European society, of subjectivation and veridiction. Thus, his goal is ultimately an ethical and political one. On one hand, there is the ‘negative’ aim of breaking loose from that ‘self’ which is merely the result of a biopolitical subjectivation (combining disciplinary techniques with scientific forms of classification), by way of acknowledging the contingences and the arbitrariness operating in modern societies and shaping our daily existence. On the other hand, there is the ‘affirmative’ aim of constituting, on a personal or rather interpersonal level, an ‘ethic of the self’ designed to be a point of resistance to disciplinary power, at the same time pleading for ‘the courage of the truth’ (on a public level), the courage to express the ‘unpopular views,’ without which the very functioning of a democratic regime runs the risk of giving birth to new forms of totalitarianism, control and ‘monopoly’ of truth (see also [4]). And I think this is the ultimate goal that explains

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1 Foucault (1997) states that “power relations are possible only insofar as the subjects are free[…] if there are relations of power in every social field, this is because there is freedom everywhere” [5]. For an acknowledgment of the tremendous yet different importance of both Nietzsche and Heidegger in shaping Foucault’s own intellectual path, see [6]. For an assessment of the differences between Nietzsche and the final Foucault regarding their conceptions of ethics, human relationships and freedom, see, for instance, [7]; [8]. Nevertheless, it should be noticed that Foucault never understood freedom as an essential property of a rational and autonomous agent (which would have implied the acceptance of a humanism explicitly rejected). He rather conceived power and freedom, in their perpetual opposition but also mutual dependence, as having their roots in two basic impulses or drives of any given individual: on one hand, the impulse to influence and control the conduct of others and of oneself; on the other hand, an inborn stubbornness or tendency to disobey, to reject conformism, discipline and rules of conduct.

2 “I have always been interested in the problem of the relationship between subject and truth”; “In actual fact, I have always been interested in this problem, even if I framed it somewhat differently” [5]. Also see [9].
Foucault’s final return to ethics and ancient philosophy conceived as an art of existence and an ascetics of the self [3].

So what is the place occupied by the theme of souci de soi in the context of this ‘ethics of truth’ that seems to be the mark of the last ‘spiral’ in Foucault’s intellectual trajectory, one in which the subject is acknowledged not only as a “mere effect of truth” (in the sense that the archaeological discursive regularities designated positions for virtual subjectivities or power-knowledge made individualism),” but as a practical subject, an action subject that takes itself as a work to accomplish, having the freedom “to constitute and transform itself on the ground of a truth discourse” [10]? I think there are two complementary ways of approaching this matter, one of them extremely careful to historical discontinuities, while the other one remains faithful to the philosophical continuity or the general orientation of ancient philosophy in Foucault’s reading — inspired by Hadot and other historians of ancient thought.

It can be argued, as Fr. Gros (2004) does, that, in his final years, Foucault approached three historical ways of ethical subjectivation, i.e. of establishing and maintaining a constant relationship to the self on the basis of a particular truth discourse: the confession or the Christian hermeneutics of the self, the Greek and Roman philosophical care of the self and the Cynical parrhêsia or fearless speech.

Foucault regards the slow elaboration of self-exegesis through the sacrament of penitence and the direction of conscience in the first Christian monasteries as actually being synonymous with the historical emergence of a new kind of self: a “divided” (coupé) moral subject, “separated from itself by a secret and bound to an indefinite, necessarily interminable task of constituting itself as the object of an obsessive and inaccessible knowledge” [11]. Foucault emphasizes what he considers to be the ‘paradox’ of the Christian ethics and also the source of the modern difficulties of grounding all experience on a ‘positive’ sense of the self: the fact that this hermeneutics of the self in its original Christian sense was not an end in itself, but merely a step towards the renunciation of the self, the kenotic movement of the purified soul that offers itself to the love of God.

