ABSTRACT

Although the care of the self looms large in Michel Foucault’s later works, his analyses are largely neglected in current debates on care. This may be due to the fact that Foucault’s work has so far been read primarily as an ethics and aesthetics of the self, concerned less with common care activities than with individualistic practices of self-cultivation. Against this background, I argue that in Foucault the care of the self is pervaded by the presence of the Other. This becomes clear as soon as one links the care of the self with the concept of parrhesia, which signifies a form of truth-telling in which the individual confronting the Other with the truth constitutes herself as the subject of a discourse of truth. It is precisely by associating the care of the self with parrhesia that the genuinely critical and emancipatory potential of each becomes effective in the first place. This makes it possible not only to detach the concept of care from its close entanglement with the private sphere and to reframe it in political terms but also to envisage a critical attitude that is based both on the care of the self and others and on the concern for truth.
In the context, both the concept of care and its German counterpart Sorge (which as a verb can mean “to care for sb./sth.”, “to be concerned about sb./sth.,” or “to take care of sb./sth.”) refers to the neoliberal ‘inversion’ of the ancient care of the self into an obligatory form of care work. As a product, commodity, and service. Here, the more general question is whether the concept of care can still fulfill its original critical and emancipatory function or whether it must itself be critically questioned.

In a different context, the ambivalence of the concept of care and its German counterpart Sorge (which as a verb can mean “to care for sb./sth.”, “to be concerned about sb./sth.,” or “to take care of sb./sth.”) seeks to reinforce values such as responsibility, participation, and intersubjective action against a one-sided focus on liberal norms of equality and freedom. In this context, both the relationship between gender and care and the question whether the concept of care tends to mask capitalist relations of exploitation or rather opens the way to a caring democracy beyond profit maximization are matters of discussion. Further is the problematic linkage of self-care, individualism, and freedom in the context of neoliberal policies that lead to the increasing commercialization of care activities and to the emergence of new ‘care industries.’ Employing slogans such as “We care for you!” or “Your worries are our concern!” these industries market care as a product, commodity, and service. Here, the more general question is whether the concept of care can still fulfill its original critical and emancipatory function or whether it must itself be critically questioned.

1. THE ETHICS OF CARE AND FOUCAULT’S CARE OF THE SELF

The concept of care has been at the center of lively philosophical and sociopolitical debates for many years, and these debates have intensified with the COVID-19 pandemic and its far-reaching societal implications. According to Carol Gilligan’s seminal work In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development (1982), theories of care propose a radical change of perspective in ethics and moral philosophy. While utilitarian as well as deontological ethics—based on the concept of justice—favor criteria such as universality, neutrality, and impartiality, theories of care emphasize the importance of social and affective bonds for ethical questions. The various approaches differ, however, in the way they define care (as caring, carefulness, nurturing, fostering, attending, etc.) and in how they frame it theoretically: as care work, with a focus on issues of social equality and distributive justice, or as an explicit counter-concept to traditional conceptions of justice in the context of an ethics of care that seeks to reinforce values such as responsibility, participation, and intersubjective action against a one-sided focus on liberal norms of equality and freedom. In this context, both the relationship between gender and care and the question whether the concept of care tends to mask capitalist relations of exploitation or rather opens the way to a caring democracy beyond profit maximization are matters of discussion. Further is the problematic linkage of self-care, individualism, and freedom in the context of neoliberal policies that lead to the increasing commercialization of care activities and to the emergence of new ‘care industries.’ Employing slogans such as “We care for you!” or “Your worries are our concern!” these industries market care as a product, commodity, and service. Here, the more general question is whether the concept of care can still fulfill its original critical and emancipatory function or whether it must itself be critically questioned.


3. This is the slogan of an Austrian insurance company (“Ihre Sorgen möchten wir haben”).

worry about sb./sth."

is reflected in the ideologically charged figure of the concerned citizen (besorgte Bürgerin). As Carolin Emcke points out, in suggesting that unfiltered feelings are per se justified, care or concern are elevated, as it were, to political categories of peculiar authority, presumably not requiring any further justification. This is not to deny the legitimacy of forms of care that relate to prudence, attentiveness, and caring for others. But the current tendency to absolutize one’s own concerns shows that the care of the self is all but immune from turning into an egocentric care for oneself that negates the Other or paternalistically subjugates her.

In view of this complex situation, it is surprising that the vibrant debates on care ethics and care work scarcely mention Michel Foucault’s analyses of the ancient principle of the care of the self (epimeleia heautou), which, according to Foucault, means “care of oneself, attending to oneself, being concerned about oneself.” One reason for this may be that Foucault, focusing on the care of the self, is concerned not primarily with typical care activities located in the domestic and private sphere but with the philosophical care of the soul and the concern for truth, which in antiquity were reserved solely for those (usually adult male citizens) who were relieved of the necessities of self and life maintenance. Another reason is that Foucault scholarship has situated the care of the self primarily in the context of technologies and practices of the self by which the individual constitutes herself as an autonomous subject, whereas one still looks in vain for an alterity-oriented conception of the care of the self, understood as a communal and dialogic practice that is pervaded by the presence of the Other.

