

# WHAT REMAINS OF STOIC ETHICS? FROM FOUCAULT TO ITALIAN CRITICAL THINKERS

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*Among Foucault's works on the "techniques of the self," the importance of the Stoic doctrine of cura sui is testified by a number of essays such as The Care of the Self and The Hermeneutics of the Subject. In line with Foucault's biopolitical thought throughout the 1970s, my core argument in this paper is that some authors of the Italian Theory develop their account of contemporary neoliberalism through the interpretation of cura sui as a form of self-enterprise. Thus, I compare certain passages of late imperial Stoicism with contemporary critical literature in order to demonstrate that (1) a certain semantic contiguity led to an interpretation of the technologies of the self that is quite different from Foucault's original purpose, and (2) their ethical outcomes in the domain of self-entrepreneurship suffer from a substantial ambiguity.*

*L'importance de la doctrine stoïque de la cura sui dans les études foucaaldiennes sur les « techniques du soi » s'affirme par des ouvrages tels que Le souci de soi et l'Herméneutique du sujet. Dans le sillage de la pensée biopolitique de Foucault à la fin des années 1970, la thèse que je développe dans ce texte est que certains auteurs de l'Italian Theory, dans leur lecture du présent néolibéral, ont rapproché la question classique de la cura sui à celle de l'auto-entrepreneuriat. Dans cette perspective, je fais une comparaison de certains passages du stoïcisme impérial tardif à la littérature critique contemporaine, afin de démontrer que (1) une certaine contiguïté sémantique a conduit à une interprétation des technologies du soi assez différente des intentions originaires de Foucault et que (2) leur finalité éthique, à propos de l'auto-entrepreneuriat, confirme son ambiguïté de fond.*

## Introduction

Michel Foucault's assessment of the relation between the production of subjectivity and the regimes of veridiction was shaped throughout the 1980s as a history of sexuality. The result is a work in four volumes;<sup>1</sup> the third, published in 1984, bears the title *The Care of the Self*.<sup>2</sup> The second chapter of this volume—*The Cultivation of the Self*—, together with some lectures held at the Collège de France a few years earlier and then merged into *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*,<sup>3</sup> contains insightful analyses on what Foucault calls “the techniques of the self.” Since these techniques concern the relation between self-care and self-knowledge, they are inextricably intertwined with the genealogical history of the modern subject. As the critical literature emphasized,<sup>4</sup> the neoliberal rhetoric of entrepreneurship evokes some of its main notions from late imperial Stoicism, connecting a number of techniques of self-development to the complex concept of self-care, or *cura sui*.

In this paper, I intend to discuss how and to what extent certain aspects of Hellenistic-Roman Stoicism developed into Foucault's account of self-transformation by means of intentionally directive practices. Through an in-depth comparative analysis of certain pivotal passages from imperial Stoicism and others from a number of contemporary philosophers of the Italian Theory who are critical of the current governmentality, I will attempt to demonstrate that the

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<sup>1</sup> From 1980 onwards, Foucault made many changes to his project of *The History of Sexuality*. His health conditions and his death on June 25<sup>th</sup> 1984 prevented him from concluding the final revision of the whole text, painstakingly edited by Frédéric Gros and posthumously published by Gallimard in four volumes: *La volonté de savoir* (1976), *L'usage des plaisirs* (1984), *Le souci de soi* (1984), and *Les aveux de la chair* (2018). For details on these volumes' publication, see Sverre Raffnsøe, “Michel Foucault's *Confessions of the Flesh*,” The fourth volume of the *History of Sexuality*,” *Foucault Studies*, no. 25 (2018): 393–421.

<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 3: The Care of the Self*, (tr.) R. Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1984). Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as CS.

<sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France 1981–82*, (tr.) G. Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005). Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as HS.

<sup>4</sup> See Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, *The New Way of the World: On Neoliberal Society*, (tr.) G. Elliott (London: Verso, 2013); Bob Aubrey, *L'entreprise de soi* (Paris: Flammarion, 2000); Bob Aubrey, *Le travail après la crise* (Paris: Interéditions, 1994); Paul Heelas, *The Values of the Enterprise Culture: The Moral Debate* (London: Routledge, 1991); J. G. Carrier, D. Miller, eds., *Virtualism: a New Political Economy* (Oxford: Berg, 1998).

substantial semantic contiguity of the experience of self-entrepreneurship and the experience of self-care derives from the fact that they are both rooted in a particular account of ethics. Secondly, I will discuss how the technologies of the self, which are substantially based on the idea of an ongoing transformation of the individual's modes of being, run the risk, under the neoliberal order, of perverting their original ethical purpose.

The theme of self-care will first be investigated through a precise analysis of its general features, as described by Socrates, Plato, and Seneca, so that it can then be questioned in the specific framework of Hellenistic-Roman thought. The core argument I will defend here is explicitly inspired by Agamben's idea that only the *archē* can constitute a point of access to the truth of the present,<sup>5</sup> because it speaks to readers awoken to contemporaneity precisely by virtue of the critical filter of temporal distance:

...the origin is not only situated in a chronological past: it is contemporary with historical becoming and does not cease to operate within it.... Both this distancing and nearness, which define contemporariness, have their foundation in this proximity to the origin that nowhere pulses with more force than in the present.<sup>6</sup>

As emphasized by Esposito,<sup>7</sup> the typical monogram of the Italian philosophical thought since the 16<sup>th</sup> century is characterized by a threefold relation among life, history, and politics. Once distanced from workerism and, accordingly, from a certain variety of historicity, the *Italian Thought* of the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century shifted the focus onto the relation between life and politics.<sup>8</sup> In this sense,