In contrast to the ‘split’ subject of Christian ethics, the care of the self in the Greek and Roman philosophical tradition would have involved an ethical subject “simply ahead of itself (décalé),” separated by itself only by the “distance of a work (oeuvre) to accomplish: the work of life (oeuvre de vie)” [11]. The self is thereby conceived not as an original secret, but as a final work in regard to which the human being ‘as it is,’ that is uneducated, philosophically untrained, remains in a kind of gap. It is no longer, or rather not yet, a subject of introspection, but only of “athletic concentration” and “ethical fortification,” aiming at a complete self-mastery or possession of the self. Fundamentally, the care of the self would not have been about self-discovery but rather about self-creation or self-fashioning; not a turn inward but rather a modified relation to the ‘exterior,’ that is to the entire web of social practices and discourses that equally express and constitute this self which “is always outside of itself” [12]. So the subject of ‘care’ is not the solitary narcissistic individual, but the human being capable of regarding his life as a raw material that has to be shaped by rules of conduct. The fundamental philosophical project was to give a certain shape or ‘style’ to one’s living, and this is what Foucault meant by an “aesthetics of existence:” not really “the exultation of dandyism — but the effort to make visible in the flow of existence the principles of action” [11]. Care of the self is about living our lives ‘as wholes’ or ‘living coherently’ (see also [13]); it also means a regulated form of the existence, the harmony between words and deeds, instilled through a series of “techniques of the self” such as the examination of conscience or the analysis of representations, the visibility of justice and other spiritual principles of conduct in our daily life. The ancient model of epimeleia heautou or philosophical ascesis seems to provide us with a challenging alternative: instead of an objectification of the subject through confession, “the subjectivation of a true discourse in a practice and exercise of oneself on
oneself” [14]; instead of a “hermeneutical” self, a “gnomic” self\(^3\). So an aesthetics of existence fitted for our times would seem to involve the bracketing of ‘interiority’ and the focus on the act of ‘incorporating’ a truth discourse, that is on the effort of radically changing our lives and ways of being in accordance to a fully embraced model (in Antiquity, this was regarded as the life of the sage).

The last ‘subjective stance’ outlined by Foucault in contrast to the Christian confession is the Cynical parrhēsia (a word translated into Latin by libertas), meaning freedom of speech, the bold, even brutal frankness of publicly stating the inconvenient truths about our daily existence. This existential attitude, which is the mark of the sage, of the spiritual master, is taken to the limit, in Foucault’s view, by the Cynical philosopher, who transforms his own life and body in a “theatre of the scandal of truth” [10], challenging his fellows to radically revise all their opinions, institutions and common shared values. So the subject’s relation to the truth is no longer constituted, in this case, by introspection and unconditional obedience to the spiritual father, nor by an ethical work on the self aiming, as in the case of Stoics or Epicureans, to ensure a harmonic correspondence between logoi and erga; instead, it is regarded as a challenge: “the truth challenges the subject to the very limit of its being” [10], forcing him into ‘experimenting’ on his body the rejection of social conventions, worrying his fellows by his subversive discourse, irritating them by his explosions of honesty.

But the highlighting of historical discontinuities does not end here. Even in the narrow sense outlined above, the care of the self would have involved three different stages: (A) a Presocratic stage focused on the ‘aesthetics of existence’ understood not as a narcissistic retreat into a private world, but as a relation to truth in the sense of the ‘right reason’ (orthos logos), “integral to the proper use of pleasures”, as “an art of constituting oneself a moral subject and one’s life a thing of beauty according to the Greek ideal of the beautiful-good” [1]; (B) a Socratic and Platonic care of the self whose main theme becomes the knowledge of the self and the purity of the soul, thus preparing the way for the modern relationship between subjectivity and truth\(^4\); (C) finally, the Hellenistic and Roman model, extensively developed in Stoic and Epicurean philosophy, where “care of the self is de-intellectualized insofar as it does not resolve itself into pure théoria,” but rather “it appears in a variety of forms of exercises such as practical meditations, regulated social activities” or even “practices of physical trial or ordeal (épreuve)” [11].

Nevertheless, this is only one way of looking at the care of the self. From a different, broader perspective, epimeleia heautou is, in Foucault’s view, the fundamental commitment, defining the very purpose of ancient philosophy. It has thus been argued that “ultimately, for Foucault, ancient philosophy can be comprehended, if not completely, then at least in several of its fundamental characteristics, as a vast project of inventing, defining, elaborating, and practicing a complex ‘care of the self’ (epimeleia heautou)” \(^5\) [12].

