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gnóthi seautón/epiméleia heautoú: Michel Foucault and the Two Paths of Western Thought

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ABSTRACT. Although it is not possible to conceive of the history of Western thought as a continuous and linear (let alone progressive) process of development, some paths seem to have been historically dominant, while other possible developments, however potentially fruitful, seem to have turned out to be "interrupted paths". This paper is concerned with the interpretation offered by Foucault in the early 1980s, according to which Socrates on the one hand and Descartes on the other would have opened up two discordant paths to the key relationship between subjectivity and truth. In both cases, the starting point is the maxim *gnóthi seautón*. In Socrates, however, it is linked to (and subordinated to) the question of *epiméleia heautoú*, which in Descartes' case would disappear completely. The modern-Cartesian approach would thus lead to a purely theoretical-gnoseological-epistemological conception of philosophy, which would lose sight of the strong practical scope of Socratic discourse. Contrary to this interpretation, an attempt is made here to show that, in fact, even at the heart of Cartesian thought one can trace an all but secondary attention to the ethical-practical dimension of philosophy and, albeit in a modified form, to the principle of the necessary "care of the self".

Keywords: Foucault, Subjectivity, Truth, Socrates, Descartes

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Subjectivity and truth

In order to reflect on the role of practical knowledge in philosophy, I would like to refer to the precious interpretative suggestions offered by Michel Foucault in his last courses at the Collège de France in the early 1980s[1]. At the heart of these courses is the question of the relationship between subjectivity and truth, and the ways it has been developed in Western philosophy. Foucault sets out to reconstruct the "genealogy" of the modern subject[2], attempting to identify the various configurations assumed by the concept of the subject throughout the history of Western thought. In his view, the central stages of this historical evolution have by no means constituted a continuum, following a single, consequential, linear path. On the contrary, from time to time, possible paths have opened up, sometimes very different from each other, to the point of appearing, in extreme cases, almost incommensurable. Some of them were decisive for subsequent developments; others, instead, while being equally important, turned out to be, in a *wirkungsgeschichtlich* perspective (to use categories foreign to the Foucauldian lexicon), *Holzwege*, interrupted paths, while sometimes resurfacing, almost karstically – marginally and in changed forms –, throughout history.

Following Foucault's indications to a large extent – but not entirely –, I would like to focus on two key-figures of Western philosophy: Socrates and Descartes. These two thinkers represent precisely two radically different ways of understanding the subject in its constitutive relationship with truth; they opened up, respectively, two different lines of reflection, the second of which proved to be the winning one for the self-constitution of the modern subject, and, in part, still of the contemporary one.

Their discourses stand clearly on two distinct levels and are located within two entirely different theoretical-gnoseological contexts, indicated by Foucault through the fundamental distinction between two domains: that of "alethurgical practices"[3] and that of "epistemological structures". Nevertheless, both thinkers move from the same premise, they share a common starting point, of which they represent two different possible declinations, namely the famous Delphic precept

[1] On Foucault's last courses see D. Lorenzini-A. Revel-A. Sforzini (dir.), *Michel Foucault: éthique et vérité (1980-1984)*, Vrin, Paris 2013.

[2] Cf. M. Foucault, *Subjectivity and Truth*, in *About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self: Lectures at Dartmouth College, 1980*, ed. by H.-P. Fruchard and D. Lorenzini, transl. by G. Burchell, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London 2016, pp. 19-51.

[3] By the word "alethurgy" he means "the production of truth, the act by which truth is manifested": M. Foucault, *The Courage of the Truth (The Government of Self and Others II): Lectures at the Collège of France 1983-1984*, ed. by. F. Gros, transl. by G. Burchell, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2011, p. 3.

gnóthi seautón. They represent two *philosophical* declinations of it, which go in the direction, respectively, of "spirituality" – i.e., roughly speaking, of the ethical-moral sphere –, and of a "scientific-epistemological" perspective, as will be discussed below. I emphasise the adjective "philosophical" because, as Foucault points out, in its proper and original sense, the precept *gnóthi seautón* was by no means a philosophical maxim: "The phrase – he says in the course *L'herméneutique du sujet* (1981-1982) – did not prescribe self-knowledge, neither as the basis of morality, nor as part of a relationship with the gods"[4]. Moreover, it was not a single, isolated principle.

As is well known, this very ancient precept was engraved on the stone of the temple of Apollo at Delphi, and this reveals its foundational importance for the Greek community. Delphi, the most important Greek religious centre for a very long time (for more than a thousand years, from the 8th century B.C. to the end of the 4th century A.D.), was considered by the Greeks the *ómphalos* of the world, its 'navel', its central point (which, as some myths relate, would have been determined by Zeus by sending two eagles from the two opposite ends of the earth's circumference, which met precisely at Delphi).

To understand the original meaning of the precept *gnóthi seautón*, however, it has to be remembered that it was part of a series of three precepts addressed to those who went to Delphi to consult Apollo's oracle. These precepts had first and foremost a religious-procedural function, a 'ritual' meaning, in that they regulated the behaviour of the postulants. The first of these precepts stated: *méden ágan* ("not too much"). These words would not express an ethical principle, a principle of measure for the human conduct. More simply, they prescribed that, when one addressed the oracle, one should not ask too many questions, but only those that were really useful and necessary. The second precept was: *eggúa pará d'áte*. The *eggúai* were the promises, the pledges, the vows made to the god. So the meaning of this precept was roughly: to pledge, to commit oneself brings bad luck, misfortune (*áte*); one had to be careful not to make vows that were too onerous, vows that one would then be unable to fulfil, thus drawing upon oneself the terrible wrath of the god. The third and final precept, *gnóthi seautón*, advised the postulants, before consulting the oracle, to carefully examine within themselves the questions they wished to ask – again, with the aim of submitting only the truly important ones to the oracle. A further meaning of this last precept was perhaps: remember that you are only a mortal being, and not a god[5].

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[4] M. Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France 1981-1982*, ed. by F. Gros, transl. by G. Burchell, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2005, p. 3.

[5] See *ibid*., pp. 3-4. Foucault refers to the following texts: W.H. Roscher, *Weiteres über die Bedeutung des E[ggua] zu Delphi und die übrigen grammata Delphika*, "Philologus", 60, 1901, pp. 81-101; J. Defradas, *Les thèmes de la propagande delphique*, Klincksieck, Paris 1954; and, in first place, to Plutarch, *Septem sapientium convivium*, 164b.

But when this third precept (*gnóthi seautón*) makes its entry, with Socrates-Plato, on the scene of philosophy, it appears very often – which has in Foucault's eyes an enormous significance – in relation to another fundamental principle: that of *epiméleia heautoú*, of the care of the self. In fact, the principle of *epiméleia heautoú*, i.e. the assertion "one ought to take care of oneself", had not, properly speaking, a philosophical origin either, but was traditionally known in Greece as a Lacedaemonian maxim. According to a late account by Plutarch, Anaxandridas, a Spartan, was asked one day why the Spartans, despite owning vast territories, did not cultivate them themselves, but entrusted them to helots. The answer was: so that we could take care of ourselves. The reference was clearly not to philosophy, but to a politically and socially privileged way of life. This principle, therefore, also undergoes a philosophical transformation in Socrates and Plato.

