

PHILOSOPHY AS AN ART OF LIVING. SITUATING THE METHOD OF SOCRATIC DIALOGUE WITHIN A FRAMEWORK OF “CARE OF THE SELF”

FILOSOFÍA COMO ARTE DE VIVIR. SITUANDO EL MÉTODO DEL DIÁLOGO SOCRÁTICO DENTRO DEL MARCO DEL “CUIDADO DEL SÍ”

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Abstract: Modern philosophy has departed from the classical conception of philosophy as the art of living. By rearticulating this conception, the late Foucault marks a mode of relating to contemporary life of which Socratic dialogue can be seen as both a manifestation and a metaphor. In this article I discuss the relationship between Michel Foucault’s revival of the Greek notion of “care of the self” and the method of Socratic dialogue as developed by Leonard Nelson with the intent of sketching a practical hermeneutics of the self. The article will show how Foucault’s genealogical thoughts on “care of the self” provide a theoretically solidifying framework for Socratic dialogue making some of its characteristic features even more explicit. It will also explain Socratic dialogue as an ethical practice, or a technology of the self, for an individual’s self-formation within a sociality and a personal striving towards self-transformation and living well.

Keywords: Care of the self, art of living, aesthetics of existence, Socratic dialogue and self-formation

Resumen: La filosofía moderna se ha apartado de la concepción clásica de la filosofía como arte de vivir. Retomando esta concepción, el último Foucault señala un modo de relacionarse con la vida contemporánea específico en el cual el diálogo socrático puede verse tanto como una manifestación como una metáfora. En este artículo, discuto la relación entre el renacimiento de la noción griega de “cuidado de sí”, realizada por Michel Foucault, y el método del diálogo socrático, tal como lo desarrolla Leonard Nelson con el intento de esquematizar una hermenéutica práctica del yo. Este artículo mostrará cómo la idea de la genealogía de Foucault ejercida sobre el “cuidado del sí” proporciona un marco teórico sólido para el diálogo socrático y cataliza que algunas de sus características sean más explícitas. Además, describiré el diálogo socrático como una práctica ética, o una tecnología del yo, destinada a la autoformación de los individuos en el ámbito de la socialización y en el del esfuerzo personal hacia la autotransformación y la vida buena.

Introduction

The American thinker Henry David Thoreau writes in his magnificent book *Walden* that nowadays there are “professors of philosophy, but not philosophers.”¹ He wrote this in 1854 at a time when philosophy had taken an ever more academic tone that eventually would exile the field from society and disengage it from the flux of life. Philosophy had cornered itself into a cerebral, self-referential esoteric specialty of reclusive scholarship that ended up behind the closed doors of the university submerged in systems of pure thought with little relevance to the lives of men.

What the quote by Thoreau essentially alludes to is that philosophy had departed from its Socratic origin of perceiving itself as a practical art of living. In Classical Antiquity, philosophy was not viewed as a theoretical, academic discourse proposing final, universally explanatory structures of the nature of man but was thought of as the ethical practices of the self and an existential choice that would form and not only inform the young students. In an Aristotelian spirit and following Hellenistic and Roman ethics, philosophy was conceived as an ethical attitude that interacted with the world, an embodied *praxis* where one tried to establish an accordance between one’s philosophical discourse and one’s living.

The fundamental idea behind *praxis* was to foster “a well being,” “a pleasant life” or “human flourishing,” as this was viewed as valuable for its own sake (love, friendship, freedom, etc. were conceived as having intrinsic value all pointing to human flourishing). As a result, the focus was also on the formation of the self as the agent in charge of cultivating virtues that would enhance “the good life.” Nelson’s method of Socratic dialogue² and the late Foucault’s notion of “care of the self” offer illuminating perspectives on how the self in contemporary life can engage in such a self-formation, in *praxis*, that transcends modern self-help psychology and abstract philosophy. In this article, I therefore

¹ The quote continues like this: “To be a philosopher is not merely to have subtle thoughts, nor even to found a school, but so to love wisdom as to live according to its dictate” (Henry David Thoreau, *Walden – Essay on Civil Disobedience*, New York, Airmont Publishing Company, 1965, p.19.

² Socrates maieutic method hinges on the active assistance in delivering thoughts by asking critical questions. Socratic dialogue in the original version as well as in the Nelsonian version seeks to curiously probe participants’ underlying values and beliefs determining the implicit definition in them and contesting their consistency but where Socrates approach was confrontational (borderline humiliating), Nelson’s has a dynamic form. Both philosophers believed in grounding philosophical reflection in the empirical world of the participants but unlike the dialogues written down by Plato between Socrates and one other person, Nelsonian Socratic dialogue is a group activity. Nelson’s method also differs from Socrates way of dialoguing by not strictly adhering to his elenctic approach of cross-examination though it is equally keen on supporting viewpoints with a valid defense.

examine the relationship between Nelsonian Socratic dialogue and Foucault's "care of the self" with the specific aim to see how Foucault can assist in the conceptualization, delineation and expansion of Nelsonian Socratic dialogue. My project is therefore also to move beyond Nelson and position Socratic dialogue in contemporary time by drawing on the late Foucault. My study will also serve as a sketch for a hermeneutics of the self that relies on the ethical practice of self-creation, or making life a work of art,³ usually affiliated with Foucauldian aesthetics of existence.

Correlating the late Foucault with philosophical practice is not a novel thought.⁴ However, correlating his thoughts on "care of the self" with the method of Socratic dialogue that is usually categorized under the field of philosophical practice has not yet enjoyed much scholarly attention. The Dutch philosopher and philosophical practitioner Dries Boele who can be considered one of the pioneers of Socratic dialogue in The Netherlands certainly ties Socratic dialogue to an understanding of philosophy as an art of living echoing the classical notion that Foucault picks up in the early 1980's but Boele has not written much on the subject⁵ nor framed Socratic dialogue explicitly within a "care of the self" or in the larger context of a hermeneutics of the self. The Australian philosopher and philosophical counselor Fiona Jenkins⁶ studies Foucault's concept of 'care of the self' in philosophical practice, but she confines her study to the one-on-one conversational process between a philosophical counselor and an individual focusing on the ideals of autonomy and authenticity. The Nelsonian method of Socratic dialogue is not assimilated into her studies.