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<sup>5</sup> "Contemporariness inscribes itself in the present by marking it above all as archaic. Only he who perceives the indices and signatures of the archaic in the most modern and recent can be contemporary. 'Archaic' means close to the *arche*, that is to say, the origin." Giorgio Agamben, "What Is the Contemporary?," in *What Is an Apparatus? and Other Essays*, (tr.) D. Kishik and S. Pedatella (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009) 50.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> See Roberto Esposito, *Bíos: Biopolitics and Philosophy*, (tr.) T. Campbell (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008); Roberto Esposito, *Living Thought: The Origins and Actuality of Italian Philosophy*, (tr.) Z. Hanafi (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> See P. Virno and M. Hard, eds., *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); S. Benso and B. Schroeder, eds., *Contemporary Italian Philosophy: Crossing the Border of Ethics, Politics, and Religion* (New York: SUNY Press, 2007); L. Chiesa and A. Toscano, eds., *The Italian Difference: Between Nihilism and Biopolitics* (Melbourne: re.press, 2009).

the reception of Foucault's inspection of biopolitics in *The Birth of Biopolitics*<sup>9</sup> played a decisive role.<sup>10</sup>

Within this theoretical framework, the Italian Theory's reflections—regardless of the fact that they deal with metaphysical issues or address criticisms of the neoliberal politics—isolated some Foucauldian themes<sup>11</sup> and situated them into our times, with the aim of making them operative. Hence, this contribution intends to demonstrate how the Italian Theory's reassessment of the issue of self-care is to be understood from this perspective, even when—in my view—the detachment from the historical investigation in which all of Foucault's research was rooted has led these contemporary authors to conflicting results with respect to Foucault's original purposes. Indeed, as I will demonstrate, their interest in the Classical Age derives from the assumption—often rejected by Foucault himself<sup>12</sup>—that, during this period, man<sup>13</sup> came into close contact with an experience of subjectification in a context rather similar to ours, namely, in the absence of a moral code, an *ethos* able to collectively organize his individual life.<sup>14</sup> In line with this interpretation, Gentili, a philosopher of the Italian Theory,<sup>15</sup> maintains in his text on the

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<sup>9</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France, 1978–1979*, (tr.) G. Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

<sup>10</sup> There is evidence of this in Agamben's whole project of *Homo Sacer*, based on the ontological-political interaction between *bios* and *zoē*. Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, (tr.) D. Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

<sup>11</sup> In this regard, one must take into account the link between the Foucauldian notion of aesthetics of existence and the theme of the use of the self in Agamben's thought. See Giorgio Agamben, *The Use of Bodies: Homo Sacer IV, 2*, (tr.) A. Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016).

<sup>12</sup> See, for instance, Michel Foucault, "The Ethics of the Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom," in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, (ed.) P. Rabinow, (tr.) R. Hurley et al. (New York: The New Press, 1997). See also Michel Foucault, "An Aesthetics of Existence," "The Return of Morality," and "The Concern for the Truth," in *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings*, (ed.) L. Kritzman (New York: Routledge, 1988).

<sup>13</sup> The masculine "man" is used when referring to humankind throughout this article merely to align my terminology with that of my sources. It should be understood that gender is not directly relevant to my argument.

<sup>14</sup> See Alessandro Pandolfi, "L'etica come pratica riflessa della libertà: L'ultima filosofia di Foucault," in *Archivio Foucault. Interventi, colloqui, interviste. 3. 1978–1985, Estetica dell'esistenza, etica, politica*, (ed.) A. Pandolfi (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1998), 24.

<sup>15</sup> See Dario Gentili, *Italian Theory: Dall'operaismo alla biopolitica* (Bologna: Il mulino, 2012). All the translations of Gentili's quotations originally in Italian are mine.

crisis as an apparatus of the current governance<sup>16</sup> that the Hellenistic period, which was characterized by Macedonian and Roman domination instead of the collective political order of the *polis*, faces a “globalization ante litteram” (CAG, 114). In other words, Roman Hellenism witnessed the sunset of the traditional convergence between the political order of the *polis* and the rational order of the cosmos. Accordingly, Hellenistic culture was compelled to radically rethink the cosmos as an individual’s reference point and privileged refuge. Under these premises, the universal idea of self-care finds in the individual “the conditions for [his] autonomy and for the constitution of his own space” (*ibid.*, 115).

As a careful observer of the political outcomes of the neoliberal order, De Carolis clearly shows in his text about the unavoidable doubleness of the current apparatus of governance (which is all at once libertarian and coercive)<sup>17</sup> how the disappearance of the political, understood as the representative and directive function of common practice, has generated two opposite orders in contemporary culture. On the one hand, there is the *cosmic* order, in which market relations are spontaneously expressed and social interactions are secured in their free competition; and, on the other hand, there is the *constituted* order, “conventional, relative and contingent representation” (RL, 231) of the former. However, if power relations are inscribed at the cosmic level and operate by means of conventions, collective practices have much deeper roots, putting them on the level of collective pacts. Accordingly, individuals find themselves in a schizophrenic situation, in which their performances are judged based on their universality towards an absolutely unpredictable cosmic necessity.