Socrates and the "entanglement" between *gnóthi seautón* and *epiméleia*

In Plato's dialogues knowing oneself is almost always connected to taking care of oneself, to caring and worrying about oneself. According to Foucault, however, the nature of the relationship that so closely links in Socratic-Platonic philosophy *gnóthi seautón* and *epiméleia heautoú* is not, as might appear obvious from a modern perspective, that of a theory/practice relationship. *Epiméleia heautoú* is by no means to be understood as a kind of practical – and, as such, secondary – application of the primary theoretical principle *gnóthi seautón*: on the contrary, *gnóthi seautón* is to be understood as forming part of the more general framework of *epiméleia heautoú*, as one of its consequences[6]. In order to grasp how Socrates understands the *gnóthi seautón*, what needs to be investigated is therefore the precise meaning that the expression *epiméleia heautoú* takes on in his teaching.

In his last course at the Collège de France, *Le courage de la verité* (February-March 1984), Foucault (who was to die a couple of months later) recalls how at the root of the word *epiméleia* there is the verb *mélo*, which is mostly found in the impersonal form *mélei moí* (I care about, or, better, it concernes me, this is very important to me). Linked to it are the verbs *epimélein* and *epimeleísthai* and the noun *epimelétes* (someone who cares for, who looks after, often in the specific sense of "supervisor" of something, also in an institutional sense). Corresponding to this are the negative forms: from the adjective *amelés* (negligent, careless), to the adverb *amelós* (negligently, carelessly), to a verb that we will return to later[7].

6 Cf. M. Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, pp. 4-5.

7 Cf. M. Foucault, *The Courage of the Truth*, pp. 117 ff.

We can already anticipate that, if for Socrates the *epiméleia heautoú* is the primary element, to which the *gnóthi seautón* is linked as a secondary element, this is not the case in Descartes – and this seems to Foucault to be a central issue with regard to the history of truth. He speaks in this respect of a Cartesian "moment" (the physical-scientific sense of the term should not be ignored): with Descartes, the *gnóthi seautón* would be philosophically requalified and, on the other hand, the *epiméleia heautoú* would be totally disqualified and forgotten, and would thus be excluded from the field of modern philosophy.

What must first be highlighted is then the peculiar link that Socrates establishes between *gnóthi seautón* and *epiméleia heautoú*. Foucault attempts to reconstruct this link, this essential connection, through the analysis of three emblematic Platonic texts: the *Apology*, of course, but firstly *Alcibiades* and *Laches*.

In the first of these two dialogues, Alcibiades, Pericles' young pupil, intends to go into politics, he wants to govern the *pólis*. Socrates tries to dissuade him, saying it would be premature. Alcibiades is not yet ready to face the internal enemies (i.e. the possible rivals in the Athenian politic arena), much less the external ones (the Spartans and the Persians), who are far superior to him not only in wealth and power, but above all in education. In particular, Socrates reminds him that the Persian princes had as many as four teachers: the teacher of wisdom (*sophía*), the teacher of justice (*dikaiosýne*), the teacher of temperance (*sophrosýne*), and the teacher of courage (*andréia*)[8]. On the contrary, Alcibiades was raised by an ignorant slave. For this reason, before embarking on the political struggle, the young Alcibiades must reflect carefully on himself (which is part of the typical Socratic requirement of the *lógon didónai*, that is the need to give account for oneself, first and foremost to oneself). It is necessary for the boy to know himself (we find here the first reference to the *gnóthi seautón*), first recognising his inferiority and ignorance. Luckily it is not too late: Alcibiades is still very young, he has still time enough to start looking after himself, taking care of himself (*epimelethénai seautoú*). The *gnóthi seautón* is therefore clearly linked and subordinated to the *epiméleia heautoú*, and the need for this inseparable link is here connected to the exercise of power, to the government of the *pólis*.

The primary imperative is, therefore, the following one: it is necessary to look after oneself, to take care of oneself. Two questions arise. The first one is: what is this "self" that needs to be taken care of? It is the problem of the *subject*: if one is to take care of oneself (*epimeleísthai heautoú*), one must first know what this "self",

[8] Cf. Plato, *Alcibiades*, 121e ff. For the English translation of Plato's passages quoted in this paper see Plato, *Complete Works*, ed. by J.M. Cooper, Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis/Cambridge 1997. For the analysis of *Alcibiades*, see M. Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, pp. 31-78.

this *heautós*, is. To know this, says Socrates, one needs "to know oneself" (and this is the second reference to the *gnóthi seautón*). He states here that this "self" that one must know, in order to be able to take care of it, is the *psyché*, the soul.

The second question is: what is the care, the *epiméleia*? What does it mean taking care of oneself, looking after oneself? According to Socrates, this means (and we have here the third reference to the *gnóthi seautón*) knowing oneself, knowing one's own soul. The interweaving/intertwining between *epiméleia heautoú* and *gnóthi seautón*, care of the self and knowledge of the self, appears both inescapable and inextricable; between the two, Foucault observes, there is a "dynamic entanglement"[9]. But how does one get to know one's own soul, i.e. oneself? Socrates resorts to a metaphor, that of the eye and sight. He asks: how can an eye see itself? It can, of course, see itself in a mirror. But Socrates adds: the true way, the eminent way in which the eye sees itself is by reflecting-mirroring itself in the eye of the other, and, more specifically, in the pupil of the other's eye; this is the element where the act of vision is realised and which is, therefore, the *principle* of vision.

Similarly, the soul can only see itself (i.e. it can only know itself) by looking at itself in an element of its own nature, or rather in the *principle* that constitutes its nature, in its very source: thought and knowledge (*to phronéin*, *to eidénai*). And the element that secures thought and knowledge, Socrates says here, is the *divine*: "Just as true mirrors are clearer, purer and brighter than the mirror of the eye, so the god (*ho theós*) is purer and brighter than the best part of our soul. […] Looking then to the god, we would make use of the best mirror, the mirror of human things that are addressed to the virtue of the soul, and in this way we would see in the best way and know ourselves"[10]. Only by turning towards the divine can the soul see (know) itself. The knowledge of the divine is revealed here as the condition of self-knowledge. Only by ascending to the divine and thus acquiring wisdom (*sophrosýne*) can the soul then descend back into the world and, now knowing how to distinguish good from evil and right from wrong, be able to deal with justice (*dikaiosýne*) in the governance of the *pólis*.

The *Alcibiades* would thus open up, according to Foucault, a first possible way of the *epiméleia heautoú*, a first possible declination of it (that would be in truth more Platonic than Socratic): the way that leads to a philosophy as knowledge of the soul, or, in a stronger sense, to a "metaphysics of the soul"[11] (whose ultimate goal is the *psyché*).

