Crisis and Transition: The Late Foucault and the Vocation of Philosophy

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**Abstract**

The work of the late Foucault, especially the turn to the care of the self and the problem of subjectivity, has often been regarded as a narcissistic withdrawal from politics. Instead, this essay argues that such a charge ignores how Foucault was responding to arguments highly-critical of individualism developed in the late 1970s, especially Christopher Lasch’s *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979). Not only was Foucault concerned with rehabilitating a notion of individualism, his historical reconstruction of the care of the self emphasized that this philosophical practice was not a withdrawal from public space but a new way of conceiving ethics and politics. Focusing on the issues of crisis and transition this essay reconstructs Foucault’s historical reflections on Greek and Roman practices of the care of the self as mediated responses to the crisis of politics in the late 1970s and as re-conceptualizations of the practice of philosophy. In particular, Foucault’s late work is read as the attempt to reconstruct or construct a sense of the vocation of philosophy. The philosophical vocation developed by Foucault is one concerned with the intensification of experience within the subject conceived of as the possibility for a new engagement with the world.

**Keywords** Foucault, subjectivity, philosophy, vocation

**Contributor’s Note**

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To write a book is in a certain way to abolish the preceding one. Finally one perceives that what one has done is – both comfort and deception – rather close to what one has already written.

–Michel Foucault, *Foucault Live (Interviews, 1966–84)* (1989: 303)

The late work of Foucault – focused on a turn to the subject, a consideration of ethics, and the analysis of the care of the self – is often seen as a rupture with the concern with power and subjection in the works of the 1970s. There seems to be a withdrawal from politics and the radicalism articulated around *Discipline and Punish* (1975), which Maurice Blanchot (1987: 83) argued was the moment of “the emergence of the political in the work and life of Foucault”. Turning away from the project announced in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* it would now appear that Foucault had retreated from politics and the collective, towards the individual and philosophy. Blanchot (1987: 108) remarked on the new calm style Foucault had adopted in the later volumes of *The History of Sexuality*, and that these volumes seemed to be the work of “a studious historian”. In fact, the situation is much more complex. First, the rupture from Foucault’s previous work is not as obvious as often stated and, second, the late historical work on the care of the self explicitly argues that such care was not simply a withdrawal from politics. To bring this complexity into focus we can assess Foucault’s discussion of the care of the self around the problems of crisis and transition. These problems not only emerge in the historical material Foucault studies, but also resonate in the context in which Foucault is writing. There is an overlapping of crises between the Roman Empire and the late 1970s and early 1980s, and the issue of transition poses the relation between these two moments and the explicit turn to philosophy as a practice in the late Foucault.

The relation of Foucault’s project of the care of the self to its context of writing is, I have suggested, complex. That complexity includes a reconsideration of the subject, the individual, and the stakes of a politics that would return to the subject. The turn to the care of the self is partly dictated by Foucault’s reading of Christopher Lasch’s *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979) (Martin et al, 1988: 4). Against Lasch’s negative portrayal of concern with the self in modernity as an inward-turning political pathology, Foucault was interested in the positive possibilities of a care of the self that could not be reduced to narcissism. It is noteworthy that Lasch’s diagnosis returned in our age of social media and a politics dominated by liberal and reactionary tendencies (Endnotes 2021). It is also noteworthy as Lasch’s analysis, with its stress on the necessity for paternal authority as a bulwark against narcissism, has been an influence on currents of the reactionary alt-right. Lasch’s work, including his later *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and its Critics* (1991) and *The Revolt of the Elites: And the Betrayal of Democracy* (1994), articulated a populism against what has become known as the postmodern managerial class. This analysis, transmitted by the journal *Telos*, would prove influential on contemporary iterations of radical populism that shear it of the left-wing notes that Lasch gave it (Gottfried 2009). Therefore, in a speculative manner, to return to the late Foucault on the care of the self and is to return to a dispute with authoritarian and populist notions of the civic and communal that continue to shape the present. Lasch’s violent critique of liberalism resonates in the contemporary landscape, while Foucault’s concern for the self might seem anachronistic or even narcissistic. The question of a withdrawal from politics by Foucault is, however, one of a revaluation of the politics of subjectivity and one carried out against invocations of the authoritarian family or authentic communal structures. This is not to absolve Foucault from the political tensions that mark this project of the care of the self, but it is to suggest that such tensions remain present to us.