According to this interpretive framework, what makes the contemporary world similar to the Stoic one is not only the disintegration of the political order and, consequently, the idea of civil representation. It is the fact that, as a result of this circumstance, the contemporary individual interacts with a cosmos (nature beforehand, market later) based on an unpredictable order. This means that, once any possibility of social and collective mediation has

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<sup>16</sup> Dario Gentili, *Crisi come arte di governo* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2018). Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as CAG.

<sup>17</sup> Massimo De Carolis, *Il rovescio della libertà: Tramonto del neoliberalismo e disagio della civiltà* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2017). Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as RL. All the translations of De Carolis’s quotations originally in Italian are mine.

vanished, man is forced to rely on in his own potential (*dynamis*) to control the cosmos in which he lives.

Nevertheless, it must be specified that our choice to approach the issue of self-care from Foucault's perspective does not aim to update the Stoics' ethical perspective, which would be a very puzzling operation for Foucault himself. Rather, our goal is to create a genealogical reconstruction of that process of subjectification that, even nowadays, continues to challenge our practice of freedom. Indeed, the need to survive within a cosmic order characterized by a high level of uncertainty and unpredictability imposes a very high rate of malleability and re-programmability on the individual. Moreover, the idea that the ontological value of the performance depends on the full realization of human potential, *Leistung* (RL, 196ff),<sup>18</sup> turns the ethical concepts of self-transformation and self-liberation into that of self-entrepreneurship. In this respect, Foucault claimed in the 1980s that

...with this notion of *epimeleia heautou* we have a body of work defining a way of being, a standpoint, forms of reflection, and practices which make it an extremely important phenomenon not just in the history of representations, notions, or theories, but in the history of subjectivity itself or, if you like, in the history of practices of subjectivity. (HS, 11)

A few decades later, his intuition is confirmed by a number of thinkers who demonstrated how the self's relation with itself is still crucial for political discourse, even if the latter has taken a different direction from the one suggested by Foucault himself. Thus, dealing with the Stoic account of self-care from a genealogical standpoint will play a twofold function in our discussion: on the one hand, it will shed light on the ways in which concepts—rather than emerging and disappearing—develop, evolve, and lose their specific meanings in favour of others, within archaeological frameworks that intertwine with the history of philosophy. On the other hand, it will clarify how *cura sui* is an ancient notion that is still able to challenge the experience of our subjectivity.

Finally, I will emphasize how certain aspects of the techniques of the self, once eradicated from their original philosophical framework, have been adopted into our daily practices, resulting in a

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<sup>18</sup> See also D. MacKenzie, F. Muniesa, and L. Siu, eds., *Do Economists Make Markets? On the Performativity of Economics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

radical perversion of the Foucauldian discourse on self-transformation to suit the logic of market. In this way, the idea of *cura sui* runs the risk of betraying both Foucault's philosophical and medical reflection on pleasure and sexual behaviour and his research on the relation between subject and truth, in which the technologies of the self are inevitably structured.

## ***Cura Sui* as an Attitude and Occupation**

Foucault conceives of the culture of the self as an art of existence insofar as it is based on the precept of "taking care of ourselves" (HS, 37–68) In his view, this precept is rooted in Greek culture. Notably, from Socrates onwards, it is placed at the very core of that *technē tou biou* which characterizes the lifestyle of certain privileged social groups throughout the first two centuries of the imperial era. One can find vestiges of it in the doctrinal body of a number of philosophical and theological traditions (*i.e.*, Platonism, Stoicism, and Christianity). The exhortation of taking care of ourselves exhibits a twofold meaning: on the one hand, it presents itself as an attitude, a posture, a change of gaze, a new style of life; on the other hand, it develops as a system of praxis, procedures, thoughts, and empirical activities within an almost disciplinary framework.

Concerning the first meaning, that is the philosophical practice of *cura sui* as a radical and enduring form of life,<sup>19</sup> Seneca argues in a letter to Lucilius on the topic of virtue:

Just as fair weather, purified into the purest brilliancy, does not admit of a still greater degree of clearness; so, when a man takes care of his body and of his soul, weaving the texture of his good from both, his condition is perfect, and he has found the consummation of his prayers, if there is no commotion in his soul or pain in his body.<sup>20</sup>

For Seneca, the exercise of soul care, in combination with that of the body, leads man to a perfect condition, intertwined with the world and yet totally independent of it. Although Zeno had already in-

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<sup>19</sup> About the influence that the theme of *cura sui* exerts on the Agambenian "form-of-life," see Estelle Ferrarese, "Le projet politique d'une vie qui ne peut être séparée de sa forme. La politique de la soustraction de Giorgio Agamben," *Raisons politiques*, no. 57 (2015): 49–63.

<sup>20</sup> Seneca, *Epistulae morales ad Lucilium*, (tr.) R. M. Gummere (London: Heinemann, 1920), 66.46. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as EL.

structed his disciples to take care of their souls, it was Seneca who viewed this precept as a condition for ethics. Indeed, from Seneca's perspective, soul care entails a full commitment to ourselves, excluding all other activities. Furthermore, it requires us to devote all our efforts to change, to transform, and to return to ourselves in order to make the best use of our freedom. Accordingly, we must approach ourselves (*ad se properare*) with solicitude, because this is the only way we will be able to make ourselves free for ourselves (EL, 17.3–7).

The theme of *cura sui* reaches its most articulated elaboration with Epictetus. According to the philosopher from Hierapolis, indeed, the essential difference between animal and man is that the latter is endowed with reason, that is, the fundamental possibility of using all his faculties to care for and make free use of himself.<sup>21</sup> In Foucault's words, "it is insofar as he is free and reasonable that man is the natural being that has been committed to the care of himself" (CS, 47). Thus, in Epictetus's pedagogy, self-care is to be understood as both a privilege, a sign of divine election (after all, it is Zeus who gives us our reason) and a binding gift or an obligation to pursue.