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[9] M. Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, p. 69.

[10] Plato, *Alcibiades*, 133c (there are actually some doubts about the authenticity of this passage, which might be spurious): see M. Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, p. 70.

[11] Cf. M. Foucault, *The Courage of the Truth*, p. 161.

A second, more genuinely Socratic way, a second declination of the *epiméleia heautoú*, would emerge in the second dialogue, *Laches* (which Foucault analyses on several occasions)[12]. This second way points in the direction of a philosophy as "proof of life", as "aesthetics (or stylistics) of existence", whose ultimate goal is no longer the *psyché*, but the *bíos*, life[13]. This dialogue, *Laches*, also known by the title *Perí andréias* (*On Courage*), also has at its centre the topic of education, i.e. the issue of the care of young men, their training in political life. Here, however, this topic is explicitly connected with another major theme of the last Foucault, that of *parresía*. This term, which has a political origin and means free speech, *franc-parler* (*parresiázestai*, *pan réma*: to say everything, with no restrictions, as directly as possible), designates one of the four modalities of truth-telling (i.e. of alethurgic forms) which, as Foucault says in *The Courage of the Truth*, are peculiar to ancient Greece – the others are: the truth-telling of prophecy, that of wisdom, and the veridiction of the technician. All these forms of veridiction are opposed to rhetoric in that it deals with the verisimilar, not with truth, but this opposition is particularly sharp in the case of *parresía*.

In a lecture series held by Foucault at the University of Berkeley in 1983, *Discourse and Truth*, he succinctly defines *parresía* as follows:

> We could say that *parresía* is a certain verbal activity in which the speaker has a specific relation to truth through frankness, a certain relation to himself through danger, a certain relation to law through freedom and duty, and a certain relation to other people through critique (self-critique or critique of other people). More precisely, it is a verbal activity in which the subject expresses his personal relation to truth and risks his life because he recognizes that telling the truth is his own duty, so as to improve or to help other people. In *parresía*, the speaker uses his freedom and chooses truth instead of lies, death instead of life and security, criticism instead of flattery, and duty instead of interest and selfishness[14].

In *Laches* Socrates is shown as the one who holds the *parresía*, who has the right to make use of it, and as the one to whom his interlocutors (which is even more important) *recognise* the essential right to use it as he wishes, as he pleases. That's

[12] Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 121-153, and M. Foucault, *Discourse and Truth and* Parrēsia, ed. by H.-P. Fruchard and D. Lorenzini, transl. by N. Luxon, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London 2019, pp. 134 ff.

[13] See M. Foucault, *The Courage of the Truth*, pp. 160 ff.

[14] M. Foucault, *Discourse and Truth and* Parrēsia, pp. 45-46. On *parresía*, also see M. Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, pp. 371-411; *The Government of Self and Others: Lectures at the Collège of France 1982-1983*, ed. by. F. Gros, transl. by G. Burchell, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2010; *The Courage of the Truth*.

why at the end of the dialogue it is agreed that he, and he alone, will have to take care of the young men and their education. If, in general, the *parresía* is connected whit the question of *truth*, its connection with the theme of *courage* is also particularly emphasised here. It is reminded how Socrates had been a brave soldier (*Laches* 181a-b)[15]. At the heart of *Laches* is therefore precisely the "courage of the truth".

The dialogue opens with a conversation between two pairs of characters: Lysimachus and Melesias, who belong to two eminent Athenians families, and Nicias und Laches, two famous generals and politicians. Lysimachus and Melesias admit that, despite their illustrious origins, they have not given great proof of themselves in their lives, and they turn to the two generals asking them to advise them in choosing a good teacher for their sons. All together they go to see the demonstration of a certain Stesilaus, a "teacher of *oplomachía*" – a "kind of sophist in military techniques", a "military sophist", says Foucault[16] –, who offers, for a fee, to educate and train young boys to the art of war.

But Stesilaus' demonstration does not entirely convince the observers, who then decide to turn to Socrates. At the end Socrates will be recognised by all them as the true (the only) teacher: through the parresiastic game in which the Socratic dialogue consists, the dialogue's partner is led (is compelled) to give an account (*lógon didónai*) of himself; but this means of "his own life", of his way of living, of conducting his own existence. Socrates' authority is precisely based on his peculiar way of life.

The *epiméleia heautoú* is therefore understood here as testing, questioning, examining and verifying life (one's own life), i.e. the *bíos* as object of the care, within a strong connection between care-examination of the *bíos*, on the one hand, and *parresía* (speaking frankly), on the other. It is precisely Socrates' peculiar way of life, with its parresiastic traits, that makes all the characters in the dialogue recognise him not only and not simply as *the* educator (education in courage, etc.), but more generally as the sieve, the criterion of measurement, the touchstone, the *básanos* (*Laches*, 188a)[17]. Socrates can sift and measure the degree of concordance, of consistence between a person's life and his words (or the rational principles that inspire it – that is between *bíos* and *lógos*), because in himself these two things harmonise perfectly, according to a "Dorian" harmony, "the only harmony that is

[15] The praise of Socrates' courage, here put into Laches' mouth, clearly recalls the eulogy pronounced by Alcibiades in *Symposium*, 219e-221c, where he recalls Socrates' valiant behaviour in the campaign of Potidea.

[16] M. Foucault, *Discourse and Truth and* Parrēsia, p. 136.

[17] The *básanos* was a black stone used to test the authenticity of gold. Also in a passage of *Gorgias* (486d-487a) the figure of the touchstone is related to the theme of the *parresía*.

genuinely Greek" (*Laches*, 188d)[18]. What Socrates says – and Laches defines him "a person privileged to speak fair words (*lógon kalón*) and to indulge in every kind of frankness (*páses parresías*)» (*Laches*,189a) – fits perfectly with what he thinks, and what he thinks fits exactly with what he does. That is why he appears to everyone to be fully authorised to play the role of the *parresiastés*, thanks to the sym-phony, harmony, *homología*, that exists between his speeches and his actions, his frank manner of speaking and his way of living, his lifestyle.

It is precisely in this regard that Foucault speaks of "aesthetics of existence": in his opinion,

> through the emergence and foundation of Socratic *parresía*, existence (*bíos*) was constituted in Greek thought as an aesthetic object, as an object of aesthetic elaboration and perception; *bíos* as a beautiful work. This opens up an extremely rich historical field. There is, of course, a history of the metaphysics of the soul. There is also – which is, up to a point, the other side and also alternative – a history of the stylistics of existence, a history of life as possible beauty[19].

