

The Care of the Present: On Foucault's Ontological Machine

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In the same years in which Foucault developed his hermeneutics of the subject, which focused on an archaeology of the “care of the self”, his research revealed an interest in ontology. He also made clear that this ontological approach to the “present” was in fact, despite appearances, representative of his entire critical, philosophical project. How can we establish a connection between the ontological approach and his research on care, and how can this connection be useful for understanding Foucault's philosophical practice? The notion of a “machine” that is oriented to the present and in turn derived from the request for freedom that stems from this present can help us to understand this connection. In order to make it clear, I will first examine the forms by which Foucault clarifies his ontological inquiry and its connection to his previous archaeological and genealogical methods. Second, I will examine how this inquiry, despite its apparent incoherence, belongs directly to Foucault's coherent philosophical practice. In particular, I will show how this inquiry is at the same time an archaeology of this practice, a liberating attitude oriented toward the present. I will then examine the connections between Foucault's archaeology of care of the self and of others in antiquity and forms of surveillance in modernity, some of which derived from the former. In this sense, I will show how the practice of care establishes a historical struggle between opposite configurations: those that aim at a form of control, and those

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that aim at a form of an-archic freedom. Finally, I will show that it is the latter that both informed and inspired Foucault's philosophical attitude of care as critical care of the present.

An ontological inquiry

Readers of the later Foucault's work will be familiar with his references to a "historical ontology of ourselves", a "critical ontology of ourselves", an "ontology of modernity", and an "ontology of the present" and "of present reality" (Foucault 1997a: 315ff; Foucault 2001b: 1506-07; Foucault 2010: 21).² For those who were familiar with his previous analyses, this shift was rather unexpected. At the beginning of his career, Foucault had responded to phenomenological approaches by developing—through his "archaeo-genealogical enterprise" (Han 1998: 305)—a deep critique of fundamental transcendentalism and ontology. The resurgence of a discourse on "being" thus prompted a fair amount of disquietude. Over the past decades, Foucault's ontological approach has been explored by specialists with the goal of situating it within (and reconciling it with) his work as a whole. The progression of the publication of his lectures and writings confirms this possibility and provides a new foundation for appreciating the ontological orientation of his works.

Following Foucault's words, it is possible to approach the peculiarity of this ontology as a questioning of the historical conditions through which, as modern people,

² On the meaning of "present" (*présent*) and "present reality" (*actualité*), see Revel (2002: 5-6). For an overview of the topic, see Revel (2003), Erozan (2006), Ong-Van-Cung (2013), Raffnsøe, Gudman-Høyer, and Thaning (2016: 455-465).

we say what we say, see what we see, and act as we act (Foucault 1997a: 315; see Revel 2015: 8). As such, Foucault's ontology can be seen as a hidden thread that runs through his previous approaches, and thus as being inextricably connected to them. In other words, as methods, archaeology and genealogy can be considered two different moments of a "historical ontology", a machine that Foucault would ultimately define as a "critical ontology of ourselves" (Foucault 1997a: 315ff) and as an "ontology of the present" (Foucault 2010: 21). Let us recall how Foucault described his archaeology in 1974:

for me archaeology is the following: a historico-political attempt based not on relations of similarity between past and present, but on relations of continuity and on the possibility of defining the tactical aims of strategies of struggle precisely in terms of this. (Foucault 2001a: 1512, *my translation*)³

Just a few lines below, he adds that archaeology is "a critical machine, a machine that puts into question certain power relations, a machine that has, or that should have, a liberating function" (Foucault 2001a: 1512, *my translation*).⁴ In a similar sense, just two years later—in 1976—Foucault describes the relation between the two historical machines of genealogy and archaeology:

³ In the original: "Pour moi, l'archéologie, c'est ça: une tentative historico-politique qui ne se fonde pas sur des relations de ressemblance entre le passé et le présent, mais plutôt sur des relations de continuité et sur la possibilité de définir actuellement des objectifs tactiques de stratégies de lutte, précisément en fonction de cela".

⁴ In the original: "Une machine critique, une machine qui remet en question certaines relations de pouvoir, une machine qui a, ou du moins devrait avoir, une fonction libératrice".

Genealogy would thus, in relation to the project of inscribing knowledges in the hierarchies of power proper to science, be an enterprise of desubjugating historical knowledges and making them free, that is to say, capable of opposing and fighting against the coercion of a unitary, formal and scientific theoretical discourse ... In short: we could perhaps say that archaeology is the method proper to the analysis of local discursivities thus described, and that genealogy is the tactic that makes use, from the discursivities thus described, of the desubjugated knowledges that emerge from them. This, for the entire project. (Foucault 2001b: 167, *my translation*)⁵

Archaeological and genealogical mechanics thus define a sort of “integrated” (not alternative) mechanics, playing a crucial role in the possibility of knowing, transforming and intervening in the present. As Foucault himself would later stress, this very mechanics is to be explicated and amplified through the ontological approach clarified in the lectures of the 1980s. The role of this mechanics belongs indeed on the one hand to a proper ontological question—what are we, we who share this historical age?—and on the other hand to a specific task of “modern” philosophy: a task described by Foucault as an *ethos*, the specific attitude of philosophy as a critical practice inscribed on the great field of philosophical practices opened up by the Enlightenment.