In other words, the Stoic perspective of self-care, as an attitude and a philosophical account oriented towards a return to the self,<sup>22</sup> gradually gives way to a typical privilege-duty of the human being. On closer inspection, self-care ought to be a pervasive and ongoing commitment, by which man ensures his *tranquillitas animi* in view of a full practice of freedom. Moreover, it is worth noting that, in this view, soul care no longer concerns just the philosophers and their few peers. Rather, it concerns all men, over and over again for all the duration of their entire lives. If this practice was originally elitist in the first two centuries after Christ (as already suggested by the Spartan aphorism reported by Plutarch,<sup>23</sup> according to which the Spartans entrusted the land to the Helots so that they could "take care of themselves"), in its Hellenistic-Roman variant, it turns into a

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<sup>21</sup> Epictetus, *Discourses of Epictetus*, (tr.) G. Long (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1904), 1.16.3–9. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as D.

<sup>22</sup> Through his reading of the *hupomnēmata* as books of life and guides for conduct, Foucault clarifies the goals of an ethics oriented towards self-care: "Withdrawing into oneself, getting in touch with oneself, living with oneself, relying on oneself, benefiting from and enjoying oneself." Michel Foucault, "Self Writing," in *Ethics*, 211.

<sup>23</sup> Plutarch, *Plutarch's Moralia, Vol. 3*, (tr.) F. C. Babbitt (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961), 217a.



precept of universal care potentially valid for all people,<sup>24</sup> independent of age. In other terms, from an elitist practice, which aims at teaching the virtues of government, soul care shifts to a desirable life practice for anyone. More precisely, such a style of life demands the individual's acceptance of a series of precise and regulated behaviours, including efforts and sacrifices, throughout his life.<sup>25</sup>

With regard to the universality of the moral exhortation, Seneca maintains, "They [the gods], it is true, did not give anyone knowledge of philosophy, but gave everyone the faculty to know it" (EL, 90.1; trans. mod.). It is for this reason that, if in the context of the Socratic and Platonic thought, the *cura sui* essentially prepared children for adulthood and, notably, for a prestigious political career, then from the perspective of Stoicism, it becomes an infinite education for all aspects and events of life. In short, it ultimately constitutes a psychagogy.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, Seneca claims,

Wherever you hide yourself, human ills will make an uproar all around. There are many external things which compass us about, to deceive us or to weigh upon us; there are many things within which, even amid solitude, fret and ferment. Therefore, gird yourself about with philosophy, an impregnable wall. Though it be assaulted by many engines, Fortune can find no passage into it. (EL, 82.4–5)

By nature, man's soul is troubled by external circumstances, which Seneca calls *mala humana* (*ibid.*, 82.4), as well as his own passions. In this respect, he accounts for philosophy both as a fortress to protect him from pain, and as an antidote for the precariousness and uncertainty of his life. Accordingly, the conceptual framework of Stoic ethics, in which Seneca's reflection is deeply rooted, provides clear insights into the meaning of care as a training for life. If Stoicism explicitly distinguishes the suitable action—*kathēkon*—from the

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<sup>24</sup> See also Cosimo Degli Atti, *Soggetto e verità: Michel Foucault e l'etica della cura di sé* (Milan: Mimesis Edizioni, 2011), 175.

<sup>25</sup> See also Sara Baranzoni, "Foucault e la filosofia antica. Cura, esperienza e scrittura di sé," in *La salute della filosofia: Sintomatologie e politiche della cura tra l'antica Grecia e il contemporaneo*, (ed.) S. Baranzoni and P. Vignola (Roma: Aracne Editrice, 2014), 169–91.

<sup>26</sup> Foucault distinguishes between Pedagogy and Psychagogy, meaning by the first term the activity through which the individual is endowed with "attitudes," "skills," "knowledge" that he did not previously possess. Psychagogy, instead, consists in the operation of transmitting a truth that has the function of modifying the "way of being" of the subject to whom it is addressed (HS, 407–409).

correct action—*katorthōma*—, the practice of *cura sui* fully belongs to the domain of morality, namely that of the right action, provided that it is practiced in an effort to be progressively adapted to the circumstances of life. In other words, in Seneca's eyes, the ethical meaning of *cura sui*, rather than deriving from its practice of "what is respectable and appropriate to do according to the circumstances, above all taking account of the agent's social condition,"<sup>27</sup> is to be found in the "transformation of the individual, of his way of being and his mode of existence" (HS, 237).

Seneca continues: "Fortune has not the long reach with which we credit her; she can seize none except him that clings to her. Let us then recoil from her as far as we are able. This will be possible for us only through knowledge of self and of the world of Nature" (EL, 82.5–7). Therefore, Seneca maintains that bad luck is just nonsense for all those who possess the wisdom of themselves and their cosmos. In the context of ancient philosophy, according to which "truth is not the product of men but, on the contrary, it is men who are the product of truth,"<sup>28</sup> the Stoic wisdom of earthly things allows the individual to grasp the "access to the truth" (HS, 15), with its power to transform both his vision of the world and his own personality. As soon as truth, far from being a human product, has an effect on the individual, it shapes him by "modeling him in his image and likeness, to the point of making him coincide with what he knows."<sup>29</sup> It is precisely in the individual's relation with truth that the subject becomes *logos*.<sup>30</sup> From this perspective, it is not surprising that some contemporary authors extended such a psychagogic aspect as self-care and turned it into a practice of production of subjectivity.