Socrates, for Foucault, thus represents the point at which

> a certain relationship is established between this no doubt archaic, ancient, and traditional concern in Greek culture for a beautiful, striking, and memorable existence, and the concern with truth-telling. More precisely, what I would like to recover is how truth-telling, in this ethical modality which appeared with Socrates right at the start of Western philosophy, interacted with the principle of existence as an œuvre to be fashioned in all its possible perfection, how the care of the self, which, in the Greek tradition long before Socrates, was governed by the principle of a brilliant and memorable existence, was not replaced but taken up, inflected, modified, and re-elaborated by the principle of truth-telling that has to be confronted courageously, how the objective of a beautiful existence and the task of giving an account of oneself in the game of truth were combined[20].

The way of living appears here as the essential correlate of the *practice* of saying-the-truth – but in this perspective this means: it appears as the eminent way for the

[18] The Dorian harmony, says Plato in *Republic* III 398e ff., is a brave harmony, unlike the Lydian mode, which is too lamenting, the Phrygian mode, too pathetic, and the Ionian mode, too sweet and effeminate.

[19] M. Foucault, *The Courage of the Truth*, p. 162.

[20] *Ibid*., pp. 162-163.

subject of *being in the truth*. The relationship between subject and truth clearly assumes a peculiar declination: Socrates shows that he has a privileged relationship with the truth not because he follows some epistemological criteria, but because he is *existentially* consistent-coherent in the way he thinks, speaks and lives. For this reason he emblematically embodies the figure of the *parresiastés*. This understanding, this sense of truth is thus inseparable from the concept (from the *practice*) of the care of the self, which is also expressed (and this is a constitutive, not accidental element) in caring for *others*. At the end of *Laches* Socrates states: "Let us join together in looking after both ourselves and the boys (*koiné hemón autón kái tón meirakíon epiméleian poiesómetha*)" (201b). And, turning to Lysimachus, he says: "I shall […] come to you tomorrow, God willing (*eán theós ethéle*)" (201c).

This final reference to the god is a clear allusion to the mission entrusted to Socrates by Apollo's oracle in Delphi. This leads us to the third Platonic text on which Foucault's interpretation is based: the *Apology.* Here, too, the theme of truth, of truth-telling (*parresía*) is closely linked to the question of the way of life, to the *bíos* – and, correlatively, to death, to *thánatos*. The exegesis of the *Apology*, developed by Foucault in particular in his last course at the Collège de France[21], focuses on the problem of truth, of telling the truth, even in the face of death (and here too *parresía* is opposed to the rhetoric way of speaking). In order to fulfil the task assigned to him by Apollo, Socrates will not hesitate to go through with it, heedless of the supreme risk. Once again, the emphasis on this conception of truth is constantly associated with the question of care, of oneself and of others.

From the very beginning, Socrates insistently and hammeringly repeats: my skilled accusers lie, I will tell the truth, and I will tell it without any rhetorical devices, in a crude, simple, direct manner, without affectation:

> I don't know, men of Athens, how my accusers affected you; as for me, I was almost carried away in spite of myself, so persuasively did they speak. And yet, hardly anything of what they say is true. Of the many lies they told, one in particular surprised me, namely that you should be careful not to be deceived by an accomplished speaker like me. That they were not ashamed to be immediately proved wrong by the facts, when I show myself not to be an accomplished speaker at all, that I thought was most shameless on their part – unless indeed they call an accomplished speaker the man who speaks the truth. If they mean that, I would agree that I am an orator, but not after their manner, for indeed, as I say, practically nothing they said was true. From me you will hear the whole truth, though not, by Zeus, gentlemen,

[21] See *ibid*., pp. 73-91.

> expressed in embroidered and stylized phrases like theirs, but things spoken at random and expressed in the first words that come to mind, for I put my trust in the justice of what I said, and let none of you expecting anything else. […] One thing I do ask and beg of you […], to pay no attention to my manner of speech – be it better or worse – but to concentrate your attention on whether what I say is just or not, for the excellence of a judge lies in this, as that of a speaker lies in telling the truth (*Apology,* 17a-18a).

Something very similar he also says in a famous passage of the *Symposium*, i.e. in a very different context, where it is not death but love that hovers over the dialogue (though, according to Lacan, the constant background of the *Symposium* would actually be the *Phaedo* and thus, again, death[22]). Here, taking the floor after Agathon's highly elaborate but totally empty speech on Eros, Socrates says with his typical irony:

> How am I not going to be tongue-tied […], after a speech delivered with such beauty and variety? […] I would almost have run away and escaped, if there had been a place to go. […] In my foolishness, I thought you should tell the truth about whatever you praise, that this should be your basis, and that from this a speaker should select the most beautiful truths and arrange them most suitably. I was quite vain, thinking that I would talk well and that I knew the truth about praising anything whatever. But now it appears that this is not what it is to praise anything whatever; rather, it is to apply to the object the grandest and the most beautiful qualities, whether he actually has them or not. And if they are false, that is no objection […]. But, if you wish, I'd like to tell the truth my way. So look, Phaedrus, would a speech like this satisfy your requirement? You will hear the truth about Love, and the words and phrasing will take care of themselves» (*Symposium*, 198b-199b).

The (blasphemous) truth about Love revealed by Socrates in his truthful speech is, as is known, that the god Eros is actually not a god at all. Coming back to the *Apology*: why was Socrates accused and brought before the tribunal? What faults was he guilty of that aroused such aversion in his fellow citizens? Evidently he has done something "strange", something non-ordinary, something different from others. He says: I acquired this bad reputation because of a "certain kind of wisdom" (*sophía*), which is, however, a special kind of wisdom: it is an *anthropíne sophía*, a "human wisdom" (20d) (he thus distances himself from both the Sophists and Anaxagoras). But what kind of wisdom is this *anthropíne sophía* that Socrates admits he possesses?

[22] See J. Lacan, *Transference: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VIII*, ed. by J.-A. Miller, transl. by B. Fink, Polity Press, Cambridge-Oxford-Boston-New York 2017.

This admission seems in fact, at first glance, surprising, given his usual declarations of ignorance. This is where the famous account of the question asked by Cherephon to the Delphic oracle comes in: "Which Greek is wiser than Socrates?". The oracle's answer, enigmatic as always, sounds: "No one is wiser than he". Socrates, of course, does not understand this response and wonders about it, asking himself: "What on earth does the god want to say (*tí póte léghei ho theós*)?" (21b).

He, however, does not interrogate the response in the traditional manner, through the usual exegetical-interpretative approach (Foucault recalls that there were three traditional attitudes towards oracular responses: exegesis, waiting for their effects to be realised, or trying to avoid them if they were inauspicious)[23]. Socrates does not, namely, try to decipher the hidden meaning of the oracle's words. He does something else. He undertakes a search (*zétesis* vs. *exégesis*), which sets out to discover *whether* the oracle has spoken the truth. He puts it to the test, discusses its validity, tries to refute it (*élenchos*). So he goes around and carries out an enquiry, an investigation-examination (*exétasis*), testing the souls of his fellow citizens (in that order: politicians, poets, artisans), in order to check, to verify, what they really know about their activities, but, above all, about themselves. Underlying this is the implicit comparison between these souls and the soul of Socrates himself (as the *básanos* of the souls of others), who in the end truly appears as the wisest. But if this first result confirms the veracity of the oracle, the second result of the Socratic investigation is quite different: hatred, slander, envy, hostility and, finally, death.