Of course, as Foucault regularly stated, the transition to the project of the care of the self also emerged out the impasses of the previous project announced with the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*. According to the back cover of that volume there would be five forthcoming studies: volume two, *Flesh and the Body*, on the early Christian problematization of sex; volume three, *The Children’s Crusade*, focused on the sexuality of children; volume four, *Women, Mother, Hysteric*, on the investment of sexuality in the female body; and volume five, *Population and Races*, examining these concepts in light of biopolitics (Davidson 2003: 125). Certainly, volumes three and four were already prefigured in *The History of Sexuality Volume One*:

Four figures emerged from this preoccupation with sex, which mounted throughout the nineteenth century-four privileged objects of knowledge, which were also targets and anchorage points for the ventures of knowledge: the hysterical woman, the masturbating child, the Malthusian couple, and the perverse adult. Each of them corresponded to one of these strategies which, each in its own way, invested and made use of the sex of women, children, and men. (Foucault 1978: 105)

In retrospect, however, Foucault (1989: 293) declared that “I had begun to write two books in accordance with my original plan; but very quickly I got bored.” The volume on Christianity and sexuality would become the fourth volume, *Confessions of the Flesh*, but the other volumes took a new direction. For Foucault (1989: 310) this boredom resulted in a fundamental shift in the discussion of sexuality from the tensions of knowledge and power into “how the experience of sexuality as desire had been constituted for the subject”.

This boredom also resulted in a change in style, in which Foucault (1989: 317) shifted towards what he called “a history of the subject”. So, we have a reconfiguration of the form of the study, the style, and also the object of study. What started to emerge out of the project on sexuality was the study of the care of the self and a turn towards the problem of the subject and the individual. Instead of the encounter with the institution, which had preoccupied Foucault’s previous studies, now Foucault was concerned with a time, Greek and Roman culture during the first three centuries of the common era, in which the relation of the self to the self was of concern. While Foucault (1989: 296) was insistent on the continuity with his previous studies, as explorations of the problematization of an area of life, he also noted a difference in perspective, starting “from the problem that sexual conduct could pose to individual’s themselves”. For Foucault (1989: 302), this resonated with the context of the 1970s, in which the lifting of sexual prohibitions had revealed that capitalism can get along well without those prohibitions and that this posed a crisis for the subject: “And so the problem of an ethics as a form to be given to one’s conduct and to one’s life has again been raised.” The return to the care of the self was a return to the problem of the individual in relation to their context, but it did not abandon social and political experience. Instead of going from the social and political context to the experience of the self, as Foucault had in his previous studies, now the experience of the self would be primary before showing “how the government of self is integrated with government of others” (Foucault 1989: 296). The problem of the collective did not disappear, but was displaced in the sense that, as we will see, the care of the self is an ethics that emerges out of a crisis in terms of the relation of the subject to power, politics, and the collective.

What is less evident are the political stakes of this transition. Foucault had always insisted that his historical or genealogical studies constituted a history of the present. In fact, contemporary interviewers would regularly press Foucault on the point of the implications of the turn to the care of the self for current political understanding. Foucault would often be reticent or certainly cautious on the stakes of this transition. We have already seen how Foucault invokes the crisis of a project of liberation in which the success of that project has not led to a further radical crisis. In that context Foucault suggests that the ethics of the care of the self is not only an historical problem but one that recurs in the development of an ethics in the wake of the lifting of prohibitions. In an interview published in May 1984 Foucault (1989: 303) is asked “Have you written these books for the liberation movements?” and replies “Not *for*, but as a function of the situation today.” This is to focus on sexuality, but there are other considerations as well. One of the most interesting remarks is that by the interviewer Alessandro Fontana, a collaborator with Foucault on *I, Pierre Rivière* (1975) (Macey 2019: 248), and later editor, with François Ewald, of Foucault’s seminars. In another interview from 1984 Fontana notes that Foucault’s seminar on biopolitics, which discussed Hayek and Von Mises, suggested that “liberalism thus seemed to be a detour taken to discover the individual beyond the mechanisms of power” (in Foucault 1989: 312). Fontana pointed out that Foucault’s shift to the subject of practices, against the phenomenological or psychological subject, was also part of this re-reading of liberalism. Unfortunately, Foucault’s answer to Fontana does not address the problem of liberalism or how liberalism problematizes the subject. The problem of liberalism is left hanging.