In this regard, it should be noted how Agamben's reflection on the monastic form of life is influenced by Foucault's inspection of the transformation of the subject's way of being, which is determined by a certain knowledge and a systematic repetition of certain practices. In both cases, the knowledge of the doctrine, combined with the practice of the rule, produces a substantial alteration to the individual's subjectivity. The analogy between Foucault's and Agamben's

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<sup>27</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Opus Dei: An Archaeology of Duty*, (tr.) A. Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 67. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as OD.

<sup>28</sup> Moreno Montanari, "La filosofia antica come esercizio spirituale e cura di sé nelle interpretazioni di Pierre Hadot e Michel Foucault," in *Studi Urbinati B. Scienze umane e sociali*, no. 80 (2010): 343–53, here 344–45. All the translations of Montanari's quotations originally in Italian are mine.

<sup>29</sup> Montanari, "La filosofia antica come esercizio spirituale," 345.

<sup>30</sup> Foucault, "The Ethics of the Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom," 286.

studies of the psychological transformation of the self by spiritual exercises is confirmed by their common outcome, insofar as both the psychagogical/ethopoietic paradigm and the one of operativity determine “a dislocation of being into the sphere of praxis, in which being is what it does, is its operativity itself” (OD, 44). A shift in the individual’s selfhood from the ontological to the ethical plane—defined by Agamben as “the tendency to resolve, or at least to indeterminate, being into acting,” but also a “transformation of being into having-to-be” (*ibid.*, 84, 57)—is the result of a system that provokes an ethical redirection of the individual by means of a certain practice.

Regardless of age, social status, and cultural degree, psychagogic activity, when practiced by the individual, leads to the individual’s ongoing modification.<sup>31</sup> Thus, if we have just defined *cura sui* as a particular activity that leads the individual who practices it to substantial alteration, as well as a philosophical attitude that prepares the individual for life, the term *epimeleia* provides us with a precise description of how the individual realizes it. Foucault defines it as follows:

The term *epimeleia* designates not just a preoccupation but a whole set of occupations; it is *epimeleia* that is employed in speaking of the activities of the master of a household, the tasks of the ruler who looks after his subjects, the care that must be given to a sick or wounded patient, or the honors that must be paid to the gods or to the dead. (CS, 50)

This means that, in Foucault’s eyes, far from being just an attitude or style, *cura sui* indicates a precise work to be done towards ourselves. As such, it takes time.

It is for this reason that we take care of ourselves at certain times of the day, at the end of our life, and—as argued by Musonius Rufus in his *Fragments*<sup>32</sup>—in specific retreats. The latter acquires importance to the extent that we must be close to truth in order to have access and introject it. If the rational man conforms to the order of *logos* and, in doing so, enters truth, it is only by man’s access to truth

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<sup>31</sup> Another view of the same issue: “The *epimeleia heautou* (care of the self) designates precisely the set of conditions of spirituality, the set of transformations of the self, that are the necessary conditions for having access to the truth” (HS, 17).

<sup>32</sup> The *Fragments* are reproduced with translations in Cora E. Lutz, “Musonius Rufus: ‘The Roman Socrates,’” in *Yale Classical Studies, Vol. 10*, (ed.) A. Bellinger (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1947).

that philosophy accomplishes its protective<sup>33</sup> and psychagogic function. In the last analysis, the man who takes care of himself modifies himself in contact with truth and returns to himself, with his soul protected from all evils.

### ***Cura Sui* as a Technique of Life**

In the first section of this text, I have attempted to clarify the notion of *cura sui* in its twofold meaning as a new posture by which the individual sets the gaze towards himself, and the individual's commitment (*occupatio*) in view of a full practice of freedom. Nevertheless, this account of *epimeleia* as an ongoing and universal activity also allows for a further problematization of this practice of self-transformation. If the transformation of the self is an ethical instrument capable of making existence compliant with the cosmic *logos*, it could also lead to an adaptation of individual practices to the socio-political order in force and, accordingly, make them much less free.

For this reason, it is worth distinguishing a further meaning of self-care as *technē tou biou*, namely as an art and technique of life. This particular meaning of self-care originated in imperial Stoicism and developed, almost four centuries later, in the context of cenobitic monasticism. Cenobitic monks subordinated themselves to a series of precepts, summarized in their *rules*. Nevertheless, these precepts are to be understood as rules of an art, rather than legal obligations. This attitude can be traced back to the Stoics, whose ethical procedures become normative prescriptions only within a broader ethical horizon, namely as techniques for producing a new subjectivity and a new form of life.<sup>34</sup> On closer inspection, from Agamben's standpoint, the practice of *cura sui* allows for a moral conversion of the Stoic that can be fully accomplished in monastic life: "The monastery is perhaps the first place where life itself—and not only the ascetic techniques that form and regulate it—has been presented as an art" (HP, 33).

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<sup>33</sup> "The *paraskeue*, which Seneca indicates with the term *instructio*, is the protection that strengthens the Self and prepares the individual for the events of life, for the unexpected that dwells in the future. The attitude of the subject is assimilated to that of the athlete, who studies the techniques to conduct the 'clash' with what has not yet manifested itself but which could, in the future, undermine it." Degli Atti, *Soggetto e verità*, 204. See also HS, 320–21.