⁵ In the original: “La généalogie, ce serait donc, par rapport au projet d’une inscription des savoirs dans la hiérarchie du pouvoir propre à la science, une sorte d’entreprise pour désassujettir les savoirs historiques et les rendre libres, c’est-à-dire capables d’opposition et de lutte contre la coercition d’un discours théorique unitaire, formel et scientifique.... En deux mots : on pourrait peut-être dire que l’archéologie, ce serait la méthode propre à l’analyse des discursivités locales, et la généalogie, la tactique qui fait jouer à partir des discursivités locales ainsi décrites les savoirs désassujettis qui s’en dégagent. Cela, pour restituer le projet d’ensemble”.

In 1984, commenting on Kant's answer to the question "What is Enlightenment?", Foucault returns to the meaning of this experimental attitude, which was grounded in Kant and which intersected with his own:

In that sense this criticism is not transcendental, and its goal is not that of making a metaphysics possible: it is genealogical in its design and archaeological in its method. Archaeological—and not transcendental—in the sense that it will not seek to identify the universal structures of all knowledge [*connaissance*] or of all possible moral action, but will seek to treat the instances of discourse that articulate what we think, say, and do as so many historical events. And this critique will be genealogical in the sense that it will not deduce from the form of what we are what it is impossible for us to do and to know; but it will separate out, from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think. (Foucault 1997a: 315-316)

According to Foucault, this critical attitude equates to a "critical ontology of ourselves" (Foucault 1997a: 315). Thanks to its archaeo-genealogical mechanics, it can be approached as "a patient labor giving form to our impatience for liberty" (Foucault 1997a: 319). Through his insistence on freedom as a main aim of the critical work of modern philosophy—"I solidly believe in human freedom" (Foucault 2001b: 1512, *my translation*),⁶ Foucault would state in an interview from 1984—we can thus observe how Foucault's ontological inquiry inherits aspects of previous epistemological approaches: a continuity that reveals the core of his previous research as also aiming to secure the freedom of forms of living in the present (see Oksala 2005: 182 ff.).

⁶ In the original: "Je crois solidement à la liberté humaine".

Self-genealogy and the present as an ontological field

Within this approach, Foucault manages to situate his own archaeological and genealogical research, as well as his own practice, in the field of the present, considered as the proper ontological object of modern philosophy: “What is philosophy today—philosophical activity, I mean—if it is not the critical work that thought brings to bear on itself?” (Foucault 1985: 9). To understand the working principle of the philosophical machine that Foucault would call “ontological” only at the end of his path, it is necessary to approach not just Foucault’s “toolbox” but rather his engagement in tirelessly questioning his own practice. What is at stake is the necessity—not available to us prior to the publication of the complete lectures given at the Collège de France—of applying Foucault’s own method to himself, of approaching Foucault not only as a historian of this or that practice or notion but as a genealogist and archaeologist of his own philosophical practice: as an ontologist of himself. The practical form of Foucault’s ontology seems in this sense to have been implemented in Foucault’s self-genealogy as a philosopher.⁷

Drafts of this self-genealogy are present in his texts on the modern attitude in Kant and Baudelaire from 1984 and in his courses on the *Government of the Self and*

⁷ “Whenever I have tried to carry out a piece of theoretical work, it has been on the basis of my own experience, always in relation to processes I saw taking place around me. It is because I thought I could recognize in the things I saw, in the institutions with which I dealt, in my relations with others, cracks, silent shocks, malfunctionings ... that I undertook a particular piece of work, a few fragments of autobiography” (Foucault 1990a: 156). See Eribon (1991: 27-30). For the characterization of Foucault’s philosophical practice as “self-modification” and *askēsis* concerning the present, see McGushin (2007: 285), Iftode (2013: 77), Raffnsøe, Thaning and Gudman-Høyer (2018: 12).

Others (see Foucault 1997a: 303-19; Foucault 2001b: 1498-1507; Foucault 2010; Foucault 2011). Here, Foucault emphasizes that his ontology of the present derives from the critical attention to the present as a main field of modern philosophical practice that was already evident in the work of certain authors, specifically Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, Weber, Husserl, Heidegger, Horkheimer, and Habermas (see Foucault 1997a: 303; Foucault 2001b: 1507; Foucault 2010: 11-21). For these authors, what was at stake was a modern *prosochē* first reserved for the Enlightenment as a field of contemporary critical practices and of philosophy: as a field of our possible experiences (Foucault 2001b: 1506). For Foucault, what is at stake is the specific way in which philosophical modernity came to question the *ethos*, the attitude, that characterizes the present, or better, the bystanders involved in the present: in other words, the attitude shared by those who live in a specific historical present. The image, and the paradigm, of this ontology of the present is the basis of the question that lies at the heart of Kant's text on Enlightenment, according to Foucault.