Foucault shares with P. Hadot the view according to which “the main objective of the Greek schools of philosophy did not consist of the elaboration, the teaching, of theory. The goal of the Greek schools of philosophy was the transformation of the individual” [15]. In the beginning of his 1982 lectures at the Collège de France, Foucault is clearly suggesting that epimeleia heautou can be seen as the “fundamental principle for describing the philosophical attitude” in Antiquity, in this way encompassing even the ‘paradoxical’ Christian ethics of the self, as well as the Cynical parrhēsia. The hypothesis he is endorsing is precisely the following: “one-thousand-year development from the appearance of the first forms of the philosophical attitude in the

\(^3\) The term gnomé designates the unity of will and knowledge; it designates also a brief piece of discourse through which truth appeared with all its force and encrusts itself in the soul of people. Then, we could say that even as late as the first century A.D., the type of subject which is proposed as a model and as a target in the Greek, or in the Hellenistic or Roman philosophy, is a gnomic self, where force of the truth is one with the form of the will” [15].

\(^4\) By comparing two Platonic dialogues, Alcibiades and Laches, we can observe, following Foucault’s interpretation, how “Plato himself offers evidence for a stylistic of life even as he argues for a metaphysics of the soul” [1].

\(^5\) In fact, the entire first part of McGushin’s 2007 book on Foucault bears the title “Philosophy as Care of the Self.” Consecrated by Socrates, the theme of the care for the self would have been “ultimately placed at the centre of that ‘art of existence’ which philosophy claimed to be,” according to Foucault [16].
Greeks to the first forms of Christian asceticism — from the fifth century B.C. to the fifth century A.D. — can be taken up starting from this notion of epimeleia heautou” [14].

From this general perspective, the care of the self could be regarded as the key to distinguish between ancient spirituality and modern rationality, between the traditional practices involved in the activity of taking care of yourself and the modern conditions of possibility for knowledge: if “we will call ‘philosophy’ the form of thought that[…]attempts to determine the conditions and limits of the subject’s access to the truth[…]then I think we could call ‘spirituality’ the search, practice, and experience through which the subject carries out the necessary transformations on himself in order to have access to the truth” [14]. As suggested by Flynn (2005), two distinct notions of truth are here colliding: on one hand, a spiritual and existential understanding of the truth; on the other hand, an “antiseptic” and objective notion that has prevailed in modern sciences and has oriented theoretical philosophy since the times of Descartes [9]. From the point of view of epimeleia heautou, the truth asks for a ‘price’ (which is that of a spiritual conversion through philosophical askēsis)⁶, promising us instead some kind of liberation or salvation.

The key element that has to be noticed when analyzing the notion of epimeleia heautou is the fact that it involved not only a permanent relationship to the self, as well as an attitude of constant vigilance and attention to the present, but also a repertoire of “actions by which one takes responsibility for oneself and by which one changes, purifies, transforms, and transfigures oneself,” and exercises of thought, in a very generic sense, aimed at producing a determined ethical effect, such as “techniques of meditation, of memorization of the past, of examination of conscience, of checking representations which appear in the mind, and so on”⁷ [14]. This is the level of what P. Hadot had called, in a more traditional manner, “spiritual exercises,” and this is what Foucault is designating by the name of “techniques of the self,” thus extending the Habermasian triangle (techniques of production – techniques of signification – techniques of domination) that had constituted his main concern until the ‘ethical’ turn (see [15]; [17]). This technology of the self is essential in order to grasp the practical dimension of ancient philosophy, as well as its fundamental ethical and political end.