<sup>34</sup> See Giorgio Agamben, *Highest Poverty: Rules and Form-of-Life*, (tr.) A. Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 29–33. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as HP.

Accordingly, this section will investigate *epimeleia* in its practical meaning and, following Foucault's lexicon, present some *technologies of the self*. As is known, in Foucault's perspective *technologies of the self* are techniques for the objectification of the self's truth at the very moment in which subjectivity is produced as invention, self-care, and relation with others.<sup>35</sup>

If the process of *cura sui* produces ethical results, it is not only by virtue of man's radical decision to devote himself to himself without hesitation; rather, it is by virtue of the transformative dynamics of his practices. In other words, there exists a particular knowledge about the world and man (not necessarily about the soul) which, once possessed, transforms the individual's being. In reference to Plutarch, Foucault defines this variety of knowledge *ethopoietic* (deriving from the Greek verb *ethopoiein*) for its ability to "produce, modify or transform the *ethos*, the way of being, the mode of existence of an individual" (HS, 237). Consistently, he denominates *techniques of the self* (*ibid.*, 61–62) as a set of procedures developed by the different philosophical traditions in order to foster a conversion of human behaviour. Thus, the notion of "techniques"—or "technologies"<sup>36</sup>—clearly accounts for the singularity of what is to be converted, in other words, the body and the soul of the subject that practices them with the aim of transforming itself. In other terms, the most ethopoietic function of philosophy consists of man's decision to experience his own subjectivity and deal with his own existence through a series of trials which will change his subjectivity and allow him to access truth.

In *HS*, Foucault uses the term "conversion" in a very broad sense that includes both the notion of the *return to oneself* and that of the *turning to oneself*. However, throughout the text, he critically addresses two main concepts of conversion (HS, 169–205). From the perspective of the Platonic tradition, conversion is conceived of as an awakening of the soul and a return of the subject to the original

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<sup>35</sup> "Technologies of the self...permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality." Michel Foucault, *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1988), 18.

<sup>36</sup> Foucault defines "technologies" as a set of knowledge involving certain modes of training and modification of individuals; according to the type of domination exercised, the author distinguishes different types of "technologies": technologies of production, technologies of sign systems, technologies of power, and technologies of the self. Foucault, *Technologies of the Self*, 18.

source of truth. However, in the Christian vision, conversion is to be understood as a rebirth of the soul, resulting from man's self-renunciation and his breaking with his bodily immanence. In comparison with these two spiritual paradigms, the Stoic conversion represents a third way. For the Stoics, the account of conversion as the individual's liberation from the immanence of the world entails a series of procedures in view of the individual's return to the self. For instance, the specific practice of Stoic meditation is based on the idea that the individual envisages a situation in order to grasp an unknown truth able to transform himself. As a result, it is patent that the essential function of these practices not only consists in "the transcendence of the ego's centering in the search for truth, ...in the relation with the cosmos and with others."<sup>37</sup> Rather, it also consists in the fact that the self, once returned to itself, "is no longer merely our egoistic, passionate individuality,"<sup>38</sup> but "it is our moral person, open to universality and objectivity, and participating in universal nature or thought."<sup>39</sup>

For the sake of clarity, it is worth emphasizing that the Stoic procedures for conversion may have either practical or mental features; likewise, they may either include their goal or achieve it later. Thus, Stoicism should be conceived of as a philosophical account based upon the tradition of self-knowledge that originated in the oracle of Delphi's words and developed as "a whole art of self-knowledge..., with precise recipes, specific forms of examination, and codified exercises" (CS, 58).

Among the techniques of the self, a first group of procedures develops around the theme of physical control and abstinence. One can find evidence in Epictetus's and Plutarch's works of a series of experimental processes with a twofold function for the subject of *epimeleia*: firstly, a psycho-pedagogical function, insofar as they foster the individual's progress in the practice of virtue by means of a modification of the self; secondly, a regulative function, in that they allow the subject to autonomously measure the state of his progress. It is important to note that Stoics do not share the Epicurean idea that temporary sacrifices are to be performed in view of future pleasures or that renunciation constitutes an end in itself (CS, 58), as

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<sup>37</sup> Romano Màdera, "Che cos'è l'analisi biografica ad orientamento filosofico?" in *Pratiche filosofiche e cura di sé*, (ed.) C. Brentari, R. Màdera, S. Natoli, and L. V. Tarca (Milan: Bruno Mondadori, 2006), 93; my translation.

<sup>38</sup> Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, (tr.) M. Chase (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 103.

<sup>39</sup> Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, 103.

will be prescribed by Christian ethics. More precisely, when the Stoic deprives himself of food, dresses poorly and follows rigid customs, he does so in order to demonstrate to himself that he is independent from the material aspects of life and to verify to what extent he is able to live without unnecessary goods. Regarding this respect, Seneca argues,

It is precisely in times of immunity from care that the soul should toughen itself beforehand for occasions of greater stress, and it is while Fortune is kind that it should fortify itself against her violence. In days of peace the soldier performs manœuvres, throws up earthworks with no enemy in sight, and wearies himself by gratuitous toil, in order that he may be equal to unavoidable toil. If you would not have a man flinch when the crisis comes, train him before it comes. (EL, 18.6)

Regardless of his progress in the practice of virtue, the Stoic trains like a soldier or an athlete. Guided by strict discipline, his body does not elude pain and strain and his soul does not abstain from difficulties and renunciations, because only in this way will his life be independent of all superfluous elements. In Seneca's words, one will always be able to stand what one is able to stand sometimes.<sup>40</sup>

