

Brill's Companion to the Reception of Athenian Democracy

From the Late Middle Ages to the Contemporary Era

Edited by

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Philosophy as a Political Praxis

Foucault's Use of the Classics

Giovanni Leghissa

1 Foucault, the Classical Heritage, and the Enlightenment

It is a matter of fact that there is an imbrication between the way in which Foucault, during the last phase of his life, explores the classical tradition from Socrates to the Church Fathers and the way in which he articulates the possibility both to transform the current and established definition of what subjectivity is and to disclose new forms of subjective self-fashioning – whereas this transformation is explicitly meant to possess a political significance.

In order to explain the meaning of this imbrication it is important, first of all, to account for the pivotal role that the concept of subjectivity plays in the broader context of Foucault's philosophy. Foucault's approach to the emergence of modern subjectivity envisages not a simple historical reconstruction, but rather the disclosure of discursive domains that should enable the conception of new forms of subjectivity. The possibility of this self-fashioning rests on the fact that there is no given subjectivity as such, but various processes of subjectivation. These involve both the materiality of institutional interventions and the "immaterial materiality"¹ of those regimes of truth the performativity of which frames the narrative each subject has to cope with – and, if necessary, to resist to – in order to build its own space of freedom and become an autonomous individual. To problematize the processes of subjectivation means, thus, to give place to a not yet established and shared experience of the self, or – which is not so much different in Foucauldian terms – to conceive of how individuals can transform their position within the power relations they are involved in.

1 Within the inaugural address at the beginning of his activity at the Collège de France, in 1971, Foucault expresses the wish to give birth to a "materialism of the immaterial" that should help us to define the peculiar materiality possessed by discursive formations (Foucault 1972a). Through this oxymoric expression he refers to the performative power of those regimes of truth that shape the position of the speaking subject.

“Ontology of actuality” – or “ontology of ourselves” – is the expression he has chosen in order to define the set of philosophical operations required to trigger this transformation.² But thanks to what he calls “ontology of actuality” Foucault defines as well a peculiar way of keeping the tradition of the Enlightenment alive. The meaning of the philosophical stance that stems from the tradition of the Enlightenment consists not so much in questioning the truth and its grounding function within the philosophical discourse, but precisely in asking how we became what we have become and, as a consequence, in figuring out whether it is possible both to give place to different forms of power relations and to fashion our identity in a different way.

Of course, Foucault’s aim at building a critical stance that can contribute to shape a new form of subjectivity does not depend on his dealing with ancient philosophy. In several occasions Foucault made clear that, since the beginning of his philosophical career, his own way toward a critical philosophy coincides with the redefinition of the relationship between the subject and the set of discourses needed to delimit the space of its agency.³ What I wish to highlight in the present context is that the study of ancient philosophy assumed a pivotal role precisely in the moment in which Foucault’s attempt to conceive of new possible forms of resistance to power took the form of a description of what Greek philosophers have written on the work one has to do on oneself in order to loosen the grip of power exerted over it.⁴ Not by chance, the course held at the Collège de France in 1982–1983 devoted to analyzing the meaning of Greek *parrhesia* opens with an explicit reference to the political meaning of the Kantian *Aufklärung*. The subject that sustains the performativity of the Enlightenment is willing both to undergo the critical gaze of philosophy and to summon the age he lives in to appear before the court of reason. And this critical attitude, which is supposed to shape the subject’s life in its wholeness, cannot be merely seen as the cultural product of a past epoch of Western civilization.

It seems to me that philosophy as the surface of emergence of a present reality, as a questioning of the philosophical meaning of the present reality of which it is part, and philosophy as the philosopher’s questioning of this “we” to which he belongs and in relation to which he has to situate

2 Foucault (2001b), 1506.

3 See, e.g., Foucault (1997a) and (1998b). In Foucault’s view, it was strategic to hinder those misleading interpretations of his work according to which the main topic of his philosophy were to be seen merely in the question of power.

4 McGushing (2007), 242–288; Cremonesi (2008), 189–212.

himself, is a distinctive feature of philosophy as a discourse of modernity and on modernity.⁵

While insisting on the fact that the critical stance that characterizes the Enlightenment is not something that belongs to the past, but rather a living part of the unfinished project of modernity, Foucault makes clear at the same time that the best way to revitalize this project consists in nourishing it with new lifeblood coming from antiquity.

Before looking at Foucault's Lectures devoted to the analysis of ancient philosophy in a more detailed manner,⁶ it is important as well to remember that Foucault's use of antiquity in order to underpin his critical stance goes back to a tradition deeply rooted within modernity. To say that does not mean to diminish the originality of Foucault's attempt to use ancient sources in order to introduce a different approach to our current ideas of subjectivity, democracy, or power relations. Even less does it mean to suggest, more or less surreptitiously, that the reference to the classical tradition covers the entire path that led to the birth of the modern age, as if this reference were a transhistorical invariant. It means, rather, to identify the place occupied by the late Foucault's philosophy within the broader context of those modern attempts to take what seems to be necessary – or simply useful – in order to carry on a critique of the present from the Greek conception of individual freedom.

The genetic process that, starting with the Italian Renaissance, gave birth to western modernity is filled with figures of thought emerging from antiquity. Each phase of this process is characterized by referring to a peculiar shape of what the ancient world was supposed to be – by reconstructing it through historical investigation, or by dealing with its remnants (artifacts of different nature or written texts) as if they were a living part of the present. The function of the cultural pattern resulting from this reconstruction, within which the historical consciousness of temporal distance often merges with imaginary projections, was to instantiate an otherness representing either the shape of a subjectivity still to be forged, or, in a more general way, the touchstone required to evaluate the present and to imagine an alternative to a given set of institutions, shared values, ways of conduct, forms of life. In other words, it

5 Foucault (2010), 13.

6 Further reading on this topic can be found in: Gros and Lévy (2003), Detel (2005), McGushin (2007), Cremonesi (2008), Montanari (2009), Bernini (2011), Boyle (2012), Lorenzini, Revel and Sforzini (2013).

seems difficult to reconstruct the emergence of modern subjectivity overlooking the role played by the constant reference to classical models.⁷

Foucault's reading of ancient philosophy and culture can be easily included in this framework. For Foucault the reference to Greece constituted, on one hand, a strategic tool used to shape and reinforce the critical stance of philosophy and, on the other, the instantiation of a past cultural dimension that cannot be brought back to life any more.

The last point is also tied with the awareness that there are important reasons to resist the lure of antiquity. Foucault, in fact, was induced to consider antiquity, taken as a whole, as "a deep mistake".⁸ Such a negative judgment is due to the fact that, on the one hand, the ethics of Greeks and Romans concerned only a small number of people and, on the other, it took the form of a spiritual path and, therefore, its philosophical and literary expression was, to a certain extent, not far from that of a religion.

2 The Care of the Self and the Political Domain

Being the ethics the Greek philosophers spoke about part of a discourse addressed to small groups of men enjoying both wealth and civil rights, it is clear that the distance between us and the Greeks is not only due to the temporal difference. Nevertheless, Foucault makes a detour through the philosophy of the classical and Hellenistic period in order to forge a philosophy of the self, which he confers a decided critical potential to.

