

The Practice of Self-Care

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CHAPTER ONE

TO COMPOSE MEANING IN TIME

The myth of Chronos (Plato, *Politics*, 269a–275e) tells us that there was once a blessed time for the human race, a time in which the gods had care for human beings. At that time the god Chronos accompanied the universe in its movement: things worked out by themselves in favour of human beings (271d). Indeed, the god Chronos governed the circular movement of the universe, caring for all of it [ἐπιμελούμενος ὅλης (271d 4)]; the universe was divided into different areas, and each area had its own ruler in accordance with the principle of one order for the entire cosmos. But this condition of beatitude, a condition in which human beings are objects of divine care, had a temporal duration that was not infinite; when this time had been completed and the movement of the cosmos reached its measure, the god withdrew to an observation point external to the movement of the world (272e) and set it free; after which all the gods abandoned, in their turn, the areas entrusted to their care. And so it happened that the movement of the universe no longer knew that first order with which it had moved and human beings found themselves abandoned, without divine care (274b–d). To begin with, still being without tools and techniques, they encountered serious difficulties, since spontaneous nutrition was no longer there. Then they received as a gift from the gods the techniques necessary for human life and with these they were able to begin seeing to their own care.

The myth of Chronos enunciates an ontological thesis on the human condition: it tells us that the condition into which human beings are born and in which they live, is that in which they find themselves abandoned by the care of the gods [τῆς ἐπιμελείας ἐπέλιπεν ἀνθρώπους] and they are called upon to ‘have care of themselves by themselves’ [τὴν ἐπιμέλειαν αὐτοὺς αὐτῶν ἔχειν] (274d).

Care constitutes the essential quality of the human condition. Since care is not something which belongs to us, like our mind or our body, but is the way of being to which we must give form, we can say that the human condition is that of being called to something which is always lacking, which is to say, care. Being in the world is always a continuous

tension to procure what is necessary to preserve life, what makes it flourish and what repairs the wounds that we suffer over time (Mortari 2018).

When we think about our own being, we discover that it has the quality of being inconsistent, in the sense that our ontological condition is one in which at every moment we discover ourselves exposed to nothingness (Stein 2002, 54). We live in time, and time is our matter, but we have no sovereignty over it. Only the present seems to belong to us, but the present is the instantaneous coming into being of a moment which instantly flees. The quality of our being is that of a continual becoming; becoming is the prorogation of instant to instant, and each instant in which we become, takes away with it a drop of our being. We are therefore lacking in being and there is nothing in the human condition that guarantees we can become what we can be. We are a series of possibilities, but the possible is not yet the being.

In that moment in which we discover ourselves to be lacking in being, prorogated from moment to moment and always exposed to the possibility of nothingness, we also find ourselves called to the responsibility of giving form to our own possible being, a responsibility fostered by the irrevocable desire to live a good life. This is the paradox of existence: feeling our being to be inconsistent, fragile, and fleeting, and that we have no sovereignty over our own becoming; yet at the same time we are tied to the responsibility to respond to the call to give a shape to our life, and bring about our own possible being, that wearisome hard, strenuous ontogenetic labour in which consists the business of living and which asks us to bracket off our tendency to live from moment to moment, in order to think over a long period of time. We are born weighed down with a task that other living beings, whether bees or birch trees, do not have, which is to give form to our own time, or in other words to outline the paths of existence with meaning. Our being is a continual becoming, and this becoming is not just a simple flowing through time, but finding ourselves totally absorbed by the preoccupation of being. We are concerned not only to preserve ourselves but also to become our own possible being. Taking on the task of giving form to our own being means having care for life, taking to heart the fact that we are called to the responsibility for the form which we give to the time of our living.

But caring for life, precisely inasmuch as it has its origin in our finding ourselves lacking a finished form, and so absorbed by the task of becoming our own possible being, runs the risk of translating itself into an egotistical movement, concentrated wholly on the self. However, this risk has in reality, an insurmountable limitation, since the becoming of each

person is inextricably mixed with that of others. We are in fact intimately relational beings. It is the relational essence of the human condition which obliges having care for life to see itself not only as care for oneself, but also as care for others and for the world, which defines responding to this call to the other as the “otherwise than being” (Lévinas 1991), to indicate the gesture of responsibility for the other.

In the responsibility for others, we should not however see an interruption of the effort of being, as if being in the world were above all being for oneself and as if the decision to have care for the other implied a decision to interrupt the attention we give ourselves. This “out-of-ourselves for the other” conceptualised by Lévinas (1991) supposes a self independent of the other; on the contrary, our being is always from the start a being-with-others. As a consequence, the being that, in its essence, consists in finding itself called to become its own possible being is always and already responsible both for itself and for others. In the ontological vision, the existential adventure of one’s neighbour is for the self even more important than one’s own, and immediately places the self as responsible for the being of others. In this displacement towards the other we find the beginnings of ethics.

But this looking towards the other, which is the generative gesture of humanity, must not obscure the essential nature of care for the self, since without care for the self there is no possibility of care for the other, just as the ethical gesture of having care for the other is essential if we are to find our own humanity. There cannot be, therefore, a simple being for oneself against which to posit an “otherwise of being”, since the act of being in the world, which in its essence is having care for life, proposes itself as indivisibly care for the self and for others.

What we are called to do is to learn to have care of existence. To put it another way, to *learn the art of existence*, that knowledge of human things [ἄνθρωπινὴ σοφία] which Socrates speaks of (Plato, *Apology of Socrates*, 20d) which would lead us towards finding a good form of living. The art of existing is the knowledge which helps us find the ways to give a good form to our being, such that we make of the time of our being a composition of meaning.

Coming to this knowledge is a difficult apprenticeship, which demands to be consciously cultivated. And it is because of the need to help young people learn this art that it takes the form of educational practice.