The seminar on biopolitics, carried out between 1978 and 1979, is a seminar devoted to the emergence of this form of neo-liberalism and, in particular, to its concern with a particular mode of subjectivity: “*Homo oeconomicus* is an entrepreneur, an entrepreneur of himself.” (Foucault 2008: 226) This text is not only striking for its prescience concerning neo-liberalism as a particular mode of life, but also due to the methodological proximities between Foucault and the neo-liberal analysis of life. Foucault’s insistence on the plurality of the state, of institutional forms, and on the diverse institutional forms of capitalism (Foucault 2008: 165), is similar to the claims of neo-liberal thinkers. Neo-liberalism denied there was a singular capitalism and aimed at developing new institutional frameworks for capitalism, inventing a new form of capitalism oriented around human capital and entrepreneurialism. This was what Foucault would call a new mode of governmentality, distinct from post-war social democracy and from the existing liberal paradigm. So, while not pursuing this question in depth at this point, we can note a certain nominalization, a focus on diversity and plurality, a stress on mutating juridical and institutional forms, that seem shared across this analysis between Foucault and neo-liberalism. Foucault’s own neutrality of presentation, in which the claims of neo-liberalism are elucidated in great detail and without clear positioning on Foucault’s part is no doubt provocative. We remain with the question that ends Foucault’s (1998: 222) discussion of authorship: “what difference does it make who is speaking?”.

We can, of course, insist that it makes a great deal of difference who is speaking. Is Foucault endorsing or merely describing the nature of neo-liberalism?[[1]](#endnote-1) Instead, however, I wish to pursue the missing answer from Foucault and this element of context through Foucault’s discussions of the care of the self. Certainly, there is a provocative parallel between this discussion and Foucault’s discussion of neo-liberalism. Foucault suggests (1988a: 2) that the space of the care of the self is one that has a degree of autonomy: “In Greek and Roman civilizations these practices of the self had a much greater importance and autonomy than later on, when they were laid siege to, up to a certain point, by institutions: religious, pedagogical, or of the medical and psychiatric kind.” This autonomy of an “aesthetics of existence” (Foucault 1989: 309–316), a very Nietzschean framing (Nietzsche 2008a, Nehamas 1985), is uncannily echoed in advance by the description of the ideal of neo-liberalism: “a society in which there is an optimization of systems of difference, in which the field is left open to fluctuating processes, in which minority individuals and practices are tolerated, in which action is brought to bear on the rules of the game rather than on the players, and finally in which there is an environmental type of intervention instead of the internal subjugation of individuals” (Foucault 2008: 259–60). This is the description of an ideal and not the reality of neo-liberalism. The suggestion is not that neo-liberalism has realized some iteration of these past practices, and Foucault (1989: 323) is insistent in the relation of contemporary morality and that of Greek antiquity that “it’s the proximity and difference that we must bring to light”. This leaves the question open, in terms of whether we stress proximity or difference, but without wanting to collapse these moments into an identity difficult questions remain for considering the political technologies of the care of the self. My suggestion is that the ethics of the care of the self as a political technology articulates the subject, sexuality, politics, and philosophy together as particular practices of the intensification of relations.

These political technologies were developed by Foucault through close historical analyses of Greek, Roman, and early Christian texts. We are in a situation in which Foucault traces and reconstructs texts and it is difficult and perhaps beside the point to insistently demand we clarify who is speaking. That is not to evade the kinds of critical questions and problems that emerge from these texts, which cannot simply be consigned to the historical past or the work of the historian. This is particularly due to the fact that these texts on the care of the self are often reconstructions of philosophical texts and, in particular, a reconstruction of philosophy as care of the self. While the dispute between Foucault and Derrida had been about, in part, the status of reading philosophy historically, in which Foucault took the side of historical reading, this does not necessarily exhaust philosophy.[[2]](#endnote-2) In fact, we might take Derrida’s (1978: 60) point that the “historicity proper to philosophy is located and constituted in the transition, the dialogue between hyperbole and the finite structure, between that which exceeds the totality and the closed totality, in the difference between history and historicity”. What Derrida is suggesting is a thinking of philosophy as transition, located, partially, in the moment in which history is exceeded by a thinking of historicity. In posing this mode of understanding Derrida allows us to return to Foucault’s reconstruction as not simply an historical account, but also a posing of certain mode of philosophy and a certain thinking of philosophy as a way of life. Re-reading Foucault in light of a thinking of philosophy as the thinking of transition will allow us to think philosophy as a vocation.