The philosophy of the self Foucault outlines within his analysis of ancient thought has an ideal-typical feature, and therefore can play the function of a mirror: by looking at it we can discover a peculiar articulation of the relationship between subject and truth that might not be simply included within our practice of everyday life, but can surely disclose a different perspective starting from which it is possible to put in question the supposed self-evidence of our present relationship to ourselves.

It is important to focus on the starting question that allows for any further articulation of Foucault's analysis of the care of the self (*epimeleia heautou*). What can I do – and, above all, what should I do – as a subject in order to take care of myself in an appropriate way? To answer this question required not only the acquaintance with a specific set of doctrines, but above all the

⁷ Leghissa (2007).

⁸ Foucault (2001c), 1517.

willingness to turn one's own individual life into a series of exercises. What Foucault highlights is the fact that the scope of these exercises was in no way external to the practice they consisted in: the specific form of ascetic conduct that had to be improved through these exercises was nothing but a form of self-government. And precisely the question of government is what interests Foucault at most.

The last point must be put in evidence in order to avoid a dangerous – and common – misunderstanding. Foucault pays a lot of attention to the fact that the care of the self did not lead to establish a normative system of ethics; the goal of the philosophical ascesis was the self-fashioning of the subject, the transformation of its habits and inclinations. This transformation had an aesthetic dimension as well: it implied the readiness to modify both the way in which the subject looked at himself and the way others looked at him. It implied, therefore, the possibility to take a certain distance from oneself. To manage this distance meant to make a decision as regards the various options available for the subject to shape his existence, to make a specific use of his freedom, of his time, of his intellectual capabilities, of his body. The analysis contained both in the second and in the third volume of the *History of Sexuality*, for example, shows how important it was for a free man to submit his desires and natural instincts to a specific control, in order to avoid doing something that could be in contrast with the social position that he occupied.⁹ But what we could define as the aesthetic moment of this ascesis must not be overestimated. Pierre Hadot, whose work on the spiritual exercises in antiquity constituted an important reference for Foucault, suggests that the way in which Foucault interprets the care of the self in antiquity results in the attempt to offer the model of an aesthetics of existence that could maintain a positive value for an individual living in our time; but, if this were the only meaning of Foucault's analysis, then Hadot would be right in affirming that Foucault's investigation of the care of the self would be nothing but a new form of Dandyism.¹⁰

It is true that Foucault himself speaks of an "aesthetics of existence", which he defines as "a way of life whose moral value did not depend either on one's being in conformity with a code of behavior, or on an effort of purification, but on a certain formal principles in the use of pleasures, in the way one distributed them, in the limits one observed, in the hierarchy one respected".¹¹ But this expression is strictly tied to the question of how it is possible for a subject to

9 Foucault (1986) and Foucault (1990).

10 Hadot (1989). On the way Hadot read Foucault's analysis of ancient philosophy, see Davidson (2003).

11 Foucault (1990), 89. See also Foucault (1988a), 49.

loosen the grip of the techniques of government on which the states of domination are based. In other words, the question Foucault articulates when he introduces the notion of “care of the self” is entirely a political one.

But it would be misleading to see the culture of the self developed in antiquity as if it would result in a direct political intervention: once the decision to take care of oneself is taken, the subject is caught in a specific game of truth that should enable him to understand to which extent a certain power can be exerted over him – or, in other words, to which extent the subject can let others conduct his own conduct. Thus, the work on oneself is to come first as regards any political action meant as a direct form of resistance against institutional power.

In addition, it is worth pointing out that Foucault was not prone at all to share the idea that liberation from power should constitute a positive and essential aspect of political action. The sheer concept of liberation seems to be wrong as far as it implies the idea that “there exists a human nature or base that, as a consequence of certain historical, economic, and social processes, has been concealed, alienated, or imprisoned in and by mechanisms of repression”. If it were so, “all that is required is to break these repressive deadlocks and man will be reconciled with himself, rediscover his nature or regain contact with his origin, and reestablish a full and positive relationship with himself”.¹²

A further point to add in order to better understand the range of what is to be seen as the political significance of the care of the self is that Foucault posed the exercise of the self on the self by which one attempts to transform oneself within a network of power relations that he, starting from the second middle of the seventies, decided to subsume under the term “governmentality”.¹³ Within this network the subject does not exist as a subject of law, as a subject that has – or has not – some specific rights. Governmentality has rather to do with “the whole range of practices that constitute, define, organize, and instrumentalize the strategies that individuals in their freedom can use in dealing with each other”. Those who want to exert a certain control over others, or limit the freedom of others, “are themselves free individuals who have at their disposal certain instruments they can use to govern others”.¹⁴ Governmentality, thus, precedes the definition, the organization and the management of those forms of power that can be pinpointed as states of domination. The techniques of government that permeate society are, rather, what governmentality is made of. This implies that specific forms of power

12 Foucault (1997a), 282.

13 On this subject, see, among others, Dean (1999).

14 Foucault (1997a), 300.

operate at every level of human relationships – a statement that must be correctly understood as well. Within Foucault’s decennial reflection on power structures the idea that there is a form of power overarching society – or even small human groups – is definitely absent. There is no such thing as “power”, spread everywhere and forcing individuals to behave in this or that way. What all individuals are involved in is a set of networks within which each individual occupies a given position, but the latter is never stable and permanent. The possibility to negotiate one’s own position, to shift from one position to another one, or even to change the rules of the power game is a constitutive element of what binds individuals to each other. And it is precisely within this game that subjectivation, meant as an ongoing process, takes place. “There are two meanings of the world *subject*: subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge”.¹⁵ Thus, the political significance of the care of the self does not consist in creating a space removed from the strategic interplay among individuals, a space where one’s self-positioning coincides with the enjoyment of absolute freedom: according to Foucault, in fact, even such a space can never exist. The care of the self enables an individual to create an autonomous sphere of action, within which it becomes possible to experience – and, above all, to measure – the degree of freedom one is willing to enjoy. Or, better: it enables an individual to perceive to which extent others are allowed to intervene within one’s own way of conduct, to which extent others are allowed, from their point of view, in the name of their interests or goals, to manage one’s own process of subjectivation.

3 The Construction of Philosophical *Ethos*

It is now important to focus on the mediatedness that characterizes the relationship between the exercise required to construct a sphere of subjective autonomy and the praxis that can – or could – lead to transform a given social order. Isn’t this praxis what we usually think of when we refer to the political action? Isn’t the political sphere that domain within which subjects negotiate their position in order to achieve more freedom and improve their agency? Or, more precisely: Isn’t the political character we use to ascribe to an action – individual or collective – strictly tied either with the modification of the existing power structure brought about by that action, or with the maintenance

¹⁵ Foucault (1983), 212.

of this power structure, in the case in which the subject occupies a dominant position?

I have already mentioned the distance Foucault takes from the idea that what matters when we take into consideration the meaning of political action can be reduced to the question of emancipation. What he seeks when he draws his – and our – attention to the care of the self, I suggest, is to make much more complex the relationship between any possible intervention aimed at transforming a given power structure and what one must do in order to acquire the critical attitude needed simply to conceive of any political action. In other words, there must be a consciously constructed gap between the space within which decisions that possess political relevance are taken and the space within which one performs any critical discourse. This is due to the fact that the latter is meant as the result of a work on oneself, or, better, as the utterance produced by a subject whose conduct of life constitutes *per se* a critical statement.