If, however, we agree to share the perspective of Socrates, according to which the art of existence consists in having “a certain knowledge of the virtue of living humanely and politically [τίς τῆς τοιαύτης ἀρετῆς, τῆς ἀνθρωπίνης τε καὶ πολιτικῆς, ἐπιστήμων ἐστίν]” (20b), then it is necessary

to be aware of the limits of educational knowledge, which cannot claim to be able to teach such an art, since nobody possesses it, not even the person who assumes the role of educator; it is a knowledge beyond the capacity of human reason, which can grasp only a few fragments of it. Nobody possesses the formula which might resolve the problem of existence. At the most we can, over time, find a few clues. What is more, the knowledge that is useful for life is something which cannot be accumulated or transferred, but a dynamic nucleus which constructs itself in the light of experience and which, in constructing itself, transforms itself and at the same time transforms the subject who develops it.

If education cannot directly teach the essential and primary knowledge which is the art of existing, it can nonetheless guide towards the acquisition of the ontogenerative methods of inquiry—that is, which give form to being—the practice of which helps us in the search for essential knowledge. In the Socratic view, the essence of education that improves the art of existing consists in the action of caring for the soul of young human beings (Plato, *Laches*, 185e) and this educative activity, which should be seen as having care that the other learns the care for self for himself, comes about not by passing on a piece of knowledge that is already given, since nobody possesses it entirely and only the wise possess it even in part; rather, it consists in guiding the other to the awareness of the existential primacy of the search for such art of living. This awareness constitutes the essential condition for the subject to be able to respond to the ontological call to activate himself in order to become his possible self. Even if the most alive and essential knowledge of all, the one about matters of life, cannot be transmitted, it is possible to encourage young people along those paths of research which, in the light of experience, have proved meaningful to undertake if we are to make sense of our time of living. Education, then, should be seen as having care to offer young people those experiences which prompt the desire to learn the practices necessary in the search for what is indispensable in order to authenticate our own time of being.

In order to learn the art of existing it is not sufficient to learn techniques, because no technique becomes a living instrument unless it is accompanied by a deeply meditated decision to seek the best possible form of one's own being. So what is to be cultivated is the *passion for the formation of the self*, the passion which directs the person to work towards the realisation of a value (Stein 2001, 186). Passion for becoming one's own being is a consciously developed vital energy to give form to one's own existence. It is passion for the search for horizons of meaning for being.

We are placed in time. Life is made of time. We cannot at all take for granted that we will succeed in giving meaning to the time of our living, or that we even wish to. We can learn to give direction and order to our own walk through time, but this can also not happen: it can happen that one's own being, instead of expanding along the different paths towards self-realisation that open up before us, contracts to the point where the person feels himself diminished in his own being. This happens when we allow ourselves to become mere spectators of our own lives, accepting the limiting of ourselves to live life as it comes along, without taking on the responsibility of undertaking those actions of manufacturing our being which are necessary in order to give a good form to our time. Becoming subjects of our own existence implies deciding to take on one's own ontological burden, so as not to let time, simply, pass with no thread of meaning being sketched out in the brief space of our own becoming.

It is unavoidable for a human being to experience moments of unease and a sense of difficulty, since we feel ourselves to be fragile and vulnerable beings. But when we do not take up our own ontogenetic responsibility, which demands to be involved in the process of weaving threads of meaning into the time which is given to us, then it can happen that we feel the anguish which comes from feeling time consume itself in an immobile chain of instances, devoid of meaning. Lacking the search for our own transcendence means risking our soul becoming sick in the desertification of a wasted existence.

The call to give sense to time, to make of our lives a worthwhile time, makes it necessary to have knowledge of living, that "human knowledge" [ἄνθρωπινή σοφία] which Socrates speaks of (Plato, *Apology for Socrates*, 20d). It is therefore essential that every human being is offered the chance to live experiences which might orient him to acquire techniques that are fundamental in the search for the knowledge of living, and also to cultivate the desire for such a search. Educating someone to take existence to heart means educating that person to have *care for the self*. Care for the self transforms simple living, the time which is allotted to us and which we could live just as it happens; a good time of life takes form in accordance with consciously meditated directions and desires. In reaching this point, we put into effect the intimate unity of life and thought.

The value of care for the self was stated by Socrates and then affirmed by other philosophers. It found an eloquent proponent in Epictetus, who defines the human being as an entity tasked with care for the self (*Discourses* 1, 16, 1–3) in order to cultivate a "great and courageous soul" (1, 6, 43). According to Epicurus, every human being, throughout the course of his life, should have care for his own soul, dedicating attention

to it every day and every hour of the day (*Letter to Menoeceus*, 122). Muson in a maxim quoted by Plutarch, writes that “He who wishes to come through life safe and sound must continue throughout his life to take care of himself” (quoted in Foucault 1988, 49). Seneca notes that “the most shameful loss is the loss due to carelessness” (*Letters to Lucilius*, 1, 1, 2). The material of our life is time and it is this that we have to learn to take care of, sketching threads of meaning which can weave together the moments of our lives.

If the event of being is implemented in the preoccupation of being, that is of becoming one’s own possible self, then having care for the self becomes an *obligatory existential duty* in that taking on this responsibility is the fruit of a decision with which consciousness responds to an unavoidable requirement. Responding with responsibility to the requirements of the real means placing oneself in an ethical position. Care for the self answers a deep and immediate need of the soul: understanding ourselves in order to find the right orientation of our being in the world.

In the light of the assumption of the primacy of care for the self we can state that to educate means to offer the other those experiences which are meaningful with regard to every aspect of the person (cognitive, affective, ethical, aesthetic, political...) and which will enable him to take on the responsibility for his own formation. Thus, the ultimate meaning of educating consists in facilitating in the other the acquisition of those capacities, and the development of those dispositions that are necessary in order to activate the process of self-formation, which itself consists in taking on the responsibility of giving as good a form as possible to our own mode of being. In this sense the master is he who has care that the other desires to have care for the self.

The direction of meaning of the process of self-formation understood as care for the self consists in constructing an “inner centre” (Stein 2002, 437) and this can mean: establishing an architecture of *essential principles* which might help to find the path of our own existential implementation; nurturing those *mental attitudes* which allow us to seek out what is essential, in other words that which when it is lacking, makes us feel a loss of being; and nourishing the *drive* to hold the mind focused on the search for that which cannot be given up.