In fact, the relation between the self and the Other is far from unequivocal in Foucault. On the one hand, Foucault seems to encourage individualist readings when he asserts, with regard to antiquity, that the “[c]are for others should not be put before the care of oneself,” that the “care of the self is ethically prior in that the relationship with oneself is ontologically prior.” On the other hand, he repeatedly suggests that the relation to the Other is constitutive of any self-relation. Thus, as Axel Honneth points out, two alternative interpretations of Foucault’s analyses of the care of the self emerge: Foucault has in mind either a “monologic” act of self-empowerment centered on a sovereign subject or a “dialogic” process of recalling valuable social ties and ethically substantial life tasks, based on the insight “that we owe our freedom not only to our own efforts but to many ties to concrete or generalized others,” which is concealed by “the orientation toward the goal of individual utility maximization.”

On the other hand, Foucault seems to encourage individualist readings when he asserts, with regard to antiquity, that the “[c]are for others should not be put before the care of oneself,” that the “care of the self is ethically prior in that the relationship with oneself is ontologically prior.” On the other hand, he repeatedly suggests that the relation to the Other is constitutive of any self-relation. Thus, as Axel Honneth points out, two alternative interpretations of Foucault’s analyses of the care of the self emerge: Foucault has in mind either a “monologic” act of self-empowerment centered on a sovereign subject or a “dialogic” process of recalling valuable social ties and ethically substantial life tasks, based on the insight “that we owe our freedom not only to our own efforts but to many ties to concrete or generalized others,” which is concealed by “the orientation toward the goal of individual utility maximization.”


This raises the question whether the care of the self can be reduced to mere self-care and self-cultivation or must be conceived of as an ethical and political practice constitutively permeated by the presence of the Other. In what follows, I argue that the Other as well as the genuinely ethical-political dimension of care come into view as soon as Foucault’s concept of care is linked to his analyses of parrhesia. Foucault himself suggests such a connection when he argues that parrhesia, as a form of telling the truth and a way of telling the truth about oneself, is intrinsically connected with the problem of the care of the self (cf. DTP, 61). Following Friedrich Balke, I oppose the common interpretation that Foucault’s “preoccupation with self-care and technologies of the self” ought to be understood “as the result of his late ‘ethical turn’ and his return to the problem of the subject.” Against this reading, it can be shown that ethics and the problem of the subject are already manifest in Foucault’s early works on madness, discipline, and sexuality. Moreover, as Frédéric Gros emphasizes, Foucault does not abandon the question of power and “politics to dedicate himself to ethics, but complicates the study of governmentalities through the exploration of the care of the self. In any case, ethics, or the subject, is not thought of as the other of politics or power.”

Building on these considerations, I propose to conceive of self-care and truth-telling as complementary practices that fully unfold their critical and emancipatory potential only in their mutual conditional relationship. This makes it possible, on the one hand, to detach the care of the self from its close entanglement with the private sphere and to refrate it in political terms and, on the other hand, to envisage a critical attitude that is based both on the care of the self and on the concern for truth. To this end, I first discuss Foucault’s analyses of the ancient principle of the care of the self (epimeleia heautou), which he contrasts with the Delphic precept of self-knowledge, the famous “know yourself” (gnthi seauton) that in modernity becomes the all-dominant principle of Western thought. With Foucault, it can be shown that the precept of self-knowledge is but one element of the more fundamental principle of the care of the self, insofar as both are modes of learning the truth about oneself. Crucially, while the care of the self is mediated through others, this aspect is largely eliminated in the modern rule of self-knowledge. As I show in a second step, this constitutive dimension of the Other can be brought back into focus by linking the care of the self to parrhesia as a form of truth-telling in which the individual speaks the truth openly to the other’s face. Third, and following from this, I concentrate on two modalities of the connection of the care of the self with parrhesia that have established two prominent philosophical traditions: the analytic tradition of Platonism and the critical tradition of Cynicism. Drawing on Sophocles’ Antigone, I then go on to examine the critical potential that arises from the connection of the care of the self with parrhesia. This brings into view a parrhesiastic care of the self that is not only an ethico-political care of the self and others but also a concern for truth.

2. SELF-CARE AND SELF-KNOWLEDGE

Foucault develops his analyses of the ancient care of the self primarily in his lectures of the 1980s. He is interested in those self-practices and technologies through which individuals are led to care about themselves and to learn the truth about themselves. This care of the self is not, however, an epistemic principle. Contrary to the modern reading that traces the care

---


16. Frédéric Gros, “Course Context,” in The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981–1982 (New York: Polgrave Macmillan, 2003), 512. Sarasin, too, seems to support such an interpretation in an earlier article when he defines the question of how to think “the subject beyond and outside the law” as Foucault’s “fundamental question,” which the latter supposedly addresses in his late work by introducing the idea of the care of the self, through which the subject “becomes capable of placing itself to some extent against power and outside power relations” (Philipp Sarasin, “Unternehmer seiner selbst,” Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie 55, no. 3 (2007), 55 (my translation).

of the self to the Delphic precept “know yourself,” traditionally associated with the figure of Socrates, Foucault insists that this precept of self-knowledge, so significant for Western cultural and intellectual history, is only one elaboration of the fundamental principle of the care of the self (epimeleia heautou). This is not to say that self-knowledge does not play an important role in the care of the self; instead, Foucault’s point is that it is not prior to the care of the self but rather “one of the components of this basic concern” (HS, 492).