“What is Enlightenment?” asks Kant. Or, as Foucault translates this question: what is this present in which we live? How did we come to be what we are? It is within the framework of this genealogical philosophy that Foucault situates his own philosophical attitude, drawing a line of contiguity connecting the different objects that interested him: an ontological question that has as its basic reference the (utterly modern) problem of what we are in this time that is ours, one that is both a critical question and an attitude—an attitude characterizing a time, or at least a line of research into modernity, having as its direction “the constitution of ourselves as autonomous subjects” (Foucault 1997a: 313).

“Genealogical in its design” and “archaeological in its method” (Foucault 1997a: 315-316), this philosophical attitude is characterized as being “experimental”, as aiming to give “new impetus, as far and wide as possible, to the undefined work of freedom” (Foucault 1997a: 316). This ontological attitude must “turn away from all projects that claim to be global or radical” and thus seems to be characterized by being addressed to “partial transformations” (Foucault 1997a: 316):

I shall thus characterize the philosophical ethos appropriate to the critical ontology of ourselves as a historico-practical test of the limits we may go beyond, and thus as work carried out by ourselves upon ourselves as free beings. (Foucault 1997a: 316)

Philosophical modernity consists specifically in this attitude, the genealogy and archaeology of which Foucault is trying to accomplish. What he views as being characteristic of the modern philosophical attitude is also the main characteristic of his own way of acting philosophically. In this sense, Foucault’s ontology can be approached as a real ontology of freedom, an ontology that is at the same time an *ethos*, the practice of which is a critique of what we are, of the boundaries and the possibilities of removal that produce what we are.

In this sense, the progression of Foucault’s research on the ancients never lost sight of the present: it is this present that is the subject of observation and critique, and it is this completely modern attitude that pushes him to take an archaeological and genealogical perspective on ancient practices. Like a game of mirrors, the same attitude that characterizes modernity authorizes the discernment of the “care of the self” as an object of investigation: at the same time, this object is a paradigmatic, ungraspable *archē* that allows us to understand the form of the present, the philosophical attitude of

modernity. While the ontology of the present functions as a critical attitude, it also functions by making its own archaeology and by discovering the key elements of overtaking the orders of discourse that trap the subject in its own present. We can produce ourselves as “free beings” (Foucault 1997a: 316) only by acting as “free beings”, facing what produces us: this is what we can discover by facing our present archaeo-genealogically. This ontology is therefore simultaneously a “practical” strength, one that pushes for a kind of conversion. The place of the *archē* is contested by the fact that every *archē* we discover brings us once again to ourselves and to our freedom: to take care of this freedom—this freedom of our present form of life, a form which is free precisely because it is present—is in this sense the only *an-archē*, the principle without principle governing (it seems to me) the Foucauldian ontological machine.

If the “present”, or free beings living in the present, is the object of Foucault’s ontology, then the latter clearly presents a form of care: care of the present and care of the self and of others who live in this present. Just as this occurs at the level of the individual, to take care of the present is to be willing and able to exercise critical effort. The image of the ancient forms of *parrhesia* and modern cynicism—connected by a similar trans-historical way of telling and testifying the truth (see i.e. Foucault 2011: 210-11), and *therefore* of taking care, through the truth, of the self and the other—are two images of an attitude that gives form to freedom through a particular philosophical exercise of it. In this sense, an ontology of the present, a critical ontology of ourselves, refers necessarily to that *prosochē* on the present, on living creatures, that is the core problem of the history of the “care” that Foucault develops contextually. It can thus be interpreted as the peculiar form of care that is developed by modern philosophy in the form of a *critical askēsis*.

It is in this sense that Foucault's ontological approach appears within the project of the hermeneutics of the subject launched some years before. If we sketch a line from this final point of the Foucauldian path to the point of departure—the investigation into governmentality, into what allows the subject to let itself be governed and to govern itself—it becomes clear that the following history of the “care of the self”—as a history of the techniques for the creation of subjects through an art of self-government—plays a key role. Foucault's investigation into the art of governing others is thus mirrored by the art of the government of the self: in this sense, the hermeneutics of the self is situated at a crossroads. When his research into the government of the self resulted in research into the government of the self and of others, as Foucault entitled his last two courses, his archaeological investigation into this care—the core of this hermeneutics—revealed the emergence of a “care of the self and others”.