Dedicating ourselves to cultivating an inner centre allows us to find sovereignty over our own movements from which depends our freedom of being, a freedom which reveals itself when the directions of being are autonomously selected and consciously set into motion. While there is a life which rolls along in unreflective mode, there is a conscious life, the life which reduces as far as possible finding ourselves moved from the

outside, letting ourselves be guided instead by the desire for transcendence, in other words generating sufficient and proper time and space for existing. Such a life needs a mind whose activity is totally rooted in itself (Stein 2002, 437), a mind which acts not on the basis of impulse in response to external promptings but on the basis of considered decisions, which are structured in the light of essential principle, to give architectonic form to existence, principles which have been acquired through rigorously meditated research.¹

A mind rooted in itself is not a self-referential, solitary mind. It is a mind whose activity depends on itself because it is engaged in cultivating an inner centre; this centre, however, weaves itself in continual dialogue with others, through the patient and considered comparison with different perspectives. Precisely because the human condition is intimately relational, a lively mind cannot be anything but a dialogic mind. If living is living together, then dialogue with others is essential in order to find the art of existing. And the dialogue which takes place in an educational relationship is particularly fertile with regard to the process of self-formation. If an authentic relationship with the other is one in which the other is never deprived of the possibility of taking on the responsibility for his own existence, in an educative relationship the sense of educating consists in urging the other to take on the responsibility for his own process of self-formation. In other words, the direction of the meaning of

¹ In tracing the movement of care for the self as a drive to act freely, an essential reference point is the work of Edith Stein (2002), who interprets the difference between acting naturally and acting freely in a religious horizon and hypothesizes that the person is ready for liberty when the soul is totally rooted in itself. For Stein, this condition only comes about when we find our reference point in the world of faith, because only by entrusting ourselves to divine grace can the soul find its foundations. It might seem a paradox to say that only entrusting ourselves to another and thereby renouncing our own freedom can we find true freedom, but this is the vision of those who have experience of faith, and theorizes philosophically from a starting point of experience which is not accessible to all. Seeking the meaning of care of the self apart from any possible religious connotations, that inner centre from which alone springs the vital force which makes free and conscious action possible can be thought of not so much in the form of a thing which lends itself objectively there to the consciousness, but as an orientation of the mind, a method, if by method we mean a way of being amongst things. When we lose the centre, when we lose the method for moving properly through time, then the soul trembles and can be overcome by anguish, because the soul feels as if its own being and life were separating apart, and the possibility of any movement were fading away. It is in these moments, where we can feel ourselves hanging by a thread, that the discipline of care of the self can keep the soul safe.

education consists in having care that the other learns to have care for himself.

If we accept that the reason for educating consists in having care that the other learns to have care for himself through caring for virtue, as enunciated by Socrates in the *Apology* (31a–31c), then the process of self-formation is essentially configured as learning how to care for one's own particular form of life. We can say that when care for the self is understood as a practice of self-formation, through which we take on the responsibility of responding to the call to give form to our life's time, then it allows us to access an authentic dimension of living. A life made up simply of impersonal acts is inauthentic, those acts in which we let things happen according to decisions made elsewhere and where we do not decide our being, beginning with our own selves. If we can say that the dimension of inauthenticity coincides with living just as it happens by chance, without any investment or design, the dimension of authenticity on the other hand consists in living by taking upon ourselves the task of making directions of meaning shine before us.

"Care for the self" was, until recently, an out-dated expression, brought back to the attention of our times especially by the work of Michel Foucault (1988, 1998, 2001). Precisely because it was outdated, before proceeding it is necessary to examine the reasons which caused this concept to be marginalised within our culture, and with it, the practice of care for the self.

First of all, we might note the diffidence which accompanies the theory of care for the self, a diffidence which, over time, has led to the eclipse of this practice. The reason for such diffidence can be sought in the fact that dealing with one's own self is seen as a form of moral dandyism, an aestheticizing individualism to be shunned (Foucault 2001, 14). On the other hand, the concept of care for the self, which in contemporary culture evokes an attitude both egoistic and individualistic, not to say a marked turning in on oneself, has constituted for many centuries a positively valued practice, representing the generative matrix of rigorous and austere ethical perspectives such as the Stoic, the Cynic and in some respects the Epicurean. We might add that many of the techniques which make up the practice of care for the self were later to reappear in the context of Christian culture. For care for the self to be reduced to an individualistic mode of being is a misinterpretation, as Foucault has demonstrated (1988, 51–54). Foucault explains that this practice turns out to be not at all a solipsistic approach to the task of dealing with existence, but on the contrary requires an intensification of social relations, for we cannot find

the path of the art of living without also comparing ourselves with other people.

Another reason for the cultural marginalisation suffered by the theory of care for the self can be traced in the fact that it was originally conceived for the privileged. In the Lacedaemonian culture in fact, looking into oneself was a practice reserved for those who could afford slaves to deal with all the everyday tasks (Foucault 2001, 33). In order to bring up to date the meaning of care for the self we must therefore re-signify this practice through an interpretation which underlines its ethical power. This formation must be of value to all citizens, a condition for one's own existential self-implementation and for the exercise of full citizenship.

Note on method

Making the object of our study the culture of care for the self requires us to immerse ourselves in the texts of ancient philosophy. Reading texts so distant in time brings the risk of slipping into an archaeology of knowledge which might produce beautiful artefacts to be admired, but which remain inert with regard to the present, and to the specific need we have of words which are alive and which speak to us.

We should also not forget that in coming to these distant texts, there can be a kind of contamination in that the gaze of the interpreter, as every gaze, is culturally situated and ends up colouring the object of study with the atmosphere of the present. The contamination of the gaze which follows from the situatedness of the cognitive act can on the other hand be turned into a resource if, far from claiming uselessly that we can annihilate our own point of view, we are able to implement a dialogical hermeneutics with the texts which is capable of transforming the presuppositions which structure our gaze into instruments which know how to listen to far-off voices. What we need to cultivate is a hermeneutics which, without giving up on our gaze immersed in the contemporary world, nonetheless lets ancient texts speak with their own voices.

Our thinking today is also enriched by the hermeneutic coordinates provided by some twentieth-century philosophies which, even if they do not deal directly with the thematics of care, address the ancient question of spirituality; in other words, attention to the practice of the profound transformation of the subject's being. It might therefore be useful to outline the features of a culture of care for the self, beginning with those philosophical gazes which, close to us in time, can nourish a fertile reading of the requirements of spirituality expressed by the ancient culture of the self. Every analytical gaze is always and already culturally situated;

identifying and bringing into explicit focus a precise observation point can lead us on the way to making up-to-date and vital what took form in far off times.