With the emergence of the Cartesian concept of the subject, the general principle of the care of the self is replaced by the more specific precept of self-knowledge. Foucault also speaks here of the “Cartesian moment,” which “came into play in two ways: by philosophically requalifying the gnōthi seauton (know yourself), and by discrediting the epimeleia heautou (care of the self)” (HS, 14). This development is accompanied by the establishment of an autonomous subject whose methodological access to truth is mediated solely by itself, without “the philosopher (or the scientist, or simply someone who seeks the truth) […] having to change or alter his being as subject” (HS, 33). In other words, whereas in ancient philosophy “a subject could not have access to the truth if he did not first operate upon himself a certain work that would make him susceptible to knowing the truth,” since Descartes “[t]o accede to the truth, it suffices that I be any subject that can see what is evident.” This implies a fundamental change in the subject’s relation to itself, to others, to the world, and to the truth. Whereas in ancient philosophy—from Plato through Stoicism and Epicureanism to Cynicism—this relation is established by a lifetime of practice, exercise, and asceticism, in Descartes it takes the form of evidence, of clear and distinct (clare et distincte) insight, through which the subject doubles itself, as it were, and constitutes itself as an object of introspection: “The relationship to the self no longer needs to be ascetic to get into relation to the truth. It suffices that the relationship to the self reveals to me the obvious truth of what I see for me to apprehend the truth definitively.”

Historically, the care of the self in its philosophical form can be traced back to Socrates recommending in the Apology to his fellow citizens “not to care for [their] persons or [their] property more than for the perfection of [their] souls.” Here, self-care forms a central prerequisite for guiding others, based on the conviction that only those who take care of themselves can take care of others. Socrates assumes this role in relation to his fellow citizens; for Socrates takes care and looks after himself “by visibly and manifestly refusing the injustices that may be done to him, but also by encouraging others […] that, knowing nothing, they really...”

18 Cf. Michel Foucault, The Courage of the Truth: The Government of Self and Others II (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 4; hereafter cited in text as GSO II. According to Foucault, the term epimeleia refers to a whole bundle of occupations, including the activities of the householder and the duties of the regent, which require a certain knowledge of oneself, as well as “the care that must be given to a sick or wounded patient, or the honors that must be paid to the gods or to the dead.” (Michel Foucault, The Care of the Self: The History of Sexuality, Vol. 3 (New York: Pantheon, 1986), 50)

19 See also Michel Foucault, The Government of Self and Others (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 44; hereafter cited in text as GSO I. This seems to resonate with Honneth’s thesis, which he develops following authors as diverse as Heidegger, Dewey, Cavell, Tomasello, and Winnicott, that cognition is not the original mode in which we relate to the world. Rather, all objectivity and cognition is preceded by a participating, caring, interested, and engaged being-in-the-world and being-with-others: “a layer of existential engagement indeed provides the basis for our entire objectifying relation to the world” (Axel Honneth, Refication: A New Look at an Old Idea (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008), 40).

20 “Cartesian moment” “within a lot of inverted commas,” as Foucault adds, since this moment is by no means associated exclusively with the name of Descartes. Already ten years earlier, in his debate with Jacques Derrida, Foucault points to the highly ambivalent character of Descartes’ Meditations for they combine elements of both exercise (askeisis) and evidence, each representing different modes of the relation between subjectivity and truth (cf. Michel Foucault, “My body, this paper, this fire: Appendix II of 1972 edition,” in History of Madness (New York: Routledge, 2006)). See also Christoph Menke, “Zweierlei Übung: Zum Verhältnis von sozialer Disziplinierung und ästhetischer Existenz,” in Michel Foucault: Zwischenblatt einer Rezeption, ed. Axel Honneth and Martin Saar (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 2003), 286; Theres Lehmann, Askeutische Praxis: Die Bedeutung der Askese für das ethische Handeln und das menschliche Sein bei Aristoteles und Michel Foucault (München, 2012); and Gerald Posselt, “Rhetorizing Philosophy: Toward a ‘Double Reading’ of Philosophical Texts,” Philosophy & Rhetoric 52, no. 1 (2019).


22 Foucault understands asceticism “not in the sense of a morality of renunciation but as an exercise of the self on the self by which one attempts to develop and transform oneself, and to attain to a certain mode of being” (Foucault, “The Ethics of the Concern for Self,” 282).


From this it follows that the care of the self is not an isolated occupation, "not an exercise in solitude, but a true social practice" that is accompanied by "an entire activity of speaking and writing in which the work of oneself on oneself and communication with others were linked together." Consequently, the care of the self is a practice and activity that requires another person, "a guide, an advisor, a friend" who—regardless of all the consequences—does not shy away from openly telling the truth to the individual or a group. According to Foucault, this is not a temporally limited relationship, reducible, for example, to the teacher-student relationship, but a social practice that encompasses the entire life and each individual: "The practice of the self links up with social practice or, if you like, the formation of a relationship of the self to the self quite clearly connects up with the relationships of the self to the Other" (HS, 155). The consequence is that "the problem of relationships with others is present throughout the development of the care of the self." The care of the self is, as it were, permeated by the presence of the Other. It is not only that "the care of the self consequently requires [...] the other’s presence, insertion, and intervention" (HS, 134); the "other [autrui, l’autre] is indispensable for the practice of the self to arrive at the self at which it aims" (HS, 127).