³ Foucault, Michel: "On the Genealogy of Ethics," in P. Rabinow (ed.) *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, vol. 1, London, Penguin books, 2000, pp. 261-62.

⁴ Significant contributors in this regard are Pierre Hadot's *Philosophy as a Way of Living. Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault* (1987), Martha Nussbaum's *The Therapy of Desire. Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (1994) and Alexander Nehamas's *The Art of Living. Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault* (1998). Other scholars include the Dutch philosopher Dries Boele and the Danish philosopher Finn Thorbjørn Hansen.

⁵ See particularly: Dries Boele, "The Benefits of a Socratic Dialogue. Or: Which Results Can We Promise?" in *Inquiry. Critical Thinking across the Disciplines*, Spring 1998, Vol. XVII, No. 3 and "Dries Boele" in Jeanette Bresson Ladegaard Knox & Jan Kyrre Berg Olsen Friis (eds.) *5 Questions: Philosophical Practice*, Copenhagen: Automatic Press/VIP, 2013, p. 33-41.

⁶ Jenkins, Fiona: "Care of the Self or Cult of the Self? How Philosophical Counseling gets Political" in *International Journal of Philosophical Practice*, issue 1. 1, Summer 2001; "Therapies of Desire and the Aesthetics of Existence: On the Relevance of Foucault for Philosophical Counseling" in *Practical Philosophy*, 4:3, November 2001; "Philosophical Counseling as Care of the Self: Notes on Foucault's Genealogy of Ethics" in *Philosophy in Society*, eds. Henning Herrestad, Helge Svare and Anders Holt, Oslo: Unipub Forlag, 1999. All three articles are very similar. Sometimes Jenkins even repeats herself or reuses paragraphs.

In the Footsteps of Socrates

The German philosopher and mathematician Leonard Nelson (1882-1927) seems as unknown in philosophy as Michel Foucault (1926-1984) is known. Few people have ever heard of him and fewer are familiar with his work and writings. Though Nelson is not as influential by any means compared to Foucault, there is power and pertinence in Nelson's thought. It merits a hearing due to his revitalization of Socratic dialogue in actuality and his vigorous efforts to awaken critical thinking in his students.

The philosophical point of departure for both Nelson and the late Foucault can be traced back to Socrates. It is not by accident that Nelson and Foucault glanced at the old Greek giant. Socrates embodies a commitment to reason and self-formation to which Nelson and Foucault both consent though differently. Nelson is predominantly inspired by Socrates maieutics in developing his method of Socratic dialogue, particularly of how maieutics can nurture the forming of the individual moral subject where Foucault in his last years extensively studies the Socratic notion of *epimeleia heautou* which he translates into "care of the self" in connection with his study of the relations between subject and truth⁷ and thus also gets involved in "the history of how an individual acts upon himself" to become a moral subject.⁸ However, their moral subject diverts. Nelson adheres to a Kantian inspired rational ethics whereas Foucault develops a creative ethics, or ethics as an aesthetics of existence. The Nelsonian moral subject is accessible through rational principles and universal moral prescriptions; the Foucauldian moral subject is fluid and in a perpetual process mirroring the continual flux of quotidian existence in contemporarity.

⁷ Foucault's study can be found particularly in *Histoire de la sexualité, III: Le souci de soi*, Paris: Gallimard, 1984; in *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, London, Penguin books, 2000, vol. 1 and in *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, New York, Picador, 2005.

⁸ The full quote also indicates the shift of attention in Foucault's last years from an analysis of power of which he is most known to an analysis of a new ethics of the self that he elsewhere calls the aesthetics of existence: "Perhaps I've insisted too much on the technology of domination and power. I am more and more interested in the interaction between oneself and others in the technologies of individual domination, the history of how an individual acts upon himself, in the technologies of self" in "Technologies of the Self," in P. Rabinow (ed.) *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, vol. 1, London, Penguin books, 2000, p. 225.

Nelsonian Socratic dialogue⁹ was originally thought of as a reflective tool and pedagogic technique for university teaching to enhance students' own critical and independent thinking, rational argumentation and support their *Bildung* (formation). It is a dialogue that is a methodologically structured, a cooperative effort within a group of students who analyze one philosophical question by way of examining concrete experiences and digging into the underpinnings of biases, assumptions and values that color or even direct these experiences. Inspired by Kant and Fries, Nelson calls this rational process regressive abstraction.¹⁰ Nelson's overall goal with his method was to teach his students to philosophize and learn that to philosophize was something distinct from academic philosophy.¹¹ The feature of regressive abstraction reveals a strong rationalistic influence on Nelson. He is convinced that the act of philosophizing can bring out "universal rational truths"¹² demonstrating that Nelson is grounded in a traditional unchanging, objective metaphysics that can be uncovered by the human mind. To Foucault this attitude is to go beyond philosophizing as it puts forward the presupposition that the subject has access to a universal truth that hides beneath the surface of reality. The act of philosophizing, according to Foucault, is conditioned by the abdication of universal truths joining other critical philosophers such as Nietzsche, Derrida and Rorty.

Though Foucault engaged in the ancient thought of philosophical dialogue, he regrettably did not himself develop any concrete practices like Nelson with his Socratic method. Though Nelson also engaged in ancient thought, he on the other hand did not place the use of maieutics within Greek and Stoic ethics or position Socratic dialogue within the classical notion of philosophy as a way of living. He never defined the aim of Socratic dialogue as a care of the self. Through its exploratory reflection on a philosophical question by use of personal experience, I believe that Socratic dialogue can, however, be interpreted as a care of the self. Viewing Socratic dialogue within the framework of "care of the

⁹ Nelson's method of Socratic dialogue was picked up by his student Gustav Heckmann and later by many other philosophers particularly in Germany, The Netherlands, England and the US (for example, Horst Gronke in Germany, Jos Kessels in The Netherlands, Lou Marinoff in the US). Finn Thorbjørn Hansen has introduced the method in Denmark. It has over the past many decades spread out to professions outside of its original realm of education, for example health care and the world of business. As a practice it has gone through several modifications and additions and two traditions have emerged: a German and a Dutch. The former is still basically loyal to Nelson's Kantian and universalistic approach where as the latter is more pragmatic and existential.