Beginning with these premises, I have decided to take phenomenology as my starting point for a gaze from the present. This choice finds legitimacy with regard to the themes of this book because phenomenologists have confronted the submerged continent of inner life. As well as those of Max Scheler, the writings of Edith Stein on the life of the mind, especially its affective side, a world which does not always receive sufficient reflection either in our daily lives or in the sciences of the spirit, are particularly vivid and methodologically rigorous. Also fundamental is the thought of María Zambrano, since she has produced refined analyses of the life of the soul and the heart, which resound with the principle of knowing oneself that Socrates places at the centre of the practice of care for the self.

Following a spiral pattern of enquiry, after studying in depth the culture of care of the self in ancient thought, I have chosen as a reading filter reflections which have matured in those philosophies which attest to profound consonance with the nucleus which characterises the culture of practices of spirituality, and from there to engage in a dialogue with ancient texts. Perhaps this choice—even while we must acknowledge that it is impossible to illuminate any path of study in linear fashion—owes itself to the fact that it is the formation influenced by and through these same philosophies which has reactivated our sensibility towards the theme of care for the self.

CHAPTER TWO

ESSENCE OF CARE FOR THE SELF

The existential primacy of care for the self

If we accept the statement that educating means directing the other towards care for the self, then the essential question—the same one that Socrates puts to Alcibiades (Plato, *Alcibiades 1*, 128a)—consists in understanding what constitutes care for the self [ἐαυτοῦ ἐπιμελεῖσθαι]. This question needs to be taken further, seeking to understand what constitutes “a perfect taking care [ὀρθῶς ἐπιμελεῖσθαι]” (128b), or that is—if we can find an adequate translation of the Greek term *orthos* [ὀρθῶς]—that of responding perfectly to all that the real becoming of things demands as necessary, and which happens in the right moment and in proper measure.

In order to understand what constitutes the essence of good care, it is important to identify *to what* such practice is addressed, what is the object, and *towards what* we should turn, in other words what are the operative directionalities.

In order to respond to these questions, we must make reference to the thought of Socrates, since it is to Socrates that we owe the institution of the concept of care for the self. It is in *Alcibiades* that we find the first important formulation of care for self (Foucault 2001, 45), but in order to better understand the meaning of this practice, this text should be read alongside the *Apology of Socrates*, since here we find a no less important interpretation of care, in that Socrates indicates its essential qualities.

In the *Apology* Socrates, speaking of the original meaning of educational practice, states that the task of the educator is to encourage the other to have a care for self so as to become as good and as wise as possible (Plato, *Apology of Socrates*, 36c) and he explains that the essence of care consists in having care for one’s own soul [ἐπιμελεῖσθαι τῆς ψυχῆς] so that it might acquire the best form possible (30b). In line with this aspiration, education should be conceived of as a practice which has as its goal the care for the soul and only the person who is expert in such care can take on the role of educator, not only insofar as he enunciates discourses on the matter, but because he lives in accordance with what

s/he thinks and asserts, realising in his own life the necessary convergence of thoughts and actions (Plato, *Laches*, 185d).

The centrality of care for the soul is underlined in other dialogues. In *Cratylus* we read that we should not entrust our own soul to a therapy founded only on names and on words (440c); in the *Phaedo* we read that since the soul is the immortal essence of the human life, it should receive all time dedication and care (107c). But it is in the *Alcibiades* that Socrates explains analytically what constitutes cultivating the soul and looks to that [ψυχῆς ἐπιμελητέον] (132c).

Given the importance of the interpretation of care for the self as care for the soul, it is necessary to synthesise here the argument developed in *Alcibiades I*, since it provides the generative matrix of the culture of care for the self. It is necessary to have care for the self (127e); having care consists in being capable of perfect care, meaning that which moves in the direction of self-improvement, and which happens at the right time and in the right measure (128b); in order to better ourselves it is necessary to know our self (129a) because only by knowing ourselves can we also come to know the art of having care for the self (129a); knowing ourselves means knowing our true essence and since the essence of the human being is “nothing other than is soul” (130c), then having care for the self means having care for the soul (132c).

In *Phaedrus* Socrates speaks specifically of the education of the soul [ψυχῆς παιδευσιν] (241c) and explains that the soul is educated insofar as it is nourished by good things, which are: “beauty [καλόν], wisdom [σοφόν], good [ἀγαθόν] and all other things similar to these” (246e). These are the things that Socrates defines as the “essences worthy of love” (250d); indeed, it is what is good that every soul searches for, and if we share the Socratic thesis according to which what is good coincides with what is beautiful (*Alcibiades I*, 116c), then knowledge of living consists in seeking the essence of what is good. “The virtue of the soul [τὴν ψυχῆς ἀρετήν]” (*Alcibiades I*, 133c) consists in dedicating oneself to the search for goodness. And this search is the only one capable of providing a clear horizon in order to interpret care for the self.

The care for the soul finds ontological reason in the need of human being to seek the right and good orientation to designate our life’s time with meaning. The value of the Socratic discourse appears evident, because if we stop to think for a moment, we cannot but feel the indispensable need to deal ethically with our own being.

Nor can we fail to point out that in the affirmation “have care for the soul” we perceive the risk of a solipsistic and intimistic interpretation of

care for the self. Such a risk fades, however, if we take note of the thesis enunciated in the *Apology*, where Socrates states that having care for the self means learning to discard the non-essential, and especially all that distracts the mind from concentrating on what cannot be given up: putting aside the search for honour, glory and success, and to have care instead for wisdom, truth (Plato, *Apology of Socrates*, 29e) and virtue (31b). Wisdom, truth and virtue are crucial if we are to make of the time we are given, a life worthy of being lived both as an individual and as a citizen, since these are essential if we are to construct community and carry out the work of politics.