Foucault’s own consideration of philosophy, defined as a daily practice of care of the self, is not just a return to a past philosophy, but a questioning of philosophy that opens that history to a transition to the present. While Foucault (1977: 139–64) is insistent on the Nietzschean mode of his thinking as radical historicization, in Nietzsche, as in Foucault, this historicization is also a matter of a transition that opens philosophy as a discourse for thinking history. Discussing his previous work, Foucault (1989: 318) noted that what “some will see as … radical non-philosophy, is at the same time a way of thinking more radically the philosophical experience”. The same holds true for the project of the care of the self, perhaps even more so as what is attempted there is an historicization of philosophical experience itself. This is not simply a non-philosophy that replaces philosophy with genealogy, but also a radical thinking of the philosophical experience as one marked by its historicity at its core. In this way the question emerges of philosophy as a type of practice and the relation and transition between that practice across historical instances.

Therefore, I return to Foucault’s analysis at a certain distance to those texts as an historical account of certain practices ascribed to philosophy. Already, I want to displace the question of historical accuracy, which is not an insignificant question by any means, for a consideration of the thinking of philosophy as a kind of transition. To do that I return to the descriptions and analysis of the care of the self, especially as it is exemplified in philosophy. In its broadest sense Foucault (1988b: 238–9) describes the care of the self as: “the development of an art of existence that revolves around the question of the self, of its dependence and independence, of its universal form and of the connection it can and should establish with others, of the procedures by which it exerts control over itself, and of the way in which it can establish a complete supremacy over itself”. As we can see the care of the self as object of analysis involved a return to the self, the individual, and the subject. If Foucault (1970: 387) had been associated with the dissolution of the concept “man”,[[3]](#endnote-3) and associated with the pluralization and multiplication of the subject in relations of power and resistance, now his concern seemed to be with the relation of the subject to itself. This was the shift that would come to characterize the late Foucault, but it requires a closer reading to engage with what exactly the care of the self is composed of.

This activity of care of the self involved a whole series of relations and practices that would organize the activities of those engaged with this self care. This included finding time for various exercises to engage in such care, such as reading, writing letters, or taking time to meditate or contemplate maxims and advice. In fact, “Around the care of the self, there developed an entire activity of speaking and writing in which the work of oneself on oneself and communication with others were linked together.” (Foucault 1988b 51) For this reason, and others, the work of the care of the self “constituted, not an exercise in solitude, but a true social existence” (Foucault 1988b: 51). These relations with others did not only include schools, institutional arrangements, and the activities of professional advisers, but also more informal arrangements through kinship, friendship, and social contacts. To seek out advice for the care of the self was central to that care, as was the duty to give such advice for those who had further mastered such care. The result was that the attention of the individual to their own self was far from the kind of narcissistic withdrawal from the communal and the common that Lasch had bemoaned. Instead, for Foucault (1988b: 53), there was another possibility in the relation of the self to the self: “The care of the self – or the attention one devotes to the care that others should take of themselves – appears then as an intensification of social relations.” The care of the self was not a turning away from social relations, but a consideration of them, a bringing of them into a relation to the self, and an intensification of those relations with others precisely through a work on the self.