¹⁰ Nelson, Leonard: "The Socratic Method," in Rene Saran & Barbara Neisser (eds) *Enquiring Minds. Socratic Dialogue in Education*, Stoke on Trent, Trentham Books, 2004, p. 141.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 135.

self,” we expand the parameter of Nelsonian Socratic dialogue to beyond the circles of students and the realm of education to also embrace the lives of all people engulfed by the diffuse and complex questions of living. Nelson fails in this way to see the wider prospects of a dialogue of this nature. It is not only confined to students engaged in their own rational arguments. Socratic dialogue as an expression of “care of the self” touches the basic human impulse to question life and the experience of being an individual subject. Foucault’s thoughts on “care of the self” as an ethical practice suggest a philosophical mode of being in the world with a transformative potential for the self. Nelson’s Socratic dialogue provides a practical format for its enactment.

An Aesthetics of Existence: The Self as a Work of Art

The abundance of today’s self-help books is ample evidence of an extensive attention put on self-realization as an individual project and responsibility. Towards the end of his life, Foucault picked up on and conceptualized this tendency in modern times to emphasize the subject’s preoccupation with self-examination. But what kind of self is Foucault referring to and what self is under examination in a Foucauldian inspired Socratic dialogue?

The kind of care of the self that Foucault defends is diametrically opposed to what he calls “the Californian cult of the self” in which “one is supposed to discover one’s true self [...] decipher its truth thanks to psychological or psychoanalytical science.”¹³ Foucault does not understand the self as an introvert and introspective process or a psychological self-realization that enables a certain level of self-mastering. The self is not a well established essence that the mind just needs to become conscious of and get to know - an original homeland that we can get to by way of memorizing an inner map. Though Socratic dialogue takes the form of a laboratory for self-examination, I believe that we reduce the complexity and range of the self in interpreting the work on the self within such a dialogue in psychological terms. In the absence of universal truths, the subject is left to work on itself by adopting an attitude that is experimental, creative and inquisitive. Foucault revives the antique idea of *askēsis* in this connection. A contemporary ascetic attitude releases the self from conformity and “normalization” in how it thinks of itself, others and the world. It is not a “renunciation of reality”¹⁴ as in Christian times but a relentless

¹³ Foucault, Michel: “On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress,” in P. Rabinow (ed.) *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, vol. 1, London, Penguin books, 2000, p. 271.

¹⁴ Foucault, Michel: “Technologies of the Self,” in P. Rabinow (ed.) *Essential Works of Foucault*

process of rejuvenation or expansion of truth and knowledge within the changing gazes of the self. The ascetic attitude expresses an exercise in becoming through the work of thought upon itself.

This attitude is not limited to a purely self-indulgent movement. Building on the format of Nelsonian Socratic dialogue and Foucault's understanding of the self, I see a dialectic between a negotiated universality (coming out of the focus on the philosophical question chosen by the group) and a revealed particularity (coming out of using individual experiences to illustrate the philosophical question) in Socratic dialogue that makes it a mode of subjection,¹⁵ i.e. the process of becoming *a* subject. This subjection hinges on how the subject is distinct from other subjects within the sociality yet, in addition, how the dialogue reverberates a philosophically founded commonality.

Foucault not only distances himself from the self-absorbed, private subject of psychology. His aesthetics of existence equally takes a critical stance towards the Kantian inspired stance on subjectivity implied by Nelson. Instead of viewing the self as an a priori concept with a solid, unitary substance, Foucault views the self more like a fluid form.¹⁶ The geography of the self is never fully uncovered as the self is not a fixed and final reality but continually expanded and explained by us as we walk along life's way. It is utopian to think that within the body resides a pure and true self, a core underneath all appearances that with the help of the mind can see the light of day. Foucault viewed the Kantian perception of the transcendental subject that precedes all empirical experience and historical and cultural determination as a menacing predicament in modern times. It has tricked us to think that the subject is founding, sovereign and autonomous when, in fact, it is flexible, dependent and fragmented. This is not to say that Foucault excludes experiences of unity within the self, of styling the fragments that makes up the self into a meaningful compilation. A sense of unity within the self is an aesthetic challenge that lingers on in each individual life; it is precisely this narrative styling that can be momentarily mounted by a (Foucauldian) Socratic dialogue.

As Foucault traces structures of thought in Western civilization, he situates concepts such as subjectivity and self within the confines of history, culture, politics and the personal storytelling of the individual. The self is not pure fiction or a blank canvas; it is coded by the temporal and spacial context it finds itself in. As Foucault writes in "On the Genealogy of Ethics": "From the idea

1954-1984, vol. 1, London, Penguin books, 2000, p. 238.

¹⁵ Foucault, Michel: *Histoire de la sexualité, I: La volonté de savoir*, Paris, Gallimard, 1984, p. 81.

¹⁶ Foucault, Michel: "The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom" in P. Rabinow (ed.) *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, vol. 1, London, Penguin books, 2000, p. 290.

that the self is not given to us, I think that there is only one practical consequence: we have to create ourselves as a work of art.”¹⁷ Echoing the views of Nietzsche, Foucault’s self is a work of art in progress and as such we can understand the self as an act of creation where the self is the artist and life is the raw material.

Foucault’s anti-universalist disposition evoked early on critical reactions from distinguished philosophers such as Taylor, Habermas and Rorty.¹⁸ They accused him of lapsing into a dangerous relativism that shuns a sense of community and humanity. However, this is a deficient critique of Foucault’s position. Foucault’s aesthetics of existence does not undermine any sense of community or humanity. Instead, Foucault empowers the individual subject with a constitutive and constructive freedom without defining what this subject is. He voices a philosophical *ethos*,¹⁹ a reflective, responsible and creative being and behavior in the world where one’s actions express ethical practices of one’s self. Combining this view with that of ‘care of the self’ we can say that Foucault introduces a critical attitude within the self that also fits the structure within Socratic dialogue. Similar to Nietzsche, Gadamer and Derrida, Foucault proposes to inject a healthy skepticism in the thinking of experience, knowledge, and truth.