When we do not have care for these things that are of maximum importance, then existence suffers, since our value depends on the things for which we have care (*Apology of Socrates*, 41e). The care for the soul, upon which depends the quality of life (Plato, *Protagoras*, 313a), requires that we have care with all solicitude of virtues (325c).¹ Having care for the self means focusing on the greatest good for the human being, which consists of thinking every day about virtue—the virtue which makes us fully human and good citizens—and in examining the questions that are of the highest existential value, since the possibility of finding a horizon of meaning to give form to a good life depends on the answers we find to these questions. Such is the importance of dealing with these things that a life that does not engage with them “is not worthy of being lived” (Plato, *Apology of Socrates*, 38a).² We should remember that in Socratic

¹ Literally this passage from *Protagoras*: “*epimelountai pasan epimeleian*” [ἐπιμελοῦνται πᾶσαν ἐπιμέλειαν] should be translated to “have care with all care” of the virtues, a marker not only of the centrality of the virtues in human life, but also of the powerful primacy assigned to the action of care.

² Having care for the self presents itself, then, as an essentially noetic activity, one, that is, which engages thought. Foucault (2001, 12) writes that care for the self implies a certain level of vigilance about what we think and what happens in our thought. This noetic essence in care for the self can also be seen in the etymological analysis of the term which in Greek means having care, or *epimeleomai* a term with evident connections to the term *melete* which means not only care and solicitude, but also thought and meditation. Also, in ancient Greek other terms indicating care also include amongst their possible meanings the activity of thinking or meditating. This is the case with the term *pronoia* which indicates both attention and care, and also the verbs *pronein* which means dedicating care to something, and *phrontizein* which Socrates uses in the *Apology* (29e–d) where he explains the directions of meaning of educative care: it means both thinking and reflecting, and having care and being engaged. In his *Clouds*, where Socrates is described in the act of meditating, Aristophanes uses the terms *phrontizein* Xenophon too, in the *Convito* (vi, 6), uses *ekphrontizein* to say that the specificity of Socrates consists in meditating. If we remember that *phrontistes* not only

philosophy this search does not resolve itself in a merely intellectual act, but is something incarnated in our mode of being, which can be witnessed and as such is at the basis of our political action, because in order to assume political responsibilities it is a necessary condition to have care for the self, cultivating the virtue of the soul (Plato, *Alcibiades I*, 134c). Only by having care for our soul can we find the “right and beautiful way [ὀρθῶς καὶ καλῶς]” to think and to act, and as a consequence procure what is good for the city (134c–d).

Thus, what inspires care for the self, as conceived by Socrates, is the principle of being concerned not for what one might possess, but for what one might be, taking care to have one’s own humanity flourish as best as possible (*Apology of Socrates*, 36c), because the *eudaimonia*, in other words a good condition of life, does not consist of the things that we have, but literally in a good (*eu*) spiritual life (*daimon*). *Daimon*, indeed, is the spirit who guides the conscience. When we do not have care for our spiritual life, then the vital space of the person contracts, and the potentialities of our own being reduce not only in quantitative, but also in qualitative terms.

To have care for the soul it is necessary to have a direction of meaning and we find this when we listen to the primary tension for which all things aim, that is good (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, I, 1, 1094a 0–5). The search for what is good for living constitutes the primary search, from which every existential act is generated. The concept of “care for the soul” becomes a valid concept when we identify the right direction for this practice. Wisdom, or that which allows us to live a good life, is not something that is possessed, but is rather an orientation of the soul which is nourished by the search for what is good, in which consists the virtue of the soul, what Aristotle defines as “ethical virtue” (*Nicomachean Ethics*, VI, 2, 1139a 22). According to Epictetus, the search for what is good is not one of the many options available of relativistic value, but is a “pre-notion” and as such common to all men, because every person recognises that what is good is useful, that it is worthy of being chosen and that we should search for it and pursue it on every occasion (*Discourses*, I, 22, 1).

Since, with regard to the vital and essential drive to a good life, it does not automatically follow that we have a clear vision of how to make this good, material and concrete, then the care for the soul—which is engaged

indicates the act of meditating, but also signifies care, we could say that the person who meditates, in other words the *phrontistes*, is the person who can withdraw from the often totalising grasp which practical affairs have over us, in order to dedicate himself to thought, and that it is precisely in meditating that he has care for the self.

precisely in seeking to give good form to our being in the world—turns out to be a task not only ontogenetically necessary, but also arduous, since it appears as a practice which cannot rest upon certain knowledge, but, rather, nourishes itself through continual searching: searching for the way in which to live well, and for what constitutes a good life.

Socrates does not limit himself to instituting the practice of care for the soul and detailing which directions of meaning it should be guided towards. He also speaks of the way in which we should understand it, when he explains that having care for the self implies having knowledge of the self. Faced with an Alcibiades, he explains to him that the most important thing he should occupy himself with, if he wants to excel, is what is written on the temple at Delphi: “know thyself [γνῶθι σαυτόν]” (Plato, *Alcibiades I*, 124a–b), because only in knowing ourselves is it possible to understand how to have care for the self (129a). The first search to be undertaken, and we are speaking here of an extremely difficult search (129a) is therefore that of knowing our own being (129d), because “if we know ourselves, we will also be able to know how to have care for the self, but if we do not know ourselves, we will not know even that” (129a).

The way to demonstrate that one has reached a certain form of excellence, and so has the competence to take on governmental tasks, consists in being capable of care [ἐπιμέλεια] and in possessing this technique [τέχνη] (124a–b), that is the practical knowledge necessary to know oneself in order to improve oneself. If, then, to educate means cultivating in the other the capacity and the passion to give form to himself, that is to practice self-education, the directions of meaning to bring about such a process consist in *developing the ethical orientation of having care for existence* and in *learning the techniques* which allow us to give form to our own being in the world.