What was this work? Foucault had stressed how this work involved a whole range of institutional and social forms. He also stressed how this relation of writing was both internal, as a kind of auditing of the self, but also external, as a communication to others (Foucault 1989: 322). We might remark here on the importance of the letter, evident in Seneca (2004), as a mode of communication that is both private and public in an indissociable fashion (Derrida 1987). In a similar fashion, the diary also seems to be a privileged writing device for self care. Foucault (1988b: 68) notes that the care of the self involves a constant recourse to tests or examinations, such as restricting the diet to simulate poverty, or analysis of modes of thought, of which writing functions as recording and assessment technology: “The task of testing oneself, examining oneself, monitoring oneself in a series of clearly defined exercises, makes the question of truth – the truth concerning what one is, what one does, and what one is capable of doing – central to the formation of the ethical subject.” This is, however, a particular mode of knowledge and relation of the self to truth. Foucault (1988b: 64) is keen to emphasize this is a practice of assessing the truth of representations that is geared to freedom, distinct from a later Christian concern with the “deep origin of the idea”. In Christianity the care of the self will become “a hermeneutic of self and a deciphering of self as subject of desire” (Foucault 1989: 299; Foucault 2005). Therefore, this particular form of care of the self is, according to Foucault, not one attending to the depth of the soul but to assessment of representations and engagement with the world.

This relation to the self is also a relation to pleasure. If Foucault emphasizes that the mode of truth is not one concerned with the depths of the soul he is also concerned to point out the relation to pleasure is not simply negative. Certainly, the practice of care of the self is a mode of asceticism, this is the focus of Foucault’s interest, but it is an asceticism that is not antithetical to pleasure. If we encounter in the care of the self a mode of linking truth to freedom, allowing an assessment of representations by the self that is dependent on free and rational choice (Foucault 1988b: 64), then the care of the self is also linked to a mode of pleasure. This is a pleasure “defined as a concrete relationship enabling one to delight in oneself, as in a thing one both possesses and has before one’s eyes” (Foucault 1988b: 65). Once again, Foucault is insistent that pleasure is not derived from transgression and law, the relation to an institution, but to the relationship with the self and to the assessment of that relationship.

It is Foucault’s contention that these emergent practices of the care of the self relate to an historical space of increasing complexity and tension. They do not simply indicate a withdrawal into private life or correspond to the common image of a decline in politics with the decline of the power of the city-states starting in the third century of the common era (Foucault 1998b: 81). Foucault, as usual in his historical reconstructions, is concerned to emphasize shifting modes of complexity rather than any simplification or decline. Instead, the political space: “was a space in which the centers of power were multiple; in which the activities, the tensions, the conflicts were numerous; in which they developed in several dimensions; and in which the equilibria were obtained through a variety of transactions” (Foucault 1988b: 82–3). Far from being a withdrawal from politics, the care of the self, according to Foucault, is a complex practice that evolves to engage with the complexity of this political space. It is shifting power relations and more requirements for reciprocity that transform the mastery of the self into a series of negotiations and reflections, in the marriage relation, and in this newly emergent political space. While withdrawal is a theme, and politics is seen as something that can be chosen rather than as a result of a certain social position, as a vocation in Weber’s sense (2000: 45–115), the result is that politics itself becomes a more complex social field.

In all this, the care of the self forms an ethics devoted to managing this complexity and intensification of relations that pass through the self. It is not simply a matter of internalizing such relations, but working on them, forming and reforming them through an activity directed towards the self. As a result: “Anyone who exercises power has to place himself in a field of complex relations where he occupies a transition point.” (Foucault 1988b: 88) We have already, citing Derrida, suggested a thinking of philosophy as transition in relation to history and historicity. Here, again, we can see the notion of transition emerging as the management of a set of complex relations that does not fall into traditional bounds or boundaries. The self that is cared for becomes a transition point. We can suggest, as Foucault (1988b: 95) does, that this is the result of a particular kind of crisis: “We need instead to think in terms of a crisis of the subject, or rather a crisis of subjectivation – that is, in terms of a difficulty in the manner in which the individual could form himself as the ethical subject of his actions, and efforts to find in devotion to self that which could enable him to submit to rules and give a purpose to his existence.” The crisis of the usual forms of identification and exercise of power generates a new demand to care of the self and to use the self as a transition point in which to assess, interrogate, and analyze representations and relations. While this certainly suggests a re-evaluation of the subject and individualism, it does not suggest an abandonment of the social or political for a narcissistic withdrawal.