Foucault is not advocating a radical individualization, i.e. self-encapsulated individual subjects drifting rootless around in the sea of social life with an outlook on others as being means of self-enhancement. Foucault is advocating for the subjectivation of the subject in the sense of giving one’s self an original form in sociality. This subjectivation within a sociality, for example the one within a Socratic dialogue, is always in a creative process of becoming and transformation. Socratic dialogue will, using Foucault, endorse a similar commitment to the interaction between self and sociality in the subjectivation of the fluid subject. A dialogue on these premises allows for a hermeneutics of the self to occur by exercising freedom in thinking differently about values and temporarily losing one’s way as one grows in knowledge. This also means the willingness to abandon the justification of one’s understanding by references to

¹⁷ Foucault, Michel: “On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress,” in P. Rabinow (ed.) *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, vol. 1, London, Penguin books, 2000, p. 262.

¹⁸ Charles Taylor, “Foucault on Freedom and Truth,” in D. C. Hoy (ed.) *Foucault: A Critical Reader*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1986; Jürgen Habermas, “Taking Aim at the Heart of the Present,” in D. C. Hoy (ed.) *Foucault: A Critical Reader*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1986; Richard Rorty, “Moral identity and Private Autonomy: The Case of Foucault,” in Richard Rorty *Essays on Heidegger and others: Philosophical Papers*, Vol. 2, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1991.

¹⁹ See Michel Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?” in P. Rabinow (ed.) *The Foucault Reader*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1984 where Foucault explores his notion of the philosophical *ethos*.

philosophical systems, religious doctrines, social conventions and cultural norms that selfhood often seem to be built on. As the self is not a solid substance, the pursuit in Socratic dialogue, if applying a Foucauldian read, is not to find the self once and for all but to get clearer on and more insightful of this creative self as it is contextually told and acted out now at this moment in time.

Philosophy as *ethos* is an art of living, or a creative act carried out by the self. It is not the accumulation of knowledge. As a result of viewing philosophy as an ethical practice or an *ethos*, Foucault develops the concept of “technology of the self.”²⁰ Technologies of the self are strategies “which permit individuals to effect by their own means, or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.”²¹ A technology of the self is thus a technique, or an activity, that the individual can adopt to access greater ethical self-knowledge. Foucault explains how the Stoic used writing, for example, as an exercise in the cultivation of the self.

During a Socratic dialogue reflections on modes of living emerge and choices of existence are drawn up, offering a practice in self-cultivation. Against a Foucauldian backdrop Socratic dialogue can be perceived as a technology of the self in the sense that it facilitates self-scrutiny and self-transformation within its own normative and confined sociality. The living substance of Socratic dialogue consists in the vibrant exchanges among the participants bouncing off on each other while trying to appropriate existential and moral orientation in their lives. The dialogue opens up a new space for rethinking and reshaping experience, truth and knowledge in tandem with it suggesting a dynamic as opposed to a static subjectivity. “Care of the self” expressed as practices enacted upon by the self on the self traces within the context of Socratic dialogue the individual choices and ethical trajectory of the self of the participants as they ponder on what they are and what they do.

The Anatomy of “Care of the Self”

In *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* (2005) which were lectures given at the Collège de France in 1981-1982, Foucault unfolds some characteristics of the

²⁰ Foucault invents the concept of “technology of the self” late in life as it only takes form within the context of his studies on Classical philosophy, particularly Stoic ethics.

²¹ Foucault, Michel: “Technologies of the Self,” in P. Rabinow (ed.) *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, vol. 1, London, Penguin books, 2000, p. 225.

Greek notion “the care of the self.” He outlines three general traits that we must be aware of in connection with this widespread notion in Antiquity. The first one he mentions is that the care of the self is a way of “behaving in the world”²² and essentially expressing a specific “attitude towards oneself, others and the world.”²³ The second he mentions is that the care of the self is “a form of attention, of looking.”²⁴ This implies a concern for the well being of oneself which also means having a close look at “what we think and what takes place in our thought.”²⁵ The last one Foucault mentions “designates a number of actions exercised on the self by the self, actions by which one takes responsibility for oneself and by which one changes, purifies, transforms, and transfigures oneself.”²⁶ I believe that the philosophical reflection within a Socratic dialogue exposes all three traits.

The first two are illustrated by the intent and content of a Socratic dialogue. A Socratic dialogue expresses an understanding of the self as a story that is continually being written and told. This kind of reflection remains within a concept of freeing oneself from systems of thought that dictate opinions, values and outlook. The intent is not to capture an answer but to open up a question or to “live the questions” as the great poet Rainer Maria Rilke once wrote.²⁷ In a Socratic dialogue there is a focus on how we (i.e. the participants) think of a specific ethical and/or existential issue. The dialogue is an open forum for exploring thought and how we are in the world. The content is the exploration into the participating selves, individually and collectively. The participation in a Socratic dialogue is a personal decision and an act where one is willing to challenge, revise and transform one’s view of oneself and life. This act can be perceived as “an action exercised on the self by the self.”²⁸ Thus, it is fair to state that this form of dialogue also illustrates Foucault’s last general trait of “care of the self.”

By reference to Plato’s *Alcibiades* which is a dialogue between Alcibiades and Socrates, Foucault explains three important functions of the formation of the self.²⁹ All three functions are relevant for my exploration of connections

²² Foucault, Michel: *The Hermeneutics of the Subject. Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981-1982*, New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2005, p. 10.

²³ Foucault op. cit., p. 10.

²⁴ Idem.

²⁵ Foucault op. cit., p. 11.

²⁶ Idem.

²⁷ Rilke, Rainer Maria: *Letters to a Young Poet*, New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2004, p. 27.

²⁸ Foucault, Michel: *The Hermeneutics of the Subject. Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981-1982*, New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2005, p. 11.

²⁹ Foucault frames these three functions within pedagogy showing the learning or formative aspect of

between “care of the self” and the philosophical reflection within Socratic dialogue.