Care of the self, care of others

If the ontological work by ourselves on ourselves can be connected—as a critical form of taking care of the present—with that history of the practices concerning the “care of oneself” to which Foucault devoted himself in the 1980s, specifically from his lectures on *Subjectivity and Truth* (1980-1981) and on the *Hermeneutics of the Subject* (1981-1982), to his lectures on the *Courage of the Truth* (1983-1984), and finally to the third volume of his *History of Sexuality, The Care of the Self* (1984), Foucault's archaeology of the ancient *epimeleia heautou* must be approached as an ontological matter. Furthermore, taking into account the previous focus on the modern forms of “governmentality”, and specifically those forms of care that are revealed by modern

forms of “pastoral power”, we should also verify how this form of “care” as “surveillance”, beyond being the testing ground for Foucault’s archaeology, is a testing ground for his ontology.

At this point, we must clarify the genealogy of the notion of “care of the self” (*souci de soi*) within Foucault’s thought. The notion of “care” related to the self first occurs in Foucault’s texts in the presentation—the *résumé*—of the lectures on *Subjectivity and Truth*, 1980-1981 (see Foucault 1997b: 88). Interestingly, Foucault approaches his new investigation’s path not by leaving behind his previous interests but by transforming them. Beginning with the notion of Alcibiades’ “souci de soi-même” (*epimeleia heautou*) Foucault undertakes a history of the care of the self, one that is both an “experience” and a “technique elaborating and transforming that experience” (see Foucault 1997b: 88)—thus a history that follows the same characteristics of Foucault’s archaeology and genealogy, already influenced by the concept of “technique” and projected onto the following notion of ontology, *as* a critical experience.

As such, this project is connected to, or located at the crossroads between, two previous themes: a “history of subjectivity” and an “analysis of the forms of ‘governmentality’” (see Foucault 1997b: 88). To show how this new history is a part of his project of a history of subjectivity, Foucault recalls his works on madness, illness, the effects of discipline on the constitution of the rational and normal subject, and “the modes of objectification” (see Foucault 1997b: 88) of the subject in the fields of knowledges, language, work and life. At the same time, he clarifies that the proper aim of the great works with which he was involved for the better part of the 1970s is twofold: on the one hand criticism of conceptions of power, and on the other an analysis

of power as the field of “strategic relations” (Foucault 1997b: 88). This latter maintains as its object the “the behavior of the other or others” and is defined by the study of institutional fields, social groups, and “different procedures and techniques” (see Foucault 1997b: 88):

The history of the “care” and “techniques” of the self would thus be a way of doing the history of subjectivity: no longer, however, through the divisions between the mad and the nonmad, the sick and nonsick, delinquents and nondelinquents, nor through the constitution of fields of scientific objectivity giving a place to the living, speaking, laboring subject; but, rather, through the putting in place, and the transformations in our culture, of “relations with oneself,” with their technical armature and knowledge effects. And in this way one could take up the question of governmentality from a different angle: the government of the self by oneself in its articulation with relations with others. (Foucault 1997b: 88)

Therefore, the project described above evolves into an in-depth analysis of Foucault’s previous projects, particularly his studies on the notion of “governmentality”: a notion which, able “to cover 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” (see Foucault 1997d: 300), had already been considered in a text focused on the “technologies of the self” (1982) as “this encounter between the technologies of domination of others and those of the self” (Foucault 1997c: 225).⁸

⁸ In this same text, he expresses regret at having focused on techniques of domination and power rather than techniques of self-government and interaction. See Foucault (2016a: 26): “having studied the field of

What appears with the study of the “care of the self” is therefore a further problematization of governmentality: a history of those technologies of the self used by Western subjects to elaborate knowledge of themselves. It is this aim that characterizes twenty-five years of Foucault’s research: a history of the forms by which the truth about the subject and the subject of truth were developed, a history of the technologies of self-government and self-emancipation related to truth. This form of “care” is therefore the macro field on which we find these technologies.

At the very beginning of his course on *Subjectivity and Truth*, Foucault explains how the two components of the history of subjectivity and of governmentality are related. If the “subject” and the “truth” appear in themselves as empty notions, the real objects of examination are technologies that connect and create them (see Foucault 2017: 10): “What relationship does the subject have to himself when this relationship can or must pass through the promised or imposed discovery of the truth about himself?” (Foucault 2017: 10-11). Finally, Foucault identifies the following problem, on which the developments to come would be focused:

In what ways is our experience of ourselves formed or transformed by the fact that somewhere in our society there are discourses considered to be true, which circulate and are imposed as true, based on ourselves as subjects? (Foucault 2017: 12)

With this “double-dipping” of the philosophical machine, the problematization of truth, as well as the problematization of subjectivity, belong to the history of the care of

government by taking as my point of departure techniques of domination, I would like in years to come to study government—especially in the field of sexuality— starting from the techniques of the self”.

the self. The technologies of truth thus belong to the technologies of care: the forms that Foucault would later study within the political and ethical paradigm of *parrhesia*, of confession, of witnessing truth, would turn out to be merely different perspectives on taking care—and thus establishing subjectivities—through the truth.