However, Socrates insists: I cannot behave differently, I *must* serve the god, who has ordered me to do so. The fundamental principle of *homología* reappears here. Socrates defends his conduct in life, which he courageously upholds in the face of any risk or danger: a man "who is any good at all", he says, should not "take into account the risk of life or death" (28b). Foucault notes that a singular contradiction seems to emerge at this point. Indeed, Socrates admits to having avoided the risks of politics (of political *parresía*): if I had been in politics, he observes, I would have been dead long ago (31d-e). But this was because he had to preserve himself for another, more important mission: in fact, he did not avoid the risk of death associated with taking on the task of a higher form of *parresía*, of truth-telling, veridiction, entrusted to him by the god.

Here, once again, appears the theme of the *epiméleia heautoú*, the theme of care, which runs insistently through these pages, connected to the theme of truth (to the principle of the *gnóthi seautón*), i.e. to this *purely existential* truth that must be defended at the cost of death. The mission entrusted to Socrates by the god is, in fact, to permanently watch over others, to take care of others (like a father

[23] See M. Foucault, *The Courage of the Truth*, p. 83.

or an elder brother), to incite them, like a "gadfly" (30e), to take care not of riches, fame and honours, but of themselves. And this means: to care for their *phrónesis*, for truth (*alétheia*) and for their soul (*psyché*), which thus represent the three areas of deployment and articulation of the *epiméleia heautoú*.

For Foucault, therefore, the three moments of the *zétesis* (the search), of the *exétasis* (the examination of the soul or the test of souls) and of the *epiméleia* (the care of oneself, as the moment in which the first two culminate and legitimise themselves) represent a unitary whole, an "ensemble", that defines the Socratic *parresía*, Socrates' "courageous veridiction"[24]. Here a new form of *parresía* is inaugurated with respect to the traditional political *parresía* (the freedom of speech in the political field): namely a *parresía* "on the axis of ethics", in which we have "the foundation of *ethos* as the principle on the basis of which conduct can be defined as rational conduct in accordance with the very being of the soul"[25].

All this will lead Socrates to death, which he does not fear, while his accusers will be "condemned by the truth". Up until the end of the text, the link between truth and *epiméleia heautoú* is emphasised. In fact, the *Apology* closes with the prayer, addressed to the good judges, to *take care* of his children:

> This much I ask from them; when my sons grow up, avenge yourselves by causing them the same kind of grief that I caused you, if you think they care (*epimeléisthai*) for money or anything else more than they care for virtue (*areté*), or if they think they are somebody when they are nobody. Reproach them as I reproached you, that they do not care for (*ouk epimeloúntai*) the right things and think they are worthy when they are not worthy of anything. If you do this, I shall have been justly treated by you, and my sons also. Now the hour to part has come. I go to die, you go to live. Which of us goes to the better lot is known to no one, except the god (*Apology*, 41e-42a).

The *pendant* of these words, as Foucault underlines, are the famous – and highly enigmatic – last words of Socrates in the *Phaedo*: "Crito, we owe a cock to Asclepius; make this offering to him, and do not forget (*mé amelésete*)" (*Phaedo*, 188a). Echoing Dumézil, Foucault challenges Nietzsche's famous interpretation of these words in the aphorism 340 of *The Gay Science* ("The Dying Socrates")[26], according to which they would mean: "Crito, life is a disease, a sickness". What would, on the

[24] *Ibid*., p. 87.

[25] *Ibid*., p. 86.

[26] See F. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, ed. by B. Williams, transl. by J. Nauckhoff, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2001.

contrary, be emphasised here is, once again, the theme of care, albeit *ex negativo*[27]: Socrates' *very last* word (and, let us remember it, Socrates is servant of Apollo and, thus, of the Delphic precept *gnóthi seautón*) would be an incitement to *epiméleia*.

Descartes: an absolutisation of *gnóthi seautón*?

According to Foucault, Descartes' revival in the modern age of the principle of *gnóthi seautón* would completely ignore its link – which is constitutive in the Socratic conception – with the principle of *epiméleia heautoú*; the latter would be completely set aside, disappearing from the horizon of philosophical-truthful discourse and, in particular, from the questioning of the relationship between the subject and truth.

> First – he writes –, the Cartesian moment requalified the *gnóthi seautón* (know yourself). Actually, and here things are very simple, the Cartesian approach, which can be read quite explicitly in the *Meditations* [*on First Philosophy*], placed self-evidence (*l'évidence*) at the origin, the point of departure of the philosophical approach – self-evidence as it appears, that is to say as it is given, as it is actually given to consciousness without any possible doubt. The Cartesian approach [therefore] refers to knowledge of the self, as a form of consciousness at least. What's more, by putting the self-evidence of the subject's own existence at the very source of access to being, this knowledge of oneself (no longer in the form of the test of self-evidence, but in the form of the impossibility of doubting my existence as a subject) made the "know yourself" into a fundamental means of access to truth[28].

This re-qualification of the *gnóthi seautón* would, however, go hand in hand with the exclusion of the related principle of *epiméleia heautoú* from the field of modern philosophical thought. To further demarcate the difference between the modern-Cartesian approach and the ancient-Socratic one, Foucault distinguishes, as already mentioned, two types of discourse: that of "philosophy" and that of "spirituality".

"Philosophy", he says, is "the form of thought that asks, not of course what is true and what is false, but what determines that there is and can be truth and falsehood and whether or not we can separate the true and the false"; philosophy

[27] On the Foucauldian interpretation of Socrates' last words see M. Foucault, *The Courage of the Truth*, pp. 95-116.

[28] M. Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, p. 14.

is "the form of thought that asks what it is that enables the subject to have access to the truth and which attempts to determine the conditions and limits of the subject's access to the truth"[29].

Instead, by the term "spirituality" (which he takes from Pierre Hadot[30]) he means

> the search, practice, and experience through which the subject carries out the necessary *transformations* of himself in order to have access to the truth. We call "spirituality" then the set of these researches, practices, and experiences, which may be purifications, ascetic exercises, renunciations, conversions of looking, modifications of existence, etc., which are, not for knowledge but for the subject, for the subject's very being, the price to be paid for access to the truth[31].

"Spirituality", he adds, has, at least in Western culture, three main characteristics. The first one is that it "postulates that the truth is never given to the subject by right […]. The truth is not given to the subject by a simple act of knowledge (*connaissance*), which would be founded and justified simply by the fact that he is the subject"; spirituality "postulates that for the subject to have right of access to the truth he must be changed, transformed, shifted, and become, to some extent and up to a certain point, other than himself. The truth is only given to the subject at a price that brings the subject's being into play. […] There can be no truth without a conversion or a transformation of the subject"[32].