The first function entails adopting a critical stance towards views on life outside of oneself. Foucault states that “the practice of the self must enable one to get rid of all the bad habits, all the false opinions that one can get from the crowd or from bad teachers, but also from parents and associates. To “unlearn” (*de-dicere*) is one of the important tasks of self-cultivation.”³⁰ Essential to a Socratic dialogue is the subjective scrutiny of one’s own attitudes, opinions, values and norms. This aspect is particularly highlighted in one of the premises of Socratic dialogue which is not to quote any authors, philosophers, teachers, etc. but solely to rely on one’s own thinking of the issue at hand. The Socratic dialogue encourages the free inquisitorial search within the recesses of the participant’s existence. In that sense Socratic dialogue becomes an archeology of the self. It is the excavation of the spheres and modalities of thought, a “training in thought by means of thought.”³¹

As we have seen so far, Socratic dialogue asserts many perceptions of the care of the self as it is narrated by Foucault. There is another important aspect that Socratic dialogue reveals which is the ancient notion that the attending to oneself is not a momentary preoccupation but a lifelong activity. It is a perpetual learning process in the act of living. Quoting among others the Stoic philosopher Gaius Musonius Rufus (often referred to as the Roman Socrates), Foucault makes this point clear: “One must always take care of oneself if one wishes to live in a wholesome way.”³² *The second function* that Foucault mentions concerning the thoughts of the formation of the self in the *Alcibiades* touches on this very subject of struggle. It captures very well this idea of a perpetual battle that the self has to endure and shows how important it is to give the individual “the weapons and the courage that will enable him to fight all his life.”³³ A Socratic dialogue is a never ending reflection on a philosophical question. Going through the different phases of such a dialogue, from individual experience to general conceptions, participants realize at the end of it that no conclusion, no final summing-up, can be reached. The dialogue has exposed not only the question at hand but exposed other vital and related questions that the chosen question has stirred up. The excavation of the spheres and modalities of thought

the care of the self; “The Hermeneutics of the Subject,” in P. Rabinow (ed.) *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, vol. 1, London, Penguin books, 2000, pp. 96-97.

³⁰ Foucault op, cit., p. 97.

³¹ Foucault op, cit., p. 102.

³² Foucault op, cit., p. 94f.

³³ Foucault op, cit., p. 97.

and existence do not end by exchanging the final words in a Socratic dialogue. The end is, in fact, a (new) beginning.

The third function relates to the effects of attending to oneself. In the true spirit of the Epicureans, the Cynics and the Stoics, Foucault recounts the curative and therapeutic function of self-cultivation.³⁴ To these thinkers philosophy's highest achievement was to transform the individual by teaching and training him in the art of living through rational thinking and practical exercises.³⁵ Philosophy as an art concerned with the well being of the soul made the philosopher's task into one of treating the diseases of the soul. In Plato's *Crito* we hear of how Socrates while facing imminent death by poison expresses a profound concern for the diseases of the soul. These diseases are of a different nature than that of the body. The diseases of the soul consist of false ideas that will eventually corrupt the soul. They are the diseases of unexamined beliefs. False ideas, fallacious convictions or erroneous presuppositions are the product of a mind that has not bothered to test the truth of these ideas, for instance by just adopting what the masses think or the general sentiment expressed about an issue. Socratic dialogue is an activity, a meeting of people engaged in pressing life issues. Through the interplay of reflective responses where *die Sache selbst* is scrutinized from all possible angles, the dialogue can generate greater clarification of one's distinctive self at this point in one's historical narrative.

As the observant reader will notice, I have in the last many pages moved beyond Nelson's dialogue by adding Foucault's aesthetics of existence to its format of thinking from experience. I will continue this expansion in the following pages.

Within our context of seeing philosophy as potentially a transformative act in the confines of Socratic dialogue, it is important to link, as does Foucault,³⁶ the care of the self to the care of others. It is hard not to cultivate the self without the help of others when positioned in the world. The care of the self is not to be framed as a complete withdrawal of the individual leading to full devotion and attention to oneself only. The care for the self is an inward and outward relating to other selves and within a Socratic dialogue to its collectivity. A Socratic

³⁴ Foucault op. cit., p. 97.

³⁵ An excellent accounts of the practical exercises of ancient philosophy and of ancient philosophical thought, I refer to Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1995; Alexander Nehamas, *The Art of Living. Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1998; John Sellars, *The Art of Living. The Stoics on the Nature and Function of Philosophy*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2003.

³⁶ Foucault, Michel: "The Hermeneutics of the Subject," in P. Rabinow (ed.) *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, vol. 1, London, Penguin books, 2000, pp. 97-98.

dialogue creates an interpretative community and thus expresses an intersubjective *nexus*.

Foucault states in “The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom” that the care of the self implies a relationship with others, “one needs a guide, a counselor, a friend, someone who will be truthful with you.”³⁷ The care of oneself cannot abstract from a care for others. In a philosophical dialogue there is a concern for and attention drawn to the thought processes of the other participants. There is an eagerness to hear what others have to say. They become each others’ guide and friend. The help that others extend in a Socratic dialogue does not take the form of indoctrination or persuasion but is, indeed, Socratic midwifery: helping to give birth to thoughts that murmur in the participants. In that way Socratic dialogue supports social relations where participants counsel each other by helping to cast light on and make more precise the perspectives and gazes of the self as well as contributing to a greater conceptual clarity of the question under investigation. The reflection that takes place is part of a hermeneutic process within the self but also in the (hermeneutic) space between selves.

Socratic dialogue magnifies the dialogical aspect of producing truth and knowledge. Knowledge and truth are generated not only through the individual’s reflection on personal experience but through the collective reflection on experience. We sustain an individual reflection but there is also a dialectical reflection among the participants that ricochets back to individual reflection. In fact, the two movements (the individual and collective reflection) are intimately intertwined preventing the reduction of the self to a purely solipsistic or universal entity.

Framing Socratic dialogue within Foucauldian “care of the self” helps shape a philosophical, or an onto-ethico, approach to life that points beyond the psychological fixation on the individual subject or the philosophical reflection on the transcendental subject. It points to a philosophical life or *ethos* rooted in a creative act, or flow, between experience and thought as well as between particularity and commonality.