On the other hand, it would not be accurate to say that the problem of care—religious and then political—appears in Foucault only as a technology of the self. In turn, governmentality as a crossroad notion derives in Foucault’s work directly from his problematization of power as power over life—as bio-power: as the power of taking care, and therefore governing, life. In fact, just a few years before his lectures on *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, which focused on the practices of the care of the self, Foucault was still working on a “critique of political reason” (Foucault 2002: 298). In the lectures of this period and in a text titled *Omnes et singulatim* (“all and everyone”), Foucault also focused on an investigation into the theme of pastoral power, or the “pastoral technologies” that are applied by the modern state to rationalize its power (see Foucault 2002: 298-325). This form of power, which coincided with the form of the “enlightened” state—Friedrich the Great’s Germany or pre- and post-revolutionary France—is a form that exercises itself in a new way and thus creates, through the development of its technologies, a new notion of sovereignty. It is a power that applies much more to the populations that inhabit a given territory than to that territory itself. In this way, what is at stake is more a “population state” than a state defined by land and borders: the sovereign exercises his sovereignty as a form of control and protection of individuals, and at the same time as a way of directing the population as a whole. He seeks to be legitimated as the chief of a family, as the one who takes care of his family. Therefore, with an inversion of perspective that secularizes and legitimates the state,

modern power is born not through a divine sign but rather as a consequence of the “economic” attention given by the sovereign to his subjects. This new kind of state, recognized by Foucault as the direct antecedent of the “providence state”, known in Europe after World War II as the “welfare state”, is a state in which police science (*Polizeiwissenschaft*), as a form of control, surveillance and protection of society, gives a form to its subjects.

Can this form of government of others be thought of as a form of “care”? It can be thought of in this way if we consider that this form of power, or art of government, is, as Foucault clarifies, inherited from the Christian theologico-political tradition, which is in turn derived on the one hand from the Hebraic tradition and on the other from the Greeks.

Two characteristics of this form of power are surveillance—pastorship as a power that never ceases to keep vigil over the herd, the “all”—and the practice of confession. Foucault’s archaeology of this power recovers “a very strange phenomenon in Greco-Roman civilization, that is, the organization of a link between total obedience, knowledge of oneself, and confession to someone else” (Foucault 2002: 310). In this sense, it is an individualizing power characterized by the personal responsibility of the individual confronting that power:

[the shepherd] pays attention to them all and scans each one of them. He’s got to know his flock as a whole, and in detail. Not only must he know where good pastures are, the season’s laws, and the order of things; he must also know each one’s particular needs. (Foucault 2002: 303)

These two practices (surveillance and confession) stress the persistence of a single movement within Foucault's archaeology and reveal how governmentality and the history of the subject are connected. In particular, what Foucault maintains as a point of reference is the intersection between the definition of the field of subjectivity concerning truth, on the one hand, and understanding the rules of conduct through which a subject can have access to its truth and can establish itself as a subject of truth, on the other.

Having left behind his research on the "care of others" (which was at stake in pastoral power), and having approached the individual as a key problem of governmentality, in the first lecture of his course on the *Hermeneutics of the Subject* (identifying the care of the self and the relation of self with oneself as the core of this hermeneutics), Foucault writes:

the *epimeleia heautou* is an attitude towards the self, others, and the world ... the *epimeleia heautou* is also a certain form of attention, of looking. Being concerned about oneself implies that we look away from the outside to... I was going to say "inside". Let's leave to one side this word, which you can well imagine raises a host of problems, and just say that we must convert our looking from the outside, from others and the world etc., towards "oneself". The care of the self implies a certain way of attending to what we think and what takes place in our thought. The word *epimeleia* is related to *melete*, which means both exercise and meditation. (Foucault 2005: 10-11)

As a form of "attending", the *epimeleia heautou* reveals its proximity to ancient pastorship, a pastorship now turned to the self, we might say. As Foucault clarifies, the care of the self is thus born as a conversion from looking from the "outside" to looking

within oneself, although the technique—the “attending”, the “taking care”—is quite similar. In this sense, I would affirm that the history of “care” coincides with a true archaeology of the gaze.

The passage from research into the care characteristic of modernity to the care characteristic of antiquity follows the passage from the care of “others” to the care of the self. It would not be long until, in his research on the government of self and others, Foucault would recover the relation between these two poles through a new form of care: indeed, the critical approach to the present through a “critical ontology of ourselves” (Foucault 1997a: 315ff), the distant ancestor of which is the philosopher-*parrhesiast*, giving form to his and others’ lives through his courage to tell the truth (see Foucault 2010: 350).