In the text of the course held in 1981–1982, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, Foucault investigates the role of the philosopher as a counselor of those who exercise a form of political power during the Roman Empire. In the first centuries of our era, the philosopher finds himself more and more involved in the political life as a professional advisor, whose competence goes from the way in which one must conduct one's life to the way in which the state must be governed. But this situation means in no way that the philosophical discipline as such increases its significance. On the contrary, it loses its own specificity as a separate domain – and precisely such separateness allows for its critical function. The philosopher “is the person who guides and initiates someone who is both his patron, almost his employer, and his friend, but his superior friend. [...] The counselor is also a sort of cultural agent for a circle into which he introduces both theoretical knowledge and practical schemas of life as well as political choices. [...] So we find them [i.e., the philosophers] everywhere, involved in political life and in great debates, conflicts, assassinations, executions, and revolts that mark the middle of the first century [...]”. But, Foucault continues,

as this figure of the philosopher develops and his importance becomes more pronounced, so also we see that he increasingly loses his singular, irreducible function external to daily life, to everyday life and political life. We see his function, rather, become more integrated within advice and opinion. The practice will be intertwined with the essential problems posed to individuals in such a way that as the profession of the philosopher becomes more important, so it is deprofessionalized. The more one needs a counselor for oneself, the more one needs to have recourse

to the Other in his practice of the self, then the more philosophy needs to assert itself, the more the philosopher's specifically philosophical function becomes increasingly blurred as well.¹⁶

This long quotation makes clear that what counts within Foucault's analysis of the care of the self is not to be referred to the direct impact this practice is supposed to have within that domain where political decisions are taken and political power is exerted. If we can consider the care of the self as a form of resistance, if we are allowed to interpret it as the first step along the way forward the practice of freedom, this is due to the fact that the ethics of the self implies the enjoyment of a certain loneliness, meant not only as a detachment from any direct involvement in the game of power (a point sufficiently underscored above), but, above all, as an uninterrupted examination of the truth of one's own thoughts, inclinations and desires. The fact that this examination is part of the care of the self is what makes the latter a philosophical praxis. To take the point made here from the reverse side: that philosophy turns itself from the discourse that simply deals with truth and defines its function within the theoretical domain into the discourse that proves the truth of one's own conduct is precisely what allows to consider philosophy as a form of praxis. And philosophy can reveal its political significance only as a practice of the truth: if the work on the self carried out by the philosopher had no reference to the truth, it would remain a merely individual issue, totally disconnected from what concerns the collectivity.

The *askesis* analyzed in *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, in fact, could be defined as the embodiment of the *logos*. It would be wrong to let this embodiment resonate with the Christian idea of incarnation: the question, of course, is not how to bridge the gap between the transcendent sphere where deity has its place and the immanent sphere where fleshy beings live their lives enclosed within the cycle of generation and corruption. The question, rather, is how to act in such a way that the truth-telling – which sets out philosophy as a discourse – becomes an integral part of one's conduct of life. In order to achieve this goal, the subject must undergo a specific set of exercises. It is necessary to prepare oneself to face every unexpected event that may occur within individual life. This requires the development of a peculiar attitude which is not far from the one needed by the athlete: the latter is supposed to maintain his balance and composure in every circumstance, being the source of any hurdle or assault coming from the adversary unknown in advance. A second series of

16 Foucault (2005), 143.

exercises consists in embedding in one's mind a certain set of *logoi*, which are not simply propositions, statements or axioms concerning the laws of nature but are, rather, *praecepta*, or *dogmata*: their content is about what one has to do in order to deal with specific circumstances of life. They constitute reasonable guidelines for one's conduct of life. By repeating them it is possible to embed them in one's mind, so that they can result always available. Only in this way it becomes possible to modify one's behavior: the presence of these *logoi* in our mind does not cause the emergence of specific convictions, but induce the subject to act in this or that way. They are truly inductive schemas of action that can aid the subject when unexpected difficulties arise in our life. The whole complex of exercises needed to achieve these schemas constitutes what the authors taken into consideration by Foucault (like Plutarch or Marcus Aurelius) call *paraskeue*. Thanks to the *paraskeue*, the *logos* transforms itself in *ethos* – and this transformation is, according to Foucault, the most interesting feature of ancient *askesis*.

The *askesis* may then be defined as the set, the regular, calculated succession of procedures that are able to form, definitively fix, periodically reactivate and, if necessary, reinforce this *paraskeue* for an individual. The *askesis* is what enables truth-telling – truth-telling addressed to the subject and also truth-telling that the subject addresses to himself – to be constituted as the subject's way of being. The *askesis* makes truth-telling a mode of being of the subject.¹⁷

Few other examples of the set of exercises needed to transform the care of the self in a philosophical ascesis will make clearer why Foucault pays so much attention to it. An interesting form of *paraskeue* is the stoic *praemeditatio malorum*, which was an attempt to point one's attention to all possible evil and damaging events. The latter are not posited in the future, are not considered as more or less probable occurrences along a temporal continuum. They are rather presentified events, which stand in front of the subject with their affective charge. The scope of the exercise is not to prepare oneself to cope with bad events in the moment of their occurrence, but to consider how flimsy and

17 Foucault (2005), 327. In this context, it is also worth mentioning the importance that authors like Nietzsche, Bataille, and Klossowski had for Foucault. In Foucault (2001a), for example, he refers to their legacy in order to explain the genesis of his own attempt to problematize philosophy as a mode of being. But it must be underscored as well that the reflection upon the concept of *parrhesia* confers a totally new significance to the idea that philosophy can be seen as a personal experience.

inconsistent are all misfortunes and dooms that may occur in life. As pointed out in Seneca's *Moral Letters to Lucilius* 24, the stoic sage, in contrast to normal people, is able to evaluate and recognize if a bad event is bearable or not. And for the stoic sage almost all pains are supposed to be tolerable – only death does not obviously belong to the number of tolerable pains, but the brevity that characterizes its occurrence makes the worry over it inappropriate.

It is principally within the *praemeditatio malorum* that the concern with death becomes an element of the ascesis. In order to overcome the fear of death, it is necessary to consider the possibility of its occurrence in every moment of life and to live, consequently, every moment as if it were the last one. Far from remaining a remote content of thought, the presence of death becomes part of everyday life. This presence transforms our perception of time and, above all, the way in which we manage our duties and business. If each day can be the last one, and if the end of the day can coincide with the end of life, then our life gains in significance and we pay much more attention to our moral improvement.