The second characteristic of spirituality is that the transformation of the subject can take several forms. Foucault lists two of them: a) first of all, the conversion-transformation may take place as "a movement that removes the subject from his current status and conditions (either an ascending movement of the subject himself, or else a movement by which the truth comes to him and enlightens him)"[33]. This movement, both ascending and descending, is the movement of *eros*, of love. b) The second major form of the conversion-transformation of the subject is realised through "a kind of work", i.e. "a work of the self on the self, an elaboration of the self by the self, a progressive transformation of the self by the self for which one takes responsibility in a long labor of ascesis (*askesis*)"[34]. *Eros* and *askesis* would be,

[29] *Ibid*., p. 15.
[30] See P. Hadot, *Exercises spirituels et philosophie antique* (1981), Albin Michel, Paris 2002.
[31] M. Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, p. 15.
[32] *Ibid*.
[33] *Ibid*., pp. 15-16.
[34] *Ibid*., p. 16.

respectively, the most important forms in which Western spirituality conceptualized the manners through which the subject has to be transformed in order to become capable of truth.

The third characteristic of spirituality, finally, is that it postulates that "once access to truth has been opened up, it produces effects", namely feed-back effects, effects "de retour", of the truth on the subject. Here the truth "is not just what is given to the subject, as reward for the act of knowledge as it were, and to fulfil the act of knowledge. The truth enlightens the subject; the truth gives beatitude to the subject; the truth gives the subject tranquillity of the soul. In short, in the truth and in access to the truth, there is something that fulfils the subject himself, which fulfils or transfigures his very being"[35].

According to Foucault, throughout Antiquity the discourse of "philosophy" – which asks the question of how to access the truth – and that of "spirituality" – which instead asks what are, in the very being of the subject, the transformations necessary to make access to truth possible – have always been closely linked (with the sole exception, in his view, of Aristotle – not surprisingly, he says, he is the philosopher who has been recognised as the founder of philosophy in the modern sense of the term). The entry of the history of truth into the modern age, on the contrary, marked the sharp separation between the two approaches. Modernity is precisely characterised by the idea that "what gives access to the truth, the condition for the subject's access to the truth, is knowledge, and knowledge alone"[36], and not the whole of existence.

The modern conception of truth and the subject begins when the philosopher becomes capable of recognising truth – and accessing it – exclusively through his cognitive acts, without his (entire) "being as a subject" being called into play, and without requiring this to be modified or transformed. This does not mean that the truth can be obtained without conditions, but now it is only a question of the "internal conditions of the act of knowledge and of the rules [the subject] must obey to have access to the truth: formal conditions, objective conditions, formal rules of method, the structure of the object to be known"[37]. In the discourse of the philosophy of the modern age, definitively detached from that of spirituality, truth is no longer able to "save the subject"[38].

With Descartes, who inaugurates both modern philosophy *and* modern science, the subject (the *cogito*) becomes (exclusively, as it would seem) the locus

[35] *Ibid*.
[36] *Ibid.,* p. 17.
[37] *Ibid*., p. 18.
[38] *Ibid*., p. 19.

of measurement of being, the locus of its *truth*; but this means, at the same time, that the subject becomes the locus of *domination* of being, what allows man to secure himself of being by means of rigorous methodical procedures, controlling and exploiting its manifestations. Man now constitutes himself, to use Heidegger's words, as the "primary and genuine *subjectum*", thus becoming "that being upon which every being, in its way of being and its truth, is founded. Man becomes the referential centre of being as such"[39]. But this is only possible because the being is reduced to representation and the world to picture, to an 'image' of the *ego*. Real (being, true) is now only that which is represented by the *ego*, i.e. by the subject. The *ego cogito*, the only residual certainty after the vertiginous dismantling operation carried out by hyperbolic doubt, becomes the *fundamentum inconcussum veritatis*. Starting from Descartes, the subject (i.e. man) "establishes himself as the measure of all measures with which whatever can count as certain, i.e., true, i.e., in being, is measured off and measured out"[40].

Which "subject" are we talking about here? It seems at first reduced by Descartes to a point-zero (albeit a "firm and immovable" point, as that required by Archimedes to "move the whole earth"[41]). In the extreme *epoché* enacted on the basis of the evil genius hypothesis, everything is suspended, everything that surrounds man and (almost) everything that man himself is – or believes himself to be. The procedure, as I have already said, is vertiginous.

This is how the end of the *First Meditation* sounds: "I will think that the sky, the air, the earth, colours, shapes, sounds, and all external things are no different from the illusions of our dreams […]. I will consider myself as having no hands, no eyes, no flesh, no blood, and no senses"[42]. To be honest, it does not seem that Descartes is here expressing relief at being reduced to a pure *res cogitans*. On the contrary, the chilling feeling caused by this absolute suspension is further amplified at the beginning of the *Second Meditation*: "Yesterday's meditation has plunged me into so many doubts that I still cannot put them out of my mind, nor, on the other hand, can I see any way to resolve them; but, as if I had suddenly slipped into a deep whirlpool, I am in such difficulties that I can neither touch bottom with my foot nor swim back to the surface"[43] (and in fact he has no feet, body, arms or legs left to swim to the surface).

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[39] M. Heidegger, *The Age of the World Picture*, in *Off the Beaten Tracks*, transl. by J. Young and K. Haynes, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2002, pp. 57-85, here pp. 66-67.

[40] *Ibid*., p. 83, note 9.

[41] R. Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy, With Selections from the Objections and Replies*, transl. by M. Moriarty, Oxford University Press, Oxford-New York 2008, p. 17.

[42] *Ibid*., p. 16.

[43] *Ibid*., p. 17.

But for Descartes, actually, what survives the process of doubt is not exactly a point-zero. With a remarkable logical-ontological leap (reproached by Nietzsche, among others), he is very quick to declare that it is a *res cogitans*. I would like to recall Nietzsche's famous criticism of this operation in aphorisms 16 and 17 of *Beyond Good and Evil*:

> There are still harmless self-observers who believe in the existence of "immediate certainties", such as "I think" […]. When I dissect the process expressed in the proposition 'I think', I get a whole set of bold claims that are difficult, perhaps impossible, to establish, – for instance, that *I* am the one who is thinking, that there must be something that is thinking in the first place, that thinking is an activity and the effect of a being who is considered the cause, that there is an 'I', and finally, that it has already been determined what is meant by thinking – that I *know* what thinking is. Because if I had not already made up my mind what thinking is, how could I tell whether what had just happened was not perhaps 'willing' or 'feeling'? Enough: this 'I think' presupposes that I *compare* my present state with other states that I have seen in myself, in order to determine what it is: and because of this retrospective comparison with other types of 'knowing', this present state has absolutely no 'immediate certainty' for me". – In place of this "immediate certainty" which may, in this case, win the faith of the people, the philosopher gets handed a whole assortment of metaphysical questions, genuinely probing intellectual questions of conscience, such as: "Where do I get the concept of thinking from? Why do I believe in causes and effects? What gives me the right to speak about an I, and, for that matter, about an I as cause, and, finally, about an I as the cause of thoughts?" […] It is, therefore, a *falsification* of the facts to say that the subject "I" is the condition of the predicate "think". *It* thinks [es *denkt*]: but to say the "it" is just that famous old "I" – well that is just an assumption or opinion, to put it mildly, and by no means an "immediate certainty"[44].