The coherence of incoherence

Foucault’s archaeological mechanics functions as a recovery of “gazes” and “turning points” that can be used to develop a critique of the present gaze, to develop a contradiction within the folds of the present. As stressed above, Foucault’s investigation into the care of the self was born and developed as an evolution of the project on governmentality. This approach sheds light on a partial answer to the question at the heart of the debate that arose between the publication of the first volume of the *History of Sexuality* in 1976 and the last two volumes in 1984 (thus before the publication of the last courses and many years before the recent publication of the fourth volume, previously projected to be the second one, *Les aveux de la chair* [*The Confessions of the Flesh*]): the question of why, within an ostensibly unified project, Foucault decided to

close the first volume by speaking of biopolitics and to dedicate the last two to the use of pleasure and the care of the self.⁹ In other words, it seems that we find internal coherence along the path connecting, on the one hand, the *mise en forme* of the relation between subjectivity and truth in the first course from the 1980s and the last two courses on the *Government of the Self and of the Other* and, on the other, the problem of the development of his investigation into *parrhesia* in his course on *The Courage of the Truth*—a coherence which can be exemplified by the integration of archaeology and genealogy as historical forms of ontology, by the theoretical passage from governmentality to the hermeneutics of the subject, and finally, by the research into care, first as a form of surveillance, then as a technology of the self, and finally as a critical ontology of the present.

There are two main consequences of this: on the one hand, it would be wrong to speak simply of an “ethical turning” away from Foucault’s more political interests of the 1970s. On the other hand, what is at stake here are the notions of *politics* and *ethics*—or at least the two notions of *ethics* and *politics* the modern tradition of which is thought to have been directly inherited from the ancients (cf. Lefebvre 2016).

As happens in the case of the long archaeology of the notion of *parrhesia*—this same notion appears in both fields, politics and ethics (see e.g. Foucault 2011: 38, 65)—to approach current processes, and finally to arrive at an ontology of subjectivity, is precisely to transform the order of the discourse by placing apparently distant notions at its center. If we wish to interrogate what is at stake in the ways in which politics represents itself and to analyze the relation between its discursive field and what it

⁹ For many years, philosophical criticism attempted to grasp the meaning of the Foucauldian turn of the 1980s (see Elden 2017: 205).

makes of us, the task is not to recover the political philosophy *strictu sensu* but to recover forms that have yet to be investigated by that tradition. Archaeology is called on to enable the emergence of traces, remains, that allow us to approach with greater certainty the dark side of the moon with regard to the traditions into which we are plunged. The fields of the care and the government of the self are more open, for Foucault, epistemologically and ontologically, than other notions: fields that allow us to delve further into what those notions can still tell us. It is necessary to abandon the notions and horizons that in some sense created us, to understand what we really are.

As Deleuze revealed in a text dedicated to Foucault, the creative element of this practice is identical to its ontological character: it creates *because* it is a critical ontology. It is an *ethopoietic* technique (see Tallane 2014: 123). In this sense, whereas Deleuze approaches philosophy as a creation of conceptual characters, in Foucault the place of characters is occupied by practices: in other words, the form by which Foucault recovers a paradigm, or a notion, of ancient traditions must be seen as a creation, as a distillation of models and practices.¹⁰ In this sense, the relevance of the archaeological recovery of the *epimeleia heautou* is similar to a true invention of a concept, or perhaps to another attribute of archaeology: that of re-“inventing” or re-“creating” concepts by recovering them in the past, with the aim of connecting remains and traces that cannot be explained in isolation. To give a name to these traces, by recovering them from the past, is itself to modify our paradigmatic horizon, to open another horizon on which

¹⁰ I am referring to Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of “conceptual personae” (see Deleuze-Guattari 1994: 61-83). Deleuze’s interpretation of Foucault follows this approach by making Foucault himself—as he had done in the case of other philosophers—another “conceptual personae” (see Deleuze 1988). Speaking of his archaeological machine, Foucault recalls Deleuze’s definition of him as a “poet” (Foucault 2001a: 1512; see Deleuze 1988: 18).

they can make sense, and to achieve a meaning that is able to reorganize the discursive order and paradigms into which we are plunged.

What we see in action in Foucault's approach to the care of the self is thus this divergent correspondence between these two perspectives: as if the object of Foucault's research, born in relation to the present, were pushing to give life to a methodological field in which it can have meaning. As a follower of Nietzsche, Foucault's aim was never to achieve abstract scientific neutrality but rather to allow the importance and necessity of the object of his research to come to light.¹¹

The care of the present as a philosophical task

In Foucault's archaeology of the gaze, the gaze seems to produce its own expression, its own object. The care of the self and of others, the care of the present as a critical ontology of ourselves, thus appears as a practical concept with which we can identify Foucault's critical ontology, his ontology of the present. Some of the ancient technologies of taking care of the self and of ourselves are in this sense paradigmatic, pre-empting figures of the philosophical *ethos* that would be described by Foucault as a "critical ontology of ourselves".