But Foucault is much more interested in another result of the exercise the subject accomplishes when concerned with the possibility that the present day can be the last one. Foucault remarks that death meditation allows individuals to fashion a new and different self-perception. First of all, the death meditation makes possible an “instantaneous view of the present from above”, it “enables thought to make a cross section of the duration of life, the flow of activities, and the stream of representations. By imagining that the moment or day we are living is the last, we immobilize the present in a snapshot, so to speak”. In this way all our activities can be evaluated with accuracy and precision, so that it becomes possible to take decisions in compliance with the decrees of reason. The second view of oneself made possible by this kind of gaze of death is the retrospective view over the whole of life. “When we test ourselves as being at the point of dying, then we can look back over the whole of what our life has been. And the truth, or rather the value of this life will be able to appear”.¹⁸

It is also remarkable to notice that, by analyzing the ancient sources (Seneca, Marcus Aurelius, Epictetus among others) within which the topic of death mediation plays a pivotal role, Foucault underscores very carefully the fact that this form of *askesis* entail a form of philosophical care of the self that does not coincide entirely with what the classical tradition usually understood under the notion of “*gnothi seauton*”. The point is not to underestimate the

¹⁸ Foucault (2005), 479.

importance of intellectual knowledge: what makes the care of the self a philosophical matter is, after all, the concrete possibility to connect one's life and experience to the truth, to scrutinize one's actions through the lens of reason. But what really matters is that such a self-scrutiny can lead to an embodiment of the *logos* within one's every day conduct of life, and that the subject can make the experience of how the care of the self merges with the performativity of a given set of *logoi* that are supposed to become part of the individual's frame of mind. The care of the self designates a permanent occupation, "a work with its methods and objectives". So, if the precept expressed by the formula "*gnothi seauton*" refers to the mental attention one must pay to oneself, the practical – but we could even say "athletic" – dimension envisaged by the formula "*epimeleia heautou*" refers, rather, to "a whole domain of complex and regular activities".¹⁹

4 *Parrhesia* as Resistance

The examples just reported above are surely enough to give a brief account of what is at stake within Foucault's analysis of ancient *askesis*. These examples, however, are still not enough to make us understand in which sense Foucault's efforts to present ancient philosophy as *ethos* are a deliberate detour in direction of how to represent the necessary relationship between philosophy and the critical attitude that is required in order to generate a specific form of political resistance. Foucault was perfectly aware of the necessity to extend his analysis of ancient sources far beyond the stoic and epicurean (or, more generally, Hellenistic) domain – no matter how important stoic and epicurean sources can be as regards the richness and length of indications they convey about how to carry on the care of self that characterizes the philosophical *ethos*. If antiquity is to be seen as a set of images we can use to fashion a certain representation of ourselves, the final feature of our self-representation will depend on the choice made among the different images we decided to pay attention to. If it is so, the bulk of material which Foucault accounted of in *The Hermeneutic of the Subject* have seemingly led him to face a question that can be put as follows. How is it possible to consider the *epimeleia heautou* as the first step that must be accomplished toward a practice of freedom that can be exercised beyond the sphere of the *oikos* if the philosopher of the Hellenistic age operates as "a guide, a director"²⁰ – or, briefly, as what we would today call a

19 Foucault (2005), 493.

20 Foucault (2005), 137.

“personal coach”? It is not simply an abused historiographical *topos* to say that the end of the *polis* coincided with the end of a political culture that not only allowed for, but also improved much more participation in public and civic life. Such participation did not require that the members of the assembly were all philosophers, but surely stimulated the emergence of specific rhetorical and political competences, at least among the ruling elite.²¹ During the period in which authors like Philodemus, Musonius, Dion of Prusa or Epictetus flourished, on the contrary, the competence that one was able to acquire by attending the teaching offered by the various philosophical schools served as a way to improve oneself, to change one’s attitude, to submit one’s desire to a sort of therapy. Thus, the various exercises aiming to improve the care of the self that the philosopher was able to impart could not lead to breed a free citizen.

In this sense, Foucault’s analysis of antiquity is well aligned with our received idea about the great gap that exists between the degree of freedom enjoyed by the male citizen of the Athenian *polis* and the impossibility for the citizen of the Roman Empire to act autonomously as a political actor.²² The fact is remarkable not because it tells us something about Foucault’s accuracy as regards his reconstruction of antiquity, but because it raises the suspicion that the political significance of his analysis of antiquity could better fit the real purpose he wanted to pursue – namely to carry on a critique of the present – if we mirror ourselves in the life of a Roman citizen and not in that of a citizen of the Athenian democracy.

The point becomes clear if we consider that Foucault begins his lectures about *The Hermeneutic of the Subject* with an accurate analysis of Plato’s *Alcibiades*. The issue discussed in this dialogue concerns the education the young Alcibiades deserves as a descendant of an aristocratic family moving his first steps toward a political career. Socrates shows how insufficient was the education Alcibiades has previously received in order to become a political leader and then invites the young ambitious man to acquire the *techné* that is necessary in order to take care of oneself. In fact, only who is concerned about oneself, only who has learnt how to care for oneself, is then able to govern the *polis*. Foucault seems to be deeply concerned with what Plato’s dialogue stands for so clearly: the emergence of the problematization of the need to take care of oneself insofar as one has to govern others. Socrates’ statement about the deep tie between self-government and government of the *polis* is representative of a historical phase of Greek history in which the philosophical discourse

21 Ober (1989).

22 On the consequences of this fact upon the production of the philosophical discourse, see – among others – Donini (1982).

about the care of the self could be perceived as one of the basic presuppositions for the establishment of a government based on the *logos* and not simply for the improvement of those attitudes that are required to conduct a good individual life.

The meaning of Plato's dialogue (questions related to the authenticity of it are not an issue for Foucault) stands out both with regard to past models of self-empowerment and with regard to the Athenian political situation contemporary to Socrates. Foucault remarks that several religious practices of purification, which were well established in the Greek culture, forerun the technology of the self whose inception he locates in Plato's *Alcibiades*.²³ He refers – rather randomly, it must be added – both to those techniques that aimed at concentrating the soul, namely at avoiding the dispersal of the vital force that keeps the body alive, and to those techniques that allowed the subject to withdraw itself from the external world; the latter, for which the Greeks used the term *anachoresis* (a term, as Foucault correctly underscores, that has played an important role within the history of spirituality), consists of a detachment from ordinary life, from one's own engagement in the external world. Another important axis along which to locate the emergence of Plato's discourse on the care of the self is to be found in the Athenian debate about the education of young citizens. This debate focused, on one hand, on the difference between the Athenian and the Spartan education. The young Spartiates could enjoy a more radical and continuous education, which enabled him to partake in the social and political life of the *polis* since the beginning of adulthood. On the other, it aimed at reflecting upon the relationship between adults and adolescent males. This relationship, albeit important and well-integrated as a social feature within the Athenian way of life, was not always sufficient to allow for the full training and development of the future citizen. It is because of the manifest flaws of the Athenian educational system that, according to Foucault, the issue of the *epimeleia heautou* became central on the philosophical agenda – an issue that encompasses not only how to “take care of the self”, but also the dialectic between “governing” and “being governed”.²⁴

In this context, Plato still remains an important author within his analysis, but, as we will see shortly, it is thanks to the reference to other ancient sources as well that Foucault articulates the relationship between philosophy as a praxis and philosophy as a form of political action aiming to put in question the existing power relations. The last two lectures held at the Collège de

23 Foucault's analysis of this aspect of the archaic Greek culture drew on previous research in this field; see for example Gernet (1968), Vernant (1983) and Detienne (1996).

24 See Foucault (2005), 45.

France, *The Government of Self and Others* (1982–83) and *The Courage of the Truth* (1983–84), are entirely devoted to show how the truth-telling – or *parrhesia* – constituted one of the most intensive moments of the strain between the philosophical praxis and the political domain where the art of government is exerted. When the philosopher plays the role of the *parrhesiast*, of the truth-teller, according to Foucault, his position in face of the realm of politics is one of exteriority. This exteriority allows for a form of critique that can affect political life far deeper than that one instantiated by the prince's advisor or by the “couch” of young scions of well-off roman families. And precisely this exteriority must be maintained today as well if philosophy still aims at building a world where justice and individual freedom can be granted.