At this point, it is important to acknowledge not merely the existence of a therapeutic dimension of ancient philosophy, but rather the fact that philosophy as ‘care of the self’ is regarded, especially in the Hellenistic and Roman age, in an extremely close analogy with medical thought and practice [16]: it’s actually the ‘medicine for the soul,’ involving the “therapy of desire” (M. Nussbaum), the “education of affectivity” (P. Aubenque) and the “discipline of assent” (P. Hadot) – these three forms being nothing else than the three compartments of the Stoics’ doctrine⁸. Elaborating on one of M. Nussbaum’s suggestions [18], I would say that care of the self,

⁶ In his manuscript of the 1982 course, Foucault noted: “finally, Western philosophy can be read throughout its history as the slow disengagement of the question: how, on what conditions can one think the truth? from the question: how, at what cost, in accordance with what procedure, must the subject’s mode of being be changed for him to have access to the truth?” [14].

⁷ It should be noted that by translating the Foucauldian souci de soi as ‘care of the self’ we risk being a bit misled for two reasons. First, as McCushin observes, “souci is not just care in the sense of an affectionate concern for oneself,” but also a kind of anxiety or ‘agitation’ [12]. Secondly, we are faced with some sort of ‘grammatical’ trap when using the phrase ‘care of the self, which, unlike epimeleia heautou, cura sui or souci de soi, seems to imply a substantial ‘self’ that pre-exists the practice of care. But Foucault’s challenging thesis is precisely that “the self is nothing else than the historical correlation” of a specific “technology” [15]: not a pre-given nature, merely the effect of a reflexive ‘folding’ of some kind. This is why O’Leary (2002) claims that a more appropriate translation of the phrase at issue would have been ‘care of self’ — “or even, in order to maintain a closer alliance to the Greek and Latin versions, ‘self-care’”. O’Leary goes on by arguing that it is because we have come to a historical and cultural stage when we no longer conceive our identity in terms of a “pre-given reality,” but rather as “a hard-won effect,” that self-care understood as auto-poiesis or self-fashioning “is no longer either an impossibility or a luxury reserved for Wildean dilettantes and dandies,” but perhaps the only ethical “imperative we continue to recognize” [8].

⁸ The description of philosophy as the “medicine for the soul” (animi medicina) is found in Cicero, who was actually expressing a very common idea of those times; “the therapy of desire” is the title of M. Nussbaum’s book about Hellenistic ethics [18]; the “education of affectivity” is an expression employed by P. Aubenque to describe the Aristotelian ethics of virtue and also the meaning of moral education for Plato [20]; the “discipline of assent” is a phrase chosen by P. Hadot to characterize the practical use of logic according to the Stoics; for an account of the three areas of the Stoic philosophical exercises, see [19].
according to various doctrines and schools developed in Antiquity, involves a philosophical diagnostic of human misery, an ideal norm of health (a rather open-ended conception about happiness), a method of clinical investigation into one’s existence and also an appropriate medication represented by the practice of spiritual exercises. But distancing myself from Hadot, who states that “modern man can practice the spiritual exercises of antiquity, at the same time separating them from the philosophical or mythical discourse which came along with them” [19], I argue that without the complete adherence to a particular vision of the world, to a particular truth embraced by a philosophical or religious school, no matter what, the practice of spiritual exercises proves to be rather useless or ineffective. At this point, Foucault’s idea of “a gnomic self, where force of the truth is one with the form of the will” [15], seems to be a more accurate account of the philosophical self-formation.

Foucault goes on asking this decisive question: if “care of the self” was the fundamental statement of ancient thought, how is it that the history of philosophy “accorded so much privilege, value, and intensity to the ‘know yourself’ and omitted, or at least, left in the shadow” the other principle that, historically, seems to have provided the ‘soil’ and the ‘frame’ for self-knowledge [14]? The historians warn us that, initially, the Delphic precept gnôthi seauton was only a technical advice concerning the kind of questions you addressed the Oracle, which didn’t really attest the emergence of a moral or philosophical conscience. And even when it entered the philosophical stage through the legendary figure of Socrates, ‘know yourself’ meant only recognizing the divine nature of your rational soul, without involving any kind of ‘introspection.’ With respect to the technique of the examination of conscience, Foucault argues that it was not originally designed to decipher the ‘secrets’ of one’s individual soul, but only to test the degree of harmony between one’s principles of conduct and one’s daily actions (see [15]; [11]). Nevertheless, if gnôthi seauton was only one aspect of this complex philosophical practice entitled ‘care of the self,’ how is it that our histories usually mention only the former?