Socratic dialogue: A Hermeneutics of the Self

Human beings relentlessly question the fundamentals of life. Our questions and the exploration of them construct narratives of being and what being should be.

³⁷ Foucault, Michel: “The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom” in P. Rabinow (ed.) *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, vol. 1, London, Penguin books, 2000, p. 287.

The daunting challenges we face in times of dilemma, doubt and disorientation can erode our understanding of reality. The disturbing experience of not being at home³⁸ can dissolve our sense of coherence and direction and make us question our moral compass.

Embedded in the philosophical practices of the self, in experience itself, lies human questioning and the challenge of giving birth to a new understanding. By situating Socratic dialogue within a framework of Foucault's genealogical thoughts of "care of the self," a hermeneutics of the self emerges. I view the pledge of the late Foucault to historicizing philosophical inquiry along with rejecting a Cartesian foundationalism in epistemology and fostering the conditions for the development of moral agency as necessary elements when outlining a hermeneutics of the self for contemporary man. The philosophical reflection within a Socratic dialogue is a hermeneutic process that engages the self of each individual participant in interpretative gazes on value, meaning and truth becoming a midwife for each other. The philosophical reflection in Socratic dialogue is a quest for self-knowledge, a search for truth and meaning. It becomes "an exercise of oneself in thought."³⁹

A hermeneutics of the self brings forth the classical Greek idea of *parrhesia*, i.e. the practice of ethical truth telling. Foucault finds *parrhesia* to play a central role in the "care of the self." If we situate this idea within a Socratic dialogue, *parrhesia* opens up a candid space among the participants committed to truth telling and speaking one's mind freely. In the true and sincere articulation of thoughts and the moral deliberation that follows, the participants display what moves their inner reality and doings in a sociality. This truthful discourse among the participants on a philosophical question helps constitute the self, or in Foucauldian terms, it subjectifies the individuals partaking in the dialogue. By discursive means, (Socratic) *parrhesia* becomes a communicative procedure of subjectivation that binds the participants together in a "confessional" sociality where the narrated identity of the self becomes distinct and local yet also joined by the humanity that the dialogue brings forth. In this way their *parrhesian* attitude incites a mutual "care of the self."

Tieng Socratic dialogue to the broader context of Foucauldian "care of the self" and living a philosophical life (or in the words of Socrates, an examined life) amplifies Socratic dialogue as an enactment of understanding that weaves hermeneutics into the classic notion of experience of philosophy as a way of living. Making one's way in life becomes a hermeneutical endeavor that brings

³⁸ Heidegger, Martin: *Being and Time*, New York: Harper & Row, 1962, p. 189.

³⁹ Foucault, Michel: *L'Usage des plaisirs*, p. 16; cited in P. Rabinow (ed.) *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, vol. 1, London, Penguin books, 2000, p. xxviii.

in a negotiated universal aspect into self-formation without losing sight of the particularity of the self. The cultivation of the self becomes a cultivation of human flourishing. Foucault's "care of the self" prescribes a hermeneutic approach for working with and on the self within an existing historic situation. Framing Socratic dialogue within this idea offers foundational and explanatory value for the quest for truth, knowledge and meaning in the perpetual forming of the self and thus assists in conceptualizing a practice that translates into ways of expanding understanding while addressing the act of being a moral subject in the world. Socratic dialogue can be conceived as the quintessence of the thoughts of the "the care of the self" *in concreto*.

Philosophizing to Nelson is essentially "the art of independent thinking" and "precision of thought."⁴⁰ Looking at Socratic dialogue through a Foucauldian lens, philosophizing becomes more than this. Foucault's "care of the self" certainly assigns importance to the process of thinking *for* oneself but the idea equally assigns focus on thinking *on* oneself suggesting a whole mode of being in the world (not just intellectually thinking) that encompasses Socratic dialogue but also extends well beyond it. Foucault offers the moral subject of contemporary times an alternative to the prevalent ideas of society of how to live and live well. The *parrhesiastic* space within Socratic dialogue highlights a truthfulness and openness about the experimental practice of living. It contains a philosophical attitude, an *ethos* that is not confined to the boundaries of the dialogue. As the self is conceived as a work of art, the creating of this self is perpetual process. The Socratic dialogue becomes a momentary narrative of the self or a concrete manifestation of the lifelong journey to and through truth, meaning and self-knowledge. In a Foucauldian perspective, Socratic dialogue is read within the broader context of living philosophically. Life is not only examined within Socratic dialogue but within life itself. Living philosophically is a way of life and through this a way of transforming the self en route.

Living philosophically is thus a concrete attitude, an *ethos*, that puts vigilant attention on the self's contextual mode of being in the world posing the old question of how one ought to live and what kind of person one would like to become. It is attainable by viewing philosophical reflection, for example the one that takes place within a Socratic dialogue, as an exercise in or an act of being with the potential to change the network of beliefs, expectations and visions one possesses and thus open up access to truth and self-knowledge. Socratic

⁴⁰ Nelson, Leonard: "The Art of Philosophizing" in *Socratic Method and Critical Philosophy. Selected Essays*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1949, p. 94.

dialogue serves as an illustration of the potentiality of such a reflexive activity and transformative practice.⁴¹

An Example of the Practice of Care of the Self

Philosophical practice to which Socratic dialogue belongs purports philosophy as philosophy in dialogue.⁴² Philosophy in dialogue is both a theoretical and practical discipline. The importance of theory to philosophy in dialogue lies not in bringing philosophical theories into the dialogue turning it into a study/reading group as this would make it too academic and stale for the lived experience of people engaged in it. The importance lies in improving its theoretical foundation and cultivating it as a practical pursuit simultaneously. In other words, it lies in providing a firm footing for the constitution and enactment of philosophy in dialogue. The overall thought behind this article is to develop the theoretical composition of philosophy in dialogue so to strengthen the framework of Socratic dialogue in particular in the hope of expanding its dimension and substantiating it further as a philosophical activity.