Philosophy as exteriority with regards to a politics which constitutes its test of reality, philosophy as critique of a domain of illusion which challenges it to constitute itself as true discourse, and philosophy as asceticism, that is to say, as constitution of the subject by himself, seem to me to constitute the mode of being of modern philosophy, or maybe that which, in the mode of being of modern philosophy, takes up the mode of being of ancient philosophy.²⁵

It is *parrhesia*, the truth-telling, what marks this exteriority, what puts, in other words, the philosopher in a position that forces the members of the *polis* to listen to him not because he is one of those “masters of truth” so vividly depicted by Marcel Detienne,²⁶ but because he instantiates the possibility of grounding a political community in the truth that stems from the *logos*.

After the first lesson, where he has shown – as reminded above – how important it is not to remove Kant's concept of *Aufklärung* from our horizon, Foucault establishes a narrow relationship between govern of self and others and the notion of *parrhesia* by defining the latter as “the obligation and possibility of telling the truth in procedures of government”, assuming, furthermore, that the truth-telling “can show how the individual is constituted as subject in the relationship to self and the relationship to others”. The relationship to self becomes evident by considering what Foucault defines as a pact: it is the “pact of the speaking subject with himself”.²⁷ In this way the subject binds himself to the statement he has just made, to the truth conveyed in the statement. At the same time, through this pact the subject binds himself to himself as the

25 Foucault (2010), 354.

26 Detienne (1996).

27 Foucault (2010), 64.

subject that has stated the truth. This double element of the parrhesiastic pact leads Foucault to define the parrhesiast as “someone who emphasizes his own freedom as an individual speaking”.²⁸ Now, this freedom can be dangerous, because it can bring the subject to face situations in which the truth-telling can cost his own life: “parrhesiasts are those who, if necessary, accept death for having told the truth”.²⁹ The problem is not simply that one’s utterance can be refused, or judged false. By challenging the power that rules the *polis* – no matter whether detained by a *tyrannos* or by the assembly – truth-telling aims at transforming the frame within which the political game takes place and, therefore, can be seen as a danger for the balance of the political community. This is due to the fact that the parrhesiastic discourse does not partake of the structure that characterizes the persuasive discourse of rhetoric. In the case that we want to consider *parrhesia* as a figure of thought, we must recognize that it is the plainest of all figures: referring to Quintilian’s *Institutio* 9.2.27, Foucault highlights that *parrhesia* represents “the most basic form of rhetoric, where the figure of thought consists in not using any figure”.³⁰ In other words, the philosopher, when standing in front of those who govern to speak to them about the way they should govern others and govern themselves, does it by occupying a position of exteriority with regards to politics. But the fact that he does it without using the force of persuasion, addressing directly the political issue at stake, implies the possibility that he risks his life.

The fact that truth-telling could entail a danger for the philosopher’s existence lays at the core of Foucault’s argument about the relationship between philosophy as a form of resistance and philosophy as care of the self. First of all, truth-telling as a dangerous attitude constitutes the only way in which philosophy can prove itself as a praxis that has a political significance, in the sense that it can bring the *polis* to reflect upon the truth needed to govern according to the *logos*. This is not in contradiction with the exteriority of philosophy in front of the *polis* described above. Quite the contrary. The philosopher as *parrhesiast*, precisely because of the irreducibility of his position toward politics meant as the ordinary art of government, can address the political game as a whole: “the object of the philosopher’s intervention must be the entire regime of the city, its *politeia*”.³¹ He speaks not in order to give advice upon a specific issue, upon a single trouble affecting the political community, or upon all matters of the government of the *polis*; of course, he says what is to be done, but

28 Foucault (2010), 65.

29 Foucault (2010), 56.

30 Foucault (2010), 53; on this point, see also 351–374.

31 Foucault (2010), 233.

he explains why a certain decision must be taken and, by doing so, offers the possibility to rethink entirely the city's regime.

Furthermore, Foucault is very careful in showing that only the specific work on self that Greek philosophers defined as *epimeleia heautou* can constitute the presupposition on which *parrhesia* proceeds. Not only in the sense that *parrhesia* can be performed only if the parrhesiast perceives it as an utterance that involves the whole existence of the philosopher – a point already made above; but, more deeply, in the sense that the readiness to put one's life in danger implies the will to act as an outsider, to act as somebody that can suffer a deep loss if the parrhesiastic utterance finds itself in opposition to shared opinions, or to prince's moods.

Because of the complex and conflicting relationship he had with Dionysius of Syracuse, Plato could very vividly perceive how ephemeral and fickle the prince's mood might be. Foucault's analysis of Plato's *Seventh Letter*, in which what drove Plato to accept Dion's invitation to Syracuse is detailed, serves two scopes. On the one hand, Plato's *Seventh Letter* offers us the opportunity to deal with a representative case study of parrhesiastic behavior: had Plato missed the *kairos* offered by Dion's invitation, he would have lost a unique opportunity to carry out in practice his ideas about laws and constitutions. On the other hand, the fact that Plato acted in obedience to reason and justice reminds us of which kind of inner necessity ties philosophy as a form of responsibility toward the *logos* and philosophy as a form of critique envisaging the foundation of political life.

Two other sources Foucault analyzed within his Lectures must be mentioned here, which are among the few referred to Athenian democracy. First of all, Thucydides' treatment of Pericles' role as a guide of the *polis*. Pericles' speeches – the first after the coming of Spartan legation (Thuc. 1.140–144), the second being the famous Funeral Oration (Thuc. 2.35–46), and the third held in occasion of the outbreak of the plague (Thuc. 2.61–64) – express the relationship between how Athenian democracy concretely worked and the role played by somebody who was willing to address the assembly not in his own name, but in the name of the whole political body. According to Foucault, what Thucydides' text helps us to grasp is the ideal of a democratic *polis* that is grounded in the proper use of *parrhesia*: it is from Pericles' mouth, in fact, that we learn that democracy is defined not by the fact that “each can speak and give his opinion, but by the fact that the city is administered in the general interest”.³²

32 Foucault (2010), 178.

There are four elements that characterize the relationship between Athenian democracy and *parrhesia*. The first condition for the exercise of *parrhesia* is democracy as a form of government that accords equality to all citizens. The second condition is the presence of group of individuals who are able to partake in the public discussions in virtue of their authority and competence, who possess the capability to persuade and move the assembly with respect to the decisions that are to be taken. The sheer presence of democracy as a set of formal rules of government, however, is not enough; what counts more is that those who speak to the assembly tell the truth. The parrhesiastic discourse must be true, it must be recognized as a form of truth-telling. The fourth element concerns the attitude of those who want to persuade their audience. Due to the high degree of rivalry and competition among the political actors involved in the democratic process of decision making, those who want to deliver a discourse of truth must demonstrate courage.