One way of answering it, inspired by Hadot, would be that Christianity, presenting itself, through the writings of the first apologists and fathers of the Church, as the ‘true’ philosophy, managed to take over the ‘therapeutic’ functions of ancient philosophy, adapting or discovering on its own many of the spiritual exercises. Then, in the Middle Ages, philosophical research mainly reduced its activity to the task of providing conceptual tools for theology. After many centuries, when philosophy finally regained its autonomy and its old status, it found itself in a very different cultural context from that of Antiquity, unavoidably inheriting a strict partition of disciplines and, most of all, the decisive separation between theoretical disciplines and life conduct. So it can be argued, as Flynn does, that the destiny of European philosophy has actually engaged the split of two principles originally conceived in a very close relationship, even co-dependence: while the Delphic precept ‘know yourself’ came to determine “the theoretical disciplines of academic philosophy as we find them today: metaphysics, philosophical anthropology, philosophy of mind, and the like, conveyed by a detached mode of reflection and an antiseptic notion of truth”, “the career of ‘care of the self’, on the other hand, moves through the Stoics, Epicureans and Cynics toward such non-academic domains of self-formation or ‘spiritual exercise’ as catechesis, political training, and psychological counselling” [9].

But Foucault’s answer is in fact a more complex one, involving both the genealogy of ethics and the history of (our access to) truth. On one hand, we have to agree that “there is clearly something a bit disturbing for us in this principle of the care of the self” [14]. The reason is our Christian heritage, which makes as to regard moral actions in terms of a strictly altruistic conduct, with the risk of neglecting the fact that care of the self originally involved the care for the others as well. Another aspect of this matter has to do with what Foucault regards as the strong ‘juridification’ of our moral culture in the Western world, focusing on alleged universal codes and prohibitions at the expense of ascetics and ethical work on ourselves [3]. On the other hand, the obnubilation of epimeleia heautou is directly linked to what the French thinker, in an openly admitted conventional manner, calls “the Cartesian moment”; his memorable formula is the following: “the modern age of the relations between the subject and truth begin when it is postulated that, such as he is, the subject is capable of truth, but that, such as it is, the truth cannot save the subject” [14].
It has to be acknowledged that Foucault’s account of epimeleia heautou was criticized in certain of its aspects even by one of its inspirers, namely P. Hadot. His main objection is that Foucault’s description of the techniques of the self “is precisely focused far too much on the ‘self,” or at least on a specific conception of the self” [19]. While, for Hadot, the goal of ‘salvation’ and spiritual conversion in Greek and Roman philosophy signifies a way to access “the best portion of the self”, “the perfect reason,” thus reaching a kind of cosmic consciousness, Foucault would have sought to identify the coordinates of a genuine “culture of the self” in late Antiquity, motivated by his aspiration to transform an ordinary life into a “work of art.” Following this line of interpretation, we could state that Foucault was in fact only interested in providing the conceptual framework for a self-creation process: this was his reason for insisting “much more on the exercises of auto-subjectivation, of the ethical fortification (renforcement) of the self by itself, etc., while marginalizing the spiritual exercises of the dissolution of the subject in a cosmic totality” [11]. Unlike Foucault, Hadot was a self-declared “agnostic mystic” that focused on self-knowledge understood as a release from the individual and an access to the universal, as an awareness of the fact that you are a part of nature and of “universal reason:” in other words, as a way of trans-subjectivation. In short, Hadot seems to judge Foucault’s account as being both historically questionable and too ‘dandyish’, that is “too narrow and insufficient” from an ethical point of view [21].