At the heart of Socratic dialogue is philosophical reflection and human interaction between moral agents.⁴³ Dialogue that is philosophically based is implemented and executed in a wide variety of venues from prisons and nursing homes to schools and organizations.⁴⁴ All these modular applications testify to the theoretical diversity and the multipurpose of philosophical dialogue. The main point of my article is to suggest Socratic dialogue as an expression of “care of the self.” One apparent and very relevant environment for the practice of my

⁴¹ Foucault’s successor to his chair at the Collège de France, Pierre Hadot contemplates as Foucault on philosophy as an art of living and the transformative impact that it can have on the self. In his wonderful book *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, Hadot eloquently captures the transformative and therapeutic aspect when he states that “The philosophical act is not situated merely on the cognitive level, but on that of the self and of being. It is a progress which causes us to *be* more fully, and makes us better. It is a conversion which turns our entire life upside down, changing the life of the person who goes through it.” Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1995, p. 83.

⁴² Lindseth, Anders: “Philosophical Practice: What is at Stake?” in *Philosophy in Society*, eds. Herrestad, Holt & Svare, Oslo, Unipub Forlag, 2002, p. 17.

⁴³ Seeskin, Kenneth: “Socratic Philosophy and the Dialogue Form,” in *Dialogue and Discovery. A Study in Socratic Method*, New York City, State University of New York Press, 1987, p. 3.

⁴⁴ A large number of philosophers have ventured into various areas of practice. To give but a few examples let me mention: Horst Gronke has worked within prisons and with prisoners; Pia Hverven Axell within nursing homes and old people; Vaughana Feary Macy within hospitals and with cancer patients, Oscar Brenifier within schools and with children; Jos Kessels within organizations and with managers and employees there. All of them have written on the subject of their interest.

article's theoretical understanding of Socratic dialogue is within a patient care setting.

To illustrate such a practice - an actual practice that Foucault neglected to develop himself - I will refer to a project that I carried out in 2012 and 2013 at the Center for Cancer and Health in Copenhagen under the auspice of the Danish Cancer Society and the County of Copenhagen, Denmark. My project which built on a pilot project a couple of years prior turned on philosophizing through dialogue with people who had survived cancer and were thus reentering everyday life or "the world of the healthy" as one participant phrased the return designating some form of non-disruptive existence as opposed to the life of a seriously ill person. For the method of philosophizing I chose to use the Socratic Dialogue Group (SDG) as it provides a structure that is beneficial to the dialogue. The project consisted of three groups. Each group met once a week for 2 hours or more. One group consisting of five members met five times and two groups consisting of six members in each met six times. Stretching the philosophical dialogue out over a month and a half optimized the continual reflection. The groups were closed groups. By not permitting rotation, the SDG created an intimate and concentrated environment that is useful for analytically thinking through personal beliefs and behavior.

Disease leaves many people confused as for direction in life. They are "free-floating in the world" as one participant explained the aftermath of having death breathing down your neck. The map that previously guided them in their life is lost.⁴⁵ Existence has been threatened creating both moral and emotional distress as well as a mind in mayhem. In the face of a chronic or life threatening disease, the essentials of being an individual are questioned as a result: values, concepts, priorities, choices, perceptions and beliefs. Signing up to partake in a SDG as a rehabilitating cancer patient was an indicator that the participant was personally invested in questions that are existentially complex and seemingly unanswerable, or they would not, it is fair to assume, have contacted me at all. My assumption is based on the fact that I briefly explained the reason behind the SDG in a brochure that was distributed electronically on the website for the Danish Cancer Society and physically placed in the Center where I held the SDG.

In the brochure I described that when serious illness overwhelms a person with a profound urge to grapple with the fundamental questions that are akin to the meaning and quality of life, of how to live as a self among selves, there is

⁴⁵ Frank, Arthur W.: *The Wounded Storyteller. Body, Illness and Ethics*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995, p. 1; Becker, G.: *Disrupted Lives: How People Create Meaning in a Chaotic World*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.

solace and stimulation to be found in philosophizing together with people in a similar situation. Philosophy has been addressing these life issues for two thousand five hundred years and can offer a positioning of the self in wonderment and wisdom.

My assumption is supported further by the phone conversations I had with all interested candidates. In the phone conversation we got acquainted and discussed the candidate's reasons for signing up, his/her needs and expectations to the SDG, candidates were introduced to SDG as a philosophically based practice of self-cultivation, as a way to work on the life issues that faced them. Only a couple of my participants had heard of SDG, but had never experienced one. It was a first time for all of them.

In the conversations I emphasized how a SDG was not enclosed in the meaning of their illness experience or even the center of our attention but how it aimed at the experimental, curious and open-ended study of life phenomena indicating its Socratic origin and objective. Their illness experience was used as the impulse that launched their confusion and new journey into selfhood, i.e. the backdrop for the intellectual and emotional muddle of their situation. It was to view illness as a moral experience.⁴⁶ Moreover, it was a way to keep an eye on how to live our life in the present and the future. Both the brochure and the phone conversation were to identify suitable candidates as well as to familiarize them with the framework within which I approached Socratic dialogue. The project was a new initiative within cancer rehabilitation and an unconventional application of philosophy and thus needed to be explained to people interested in participating even if it did for the most part remain vague and hazy as for what exactly was in store for them.

For my SDG I targeted people who were in the final stages of their rehabilitation or declared cured. In other words, they were not recently diagnosed or in the midst of their treatment plan.⁴⁷ My pilot project taught me that once their physical situation had stabilized and things looked promising, people were ready to shift their focus to the task of healing and restoring themselves, whereas in the earlier stages they are preoccupied with getting their body through often rough treatments, such as chemotherapy and radiation, and struggling to survive the disease. Though none of the 17 participants in my three

⁴⁶ Kleinman, A.: "A Search for Wisdom," in *The Lancet*, 378 (9803): 1621-1622, 2011.

⁴⁷ The American philosopher and philosophical practitioner Vaughana Macy Feary created a program for the group counseling of cancer patients which, unfortunately, no longer runs. Though her method was group dialogue, it was not specifically in the form of SDG. In addition, she only worked with newly diagnosed cancer patients. See Feary, Vaughana: "Medicine for the Soul: Philosophical Counseling with Cancer Patients," in *Philosophy in Society*, eds. Herrestad, Holt & Svare, Oslo, Unipub forlag, 2002, pp. 35-51.