In addition to practical trials, the checking of one's conscience is a pivotal element of the transformative techniques of the self. With its origins in Pythagoreanism, its use by Stoics is extensively testified.<sup>41</sup> It consists of a check procedure by which the individual, in the morning, concentrates on his tasks or obligations and, in the evening, considers his daily action while waiting for a restorative sleep. As he checks his performed actions, the subject does not take into account his guilt and the resulting feeling of remorse. Instead, he focuses on all the attitudes that proved inadequate for achieving his goals, so that he may evaluate them, commit them to memory, and cherish them. In this regard, Foucault observes, "If one 'conceals nothing to oneself,' if one 'omits nothing,' it is in order to commit to memory, so as to have them present in one's mind, legitimate ends, but also rules of conduct that enable one to achieve these ends through the choice of appropriate means" (CS, 62). In contrast to what is suggested in the legal lexicon used by Seneca to describe the attitude of the Stoic

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<sup>40</sup> Cf. Seneca, "Ad Helviam Matrem de Consolatione," in *Four Dialogues*, (tr.) C. D. N. Costa (Warminster: Aris & Philips, 1994), 157: "If you have the strength to tackle any one aspect of misfortune you can tackle all."

<sup>41</sup> See Seneca, *Epistulae*; Seneca, "Of Anger," in *Minor Dialogues together with the Dialogue on Clemency*, (tr.) A. Stewart (London: G. Bell, 1889).

performing his conscience check, Foucault views the rational man as a “thrifty” judge who is mainly interested in the constitution of a rational baggage in view of a more virtuous conduct, rather than in the mortification or punishment of the accused. As in the case of ascetic practices, the conscience check is a technique freely used by the individual to modify his conduct, his vision of the world and, finally, his subjectivity as a whole.

It must also be noted that, when practicing his conscience check, the subject dissects the flow of time into units of actions, to be accomplished and then remembered. Such an operation appears to be very similar to the process of temporal discrimination that takes place in the practice of *meditatio* by Christian monks, described by Agamben as “a mixture and a sort of hybridisation between manual work and prayer” (HP, 24). Provided that the analytical observation of an action, aimed at controlling it, can take place only *a posteriori* and beyond any linear temporality, the continuity of the temporal flow is in both cases fragmented, although in Christian *meditatio* it is “interiorized in the form of a *perpensatio horarum*, a mental articulation of the passing of the hours” (*ibid.*). As a result, it is precisely the total overlap of time and life occurring in the monastic form of life and embryonically experienced by the Stoics that leads Agamben to consider the cenobitic *horologium vitae* as an “element that permits it to act on the life of the individual and the community with an incomparably greater efficacy than the Stoic...care of the self could achieve” (*ibid.*).

Furthermore, among the techniques of the self used by Hellenistic-Roman Stoicism, particular attention should be paid to the control of representations, whose systematic practice aims at reaching a deep level of connection with the subject by giving rise to a *habitus*, rather than a progressive moral improvement resulting from the subject’s efforts. In the *Discourses*, Epictetus describes how the control of representations works (D, 3.12.15). When a representation stands out, the subject, following the Stoic rule, discriminates what depends and what does not depend on us. Then, he accepts the representations that refer to our field of inference and leaves the opposite, insofar as they are beyond the range of human action. This clearly means that in this practice the ethical subject does not look for the ultimate foundation or origin of his representations (as will happen later in Christian spirituality), nor does he attempt to decipher their deepest meaning (as will happen much later in the psychoanalytic system). Rather, he considers them in the naturalness of their occurrence. Accordingly, an honest inspection of his own mental representations will help the Stoic to discover the nature of the



relation that intertwines them with his subjectivity and to accept consciously only those deriving from a direct practice of freedom. In conclusion, Marcus Aurelius maintains that “nothing is so capable of making our soul great...as being able to identify, with method and according to truth, each of the objects that present themselves throughout life,”<sup>42</sup> precisely because no man can free himself from opinions that have not been scrutinized by critical inspection. The self-check of the individual’s representations frees him from the slavery of his opinions and passions, leads him to a full control over himself, relativizes the centrality of his existential experiences, shapes his ethical history, and ultimately constitutes itself as an ethopoietic technique.

## **Self-Care as Self-Enterprise**

In the previous sections of this text, I defined the Hellenistic-Roman meaning of *epimeleia* as an art of living that entails the turning of the subject’s gaze and a practice that he must perform continuously. I have also shed light on its psychagogic function, based on the fact that truth, once learned and systematically remembered, leads to an ethical redirection of the subject and his conversion. Finally, I have shown the polyvalency of the technologies of the self, understood as a set of practices of connaturation with the subject. In other words, the soul and the body, subjected to the ongoing and meditated reproduction of a practice, acquire a *habitus* that produces a new subjectivity. Finally, it is worth drawing a connection between some of the concepts that have emerged so far and the puzzling assumption made by certain philosophers, deeply influenced by Foucault, of a basic analogy between the dynamics of antiquity and those of our neoliberal order.

In the Stoic doctrine, the cosmos is like “a single city” (D, 3.24.10–11) guided by a single providential logic. Hence, the cosmos consists in a single substance in which, due to its periodic motion, all things exchange position with other things, some dissolving, others appearing (*ibid.*). As mentioned in the introductory section of this work, following political circumstances of foreign dominations, the rationality of the cosmos becomes for the Stoic the privileged point of reference on the horizon:

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<sup>42</sup> Marcus Aurelius, *The Meditations of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus*, (tr.) F. Hutcheson and J. Moor (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2003), III.11.