We can only discover this by applying an archaeological gaze to this attitude: only in this way can we discover how our philosophical attitudes really work, how the concepts and practices that we embody as creatures of modernity, as creatures living in this time and not another, really function. It is within the critique of oneself that the

¹¹ In this sense, "a diagnosis of the present is to regain its incontemporaneity" (Raffnsøe, Gudman-Høyer, and Thaning 2016: 465). See also Ong-Van-Cung (2013: 335).

modern agent encounters, in his or her time, an *ethos* that is equivalent to the ancient *ethos*.

A critical ontology of the present, archaeo-genealogically examining ancient practices, concerns, for instance, a precise configuration of the relation with time. In this sense, in the *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, we can verify how, almost superficially, Foucault approaches the theme of salvation as a peculiar form of care concerning time. In turn, the theological horizon of salvation is the ancient derivation of the self-finalization that the subject makes of himself through the practice of the care of the self. Salvation, as a form of care of the self, is also a form of care of others. Foucault identifies the notion of salvation as an “operator”, one that brings us—at least to a certain point, at which we must continue on our own—to the dimension of the “time of salvation” of the Christian Age. As a technology of government, Christian “care”, from which pastoral power would develop in the modern era, also entails a particular, highly consequential relation between the form of being and the form of time.

Let us consider this in more depth. Among the practices of the care of the self, we can stress the direction of consciousness: in the same age in which the direction of consciousness acquires Christian features by leaving to the side its Stoical elements, the pastoral paradigm enters politics as a paradigm of salvation. Surveillance by bishop-shepherds, which replaces surveillance by Christ, the shepherd of all mankind, establishes Christian society as a society waiting for the Second—and increasingly distant—Coming of Christ. In *Omnes et singulatim*, Foucault does not stress this point, but we can underscore how both the development of the political relation *omnes/singulatim* and the form of the direction of Christian consciousness are the distant, parallel traces that secularized modernity would apply in different forms.

The recovery of this ancient moment, in which the “care of the self” becomes a “care of others”, traces the development of a technology of time, based on the time of salvation. The time of Christian salvation, as well as the form of the historical time of modernity, opens to a dimension that was completely unknown to the ancient world—that of the time of waiting, of delay. The characteristics identified by Foucault in this notion are therefore twofold: on the one hand, the figure of a boundary, of a crossing through, on the other, the figure of a dramatic event, cutting through time. Nevertheless, according to Foucault these are characteristics that prove that certain ancient religious elements remain present in current, seemingly secular ways of looking at things and that they raise difficulties for understanding the notion of salvation in different terms, such as those of antiquity.

Foucault’s archaeological recovery proves, indeed, that seeking safety has a different connotation in the Stoic form of the “care of the self”. What is certain is that “the person saved is the person in a state of alert, in a state of resistance and of mastery and sovereignty over the self, enabling him to repel every attack and assault” (Foucault 2005: 184): “Salvation then is an activity, the subject’s constant action on himself, which finds its reward in a certain relationship of the subject to himself ...” (Foucault 2005: 184). Salvation is an agent of the subject itself.

What the archaeology of practices of the care of the self reveals is precisely that the key moment of these practices consists in the transformation of the practices of salvation. The *bios*, life as the way in which the world presents itself to us within our existence, begins to be considered, at a certain moment in antiquity, as an object of transformation: a test object, an object of experimentation, the place in which we can give form to ourselves, an exercise of the self. Here it is possible to encounter what

Foucault viewed as the dare at the heart of philosophy, as a “discourse and tradition” (Foucault 2005: 487): the dare of questioning the place in which “the truth of the subject we are” (Foucault 2005: 487) is expressed, and at the same time the dare of situating the world, as the place where one experiments on oneself as an “ethical subject of the truth” (Foucault 2005: 463). In this sense, writes Foucault, Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Mind* is the summit of this philosophy, in which it is asked how “a subject of knowledge (*connaissance*) which takes the world as object through a *techne*, and a subject of self-experience which takes this same world, but in the radically different form of the place of its test”, can exist (Foucault 2005: 487).

Thus, the long path of the care of the self leads, in Foucault’s archaeology, to a place where, by recovering an attitude of pre-Christian salvation, prior to Christian forms of surveillance, such as Stoic nightwatching, an overtaking of modernity as the last territory still placed within a structure of discursive self-legitimacy typical of the Christian era is authorized. At the same time, the same archaeology recovers for the present the ancient attitude of “salvation”, which is completely the opposite of the Christian notion of salvation.

It is here, perhaps, that we encounter a crucial meaning of the “critical ontology of ourselves” (Foucault 1997a: 315ff), in the form of an ontological machine of “care” detached from the historical machines of metaphysics. This ontological machine opens anew to an unknown threshold of a time that can be understood and that transforms itself within the *ethos* of the “present people”: people who share a time and the possibility of confronting the world through how they live their truth, of the many who construct this present, in the same way they take care of it, of themselves, and of their words. By recovering the ancient meaning of salvation as a critical care of the present

itself, one that for this reason belongs to the history of care, Foucault's ontology of the present is therefore an engine that seeks to move away from the practices of "salvation" that characterized the Christian era, that seeks to move away from the care of a time of delay, to a time concerning the present reality and its "free beings".¹² Care of a present that can only take care of itself.