This is Foucault’s wager. Drawing on the work of Max Weber (Foucault 1988a: 2), we could say that Foucault is rethinking the problem of asceticism and vocation as an activity of the care of the self. In this process of rethinking, which is always highly-focused on this historical moment and reluctant to draw out further lessons, the problems of crisis and transition suggest the uncertain nature of this delimitation of the care of the self. It also suggests a caution on Foucault’s part, perhaps as a result of the rapidity with which his previous histories of the present had been given contemporary political valence. This was, of course, also true of Foucault, who had constantly stressed this relation to the present while often remaining agnostic or reserved on the implications of that relation. In fact, we could say this is part of Foucault’s own ethics of resistance, which always preferred to trace out the mechanisms of power, to map the present, rather than lay out forms of resistance that would then become vulnerable to the shifting modes of power. This was certainly true of that mode of life or care of the self that Foucault (1977: 205–17) had named the “specific intellectual”, which was one attempt to give a sense of another seeming withdrawal from politics and political statement that was not, for Foucault, to be taken as a withdrawal. What remained was the role of the intellectual as one of problematization: “The work of modifying one’s own thought and that of others seems to me to be the intellectual’s reason for being.” (Foucault 1989: 303) In that sense, the role of the intellectual is not only an examination of the care for the self as a practice of modification, but itself an instance of this practice as a mode of modification.

This complex series of questions and problems, which had condensed in the crisis of the subject and subjectivation that formed in the period of the 1970s, were far from being resolved. The context of the 1970s, in which a waning of particular modes of insurgent politics was accompanied by the attempts at new forms of socialist governmentality and, of course, the challenge of a new neo-liberal mode of governmentality, made for a crisis in which Foucault’s work circulated. That crisis, its multiplicity, and the demand for ethical modes of subjectivity, would all resonate in the writing of the late Foucault. It would, however, be too simple, to read crisis and transition in the Stoics and other Greco-Roman texts, as Foucault’s displacement of the crisis and transition of the 1970s. If there is not a displacement it is impossible not to think there is some relation, which is precisely what we have tracked through transition between a description of philosophy as an historical practice and philosophy as such, as a thinking through of modes of subjectivity and subjectivation, to use Foucault’s language, that precisely do not settle in historical classifications. The Nietzschean demand for an historical sense in philosophy, and Foucault (1989: 327) remains insistent “I am simply a Nietzschean”,[[4]](#endnote-4) does not close the relation to the present. The appearance of these books as works of the historian does not simply remove us from the problem of philosophy, not least because these are, in part, histories of philosophies. Nietzschean genealogy, if it is anything, is precisely an interested history geared to the present. Therefore, that question of how these studies of the care of the self might appear as a function of the situation today remains crucial. This involves the clarification of the status of philosophy in these studies and of the relation of the form of philosophy to the problems of crisis and transition.

What then is the practice of philosophy as a practice of care of the self? What is the transition from the historical description of crisis to the present moment of crisis? To this could also be added to problems of crisis and transition now, after Foucault’s own moment, and the resonances that remain. Foucault is highly critical of a notion, which we could associate with Nietzsche but more especially Heidegger, that philosophy departed from a key concept and must return to it to save itself: “Nothing is more foreign to me than the idea that philosophy strayed at a certain moment of time, and that is has forgotten something and that somewhere in history there exists a principle, a basis that must be rediscovered.” (Foucault 1988a: 14) Unlike Nietzsche’s (2008a) turn to the Dionysiac power of Attic tragedy against Socratic rationalism, or the Heideggerian (1987: 125) turn to the pre-Socratics, Foucault claims that the turn to the care of the self is not a turn to where philosophy went wrong. That said, we might be skeptical and certainly see a certain measure of nostalgia at work. Blanchot (1987: 86), discussing *Discipline and Punish*, remarked that “one suspects somehow that Foucault would prefer the openly barbarous times when torture hid nothing of its horror”. Blanchot (1987: 107) also remarks, in light of the project of the care of the self, of “the temptation we all entertain of returning to sources”. We may suspect that Foucault prefers the practice of care of the self which, according to Foucault, existed at some distance from institutions, from problems of law and prohibition, and from the hermeneutics of depth. What Foucault rediscovers in the Greeks, as Blanchot (1987: 109) indicates, is that life as work of art that so fascinated Nietzsche, as well as a particular politics of friendship.