3. PARRHESIA AND THE ROLE OF THE OTHER

The first conclusion to be drawn from this is the following. If the Other is indispensable for the constitution of the subject and the care of the self is a lifelong practice that cannot be reduced to a pedagogical relationship, then the care of the self is not a monologic but a dialogic endeavor. Consequently, the reading that sees the care of the self as a ‘monologic act of self-empowerment’ is difficult to sustain. Nor does the care for others seem to be simply subordinate or secondary to the care of the self. Rather, it turns out that every self-relation is constitutionally permeated by the presence of the Other, so that the care of the self always implies the care for others. This interpretation can be further substantiated once we reconstruct the care of the self as an activity and epistemic practice that is closely linked to parrhesia as a form of truth-telling in the face of the Other. Foucault even suggests that the connection of the care of the self with parrhesia is the essential achievement of Greco-Roman philosophy: "Ancient philosophy linked the principle of the care of self (duty to take care of oneself) and the requirement of the courage to tell the truth, to manifest the truth" (GSO II, 339).

In order to make this connection plausible, it is necessary first to recall the central features and the ambivalent character of parrhesia: In its positive sense, parrhesia means to say everything, the whole truth, frankly, directly, immediately, and without regard to oneself or others. However, to say everything can also mean—and this is the negative sense of parrhesia—to say "anything one has in mind, without any distinction, without taking care of what he says," so that parrhesia would be nothing more than empty talk or mere chatter. Moreover, the speaker can make use of parrhesia as a rhetorical strategy to fashion himself as a courageous truth-teller in order to flatter or impress his audience. In rhetoric, therefore, parrhesia (Latin licentia) denotes both

25 This is also the reason why Socrates himself in the face of death sets a good example, not tiring of exhorting his fellow citizens to be concerned less about their fame and fortunes and—like himself—more about their souls. However, this is not to be understood in terms of altruistic or selfless behavior. For it is precisely by taking care of his fellow citizens and the polis that Socrates takes care of himself; indeed, it is from taking care of oneself that "all other good things to man, both to the individual and to the state," follow (Plato, "Apology," 30b).

26 Foucault, The Care of the Self, 51.


28 See above, Honneth, "Freiheit und Individualisierung," 237.


30 Cf. Michel Foucault, Discourse & Truth, and Parrēsia (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2019), 41; hereafter cited in text as DTP.

31 Foucault points out that in Greek society women were generally excluded from "the use of parrhesia (along with aliens, slaves, and children)" (Michel Foucault, Fearless Speech (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2001), 12); this changes to some extent with Cynicism.
the open and frank speech that directly confronts the audience with an inconvenient truth and the disguised frankness that appears as flattery and aims at the mere approval of the listeners.\footnote{Cf. Michael P. Schmude, “Licentia,” in Historisches Wörterbuch der Rhetorik, Bd. 5, ed. Gert Ueding (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2001).}

The only criteria that can guarantee that the parrhesiastes, the one who engages in parrhesia, is actually telling the truth are the courage that telling the truth requires and the risk that comes with it. These are, as it were, the guarantees that the truth-teller is sincere both to himself and to others. Indeed, the price the truth-teller has to pay for his courage can be considerable. In extreme cases, the one who addresses the powerful with an unpleasant truth—the people’s assembly in a democracy (think of Socrates addressing his fellow citizens) or the autocrat in a monarchy (think of Plato addressing the tyrant Dionysius of Syracuse)—must be prepared to pay for his frankness with his own life.\footnote{At first glance, this description is reminiscent of Rawls’s definition of civil disobedience, according to which the subject can demonstrate the sincerity of its actions—to itself and to others—only by the price it may have to pay: “To be completely open and candid is to give bond of one’s sincerity, for it is not easy to convince another that one’s acts are conscientious, or even to be sure of this before oneself. […] We must pay a certain price to convince others that our actions have, in our carefully considered view, a sufficient moral basis in the political convictions of the community.” (John Rawls, A Theory of Justice, Revised ed. (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1999), 321) There is, however, a decisive difference between civil disobedience and parrhesia—namely, the violent and hurtful character of the latter (cf. Posselt, “Wahr sprechen, Wortergreifung und ‘Collateral Murder’,” 84).}

Ideally, this results in a kind of pact or contract between the one who knows the truth but does not have power and the one who has power but is not in possession of the truth (cf. DTP, 74). If the powerful accept the parrhesiastic game, they can benefit substantially from it; if, on the other hand, they reject it, they lose the opportunity to know the truth, while the parrhesiastes risks losing his life (GSO I, 56).

For democracy, however, parrhesia poses a fundamental problem, as Foucault makes clear in his historical reconstruction of the term. As a form of government in which everyone is equal before the law and everybody can express their opinion more or less safely, courage and risk are insufficient criteria to ensure the sincerity and conscientiousness of the speaker. The problem is that democracy by itself does not provide criteria to differentiate those forms of panhresia that are useful to the community from those that are harmful to it.\footnote{See also Jacques Derrida, Rogues: Two Essays on Reason (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2005), 21: “It has always been very difficult, and for essential reasons, to distinguish rigorously between the goods and the evils of democracy [...]. It has always been hard to distinguish, with regard to free will, between the good of democratic freedom or liberty and the evil of democratic license.”}