But Foucault's main concern with regard to the Athenian context within which the parrhesiastic discourse took its shape aims, above all, at questioning "how democracy can withstand the truth".³³ What Foucault shows by analyzing the figure of Pericles according to the Thucydidean reconstruction is the complex and uneasy role that truth-telling played within Athenian democracy. Pericles' plans run always the risk of being refused: Pericles' position is surely clear and unambiguous, anybody can put in question neither his competence nor his willingness to act in the name of the common good; moreover his familiar ancestry is outstanding (from his mother's side he comes from the powerful family of the Alcmaeonids), nevertheless the path he intends to follow during the conduct of war is uneven, hazardous and unpredictable. Thus, it is possible that his fellow citizens do not agree with his strategy. In other words, neither Pericles' insights nor his peculiar strategic intelligence were able, as such, to prevent his political guidance of the *polis* from failure. Then the question: what assured Pericles' success? Foucault's answer is unambiguous: his *parrhesia*. Pericles could see the truth, he revealed to be capable to tell it, and was devoted to the general interest. Moreover, he could prove to be morally reliable, honest, and incorruptible. Only by having these qualities he was able to exercise "the ascendancy necessary for a democratic city to be governed – in spite of or through democracy".³⁴ In other words, Foucault's reconstruction of the Thucydidean text does not lead to the result that *parrhesia* and democracy are necessarily coupled together for the good of the *polis*; only under specific

33 Foucault (2010), 174.

34 Foucault (2010), 180.

circumstances, whereas the peculiar character and the talent of the politician play an important role, the exercise of *parrhesia* and truth-telling entails an ascendancy of the ruler over the city from which the latter can take a fruitful advantage.

Not by chance Foucault's analysis of Athenian democracy goes on by taking into consideration Isocrates' speech *On the peace*. In this text we find the example of the fact that *parrhesia* can also constitute a danger for the *polis*. What appears here is the presence of individuals who, lacking the courage that characterized Pericles' behavior, address the assembly just to "ensure their own safety and their own success by pleasing the listeners, by flattering their feelings and opinions".³⁵ What they bring to expression is the prevailing opinion, which does not necessary lead to take the best decision for the *polis*.

The relationship between democracy and *parrhesia* is thus an ambiguous one: there cannot be democracy without *parrhesia*, "but democracy threatens the very existence of true discourse" by giving to anyone, even to those who speak only in the name of their own interest, the opportunity to speak.

That *parrhesia* and democracy are strictly tied to each other is an important element within Foucault's argument, but the latter cannot be reduced to this tie. Otherwise, it could be hard for Foucault to ascribe – as he effectively does – an ideal-typical feature to the philosopher's attitude instantiated by *parrhesia*. Thus, it is no surprise that Foucault kept describing the historical development of parrhesiastic behavior by taking into consideration the role played by Cynicism within classical philosophy. His death occurred in June 1984, short after the end of the Lectures *The Courage of the Truth*, the second half of which is entirely devoted to describing how far Cynicism went in radicalizing the parrhesiastic nature of philosophy meant as a mode of being. These Lectures are his last statement about the way to get through the achievement of individual freedom, and therefore can be read as his ultimate legacy.

Cynicism constitutes the extreme form of *parrhesia*, by far the most radical one. The cynic philosopher embodies the short way to virtue, the one that is entirely based on an ascetic praxis.

There are two ways, one of which is lengthy, relatively easy, and does not call for great effort, which is the way by which one achieves virtue through the *logos*, that is to say, through discourses and learning them [...]. Then there is the other, short way, which is the difficult, arduous way which rises straight to the summit over many obstacles and which is, as it

35 Foucault (2010), 183.

were, the silent way. Anyway, it is the way of exercise, of *askesis*, of practices of destitution and endurance.³⁶

The *topos* of the two ways is not specific to Cynicism, but cynic philosophy confers to it a new significance. By emphasizing to an extreme degree the importance of transforming his own life in a visible and concrete proof of the truth he ascribes to the grounding concepts of his own thought, the Cynic transforms the meaning of *parrhesia* as well. *Parrhesia* ceases to be the hallmark of an attitude that, on occasions, generates a specific behavior under specific circumstances, leading the subject to act in the name of truth, when the general interest of the *polis* is at stake, even if it can cost his life to do so. The parrhesiastic behavior of the Cynic coincides rather with his entire existence, is an ongoing series of silent utterances spoken by the body language and by behavioral choices that can be immediately perceived as revolutionary by others.

The revolutionary character of Cynicism explains, according to Foucault, the reason why some of ancient sources showed a deep disappointment toward the radicalism of the cynic way of life. The behavior of the Cynic in every day life has been seen, in fact, as a sort of distortion of what true philosophy was supposed to be. This led many authors of antiquity (Seneca, Epictetus, the Emperor Julian among others) to distinguish between Cynicism as a universal philosophical standpoint, as a possible instantiation of what philosophy is or can be, and Cynicism as a caricature of philosophy that renders a misleading image of the latter.

It is the broken mirror in which every philosopher can and must recognize himself, in which he can and must recognize the very image of philosophy, the reflection of what it is and should be, and of what he is and would like to be. And at the same time, the philosopher sees in this mirror something like a grimace, a violent, ugly, unsightly deformation in which there is no way in which he could recognize either himself or philosophy. All of this amounts to saying, quite simply, that Cynicism was seen, I think, as the banality of philosophy, but its scandalous banality.³⁷

Despite the fact that the Cynic way of life runs the risk of bringing the parrhesiastic attitude to such a point that it becomes nearly impossible to recognize

36 Foucault (2011), 207.

37 Foucault (2011), 232.

its positive value, the way in which Foucault describes Cynicism reveals his fascination with this mode of practicing philosophy. Cynicism seems indeed to embody the most complete and radical form of a philosophical existence that puts in question the political and social order. By challenging all the customs and conventions that are based on commonsense and are therefore supposed to be self-evident, the Cynic aims, thanks to his unconventional behavior, not only at marking these customs and conventions as artificial, relative and groundless, but also at proving that a different social order is possible – a social order based on the decrees of nature.

Foucault underscores the importance that the reference to the realm of nature assumes within Cynicism. Different from the ordered and harmonic conception of nature we can find within stoic thought, the image of nature Cynicism conveyed had the function to represent a form of radical otherness that the mental models shared within contemporary society could not encompass without generating a sense of unease. In this context, the very association of the name of the philosophical movement with the name of an animal (the dog) becomes meaningful, as Foucault does not miss to highlight. Motivated by the willingness to conduct a straight life, the Cynic derives directly from the realm of animality the criterion according to which it is possible to judge what is wrong and what is right among human beings. This criterion helps to cut away from our ordinary conduct of life all that is to be seen as redundant or superfluous. The Cynic does not mean that the distinction between human beings and animals must disappear, but he confers a new meaning to this distinction: the animal ceases to be the projection of all that we find inferior, or, worse, repugnant; instead, animal life becomes the paradigm we need in order to shape a life-style that is not in contrast with nature. So, within Cynicism, animality

will be charged with positive value, it will be a model of behavior, a material model in accordance with the idea that the human being must not have as a need what the animal can do without. [...] When need is a weakness, a dependence, a lack of liberty, man must have no other needs than those of the animal, those satisfied by nature itself. [...] Animality is not a given; it is a duty. Or rather, it a given, offered us directly by nature, but at the same time to be continually taken up.