We should not dismiss this possibility of nostalgia, which functions as a kind of connection or relation between Foucault and his present. There is something in common, something posed by philosophy, exactly as something that is not saturated by its historical moment. Despite the equivocations of Foucault on this point, or because of them, we do not want to treat the project of the care of the self as the return to or recovery of some pristine moment before the fall into Christian hermeneutics (Foucault 1989: 311). Despite all the caveats and warnings, the epochal tone one finds in Nietzsche and Heidegger, in which crisis becomes a matter of civilization and Christian civilization is easily read between the lines of Foucault’s text. This is the reading I want to resist. Instead, the mapping of crisis between these moments might be treated as moments of a common problematization, to use a favorite word of Foucault’s (1989: 295). The resonances that seem to indicate a transition in relation to crisis for Foucault (1988a: 10) are the resonances of the care of the self as that “which would allow these games of power to be played with a minimum of domination”. Foucault, in interviews, distinguishes between the possibilities of the care of the self as a game with truth and power from those congealed states of domination in which such games have been frozen into institutions and laws. In this sense, although posed with a high degree of reticence, we can see the suggestion that a practice of philosophy as a practice of care of the self is a practice on the self that aims at freedom and liberty. Rather than a process of liberation, to which Foucault remains skeptical, we have practices of freedom and liberty that work upon the self and others. These are practices that are responses to a weakening or crisis of vocation and institutional forms (Agamben 2000: 20–33). This weakening has not, however, in Foucault’s moment and ours necessarily produced liberty or liberation, but rather a complex field of relations that the subject must negotiate.

This turn to the vocation of philosophy obviously echoes Weber’s (2020) analysis of the vocations of scholarship and politics. If we were to accuse Foucault of depoliticization by turning to philosophy instead of politics then we should remind ourselves that in his discussion of the vocation of politics Weber (2020: 97) stressed that while politics was a vocation driven by passion and engagement it also required “a certain distance”. Foucault’s withdrawal into philosophy is not simply an abandonment of politics. Instead, with Weber (2020: 97), we can stress that the vocation of politics is one that must mediate passion and detachment, and the politician must overcome the threats of vanity and irresponsibility. This is not to suggest that we collapse together philosophy and politics and read the late Foucault’s concern with the vocation of philosophy as simply a disguised or sublimated expression of the desire to do politics. It is also not simply that in the face of the demand for politics or the complex situation of the waning of left politics during the later 1970s and early1980s that Foucault replaces the difficulty of continuing to practice politics with a turn to philosophical ethics.[[5]](#endnote-5) Instead, as I have suggested, the reading proposed here is that this not to be seen as a withdrawal but as a new mode of the practice of philosophy that could also be considered as an intensification of the political and ethical through this practice of interiorization and consideration in the relation to the self and to others through the technologies of the self and of governmentality. What philosophy poses, or philosophy considered as this type of vocation poses, is the question of the governance of the self and others. In this way such a vocation only apparently turns away from the world, or turns away from the world in certain of its forms, to undertake this practice.

Such a vocation and practice of philosophy is also, as Foucault stresses (1988b: 99–104), intimately linked to the medical, the bodily, and so remains within the ambit of what Foucault had called biopolitics. Blanchot (1987: 108) indicates the biographical pathos of this turn to philosophy as a medical practice of the self in the face of Foucault’s experience of “a strong body that stops being so, a serious illness that he barely anticipated, ultimately the approach of death that opened him up not to anguish but to a new and surprising serenity”. This is not to reduce that moment to personal experience, a category Foucault always maintained a deep suspicion for, and this is not Blanchot’s intention. Instead, we might say that the consideration of philosophy as a vocation of the care of the self resonates with a physical and bodily practice that is one of care and intensification, one that remains as a distance from the law and desire, but one that insists on the bodily form of philosophy as a mode of subjectivation.