As an egalitarian form of government that grants everyone the same right to speak (at least those who are part of the demos), democracy is itself unable to determine who is intellectually, socially, and morally qualified to speak the truth (DTP, 113–114)—a problematic that takes on new relevance in our ‘post-truth’ era of fake news, ‘alternative facts,’ and ‘felt truths.’\footnote{Cf. Vincent F. Hendricks and Mads Vestergaard, Reality Lost: Markets of Attention, Misinformation and Manipulation (Cham: Springer, 2019); Silke van Dyk, “Krise der Faktizität? Über Wahrheit und Lüge in der Politik und die Aufgabe der Kritik,” PROKLA 188 (Jg. 47), no. 3 (2017); Frieder Vogelmann, “The Problem of Post-truth: Rethinking the Relationship between Truth and Politics,” Behemoth 11, no. 2 (2018).}

For while there are political and institutional norms that define who is entitled to speak in what situation (in an assembly, in court, in parliament, etc.), as well as logical laws and argumentative rules that define how we can distinguish true from false statements, there are no reliable rules that allow us to determine who is qualified to tell the truth and to do so in a way that benefits individuals and the political community alike (cf. DTP, 113).\footnote{For a discussion of normative criteria for evaluating parrhesiastic speech acts, especially in light of their increasing appropriation by right-wing populist actors, see Posselt and Seitz, “Sprachen des Widerstands.”}

One consequence of this dilemma is that, seen from a historical perspective, parrhesia gradually shifts from the political field to the realm of personal relations. “The problem of freedom in the use of logos becomes more and more the problem of freedom in the choice of the way you live, and freedom in the choice of the bios” (DTP, 131). In other words, parrhesia, understood as an societal practice and institution, becomes more and more “a personal attitude” (DTP, 59). For if there are no rules to determine who is competent to speak the truth, and if the relationship between the speaking subject and the truth spoken can no longer be established by “pure frankness or pure courage” (DTP, 113), then the only option is to get individuals to care about themselves and the truth through constant practice, exercise, and reminding. According to Foucault, this development leads to the emergence of an ethical form of parrhesia located in “the field of personal relations to oneself and to others, parrēxia in the care of the self” (DTP, 123). From now on...
on, *parrhesia*, it seems, has its primary place not in politics and political practice but in the realm of education, personal guidance, and “the formation of the moral subject” (GSO II, 8).

However, this is not to say that *parrhesia*, with its location in the ethical realm, has completely lost its political meaning. Rather, the concept of *parrhesia* transforms itself, “without losing this meaning, [...] by joining up with the principle of the care of self” (GSO II, 339). The transition from a political to an ethical *parrhesia* diagnosed by Foucault does not, therefore, imply an ‘ethical turn’ of any kind. Rather, it indicates the close intertwining of ethics and politics and the genuine ethico-political dimension of *parrhesia*. This becomes particularly clear when *parrhesia* is reconstructed as a form of political subjectivation that is constitutively entangled with the presence of the Other. This relation to the Other also makes apparent the close connection between *parrhesia* and the care of the self: For as a practice that is essentially about “telling the truth about oneself,” *parrhesia* necessarily requires “the presence of the other person who listens and enjoins one to speak, and who speaks himself” (GSO II, 5). Similarly, “one cannot attend to oneself, take care of oneself, without a relationship to another person,” “to an Other whose task ‘is precisely to tell the truth, to tell the whole truth, or at any rate to tell all the truth that is necessary’” (GSO I, 43).

In *The Hermeneutics of the Self*, Foucault also speaks of *parrhesia* as a new ethic, “which is not so much a new ethic of language or discourse in general, but of the verbal relationship with the Other” (HS, 164). One of the ways in which this new ethic is made possible is that the care of the self is expanded from a self-practice, which in antiquity was often limited to the relationship between teacher and student, to a social relationship, thus becoming, as it were, politicized, without, however, being reducible to politics. After all, the goal of *parrhesia*, understood as a general “philosophical activity,” is not simply to persuade or win over another or the political assembly for a particular cause, but “to convince someone that he must care for himself and change his life” (DTP, 156). The conversion that the *parrhesiastes* or truth-teller seeks is thus of a more fundamental kind, “since it is not only a question of changing one’s opinion, but of changing completely one’s life, one’s style of life, one’s relations to others, and one’s relations to oneself” (DTP, 156; my italics). Nor is it enough for someone to be “courageous enough to tell the truth to other people”; one must also be “courageous enough to disclose the truth about oneself” (DTP, 193).

4. ANALYSIS AND CRITIQUE

Against this background, Foucault distinguishes two modalities of the connection between self-care and *parrhesia*, both of which can be traced back to the figure of Socrates and give rise to two influential philosophical traditions: Platonism and Cynicism. The Platonic modality emphasizes the importance of knowledge, teaching, and instruction (*mathemata*) and “gives to self-knowledge the form of introspection,” which leads to the division “between soul and body,” “between the true world and the world of appearances.” By contrast, the Cynic modality “reduces as strictly as possible the domain of the *mathêmata*” and “gives knowledge of self the privileged form of exercise, test, and practices of endurance” (GSO II, 339). In other words, while self-knowledge in Platonism takes place as contemplation, with the aim of fathoming the psyche as an ontologically distinct reality from the body, in Cynicism it constitutes an ongoing practice and exercise, with the purpose of constantly examining and putting to the test one’s own way of life (cf. GSO II, 159–162). In each case, this is accompanied by a different relation

---

37 On the difference between discourse ethics in the sense of Karl Otto Apel and Jürgen Habermas (to which Foucault implicitly seems to allude here) and Foucault’s *dramatics of discourse*, which he introduces in *The Government of Self and Others*, cf. Posselt, “*Wahrsprechen, Wortergreifung und ‘Collateral Murder’*,” 82–84.