Shortly – and icastically – Foucault defines animality as an “exercise”.³⁸ Like an animal, the Cynic is someone that knows perfectly well what he needs and therefore cannot suffer from the uninterrupted emergence of new desires as

38 Foucault (2011), 265.

people normally do. He lives according to his own principles, and precisely this coherence between theory and praxis makes him free. Of course, this freedom is the result of his ascetic conduct of life, it is the direct consequence of the work he does on himself by observing carefully his thoughts. Thus, *parrhesia* and *epimeleia heautou* are so strictly intertwined to each other that Foucault describes their mutual connection as a “relationship of physical, corporal conformity, so to speak, between the Cynic and the truth”,³⁹

Furthermore, Foucault points his attention to the fact that the freedom the Cynic enjoys is to be understood as a form of sovereignty. The Cynic is free not only in the sense that his blessed life does not depend on the realization of unmanageable desires, but also in the sense that he establishes a relation of enjoyment to himself: his life is a life of possession of itself. “Being sovereign is first and foremost being one’s own, belonging to oneself”. Moreover, the Cynic is able to take pleasure in himself, to find in himself “all the sources and foundations of true delight, which is not that of the body, or that which depends on external objects, but the delight one can have indefinitely without ever being deprived of it”.⁴⁰ This sovereign life implies not only a peculiar form of relation to oneself, but also opens out onto a relationship to the other and others. The sheer presence of the Cynic among other members of the human assembly constitutes a sort of gift, a blessing. First, the Cynic is a true master, not a master whose role is limited to pass knowledge on to those who come to listen to him. He is a master that establishes a relationship of care, assistance, and help. In short, he is more like a physician that can alleviate other’s ills. Second, his sovereign life is useful and beneficial to others also because it is a sort of lesson of universal significance that is given to humankind by the very way in which he lives.

Cynic’s sovereign life assumes a further significance when confronted with the legitimate source of political power. In this context, Foucault cannot help giving an account of the famous anecdote that describes the confrontation between Diogenes and Alexander,⁴¹ a matrix scene to which the Cynics constantly referred. Even in front of the king’s glory the cynic maintains his sovereignty – and we would miss the punch line of the story if we were not able to grasp that Diogenes’ sovereignty, not Alexander’s, is the only true one. The cynic is of course a hidden king, ignored as such by most of people because of his poverty, nakedness, and shamelessness. But the core of cynic *parrhesia* lies entirely in this dramatization of what is normally understood as sovereign life.

39 Foucault (2011), 310.

40 Foucault (2011), 271.

41 Foucault (2011), 275 ff.

But what Foucault is at most interested in is the peculiar militantism that characterizes the *bios philosophikos* of the Cynic – a militantism entailed by his sovereignty, his endurance, his willingness to challenge the accepted rules on which society is based. Foucault confers an archetypal value to this militantism, in the sense that all the features assumed by the revolutionary subject along the western tradition can be brought back to the cynic attitude. The Christian martyr, the Christian monk that decides to detach himself from the world and to spend his life in the desert, the member of a secret society,⁴² the member of a revolutionary party that aims at establishing a new social order, the artist and all those who choose a style of existence that contrast radically with the conventions, habits, and values of society: in sum, all those who bear witness by their own life and behavior of the concrete possibility of an *other* life perform a militancy that found its first and most complete expression in the cynic militantism. In the Lecture of 29 February 1984, Foucault draws particular attention to the deep connection between art and militantism – thus suggesting that modern art can be seen as the true heir of ancient Cynicism.

Modern art has what could be called an essentially anti-cultural function. The consensus of culture has to be opposed by the courage of art in its barbaric truth. Modern art is Cynicism in culture; the cynicism of culture turned against itself. And if this is not just in art, in the modern world, in our world, it is especially in art that the most intense forms of a truth-telling with the courage to take the risk of offending are concentrated.⁴³

So, if Plato's Socrates can be seen as someone whose main intention was to change the rules governing the *polis*, the Cynic philosophical program aimed at transforming the world: by displaying a mode of being that everybody could observe and perceive as radically different from the common one, the Cynic intended to affect the shared frame of mind of peers as well as to bear witness of the fact that a different world was possible. "The aim of this practice of the

42 Here a further – even if short – explanation is necessary. According to Foucault, the Christian monk accomplished a form of *parrhesia* that maintained the essential traits of the classic one. But Foucault is very careful in distinguishing the context in which monastic life arose from the context in which ancient *parrhesia* has been developed. What he emphasizes is the fact that the Christian monk was prevented from making the experience of freedom that, on the contrary, was supposed to be the result of the care of the self. The goal pursued through the Christian ascetic conduct of life was to create men and women who were able to obey, for whom, better, the practice of obedience was to become part of their whole conduct of life. On this subject, see Foucault (2014).

43 Foucault (2011), 189.

truth characterizing the Cynic life is not just to say and show what the world is in its truth. Its aim [...] is to show that the world [...] will be able to transfigure itself and become other in order to get back to what it is in its truth, only at the price of a change, a complete alteration, the complete change and alteration in the relation one has to self".⁴⁴

Thus, the Cynic attitude so vividly described in Foucault's Lectures of 1983–84 seems to meet the main urgencies he gave expression to during the last phase of his philosophical career – namely, how to build an ethics of the self that can at the same time embody what is required in order to challenge the existing power structure. Already in the Lectures of 1981–82, in fact, Foucault claimed that the impossibility of bringing the ancient philosophical *ethos* to life again couldn't be seen as a reason for renouncing the acknowledgement of its importance for us: despite the difficulties related to this project, the constitution of an ethic of the self is "an urgent, fundamental, and politically indispensable task, if it is true after all that there is no first or final point of resistance to political power other than in the relationship one has to oneself".⁴⁵

5 Nussbaum's Theory of Justice – or, What Foucault's Philosophy Lacks

It is true that an ethic of the self based on the cynic model cannot be reconstructed and brought back to life in our contemporary society as well as it is problematic to assume that the militancy of the artist constitutes a form of resistance that could hint at alternative modes of self-fashioning – a path, the latter, that Foucault deliberately explored also in a text of 1984 devoted to the question of the Enlightenment, where, emphasizing how Baudelaire's conception of the artist helps us to understand the genesis of modern subjectivity, he affirms that modern man "is not the man who goes off to discover himself, his secrets and his hidden truth; he is the man who tries to invent himself. This modernity [...] compels him to face the task of producing himself".⁴⁶ Nevertheless, the task Foucault formulated by analyzing the ancient *ethos* based on *parresia* must be recognized as an issue that cannot be set apart or erased with a simple gesture, as if this issue were not to concern us any more. But the sense of unease that might affect the reader of Foucault's last Lectures on ancient philosophy does not concern the suggestion that we should question what we