Foucault’s sketch of the philosophical vocation may seem to remain in the Nietzschean ambit he claimed. This vocation is presented as an aesthetics of existence, as an aesthetic working on the self, in consonance with Nietzsche’s (2008a) aesthetic justification of existence. It also shares with Nietzsche (2008b) the emphasis of a physiological and medial diagnostic as the model for the philosophical relation to the self and to the other. Finally, it also inhabits Nietzsche’s (2008b) hostility to Christianity as a hermeneutics of depth and as a style of self-creation that deepens the sense of interiority. This identification with Nietzsche is reinforced by the reference to Weber, who also treated the problem of vocation in a Nietzschean style, as a matter of choice within a realm of fundamentally equivalent values. The Nietzschean identification is also, of course, consonant with Foucault’s own self-description of his project. In this case, the model of the vocation of philosophy becomes one dependent on a “pathos of distance” (Nietzsche 2008b: 12), either in the form of Nietzsche’s aristocratic radicalism (Losurdo 2020) or Weber’s Nietzschean liberalism. While modifying Nietzsche in significant ways, such a presentation of the vocation of philosophy remains vulnerable, not so much to charges of depoliticization, as are commonplace, but rather to a politicization that inhabits an aristocratic distance and remains hostile to fundamental elements of the project of mass liberation.

In contrast, and in conclusion, I wish to emphasize the Stoic dimension of Foucault’s thinking of the vocation of philosophy against these Nietzschean elements. In the strange transitional and hybrid form of the philosophical vocation that Foucault constructs we can note that the withdrawal from relations is a withdrawal into a process by which external representations are tested and assessed. The practices of the care of the self are practices that take these representations from outside and subject them to rational testing through the assessment by the various technologies of the self we have traced. Crucial instances of such technologies of the self are friendship, the relation to an interlocutor, whether philosophical guide or the one being guided, and the deployment of technologies of writing. Certainly, such friendship is based on a masculine model and Foucault does little to develop or question this aspect in regard to gender.[[6]](#endnote-6) It is also, however, a relation that is not simple aesthetic, in the Nietzschean sense, but social and political in a new fashion. What is also true is that the care of the self still operates by an intimate relation to truth. Unlike Nietzsche’s (2008b) attempt to replace or displace the problem of truth for the problem of the will-to-power, Foucault continually insists on the complex relation of truth to knowledge. At times Foucault speaks of the game of truth and power, although not implying a sense of play, but these games still establish a relation to truth and so to the rational assessment of representations and the interrogation of questions of power. Foucault’s vocation of philosophy, which we have tried to draw out from the complexities and perplexities of the late work, is a vocation that maintains the relationship between philosophy and critique, philosophy and politics, and philosophy and truth.

This maintaining of the problem of critique, politics, and truth, suggests a vocation for philosophy as a working on relations that is not one of aristocratic distance, but rather intimate intensification. The relations between practices are brought inside as a matter of practice, before beginning a new relation to the outside. This is also a relation to pleasure, in which the working of these relations considers the possibilities of pleasure and the intensification of pleasures that delights in these possibilities of the self. This, I think, is the vocation of philosophy that Foucault sketches in the mode of a thinking of the crisis of institutions and the transition between political and philosophical forms of life. It suggests that philosophy is not simply dissolved into history as one practice amongst others, but is a practice that takes a relation to all other practices by putting them in relation to reason and truth. In this way we can answer both those who accuse Foucault of depoliticization, as this practice of philosophy still works on and intensifies political relations, but also the problem of a politicization, in the Nietzschean sense, that might dissolve the relation of philosophy to truth for a purely instrumental relation. In this complex situation the practice of the care of the self offers a fragile solution in which we can maintain philosophy as a vocation through the moment of crisis and transition.

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1. See the critical discussions in Zamora and Behrent (2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. See Derrida 1978, pp. and Foucault 1979. For later reflections, see Derrida 1998, pp.70–118. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See also Lévi-Strauss’s (1966: 247) remark: “the ultimate goal of the human sciences to be not to constitute, but to dissolve man”. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Elsewhere Foucault will be much more reticent about this identification with Nietzsche, when challenged with the interest of Nietzsche by the new right in Germany Foucault suggests the use of Nietzsche as merely a “tool” (Foucault 1989: 247). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. For a critical account of the turn to ethics as a withdrawal from the problems of political fidelity during the late 1970s and 1980s see Alain Badiou (2000, 2008). For a more sympathetic account, see Bourg (2007). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. See Derrida (1997) for a discussion of the gendered dimensions of the politics of friendship, especially its fraternal dimension. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)