38 *Parrhesia* is first addressed explicitly by Foucault in *The Hermeneutics of the Self* (1981/1982), in the context of the ancient practice of conscience guidance and the pedagogical relationship between teacher and student. In this relationship, *parrhesia* belongs to the teacher alone, while “[w]hat was imposed on the disciple as duty and conduct [...] was silence, a particular organized silence” (Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 372). The task of the disciple is “to constitute himself as a subject of sovereignty over himself” (Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 372) and “to form an autonomous, independent, full and satisfying relationship to himself” (Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 379; cf. on this reading, for instance, Leonard Lawlor, *From Violence to Speaking Out: Apocalypse and Expression in Foucault, Derrida and Deleuze* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2016)). Only a year later, Foucault rejects the ‘pedagogical’ conception of *parrhesia*, emphasizing instead its violent, injurious character (Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others I*, 54) as well as the aspects of critique and risk: “*Parrêsiâ* comes from ‘below’ and is oriented towards those ‘above.’ [...] That is the reason why the Greeks wouldn’t say that a teacher or that a father, when he criticizes a child, uses *parrêsiâ*” (Foucault, *Discourse & Truth, and Parrêsiâ*, 44).
to the truth, to the world, and to life. In Platonism, which seeks to recognize the soul in its own being, the true world can only be an other world, a world distinct from the world of mere appearances. In Cynicism, which centers on bios, on "putting oneself to the test," on the "battle in this world against the world" (GSO II, 340), true life is possible only as an other life (GSO II, 314), a life that differs from the ordinary life of human beings. Consequently, as Foucault points out, referring to Platonism and Cynicism as the two liminal figures of the connection of the care of the self with parrhesia, "there is no establishment of the truth without an essential position of otherness; the truth is never the same; there can be truth only in the form of the other world and the other life (l’autre monde et de la vie autre)" (GSO II, 340).

This double-sidedness and the emphasis on both the other world and the other life are crucial; for they underline that the two modalities of the connection between the care of the self and parrhesia are neither detachable from each other nor reducible to each other. This also applies to the two different ways of problematizing the truth that can be traced back to these modalities: The more influential of these two ways in the history of philosophy "is concerned with the question of how to make sure that a statement is true, that its reasoning is correct, and that we are able to get access to truth" (DTP, 224). The focus here is on the analysis of truth: the propositional truth content of statements, the criteria "through which anyone [...] can recognize if a statement is true or not" (DTP, 222), and the consistency of the line of reasoning. The other, less prominent tradition deals with truth from the point of view of truth-telling as an activity and asks about the meaning of truth for the individual and the community. Here, the question is, "what is the importance of telling the truth, who is able to tell the truth, and why should we tell the truth, know the truth, and recognize who is able to tell the truth?" (DTP, 224). Thus, according to Foucault, there are two ways of problematizing the truth, both of which have their roots in the figure of Socrates and to this day remain characteristic of philosophy. The analytic tradition pursues an "analytics of truth" aimed at establishing criteria for what is true and what is false, as well as guaranteeing the correctness of judgments. The critical tradition, on the other hand, asks who can and should speak the truth, about what, with what consequences, and in what relation to power; who is competent to speak the truth at all; what issues and events require that one speaks the truth; and "what are the relations between this activity of telling the truth and exercising power" (DTP, 223–24), thus addressing the role of power "in the interplay between the subject and truth" (GSO II, 8).

Although Foucault himself locates his own enterprise in the critical tradition, the crucial point is that any one-sided focus—either on truth as analysis or on truth as critique—falls short. The connection between parrhesia and self-care is limited neither to a purely epistemic approach in terms of demonstration and (self-)knowledge nor to a purely ascetic attitude in terms of exercise and practice; rather, these two modalities mutually condition and require each other. According to Foucault, however, with the emergence of Cartesianism, this conditional relationship gets suppressed: through the devaluation of the care of the self and parrhesia vis-à-vis the precept of self-knowledge and truth as evidence, the analytic perspective is unilaterally valorized and privileged vis-à-vis the critical tradition.

5. SELF-CARE AND PARRHESIA AS CRITICAL PRACTICES

Foucault’s preoccupation with the care of the self and parrhesia can, in fact, be understood as part of his larger project to elaborate a "genealogy of the critical attitude in philosophy" (DTP, 224). In “What is Critique?” (1978), Foucault already argues that to adopt a critical attitude
means to assume a certain relation to oneself and to others: “a certain way of thinking, speaking and acting, a certain relationship to what exists, to what one knows, to what one does, a relationship to society, to culture and also a relationship to others.” As such a relationship to oneself and to others, the critical attitude, as Foucault puts it following Kant’s “What is Enlightenment?,” is an appeal to courage—an appeal, however, that is not limited to the courage to make use of one’s own understanding but also points to the courage “to question truth on its effects of power and question power on its discourses of truth.” While in “What is Critique?” Foucault seeks to develop the genealogy of the critical attitude starting from the Christian pastorate, in his 1983 Berkeley lectures Discourse & Truth he explicitly traces it back to parrhesia and the care of the self (cf. DTP, 68). It should not be overlooked, however, that the care of the self—like parrhesia—in ancient culture was a privilege reserved solely for those who were relieved of the need to care for their own subsistence. In this context, Foucault also speaks of a “male ethics,” “an ethics for men: an ethics thought, written, and taught by men, and addressed to men—to free men, obviously [...], in which women figured only as objects or, at most, as partners that one had best train, educate, and watch over.” Understood in this way, the principle of self-care seems difficult to reconcile with a contemporary perspective on care that explicitly criticizes the invisibilization of care activities that results from their being performed primarily by women in the private sphere of domestic care work.