At the point where Socrates theorizes the primacy of knowing oneself (129e) he does not, however, establish a coincidence between this practice and that of care for the self. Rather, he considers the first condition as a preliminary to the exercise of the second.³ Indeed, in the *Apology* Socrates

³ If it is true that Platonism assigns a primary value to self-knowledge (Foucault 2001, 64–65), nonetheless it does not seem possible to make this practice coincide with care for the self, because if we analyse the Socratic dialogues as a whole, we find that in order to realise care for the self, other spiritual practices are indicated (concentration of the thought on oneself, contraction of the soul about its axis, withdrawal and isolation from the world) which cannot be assimilated to the knowledge of the self. It is true that knowledge of the self and care for the self

makes clear that having care for the self is fulfilled in the search for wisdom about human affairs, and this is in essential relation to the search for virtue; in Alcibiades he not only affirms that the care for the self consists in learning the art of “becoming as good as possible” (124b–c), but he writes that knowing ourselves is a crucial exercise in order to learn such an art (129a) and so subordinates the exercise of knowing oneself to the search for a good form of the self. It is thus evident that knowing ourselves does not coincide with care for the self, but constitutes a condition for it, when just a little further on he says: If we know ourselves, we will also be able to know how to care for ourselves, but if we do not know ourselves, we will not know that either (129a).

In order to constitute ourselves as subjects who freely give form to our own matter, our self must know itself and take a position with regard to the forms of its becoming. If I stop and think about my lived experience, I can discover that there are diverse actions through which I move in the world: some arrive as from opaque depths, and others manifest themselves as free acts consciously chosen. The complexity of lived experience is such as to show up the urgent need to turn our attention to it in order to seek a little clarity.

Knowing ourselves means understanding what the forces are which act on the life of the mind, what implications they might have for our own way of being and then judging to what extent they might help us in our becoming our own potential being and in our own existential implementation. But it is a difficult matter to deepen our knowledge of ourselves, and for this reason we often find ourselves backing away from such a commitment. When we abdicate from the task of knowing ourselves in order to approach the most intimate nucleus of the life of the soul, we end up living a life on the periphery, consuming time in activities far away from those directions by which we might interpret life according to what is essential. Deciphering what we think and what we feel, seeking as clear an understanding as possible of the visions, the theories, the emotions and the desires which constitute the generative matrix of our way of being, is a need which we feel deep within us, because when we stop and listen to ourselves, we cannot help but feel that the life in which our being flows demands a certain level of transparency.

imply a reciprocal coming together (Foucault 2001, 67); nonetheless care for the self remains an objective to which all the various practices are subordinated. If then it is possible to state that knowledge of the self carries out an essential role, it does not however seem correct to deduce from this the coincidence of this practice with care for the self.

If we think of the soul as the centre of the vital force of our own being, from which take form the directions of self-realisation of the person in his unique singularity, where the search for the composition of the sense of our life is generated and cultivated, then the delineation of care for the self as care for the soul seems fundamental. If we accept thinking of the soul as the dynamic centre of our being in the world, and that the substance of our being is given by the thoughts that we think and the emotions that we feel, then care for the self, when it is understood as care for the soul, becomes care of our thinking and of our feeling. And since, Socratically, care for the self implies knowledge of the self, having care for the self means knowing how we think and how we feel.

A further important element to take into consideration is that in *Alcibiades*, care for the self is presented as a practice of self-formation that is necessary in order to prepare ourselves for public life, because we cannot deal with shared space if we do not exercise ourselves in having care for our own way of being in the world. Socrates establishes a substantial relationship between care for the self and the exercise of political virtue, thus exempting self-care from any solipsistic or apolitical vision. In Socrates/Plato care is the primary way of being, and is in fact conceptualised as an essential practice both in the relationship we have with ourselves, to cultivate our own humanity, and on the social and political level. The ontological and ethical paradigmatic status of care is evident in *Politics*, where every time political action is defined, the term “care [ἐπιμέλεια]” is used and the man of politics is defined as he who has care for many, to be precise as he has care not just singly but collectively (275c); politics is defined as “the science of bringing human beings into community [ἀνθρώπων κοινοτροφικὴν ἐπιστήμην]” (267d 11) and in another passage in the dialogue, as “care for the whole of the human community [ἐπιμέλεια δὲ γε ἀνθρωπίνης συμπάσης κοινωνίας]” (276b 7).

If we consider that not only politics, but also and above all education, manifests itself as care, since the educator is the one who cares for the other so that he/she can mature his capacity to care for his/her own soul, then we might say, with Socrates, that care qualifies every essential gesture of our being: care that the individual person exercises towards himself (care of the self), care that the educator gives the student (*paideia* as the care that takes place when we take the other to heart in his singular uniqueness), and care that whoever is engaged in politics exercises towards the citizens as a collectivity (politics as care). Care for the self is, then, nothing other than the essential moment for carrying out a range of social roles.

While we cannot neglect successive interpretations to which the concept of care for the self has been subjected over time, it is the, so to speak, political version of care for the self, which offers an intersubjective dimension, that persuades us to take up Socratic thought as the horizon on which to place the current discourse. Indeed, given the plural nature of the human condition, which means that no existence is closed up within the confines of one's own skin but is structurally and inevitably relational, care for the self cannot but be thought of in relation to our being called upon to live together with others. This aspect in its most significant form for human beings means that taking on care for the self means also having care to live well with others.

Care for the self as practice

In his clear and refined analysis of the concept of care for the self [ἐπιμέλεια ἑαυτοῦ], Foucault is concerned to demonstrate how care for the self designates not only an attitude of attention to one's self, but also implies a certain typology of actions which we exercise upon ourselves in order to bring about a more or less profound modification and transformation in the subject's being (Foucault 2001, 12–13). The verbal expression which in ancient Greek indicates care for the self identifies not only an attitude but a way of being and acting. Etymology sends us on to terms such as *meletan* [μελετᾶν], *melete* [μελέτη], and *meletai* [μελέται]; *meletan* is often associated with *gumnazein* [γυμνάζειν] which means taking exercise, or training oneself. To be more exact, the term *gumnazein* denotes an exercise of the self with things to do with reality, while *meletan* represents an exercise of thought (Foucault, 2001, 339). In Christian vocabulary of the fourth century too, *epimeleia* indicates taking exercise, in particular ascetic exercise. Since the terms relative to care denote a number of practices, we must consider the practices by which the essence of care for the self is carried out.