At this point, what we are facing seems to be a philosophical *machina*, something slightly more complex than what is usually considered to be Foucault's ontological approach. Whereas Han spoke of Foucault's "missed ontology", what we seem to have here is quite the opposite. What was interpreted as a sort of ontological "lack", also due to Foucault's unexpected death, seems to be part of this machine, and indeed its main engine. An ontology that turns on "free beings" (Foucault 1997a: 316) must be a practical attitude that acts as a void. As an ontological, archaeo-genealogical, critical machine that stands in contrast to other ontological horizons of the twentieth century, and above all phenomenology—the "subject" does not appear again, not even as a sign—it is an ontology that has as its object its own practices, and thus itself: an ontology of transformation, of overcoming boundaries, and of the unfounded.

¹² A similar necessity is required concerning the recovery of the ancient philosophical care of the self in contrast to the Christian one. Whereas the problem of Western culture was "the positive foundation for the technologies of the self", "[m]aybe our problem is now to discover that the self is nothing else than the historical correlation of the technology built in our history. Maybe the problem is to change those technologies. And in this case, one of the main political problems would be nowadays, in the strict sense of the word, the politics of ourselves" (Foucault 2016b: 76). The care of time as an evening-like time, the time between the "not yet" and the "already now", is at the center of Foucault's review of Roger Laporte's novel *La Veille*, from 1963 (Foucault 2015). See Raffnsøe, Thaning and Gudman-Høyer (2018: 15-18). On this theme, it is also worth mentioning the letter to Rolf Italiaander "Veilleur de la nuit des hommes" (Foucault 2001a: 257-261).

Whereas the influence of Heidegger's approach to the question of care as a main question of Western thought is clear in this context, at the same time the anarchic mechanics of Foucault's ontology establishes an answer that is directly connected to Foucault's notion of freedom.¹³ In *Being and Time*, Heidegger observed that the expression "care for oneself", following the analogy of taking care and concern, "would be a tautology"—this, because his notion of care "cannot mean a special attitude toward the self" (Heidegger 1996: 180).

The characterization of care as "being-ahead-of-itself-in-already-being-in"—as being-together-with—makes it clear that this phenomenon, too, is yet structurally *articulated* in itself. But is that not a phenomenal indication that the ontological question must be pursued still further until we can set forth a *still more primordial* phenomenon which ontologically supports the unity and totality of the structural manifold of care? (Heidegger 1996: 183)

As an ontological approach, and as a form of "care of the present", Foucault's archaeology does not need to set forth a "*still more primordial* phenomenon"—this, because it finds that the attitude described by the *epimeleia* implies an *ethos*. Foucault's care is not simply, in this sense, an attribute that tautologically enters into relation with

¹³ In his last interview, Foucault clarifies the crucial role of Heidegger's readings in his thought. See Foucault (1990b: 250). Han identifies the common Kantian origin of phenomenology and Foucault's archaeology. On the "historical ontology of ourselves" projected by Foucault, Han asks whether the hermeneutical ontology is a "more coherent foundation", arguing that the Heideggerian ontology can be read as the *unthought* of Foucault's work (Han 1999: 27). On Heidegger's influence on Foucault, see Han (1999: 305-321), Elden (2002), Rayner (2007), Milchman and Rosenberg (2013). For a recent, useful approach to the parallelism between the two authors, see Nichols (2014).

the self but rather precisely what establishes freedom as an ethical ontology. That is, it establishes that freedom requires reflection in order to be a form of ethics: “Freedom is the ontological condition of ethics. But ethics is the considered form that freedom takes when it is informed by reflection” (Foucault 1997d: 284). As with Foucault’s use of the “self”, the “present” is not something that *needs* care on his view, as if it were something separate from care (see Smith 2015: 137). “Care of the self” is necessarily tautological, as “care of the present” is. No practice of the present is possible, ethically or politically, without care, and no care is possible, abstractly, without being plunged in the present. This tautology—the core of Foucault’s anarchic ontological machine—is necessary if the aim, in contrast to Heidegger’s notion (and according, for instance, to Pareyson’s ontology of freedom)¹⁴ is to give form to freedom as a “conscious [*réfléchi*]” (Foucault 1997d: 284) practice performed by people living together in the present.

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¹⁴ “Freedom is done; but it is done indeed as freedom. The act by which freedom is done, that is, begins to be, cannot be configured differently from an act by which freedom begins by itself, is initiative” (Pareyson 2000: 16). On freedom as “operational concept”, see also Oksala (2005: 208-210).

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