Consequently, Foucault’s analyses of the care of the self and parrhesia can be read in two ways: First, it could be argued that Foucault’s genealogical reconstruction of the principle of self-care represents yet another example of the appropriation of the concept of care to the conceptual system of Western metaphysics, an incorporation of self-care into a patrilineal genealogy that extends from ancient Greece to modernity. What speaks against such a reading, however, is the fact that Foucault is not at all interested in simply rehabilitating the ancient principle of self-care. As a matter of fact, he explicitly opposes the idea “that, at a certain moment, philosophy went astray and forgot something,” in other words, “that somewhere in its history there is a principle, a foundation that must be rediscovered.” Foucault’s critical genealogy is, in fact, concerned not with reviving forgotten principles or concepts but with developing concepts and tools suitable for the present situation—that is, “for analyzing what’s going on now—and to change it.” Against this background, the second reading—the one that I propose—emphasizes the close connection between self-care and parrhesia. The reformulation of self-care via parrhesia as a form of truth-telling rooted in the political sphere not only reveals the care of the self as a care for others; it also offers the chance to detach the notion of care from its close entanglement with care work performed in the private sphere and to re-politicize the classical demarcation between the private and the public.

This second reading—and thus the mobilizing power of the connection between self-care and parrhesia—can be exemplified by means of Sophocles’ Antigone. For Antigone takes care of herself and others (her brother Polyneices, her sister Ismene, Creon, the polis, etc.) not only by symbolically burying her brother’s corpse—following the unwritten, divine law and

43 Foucault, What is Critique?, 46; see also Sarasin, “Foucaults Wende,” 6f. Foucault does not yet use the term parrhesia in “What is Critique?”, but he first introduces it in his lectures on The Hermeneutics of the Subject (1981/82). The continuity between the ancient problematization of parrhesia and Kant’s account of Enlightenment is emphasized by Foucault in The Government of Self and Others. “Kant’s text on the Aufklärung is a certain way for philosophy, through the critique of the Aufklärung, to become aware of problems which were traditionally problems of parrēsia in antiquity” (Foucault, The Government of Self and Others 1, 350). On Foucault’s ‘genealogy of critique’ from ancient parrhesia to the (neo)liberal critique of the state, see Andreas Folkers, “Daring the Truth: Foucault, Parrhesia and the Genealogy of Critique,” Theory, Culture & Society 33, no. 1 (2016).
44 These passages are missing in the first English edition of Foucault’s lectures, published under the title Fearless Speech, ed. by Joseph Pearson, Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2001.
45 Cf. Foucault, The Hermeneutics of the Subject, 31: “taking care of oneself is not at all philosophical but doubtless a fairly common principle linked, however, and we will find this again and again in the history of the epimeleia heautou, to a privilege, which in this case is political, economic, and social.”
transgressing Creon's human law—but also by fearlessly telling Creon the truth to his face and binding herself to the truth she tells: "I admit it—I do not deny anything." Thus, the care of the self and others is therefore not confined to the private sphere; rather, it requires open and free speech to gain political significance. Thus, Antigone not only reminds her sister Ismene that she should worry less about her, Antigone, than about herself; she also harshly rejects Ismene's assurance that she will not reveal Antigone's plans, saying, "No—tell everyone. I insist. You will be more hated for silence than if you shout it from the city walls." What becomes clear here is that *parrhesia* is a form of truth-telling "that is equivalent to commitment, to a bond, and which establishes a certain pact between the subject of enunciation and the subject of conduct" (HS, 406). Through this pact, the speaking subject commits itself to be "the subject of conduct who conforms in every respect to the truth [it] expresses," thereby implying "that there can be no teaching of the truth without an exemplum. There can be no teaching of the truth without the person who speaks the truth being the example of this truth" (HS, 406), as when Socrates courageously addresses his judges in the Apology, or when Antigone openly confesses her deed to Creon.

However, this should not obscure the fact that Antigone, as a woman, is denied *parrhesia* as well as the care of the self. When Antigone nevertheless speaks, when she frankly opposes Creon with her speech, she succeeds only through the catachrestic appropriation of precisely those concepts and norms that exclude her. Such a catachrestic speech act occurs, Judith Butler argues in her reading of Antigone, "when the less than human speaks as human, when gender is displaced, and kinship founders on its own founding laws." Thus, Antigone's alliance with herself paradoxically implies a kind of rupture at the same time. For, according to Butler, "as she begins to act in language, she also departs from herself. Her act is never fully her act, and though she uses language to claim her deed, to assert a 'manly' and defiant autonomy, she can perform that act only through embodying the norms of the power she opposes." Indeed, Antigone's speech and actions not only violate Creon's rule but simultaneously challenge the prevailing political order, including the order of the sexes and the dividing line between the public and the private spheres. Therefore, for Creon, the fact that Antigone boasts about her deed and mocks him weighs at least as heavily as the transgression of his commandment. For it is not by her transgressive act alone but by virtue of her *parrhesiastic* speech act that Antigone constitutes herself as a truth-speaking subject and subverts the prevailing gender relations: "She will be the man, not I, if she can go victorious and unpunished!"