Amongst the transformative practices which configure care for the self discussed by the philosophical culture of antiquity we find various techniques: meditation, memorisation of the past, examining our conscience, and analysis of the representations which take form one by one in our minds (Foucault 2001, 13). Certain “techniques of the self” were already present in the most ancient of epochs: for example, the purification rites deemed necessary to prepare one's being to come face to face with religious experiences and approach the transcendental; the practice of isolation, which consists in removing oneself from the ordinary world, absenting oneself from normal daily life in order to focus on one's self;

techniques of silence to empower the vital capacity of the soul and prevent it, insofar as it is a breath of air, from disintegrating beneath the pressures of the world; the technique of perseverance, through which the subject trains himself in dealing calmly with whatever existence might bring him that causes pain; and detailed consideration of daily life in order to have full consciousness of our own way of acting. Some of these techniques, whilst subject to processes of revision and remodelling, survived first into the Hellenistic and Roman philosophical tradition and then into Christian culture.

We find an echo of these practices in Plato. In his *Phaedrus* (65b–c) we read that it is necessary to educate the soul to concentrate upon itself, to find silence within, and to free itself from bodily ties, because these, with all the tensions they bring, would prevent the soul from “touching” the truth (65b). A spiritual practice then is identified in the exercise designed to free thought from its ties to matter in order to become a pure regard (66c), because if what is true is shorn of impurities, then it follows that the mind can approach it only when it reasons with the maximum purity.⁴

In the “cave myth” (Plato, *Republic*, book VII), the soul is summoned to a radical conversion which takes it far away from the transient things of the world, where all that is accessible to the mind are shadows, in order to rise towards the light, where alone it can have access to truth. The soul needs a clear life, and this clarity is found in seeking an answer to the questions which we sense are fundamental to seek knowledge in human matters. The work of spirituality, in Plato, is therefore essentially a work of purification whose purpose is to enable the capacity of the soul and the desire to accede to true knowledge.

The Platonic culture of care subsequently finds important echoes in Greek and Roman culture. The *Handbook* of the Stoic philosopher Epictetus is a text of spiritual practices, from which we learn that reading and studying are worthless unless the subject seeks to apply to himself the principles in order to give form to his own being.

⁴ Dematerialised fleshless thought cannot happen for we are our body and all our cognitive life is fed by sensory data; nonetheless, the epistemological asceticism of Plato, even while we should exercise some caution, still maintains its heuristic value, because with its impossible ideal of perfect purity (*Phaedo*, 65e), it recalls the task of undertaking the work of knowing, seeking to approach the question with the mind freed as far as possible from the mental content and those standard procedures which impede the acquisition of knowledge which is, as far as possible, “objective”.

Examining the techniques of self-transformation designed to shape a good form for one's own being is an essential question and as such always current. Turning back to the past while nourishing our gaze with contemporary philosophies which deal with work upon one's self can help us to find seeds of thought capable of fertilising a culture of care, now more urgent than ever.

That the human being has been given the possibility of shaping his own being is a sign that he enjoys a certain degree of freedom, together with a certain ontological force. Nonetheless, we should underline that this work of shaping has limits, and for this reason we should not expect too much from this work on one's self. Stein (2002, 372) hypothesizes that it is an originary predisposition which limits the effort of self-transformation, a sort of original imprint which whilst it makes certain developments possible, prevents the being from developing other aspects. This hypothesis, which like others presents itself in terms of an unverifiable presupposition, should be viewed with due critical caution, because it introduces a form, weak though it may be, of genetic determinism. Rather than hypothesise an originary predisposition, I prefer to think of the weight that the first forms our being receives in the first moments of life, because they are acquired when the material of our being is highly malleable and have a particular ontogenetic force, but they are not determining or irreversible in any coercive way. The first experiences of life, when we are most vulnerable and malleable, completely dependent on others and the matter of our being finds itself immersed in a morphogenetic process over which we have no control, prompt the emergence of certain modes of being which, if they remain acquired in this way without being subjected to a reflective gaze, have a powerful modelling force which we must be aware of when we decide to turn to the care of our own form of being. Another limit to the work of self-formation is the quality of the environment in which we act, which together with resources and possibilities presents forces and pressures which often tug the being in opposite directions. Knowing the objective limits of the work of self-formation is essential if we are to avoid useless and damaging illusions of omnipotence.

Spiritual practices

Applying the techniques of work to the self means doing spiritual work, because spirituality is the practice and experience by which the subject carries out upon himself the necessary transformations in order to have access to the truth (Foucault 2001, 17). Unlike what will happen in the

modern era with Descartes, for whom truth is an object accessible to thought through the application of a method understood as being in conformity to a set of rules, for the culture of care for the self, truth is not something objectively available which simply awaits being acquired by the intellect, but a horizon to which we have access by shaping our own being in order to make it able to act with truth. If we develop our discourse within a Socratic perspective, it becomes legitimate to interpret care for the self as a practice of spirituality, which demands that we put into action techniques of self-transformation with the aim of “working on our own inner principle” (Epictetus, *Handbook*, 29).⁵ Care for the self should be seen then as a spiritual practice of work on our own mode of being in an attempt to untangle the thread, following which we might have access to some fragment of truth; a truth which is enacted, and not just thought, and thus a truth which has transformative effects on the subject himself, not only when it has been reached but during the search process itself.

Precisely because of the semantic stratifications which the concept of truth brings with it, we need to make some clarifications before proceeding with our discourse. First of all, from a constructivist point of view there is no preconceived truth which the mind must see and contemplate, but truth is always something that the mind constructs in a continuous dialogue with reality. Besides, we must distinguish two kinds of truth: the truth of science which answers the need to *explain* phenomena in order to control them, and which is acquired through speculative and experimental enquiry into the world; and the truth of existence, which answers the need to *orient* the process of construction of horizons of meaning which are necessary to bring truth into our life’s time. The truth of existence does not simply limit itself to saying what living consists of, but, rather, enunciates the essence of living well (Epictetus, *Discourses*, 1, 4, 31). The methods for achieving the latter are not those useful to scientific truth, just as modes of verification of the reliability of the theses we might develop are also different.

⁵ In Pierre Hadot we find the pragmatic use of the term “spiritual” when in order to indicate the quality of the thought exercises suggested by ancient philosophy, he speaks of spiritual exercises understood as cognitive practices through which the mind makes of itself matter to be understood and modified with the purpose of operating a change in our way of being (Hadot 2002, 30). We speak of exercises because there is a fundamental analogy with physical action to mould the body and spiritual action to cultivate inner life: just as physical exercises, regularly repeated, allow us to acquire a good physical form and develop specific abilities, so spiritual exercise transforms the quality of inner life and with it the subject’s way of being.