It is generally admitted that Hadot provides a more accurate account of the ancient philosophy⁹, while Foucault is mainly interested in finding a source of inspiration for an ‘aesthetics of existence’ fitted for our times, bringing forth a frame of subjectivation focused on the freedom of human beings to invent new styles of existence. P. Veyne points out that Foucault actually judged Greek ethics “as undesirable as it would be impossible to resuscitate[…]; but he considered one of its elements, namely the idea of a work of the self on the self, to be capable of reacquiring a contemporary meaning” [22]. Nevertheless, the idea of an ‘aesthetic of existence’ has its undeniably ancient roots: it is not meant to cover only the artistic abilities of some élite or singular genius to embellish ordinary life, as it may be the case with the Wildean dandy or even with Nietzsche’s ‘grand style,’ but it rather targets the instilled harmony between logoi and erga in accordance with the Greek ideal of the beautiful-good (kalos kagathos)¹⁰. It may also be true, as suggested by O’Leary (2002), that Foucault’s choice to interpret epimeleia heautou and technê tou biou in terms of an aesthetics of existence shows his deep conviction that the age of moral theories based on universally applicable codes of rules is now over and that we should try to see the ethical work (travail) on ourselves in a closer analogy with the work of an artist that does not rely on any eternal standards of good taste and is forced to experience various creative methods throughout his life. Nevertheless, if “creativity, too, is always historically situated” [23] and “aesthetic judgment is inseparable from the sensus communis – the sense of belonging to a community” [12], the same can be said about the creation of the self understood as “an ephemeral, never to be completed work-in-progress” [8]. So it may be argued that, “for Foucault, the aesthetics of existence always takes place in, and responds to, a community and defines itself in terms of its attachments to, or ruptures with, that community” [12].

I believe this to be one of the main reasons for rejecting the general views expressed in the 80s and the 90s accusing the ‘last’ Foucault of a narcissistic, “anti-humanist individualism” [24]. In fact, the very mentioning of Foucault as an ‘individualist’ seems rather inappropriate, given the fact that the French thinker considered the very definition of “the self as something wholly contained within an individual monad” as actually being “the effect of techniques of separation, isolation, individuation, and differentiation” that shape the modern world [12].

⁹ A. Davidson believes that it is the absence of “the figure of the sage” from Foucault’s writings on ancient philosophy that sometimes allows him “to pass too smoothly from ancient to modern experiences of the self. By anchoring the ideal of the sage at the basis of ancient ethics, we can better see the abyss that separates psuchê from any possible estheticization of the self” [25]. The same criticism may be found in Pradeau, who also elaborates on an idea shared by many scholars, according to whom Foucault’s account of the practices of the self constitutes “an obstacle for understanding the actual scientific project of the ancient philosophy” [26]. This kind of general critique involving both Foucault and Hadot will be addressed in the final part of the present study.

¹⁰ See Plato, Republic, 402d – 403b and Xenophon, Cyropaedia, VIII, 1, 33, cited by Foucault [3].
And this is precisely what I think motivates his final return to the ancient definition of philosophy as ‘ascetics’ and ‘care of the self.’

As Fr. Gros clearly formulates it, “what interests Foucault in the care of the self, is the manner by which it is integrated in the social fabric and constitutes a motor for political action” [11]. If politics had to begin with care of the self according to Socrates, it may be argued that, in his final years, Foucault comes to see the techniques of the self first elaborated in the Greek philosophy as an antidote for modern disciplinary techniques having their historical roots in the Christian pastoral. Being well aware of the ‘strategic’ use of the rhetoric of authenticity and self-discovery in the context of today, Foucault holds that the idea of constituting “an ethic of the self” conceived as an art of self-fashioning remains the only “point of resistance” to biopolitical normalization [14]. So philosophy as care of the self becomes a key element in the struggle for a modern subjectivity, a struggle that involves, on one hand, the resistance to normalization and, on the other hand, the resistance to solitude or estrangement, to “everything which separates the individual, breaks his links with others, splits up community life, forces the individual back on himself and ties him to his own identity in a constraining way” [2]. It is thus essential not to forget that in its Socratic or Stoic context, the care of the self did not imply “a solitary activity,” but that it “was exercised in a largely communal and institutional framework,” constituting “an intensified mode of social relation” and having an aim that was both ethical and political [11]. It should be added that the care of the self have always supposed a partner, “the figure of the master of existence,” the one helping me to learn how to ‘care,’ and that for a Greek or a Roman philosopher, the care of the self cannot be separated from the care for the others. In fact, most of the spiritual exercises or ‘techniques of the self’ took “the form of eminently social activities: conversations, correspondences, teaching and apprenticeship in the schools, individual formation, etc.” [11]. More than this, if we agree to P. Hadot’s interpretation of the spiritual exercises [19], all of them supposed a dialogical structure, implicit if not explicit: they involved an intensification of the attention and a permanent dialogue with oneself as well as the others.