Crucially, Antigone's speech act unfolds its critical-emancipatory power precisely by combining *parrhesia* with the care of the self in a constitutive way: For it is only because Antigone cares for herself and the truth that her speech act toward Creon is more than mere folly or foolish arrogance; and it is only because Antigone publicly binds herself to the truth she speaks that her concern for herself and others (for Polynices and Ismene as well as for Creon and the polis) is not limited to the private and personal sphere but unfolds its politically subversive power and effectiveness. What comes into view here is what we might call a *parrhesiastic* care of the self and others: just as *parrhesia* becomes empty chatter, speech dangerous for democracy and the community if it is not sustained by the care of the self and others, so the care of the self and others remains mute and trapped in the private sphere if it is not accompanied by the courage of the truth and the risk of speaking out. Creon's tyrannical exercise of power and ultimate failure, on the other hand, stem from his inability to take care of himself and others. This, in turn, results in his incapacity to engage in the *parrhesiastic* game, in which those who know the truth but do not have power turn to those who have power but are not in possession

49 Sophocles, "Antigone," in The Theban Plays: Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus, Antigone (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2009), line 443.
51 Cf. also Hannah Arendt, "Truth and Politics," in Truth: Engagements Across Philosophical Traditions, ed. David Wood and José Medina (Malden: Blackwell, 2005), 306, with reference to Socrates: "This teaching by example is, indeed, the only form of 'persuasion' that philosophical truth is capable of without perversion or distortion."
53 Butler, Antigone's Claim, 10.
54 Sophocles, "Antigone," lines 484–85.
of the truth.\textsuperscript{55} This constellation is by no means limited to the ancient figure of Antigone but still figures prominently in political forms of speaking up and resistance. For a present example of the constitutive connection between parrhesia and the care of the self, think of the whistleblower Edward Snowden’s statement, made in the first interview after his escape from the United States, that the care for himself and others was the main motivation for going public with his revelations—despite the risks involved.\textsuperscript{56}


Two important conclusions can be drawn from all this: On the one hand, the care of the self and others and parrhesia are closely interwoven with the role of power in the relationship between the subject and truth; on the other hand, both develop their genuine critical and emancipatory potential only in their constitutive relatedness to each other—that is, as a parrhesiastic care of the self and others. For just as parrhesia must be rooted in the care of the self and others as well as in the concern for truth\textsuperscript{57} if it is not to become empty talk and chatter endangering and threatening the democratic community and social solidarity, the care of the self and others threatens to turn into a mere cult of the self, xenophobic isolation, or paternalistic welfare if it is not tied back to the ethical-political practice of parrhesia. Such one-sidedness is at play in the figure of the concerned citizen, who negates the claims and needs of others while rendering her own concerns absolute and immunizing them against any questioning. Further, it is manifest in the political model of the ‘welfare state’ (German Fürsorgestaat), in which, according to Foucault, the “political power at work within the state as a legal framework of unity” is interwoven with “a power we can call ‘pastoral’, whose role is to constantly ensure, sustain, and improve the lives of each and every one.”\textsuperscript{58} And it can also be seen in the neoliberal appropriation of the care of the self in terms of an obligatory individualism that declares freedom the norm and transforms people into entrepreneurs of themselves.\textsuperscript{59}

Based on the reconstruction of Foucault’s concept of care proposed here, we can now reformulate the problem that still seemed unsolvable to Foucault in The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Namely, “that we find it impossible today to constitute an ethic of the self, even though it may be an urgent, fundamental, and politically indispensable task, if it is true after all that there is no first or final point of resistance to political power other than in the relationship one has to oneself” (HS, 252). Such an ethics appears impossible, however, only if one fails to recognize that every self-relation implies alterity. If, on the other hand, we combine parrhesia with the care of the self, and if we recognize that every self-relation is constitutively a relation with others, then perhaps what becomes possible is not only an ethics of “the verbal relationship with the Other” (HS, 164) but also a politics of the care of self and others that is also a concern for truth.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The research leading to this article has been financed by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) Research Project P 26579-G22 “Language and Violence.” My special thanks go to Florian Pistrol, Tatjana Schönwälder-Kuntze, Sergej Seltz, and Ľubomír Dunoj, Michael Stiegler as well as to the anonymous reviewers for their helpful remarks and suggestions.

AUTHOR AFFILIATION

Gerald Posselt \hspace{1em} orcid.org/0000-0002-7175-8623

University of Vienna, AT


\textsuperscript{56} Cf. Snowden in: Laura Poitras, Citizenfour (USA: RADiUS-TWC 2014), app. 00:27:00.


\textsuperscript{58} Foucault, “Omnes et Singulatim,” 235.


The Foucauldien. DOI: 10.16995/lefou.107
TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Submitted: 24 June 2021
Accepted: 18 August 2021
Published: 04 October 2021

COPYRIGHT:
© 2021 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/.

Le foucaldien is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Open Library of Humanities.