SDG specifically characterized their participation as a care of their self, their existential and ethical compass had clearly been shaken up by the human challenge of the disease which in their cases ignited an interest in exploring the thoughts that this situation had triggered. By joining a SDG, participants illustrated a desire to dwell on and nurture themselves, to work on themselves as moral agents on a path to “well-being.”

Most participants remarked that they signed up specifically because of the dialogue’s philosophical perspective on their situation, some explicitly stating that they were not interested in group therapy or a psychology oriented session. A purely clinical approach that revolved around psychological problems that needed to be solved was discarded. One participant expressed this sentiment well when he said to me before starting that while he was willing to talk about emotions, he made it a point that he was unwilling to do so in a self-indulgent, wallowing way. People generally voiced a keen interest in placing their self-understanding in a picture that incorporated a larger view of the fundamental phenomena of life that had been turned upside down and inside out by their life threatening disease. They seemed in pursuit of a view that would not limit but open their position; a view that was not bogged down by a specific set of systems of thought about the subject and the world or claimed to hold lasting explanations but, instead, set up to free interpretation. Their “fluid” perception of the major questions that perplexed and intrigued them, that challenged them on their very existence in the world, accommodates well with the late Foucault’s philosophical outlook that permeates this article.

Repeatedly I heard participants say that they had gained a heightened awareness of self due to the philosophizing through dialogue. This awareness consisted generally of a sharper and richer picture of who they were now, the immediate future road on which they were going to travel and what their values and virtues meant in actual life but it had been achieved by lifting the dialogue up to an abstract level viewing the particular through the lens of the human condition and fundamental concepts. The dialogue “enhances my own ability to see the direction that I need to take in order to become a whole person again” as one participant summarized the experience of philosophizing with others. The careful scrutiny of one single philosophical question by incorporating both concrete experiences and abstract thinking revealed, as several stated both during the dialogues and in subsequent interviews, something about the general commonality within human existence but it also reflected back on individual experiences making the participants dwell on their own insights. In sharing individual experiences and analyzing them via the question of what constitutes them as human experiences, the participants got a chance to reflect both on themselves and in an abstract manner on these experiences. Highlighting one

philosophical question, such as what is vitality of life as one group decided to dive into, seemed to cast light both on the universality of it and the particularity of it expressed through the individual experiences.

The way I construct and facilitate a SDG with survivors of cancer has one single philosophical question as its epicenter as all SDGs have. Readers familiar with SDGs know that it is customary for the facilitator to pick out a question or have the organization hiring the facilitator to decide on one. This was not entirely the case in my groups. The Center for Cancer and Health did not select the question, nor did I; I facilitated it. It was the participants who decided on a question that they found was the most relevant for them. This philosophical question emerged after an initial round of expressing what their existential situation generated as for thoughts, experiences and emotions. The question serves to focus the group around a universal theme personified in a variety of particular stories. It is of great consequence that they individually have a personal stake in the question. Without having a personal stake in the philosophical question, the dialogue risks becoming aloof, detached and indifferent to the lives of the people in the group which complicates the actualization of SDG as self-cultivation.

The grappling, probing, doubting and refuting that took place among the participants in their examination of a philosophical question which is typical of a SDG exemplify the Foucauldian understanding of philosophy as an art of living and his idea of aesthetically styling the subject as a work of art.⁴⁸ Through a philosophical dialogue the participants awarded themselves the freedom to shape or style their own thoughts on self and truth. They were free to revise and modify any thought that was aired in the attempt to widen their insight. In this way SDG offered itself as an *askesis* connecting self and ethical practice. The artful or aesthetic labor was the critical and inquisitive approach that motivated the participants' dialogue, not the possible end result. Reflecting in tandem on experience from a micro and macro perspective opened a room for a transformative process, or at least possessed the potential, that can aid participants in the formulation of a desired style (or moulding) of existence post cancer where meaningful narratives and realistic ideals are created anew. Participating in a SDG was by and large viewed by the participants as an opportunity to work on and expand their perception of self and others as well as to deepen their sense of the human community that unites us in the dangerous endeavor of living. There was a readiness to look at their situation as an edifying one and to dig out the wisdom buried in their experience. A SDG became in the

⁴⁸ Michel Foucault belongs to a long line of philosophers from Socrates through Nietzsche and Wittgenstein who have been preoccupied with "self-styling."

words of one participant “a good stepping stone” among others on their incessant path to curative self-cultivation.

Endnote

In a Foucauldian perspective Socratic dialogue becomes an ethical practice of the self in its relating to other selves. It is the participants’ narratives that are the occasion for the reflective enactment taking place in Socratic dialogue. The lived experience that is examined within this dialogue creates a stage for the act of philosophizing outside of academia. This act of philosophizing becomes more akin to Foucault’s aesthetics of existence than a study of scholarship; it metamorphosizes, in fact, philosophy into a verb rather than a noun. But although the late Foucault links practices of self to the practice of philosophy, he falls short of developing measures or methodologies for a practice where actual lived experience can be scrutinized. Nelson’s Socratic dialogue supplies a constructive format for philosophical reflection *in situ*.

Socratic dialogue is a way of investigating the experience of being. Through its philosophical inquiry it becomes both a metaphor for and a practice of the notion of “care of the self.” This inquiry supports Foucault’s maxim of living a philosophical life and Socrates’ dictum that the unexamined life is hardly worth living. Understanding the human impulse to question how to live within a framework of “care of the self” can be seen as a foundational and constitutive attitude that installs in the Socratic dialogical encounter measures to avoid the coagulation of the self and the production of all encompassing systems of thought or just unwavering opinions to cloud and deceive our ethical and existential vision on life. In this way, “care of the self” harbors a transformative potential. As the participants enter into a Socratic dialogue, they engage in a hermeneutics of the self. They enter into a laboratory of self-formation, or in the words of the Greeks *askēsis*, where they can be transformed by the activity of thinking in unison.

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