There is yet another tendency than can be noticed among outstanding representatives of academic philosophy, one that not only regards Foucault as a narcissistic individualist (L. Ferry, A. Renaut, etc.) or denies the critical power of his analysis (Ch. Taylor, J. Habermas, etc.), but that is strongly rejecting the very notion of philosophy as a ‘way of life’ or ‘care of the self.’ In a study intended to be a critical response to my 2010 book Philosophy as a Way of Life: The Sources of Authenticity denies any validity of this metaphilosophical perspective [27]. It seems to me that his strong criticisms can be placed in two distinct categories. The first involves the actual network of power/knowledge relations that configures the cultural and philosophical paradigm dominant nowadays, a paradigm focused on understanding the philosophical activity as being nothing more and nothing less than a kind of ‘scientific’ research. From this point of view, Mureșan denounces the mirage, as well as the institutional pitfalls, that the vision supported by both Hadot and Foucault would engage, encouraging philosophical vulgarization and amateurism, Nietzschean vitalism, the lack of study and critical thinking. A ‘therapeutic’ vision of philosophy would correspond, at the most, only to a possible application of philosophy, which is the philosophical consultancy, but not to philosophy in its ‘strong’ sense, that is a strictly theoretical one. The second objection is of historical or historiographical kind, reducing ‘philosophy as a way of life’ to a type of Neostoicism and accusing the lack of textual evidence to support the importance of this existential concern throughout the history of philosophy.

I think this last objection may be challenged by arguing that the oscillation between “the pole of discourse” and “the pole of life choice” has always been a constitutive mark of philosophy [28] and, even more, that it denotes a tension noticeable in the thought of almost every major philosopher. Plato has spoken about spiritual conversion (periagôgês technê) as the goal of philosophy in his Republic (518d), also claiming, at least in the Seventh Letter (341c-e), that his philosophy was not captured by any discourse. Aristotle states in his Politics that the theoretical activities are also practical in the sense of self-transformation (1325b); in the Nicomachean Ethics, he affirms that the ones taking “refuge in argument, thinking that they are being philosophers and that this is the way to be good[…are rather like patients who listen carefully to their doctors, but do not do what they are told”
Even Kant claims at some point that the philosophers from Antiquity, who were concerned with “the destination of men, and the means to achieve it”, “thus remained much more faithful to the true Idea of the philosopher than has been the case in modern times, when we encounter the philosopher only as an artist of reason” [28].

As to the first objection, it is my belief that we are confronted with a perfect illustration of the risk involved in taking into consideration only the philosophical investigations that meet the criteria of ‘scientific’ research in an extremely narrow sense: a biopolitical ‘normalization’ that not only neutralizes the transformative potential of philosophy, both for individuals and for the social reality, but also tends to obliterate the very meaning of philosophical creation, whether we speak about self-fashioning through philosophical practices or simply about the creation of new concepts and truth discourses.

“What is philosophy when rather than as merely logos, one wants to think of it as ergon? [...]for philosophy to find its reality it must be practice (both in the singular and plural, a practice and practices); the reality of philosophy is found in its practices,” stated Foucault in his 1983 course at Collège de France, while commenting Plato’s Seventh Letter [30]. And it might be true that our efforts, today, in changing our metaphilosophical views and trying to conceive the nature of philosophy not as a body of theories having possible applications, but as a set of social practices (most of which having, of course, an eminently discursive or dialogical character) go hand in hand with that “urgent, fundamental, and politically indispensable task” of constituting an “ethic of the self” suitable for our late modernity [14].

References