Descartes states: I think, I am; I know with certainty that I exist, even though all images and things referring to the nature of the body may be nothing more than dreams or chimeras. And – he adds promptly – I also know with certainty that I am a "thinking thing": "But what therefore I am? A thinking thing. What is that? I mean a thing that doubts, that understands, that affirms, that denies, that wishes to do this and does not wish to do that, and also that imagines and perceives by the

[44] F. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, ed. by R.P. Horstmann, transl. by J. Norman, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge-New York 2002, pp. 16-17.

senses [*Sed quid igitur sum? Res cogitans. Quid est hoc? Nempe dubitans, intelligens, affirmans, negans, volens, nolens, imaginans quoque et sentiens*]. Well, indeed, there is quite a lot there, if all these things really do belong to me"[45].

To the nature of the *cogito*, in short, belong "a lot" of things. Nor is it a purely abstract, theoretical subject, since the will is also included in it. And then, of course, Descartes also recovers the rest, the corporeal. The famous image of the pilot and the ship in the *Sixth Meditation* leads one to seriously doubt that one can really speak of a strict Cartesian 'dualism':

> Now there is nothing I am more emphatically taught by this nature of mine than that I have a body, with which there is something wrong when I feel pain, which needs food or drink, when I experience hunger or thirst, and so on and so forth. Hence I cannot doubt that there is some truth in all this. Nature likewise teaches me, through these very feelings of pain, hunger and thirst, and so forth, that I am not present in my body only as a pilot is present in a ship, but that I am very closely conjoined to it and, so to speak, fused with it [*sed illi arctissime esse conjunctum et quasi permixtum*], so as to form a single entity with it. For otherwise, when the body is injured, I, who am nothing other than a thinking thing, would not feel pain as a result, but would perceive the injury purely intellectually, as the pilot perceives by sight any damage occurring to his ship, and when the body lacks food or drink, I would understand this explicitly, instead of having confused feelings of hunger and thirst. For certainly, these feelings of thirst, hunger, pain, and so forth are nothing other than certain confused modes of thinking, arising from the union and, so to speak, fusion [*ab unione et quasi permixtione*] of the mind with the body[46].

We have here neither a purely theoretical subject, nor a dimidiated man, a man who would be split in half. According to Paul Ricoeur (who quotes François Azouvi), on the contrary, Descartes would have been "able to posit a phenomenology of subjective corporeal existence"[47]. But I would like to hazard an even more extreme hypothesis: not only is the *gnóthi seautón* taken up again in Descartes, in ways that are certainly different from the Socratic ones, but perhaps the theme of *epiméleia heautoú* is not absent in him either (although obviously declined in a very different way than in ancient philosophy).

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[45] R. Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, pp. 20-21.

[46] *Ibid*., p. 57.

[47] J.-P. Changeux-P. Ricoeur, *What Makes Us Think?: A Neuroscientist and a Philosopher Argue about Ethics, Human Nature, and the Brain*, transl. by M.B. DeBevoise, Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford 2000, p. 39.

For his *Meditations*, a work which is central to the establishment of his metaphysical system, Descartes chooses a strange title and adopts a strange style, actually referring to a precise philosophical-literary genre. As Pierre Hadot points out: "When Descartes chose to give one of his works the title *Meditations*, he knew perfectly well that the word designated an exercise of the soul within the tradition of ancient spirituality. Each *Meditation* is indeed a spiritual exercise – that is, work by oneself and upon oneself which must be finished before one can move to the next stage"[48].

It might be recalled, for example, how on several occasions Descartes repeats in the *Meditations* that, once the rigorous procedure of doubt has been set in motion (with the radical *epoché* that it entails and demands), one must continually strive not to fall back into the old opinions – or, as Husserl would say, into the natural attitude. I give only one example among many possible:

> I am forced to admit that there is nothing of all those things I once thought true, of which it is not legitimate to doubt […]; and therefore that, from these things as well, no less than from what is blatantly false, I must now carefully withhold my assent if I wish to discover any thing that is certain. But it is not enough to have realized all this, I must take care to remember it: for my accostumed opinions continually creep back into my mind, and take possession of my belief, which has, so to speak, been enslaved to them by long experience and familiarity, for the most part against my will. […] But to carry out this plan requires great effort, and there is a kind of indolence that drags me back to my customary way of life. Just as a prisoner, who was perhaps enjoying an imaginary freedom in his dreams, when he then begins to suspect that he is asleep is afraid of being woken up, and lets himself sink back into his soothing illusions; so I of my own accord slip back into my former opinions, and am scared to awake, for fear that tranquil sleep will give way to laborious hours of waking, which from now on I shall have to spend not in any kind of light, but in the unrelenting darkness of the difficulties just stirred up[49].

Indeed, many years before branding the "Cartesian moment" so negatively, Foucault himself had dwelt in precisely the same vein on this singular choice of title by Descartes. Disputing with Derrida about the interpretation of Descartes delivered in *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique*, he wrote: "We must keep in mind the very title of 'meditations'". Distinguishing between "demonstration" and "meditation",

[48] P. Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, transl. by M. Chase, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge (Mass.)-London 2002, p. 264.

[49] R. Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, pp. 16-17.

he said that the utterances (the "discursive events") that make up any discourse appear in the case of the demonstration "as a series of events linked one to another according to a certain number of formal rules; as for the subject of the discourse, he is not implicated in the demonstration – he remains, in relation to it, fixed, invariable and as if neutralized"[50]. In the case of "meditation", on the contrary, the utterances produced lead to a series of modifications of the subject of the discourse:

> through what is said in meditation, the subject passes from darkness to light, from impurity to purity, from the constraint of passions to detachment, from uncertainty and disordered movements to the serenity of wisdom, and so on. In meditation, the subject is ceaselessly altered by his own movement; his discourse provokes effects within which he is caught; it exposes him to risks, makes him pass through trials or temptations, produced states in him, and confers on him a status or qualification he did not hold at the initial moment. In short, meditation implies a mobile subject modifiable through the effect of the discursive events that take place[51].