44 Foucault (2011), 315.

45 Foucault (2005), 252.

46 Foucault (1997b), 312.

are, or, better, how we have become what we are as subjects, but concerns rather the philosophical presuppositions that support this suggestion. So, coming back from the journey through Greece Foucault has invited us to make, even if we can barely expect that modern individuals shape their subjectivity according to the ancient *ethos*, we are not like an empty-handed Anacharsis: we have learnt that only the construction of a new form of subjectivity based on the care of the self constitutes an essential presupposition for any collective practice of freedom. Yet, the young Anacharsis, into whom we turned ourselves for a moment, must either way acknowledge that the outcome of the whole journey is not satisfying. Almost unavoidably, in fact, the following question must be asked: is Foucault suggesting that any collective action that must be undertaken in order to improve individual freedom occurs *only* as a result of specific changes that affect the individual way of conduct and the personal life-style? If the answer were positive (and I think that no other answer is possible), then the political significance of his position would be nothing more than an attempt to bring again to life the old liberal stance – or, better, the republican stance, within which the willingness not to be governed arbitrarily has played a stronger role than within the liberal tradition.⁴⁷ In a nutshell, what Foucault proposes is a scenario where well-educated individuals, possessing enough time to take care of themselves, are supposed to possess, above all, the insight that the care of the self must generate a behavior that constitutes *per se* a challenge to the accepted rules governing the society they live in. Whether the claim that a social and political change stemming from the efforts done by some progressive individuals can be sustained with enough evidence is a question I prefer to leave aside, being it a question that pertains the domain of sociology. After all, the objection that must be raised regarding the philosophical foundations of Foucault's argument is serious enough. The objection I want to formulate is not primarily related to the care of the self: the latter can be seen as a form of therapy the subject undergoes for the sake of his/her own well-being. Problematic is rather the motivation that is required to sustain the willingness to confer to one's own work on self a political significance. This motivation can only stem from a theory of justice, which Foucault's work lacks completely.

As noticed before, Foucault's position presents some similarities to the liberal one (taken in a very broad sense). A sympathetic affinity with the latter can be traced in the Lectures held in 1978–79. In these Lectures he reconstructs the genesis of neoliberal governmentality, which constitutes not a development,

47 Pettit (1997).

but a radical transformation of the classical liberal stance. Foucault opposes liberalism and neoliberalism in such a way that the judgment about the first is positive, while the second is depicted as a form of government of individual life that leaves a narrower space for individual agency – not insofar as the neoliberal project gives birth to a totalitarian system, but insofar as individuals are led to act within a preconceived architecture of choice, no matter whether the organization they act within is a public institution or a firm. Nevertheless, the main topic of the Lectures of 1978–79 was the genesis of modern biopolitics, not the possibility of opposing the liberal stance to the neoliberal governmentality.⁴⁸ So, in this case as well, the question posed above remains without an answer.

To conclude: generally speaking, more than a generic plea for challenging the power rules governing our present society cannot be found in his writings. Hence, from a systematic point of view, in order to complete Foucault's appeal for the construction of new forms of subjectivity and to make it more persuasive it is necessary to search for a solution elsewhere. A good solution, I suggest, would consist in taking into consideration Martha Nussbaum's work.⁴⁹

The reasons for doing this are threefold. First, Foucault is aware of the fact that freedom "is not defined as a right to be free, but as a capacity for free action",⁵⁰ but he never develops this point in a consistent way. On the contrary, Nussbaum's attempt to complete the liberal conception of freedom is precisely based on a theory of central human capabilities.⁵¹ Second, Nussbaum turns her attention to the contribution that comes from the Aristotelian perspective according to the assumption that the latter can better produce the anthropological foundation needed by whatsoever theory of justice⁵² – instead, Foucault's reconstruction of ancient thought lacks any reference to the Aristotelian tradition. Third, Nussbaum's analysis of the care of the self, to which she devoted one of her most important work on ancient philosophy, raises very clearly the issue I referred to above, namely how to turn the work on self we are invited to carry on by ancient authors into a conscious politicization of subjective self-fashioning that can effectively support the need for more individual and collective freedom.⁵³

48 Foucault (2008).

49 See also Tobias (2005).

50 Foucault (2010), 310.

51 Nussbaum (2001), 404 ff.

52 Nussbaum (1990b).

53 Nussbaum (1996), 484–510.

Nussbaum's theory of central human capabilities offers the opportunity to complete and broaden Rawls' theory of justice in such a way that it becomes possible to take into consideration the real and concrete functioning of human beings without presupposing any essentialist conception of human nature. Nussbaum's approach starts from the way in which men and women build their own relationship to themselves and to other members of our species (without neglecting members of other species); this approach aims at providing the conceptual tools a reasonable individual needs in order to judge whether other individuals are involved in a social or political context that might prevent them from conducting a good life.

Furthermore, Nussbaum is also aware of the fact that individuals need to be educated in order to know what a good life is, how it looks like, to which extent it is reasonable to make a conscious effort in order to achieve it. She has devoted a noteworthy effort to better articulate the question of how to improve both the subjective perception of one's condition and the capability to imagine the steps one has to undertake in order to pursue one's happiness. The Aristotelian premise of Nussbaum's discourse comes to light with great evidence here: since the domain of practical reason cannot be managed thanks to the body of knowledge that has the form of the *episteme*, we need a conception of rational choice that leaves room for the emotions and the imagination. The latter form, so to speak, what a rational individual needs in order to value the real constituents of the good life being conscious of the fact that these constituents cannot be measured in a way that we could define as "scientific".⁵⁴ Hence the necessity to improve our acquaintance with the classics: both confronting the experience of life we find in classical literary works with the one that is proper to us as inhabitants of the modern era and learning to appreciate the universal value of human efforts toward self-realization as represented in Greek tragedies or in works belonging to other literary traditions constitute that what one needs in order to cultivate one's own imagination; and this exercise of imagining human experience in its more general and universal form sharpen our moral judgment, so that it becomes possible to evaluate the bad or good conditions that affect the life of other individuals, even when they are far from being members of the close and small community we belong to.

What is at stake here, in other words, is the consciousness that societies shape the judgments that form the cognitive content of compassion. Starting from this consciousness, it becomes important to contrast those narratives that prevent individuals both from imagining the injustice suffered by

54 See in particular Nussbaum (1990), 54–105.

others and from longing for a world where the most brutal forms of injustice have no place anymore. Precisely in this context the acquaintance with the classical literature allows for a work on self that can lead to a radical transformation of individual subjectivity. In a certain way, this work on self is not essentially different from the work on self discussed in Foucault's last Lectures on *parrhesia* and *epimeleia heautou*. But there are important differences as well. Nussbaum's discourse about the ethical and political significance of the work on self that might originate from a certain acquaintance with the classics presupposes more a well performing public school system, to which everybody has access, than the good will shared by a small elite that feel unease with the prevailing social order and wish therefore they were able to make clear that a different world is possible simply by embodying a different mode of being.

Yet, what really matters for the purpose I pursue here is the fact that Nussbaum's conception of the way in which the use of the classics might affect our contemporaneity rests on a theory of justice that is both self-consistent and able to stand in front of an assembly where individuals belonging to different cultural traditions sit together in order to prove its cross-cultural significance.⁵⁵ Precisely because she is willing to follow Pericles' suggestion according to which the love of artistic excellence is deeply connected "with the production of a certain sort of independent and passionate citizenry",⁵⁶ Nussbaum seems to be perfectly aware of the fact that justice is a matter of reason as well. Our present task consists thus in embedding the good reasons for living in a society based on principles of justice in a shared narrative that can affect both the imagination and the emotions. A task that we can better commit ourselves to, I think, if we are ready to combine Foucault's and Nussbaum's philosophical perspectives – despite the unwritten call coming from the academia for a clear and good-mannered separation of scientific domains and philosophical traditions.

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55 Nussbaum (2006), 9–95 and 224–324.

56 Nussbaum (2001), 433.

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