In other words, the truth of existence is not something to be acquired by recourse to precise epistemic rules, but requires us to put into action a technique of existence with which the subject modifies and transforms himself. The truth of existence is something incarnate, which enacts itself by developing certain modes of being: there can be no truth without a conversion or a transformation of the subject (Foucault 2001, 17).

As a consequence of the different order of questions from which we generate, on the one hand, the search for scientific knowledge and, on the other, the search for knowledge of living, the truths to which scientific research aspires are irrefutable, in that they express themselves in propositions of coercive value, while the truths of existence come into being in propositions which require continual reflection and they express an exemplar value.

In the scientific paradigm, the search for truth is not a matter of opinion but has to be asserted on the basis of evidence and justifications, and as such has its own rigour and its own method. Can we speak of evidence for the truth of existence? It is the case that for this type of truth too, we go in search of something which is not just a matter of opinion, and such a research comes about in seeking intersubjective agreement, the validity of whose outcome depends on the radicality of the examination to which are subjected the presumed ideas of truth, and on the quality of the dialectical confrontation on the discourses as they are developed. It is, however, difficult to be able to speak of irrefutable evidence and rigorous justifications, which are epistemological conceptualisations that are rather applicable, even if with some caution, to the other order of truth, that of science.

When Foucault (2001, 18) speaks of truth, he seems to take the term in a broad sense, including the truth of science as well as philosophical truths: as subjects in search of truth indeed he mentions both the scientist and the philosopher. Here, instead, when I speak of truth as a tensional pole of care for the self, I mean the truth of existence, that is, those existential attitudes and those directions of being which might permit access to a “good life”, in which each person feels that they are realising their own humanity, their call to being in the world in the best way that is possible. The truth to be sought is the “knowledge of the soul” (Zambrano 1996a), that truth which responds to the yearning for transcendence so that it might open up life to something else. Finding this “knowledge of the soul” (in Latin: *sapientia*) in which is condensed the truth of existence would be like finding the vision which orients our path through time, and which points out the directions of meaning and the proper rhythm of inhabiting time. The truth we are seeking is the one which can suggest the

movements of being to be cultivated, and knows how to indicate the proper measure.

Care for the self, understood as a practice of spirituality in accordance with a Socratic vision, should be conceived of as a path which takes as its direction of horizon the truth of existence: we train ourselves in care for the self not in order to resolve theorems or to improve techniques for carrying out experiments in a laboratory, but to seek an answer to the questions specific to humans, those which Socrates does not cease to put to his interlocutors: what is it good, right and beautiful to do in order to bring truth into our allotted span? Taking these questions to heart and examining them with discipline, letting ourselves be guided by the drive to search for what does good to our being, are a necessary condition for seeking that horizon which might enlighten the path through life and make our experience glow with meaning.

If we hold to the current mode of understanding cognitive activity, that is, as an activity of the mind deputed to comprehend the quality of things, then “knowing one’s self” should not be numbered amongst the techniques which configure care for the self, since we tend to attribute to it a sense of simple recognition—seeing the quality of things, a re-cognition of the truth—whilst care for the self requires us to apply transformative techniques. Rather, the “know thyself” of which Socrates speaks should be seen as a transformative or morphogenerative practice, because in order to be capable of knowing ourselves, or, rather, of examining the soul in order to seek knowledge of human things, it is necessary to activate a certain way of looking, develop precise stances of the mind and modify certain traits of cognitive activity. We might say that knowing one’s self takes place through spiritual exercises, that is through cognitive practices which the mind exercises upon itself in order to gradually bring about a transformation of being.

In the Socratic view, “thinking oneself” is interpreted as a form of action which moulds the being. By conceiving knowing as an action, knowledge of the self happens by conceiving of ourselves, that is, by giving form to our self. Understood in this way, knowing one’s self can be included amongst the techniques of spirituality which permit the activation of care for life, since the practice of enquiry into our own being should not be seen as the mirroring of a given reality, but as the being in form which, oriented by a desire for what lies beyond, produces the modelling of the self. In this perspective, *knowing one’s self can be conceived as a thinking which seeks the method of living.*

How knowing one's self can have transformative effects emerges clearly from Stein's reflections on inner life, which is threatened by being all too often taken up with too many useless thoughts and worries and keeps the life of the mind far away from what is essential, but also by a sense of unease which keeps us in a state of continual agitation. When knowing one's self is prompted by the intention of knowing the quality of one's own inner life, we can reach the point of being able to discriminate between what is essential and what on the other hand merely prompts useless anxieties, and acquiring this level of awareness allows us to find a kind of distension of the soul, and to understand what forms of action we should take in order to seek the order of the heart which is the fount from which we should take the measure of our own being (Stein 2002, 56). Knowing one's self means knowing how to move oneself with a certain level of freedom.

For a very different interpretation of the Delphic principle, which might help us glimpse the quality of transformative practice, it is useful here to turn again to the distinction made by Arendt between knowing and thinking (Arendt 1978, 14). If with Arendt we assume that *knowing* is the cognitive faculty developed by the mind with the aim of finding reliable and rigorous explanations for the phenomena in which our life is immersed, and that *thinking* is that mental activity tasked with examining radical questions with the aim of seeking out horizons of meaning, then the Delphic principle could find a more fitting translation in the formula "think thyself". Beginning with this semantic clarification it would then be possible to undertake that epistemology of personal experience, all of which in truth has still to be constructed.

In a time such as ours, when we are fascinated by the power of the natural sciences, in particular those relying on mathematics, and by the successes of technologies, it seems like wasted time to linger in this thinking which realises itself in spiritual practices which can grasp nothing that can be calculated. However, precisely because of thinking, which goes in search of the indispensable it becomes a question of our own being in the world, and deciding in favour of self-knowing turns out to be an essential existential act on a personal as well as political level.

Knowing one's self

Knowing one's self answers the critical need which the human being feels to lessen the opacity around him in order to shed light, as far as is possible, on his own being. "Everyone has the potential for self-knowledge and sound thinking" (Heraclitus, F31/ DK-22B116) in order to uncover our