Descartes' text should therefore be seen as a "demonstrative meditation", i.e. as

> a set of discursive events which constitute at once groups of utterances linked one to another by formal rules of deduction, and series of modifications of the enunciating subject which follow continuously one from another. More precisely, in a demonstrative meditation the utterances, which are formally linked, modify the subject as they develop, liberating him from his convictions or on the contrary inducing systematic doubts, provoking illuminations or resolutions, freeing him from his attachments or immediate certainties, including new states. But, inversely, the decisions, fluctuations, displacements, primary or acquired qualifications of the subject make sets of new utterances possible, which are in their turn deduced regularly one from another. The *Meditations* require this double reading: a set of propositions forming a *system*, which each reader must follow through if he wishes to feel their truth, and a set of modifications forming an *exercise*, which each reader must effect, by which each reader must be affected, if he in turn wants to be the subject enunciating this truth on his own behalf[52].

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[50] M. Foucault, *My Body, This Paper, This Fire*, transl. by G. Bennington, in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, ed. by J.D. Faubion, transl. by R. Hurley *et al*., *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, Vol. II, The New Press, New York 1998, pp. 393-417, here p. 405.

[51] *Ibid*., p. 406.

[52] *Ibid*.

But Descartes did not only write the *Meditations*, but also *The Passions of the Soul*, which is the central text not only for understanding how he seeks to investigate the subject as an inseparable union of soul and body, but also for understanding how he explores – certainly in his own way – the sphere designated by Foucault as that of "spirituality".

In such a perspective, this work should be read by dwelling precisely on the points where Descartes reflects on its fundamental purpose, which is that of self-government, of the search (à la Seneca) for a blissful life (*vita beata*)[53]. Descartes deals here – although he declares that he does not wish to do so either from a rhetorical point of view or as a moral philosopher, but only "en Physicien" – with the relationship between the subject and its passions; but the purpose of investigating passions, which involves a clash with their immediate opacity to philosophical inquiry, reveals his profound involvement with the "pathic universe", with its characteristics, its modes of action, and its effects on moral life.

How should the human subject behave in the face of the forces of Fortune or Chance, which are beyond his control? How is it possible to come to terms with one's passions, to face and dominate them – as far as possible – in order to achieve a balance, on which alone "all the good and evil of this life depends", as the title of the last article of the *Passions* states? Descartes writes here: "Now the soul may have her delights by herself, but for those which are common to her with the body, they absolutely depend on the passions, so that those men whom they move most may be apt to taste most sweetness in this life"[54]. Also in the letter of 1 November 1646 to Chanut he says that the only reason why our soul wants to remain united to the body is that it is only in this way that it can experience the passions. It is true that our passions can bring us the greatest bitterness, if we do not use them properly; but "wisdom is herein especially requisite, that it teaches us so to make ourselves master of them, and manage them with so much dexterity, that the evils they cause may be easily endured, and we may even extract joy from them all"[55].

How is it possible, however, to make oneself master of one's passions? "*Passions* of the soul" evidently means that with regard to them, the soul is in a condition of passivity, in which the role of the will is excluded (we do not choose to fall in love, we do not decide to be afraid, to despair; the passions invest us, they overwhelm us, whether we want them to or not).

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[53] On this regard see also *The Correspondence between Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia and René Descartes*, ed. and transl. by L. Shapiro, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London 2007.

[54] R. Descartes, *Passions of the Soul*, https://TheVirtualLibrary.org, 212th Art.

[55] *Ibid*., 212th Art.

In short: in Descartes' mechanistic interpretation, the passions depend exclusively on the body, being "caused, fomented, and fortified by some motion of the [animal] spirits"[56] (an obscure notion that dates back to Galen but is still to be found in the medical treatises of the modern age[57]); these purely mechanical motions of the animal spirits ("these very subtle parts of the blood" which are "begotten in the brain"[58]) are then transmitted to the soul by the pineal gland. What power does the soul have over its own passions[59]? An only *indirect* power[60], which is exercised through "industry" and "habit", a term that should be understood in a double sense[61].

Already in the *Meditations*, speaking of the difficulty of maintaining, so to say, a rigorous attitude of *epoché*, Descartes had mentioned the possibility of erasing "the lifelong habit of confusing the things of the intellect with those of the body"[62] by means of a *contrary habit* acquired through the *exercise*: the old theme of *askesis* returns here, albeit in radically changed terms. Similarly, in the *Passions* he states that there is no soul so weak that it cannot, if well managed, acquire power over its own passions:

> Although every motion of the kernel [the pineal gland] seems to have been joined by nature to each of our thoughts even from the beginning of our life, they may yet be annexed to others by habits […]. Although the motions, as well of the kernel as the [animal] spirits and brain, which represent certain objects to the soul, be naturally joined with those that excite certain passions in her, yet they may by habit be separated, and annexed to others very different[63].

Even animals ("beasts"), though "they have no reason, nor it may be any thought", can be trained to perform actions far removed from what would be natural to them (he gives the example of hunting dogs). One must therefore have the "courage" to apply oneself to regulate one's passions: "For since with a little art the motions of the brain in beasts who are void of reason may be altered, it is evident they may

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[56] *Ibid*., 27th Art.

[57] Cf. M. Foucault, *History of Madness*, ed. by J. Khalfa, transl. by J. Murphy and J. Khalfa, Routledge, London and New York 2006, Part Two, Chapter II: "The transcendence of delirium".

[58] R. Descartes, *Passions of the Soul*, 10th Art.

[59] See *ibid*., 41st and 45th Art.

[60] See *ibid*., 45th Art.

[61] See *ibid*., 44th Art.

[62] R. Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy (The Objections and Replies)*, p. 88.

[63] R. Descartes, *Passions of the Soul*, 50th Art.

more easily in men and that even those who have the weakest souls, may acquire an […] empire over all their passions, if art and industry be used to manage and govern them"[64].

The habit, connected with exercise ("art and industry"), thus appears as an instrument of power of the soul, replacing the will that cannot act on the passions. The habit, which arises by association[65], can be changed by establishing a different association: through commitment and a long exercise it can be replaced by a contrary habit. Descartes suggests here, therefore, the possibility of educating and correcting the passions[66] – although always within certain limits, since it must always be remembered that the soul[67] can never entirely dispose of its passions.

In conclusion: is it really true, then, that in modern philosophy the link between knowledge and spirituality has been definitively severed, as Foucault suggests[68]? It would rather seem that especially in his last work, *The Passions of the Soul*, Descartes has in mind a subject that can and must be modified, transformed, in its constitutive relationship with a truth that is other – but just as real and important for us, as the *most* important – than the purely theoretical-gnoseological one: namely the *existential* truth of the universe of passions, on which, as I would like to repeat once more, "all the good and evil of this life depends".

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[64] *Ibid*.

[65] See *ibid*., 42nd Art.

[66] See *ibid*., 211th Art.

[67] See *ibid*., 46th Art.

[68] He himself, actually, expresses *en passant* some doubts in this respect, at least with regard to a part of 19th century philosophy (Hegel, Schelling, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche) and some 20th century philosophers (the late Husserl, Heidegger): see M. Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, p. 28.

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