From everything which is or happens in the world, it is easy to praise Providence, if a man possesses these two qualities, the faculty of seeing what belongs and happens to all persons and things, and a grateful disposition. If he does not possess these two qualities, one man will not see the use of things which are and which happen: another will not be thankful for them, even if he does know them. (*Ibid.*, 1.6.1–2)

As Epictetus's words demonstrate, it is the ability of the subject to deal with the logic of the cosmos that safeguards the meaning of individual existence. Therefore, the experience of the uncertainty of the world is compensated for by the human talent to rely on it and govern what is specifically governable, namely the individual's posture towards the cosmos.

In his work on neoliberalism, De Carolis describes the order of market relations as *cosmic* and defines it in opposition to the *constituted* order, made up of rules and institutions in which political actors move (RL, 206ff.). The author evokes the distinction between the market order and the intentionally governed order that Hayek introduced in *Law, Legislation and Freedom*:

[W]hile a real economy is an organization in the technical sense in which this term has been defined, *i.e.* a deliberate antagonism of the use of the means known to a single entity, the *cosmos* of the market is not and could not be governed by this single scale of ends; it serves the separate and immeasurable purposes of all its individual members.<sup>43</sup>

Thus, in the neoliberal era, the collective welfare of the population is removed from the final purposes of market mechanisms and comes to coincide with a spontaneous order that does not correspond to any economic (or constituted) order, insofar as it is not intentionally organized and, most importantly, does not pursue any precise project. Nevertheless, since the *cosmic* order demands to be governed by the support of human rules and institutions, it involves the individual practices in a seemingly unintelligible system. As argued by Gentili, under the domain of neoliberal rationality, "individuals involved in the *cosmos* have a 'limited' capacity to understand and grasp its overall design and, therefore, to master the 'destiny' of their actions" (CAG, 98). Just like in the Stoic concept, in

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<sup>43</sup> Friedrich A. Hayek, *Law, Legislation and Liberty: A New Statement of the Liberal Principles of Justice and Political Economy*, Vol. 2: *The Mirage of Social Justice* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 108.

which the individual was subordinate to a universal *logos* to which he must abandon himself, the neoliberal individual in the contemporary world is determined by a spontaneous *logos*,<sup>44</sup> which is as inscrutable as the Stoic one. In both cases, it is the rationality of the *cosmos*—natural or divine—that has a strong impact on the processes of subjectification.

Uncertain participation in a necessary and intelligible global reality leads the subject to a threshold of indistinction where cosmic and constituted order collapse and the work sphere is charged with existential meanings. In order to “stay on the market,” to survive within a system that seems to be the only one able to preserve his life, the subject cannot but shape his form of life following the short-sighted parameters imposed by the market itself. Thus, training, education, contacts, relations, energy, health, and talent become referents of an action of domination that the subject imposes on himself, in order to reach a “controlled” self-experience, *i.e.*, a self-experience that is as little contingent as possible.

From this viewpoint, which is actually very different from Foucault’s inspection of liberalism, *cura sui* turns now into a form of self-enterprise which consists in “‘managing a business portfolio,’ developing strategies for learning, marriage, friendship, educating one’s children, and managing the ‘capital of personal enterprise.’”<sup>45</sup> In doing so, the individual exhibits his life to the market value; in other terms, he becomes an “entrepreneur of himself,” by shifting the gaze from the domain of work to that of ethics. The neoliberal subject must not only acquire new tools in order to increase his chances of survival on the market, he must also develop techniques that, through an ongoing assimilation (as in Stoicism), modify his *habitus*, preparing him to face the risky existence<sup>46</sup> of the *cosmic* order of market.

According to the neoliberal vision of the world, the *epimeleia heautou* becomes the personal ethical response to uncertainty. In Aubrey’s words, “the enterprise of oneself is to find a meaning, a commitment in the totality of life.”<sup>47</sup> The ethopoietic and

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<sup>44</sup> It should be pointed out that “the *spontaneous* order of the market should not be confused with an *order* deliberately created by some incarnation of Providence” (RL, 37).

<sup>45</sup> Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, *The New Way of the World: On Neo-liberal Society*, (tr.) G. Elliott (London: Verso, 2013), 267.

<sup>46</sup> About the motto of liberalism of “live dangerously,” see Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 66.

<sup>47</sup> Bob Aubrey, *Le travail après la crise* (Paris: Interéditions, 1994), 101–105; my translation.

psychagogic functions of the ancient technologies of the self are therefore maintained in the contemporary age, to the extent that the subject undergoes a series of procedures of self-care that modify his style of life. What changes, however, is the cultural framework within which these technologies are conceived. The cosmic truth the Stoic aims for in order to modify himself entails his full trust in a divine providence that is totally absent when the only aleatory truth remaining is the market. The subject under neoliberal governance, as Leghissa claims, discovers a truth about himself “which can be understood and structured only through a reference to the inexhaustible productivity of organic life—a productivity in which are included constraint and freedom, necessity and contingency.”<sup>48</sup>

Nowadays, the technologies of the self that previously allowed for a conversion of the subject, fostering the subject’s access to transcendence, act on a level of immanence that does not require any ethical detachment from the world. As a result, far from approaching or understanding the cosmic logos, the neoliberal individual finds himself involved in the asceticism of the performance that is totally oriented towards the dominion of immanence. Finally, the asceticism of the contemporary subject “sans rêve et sans merci,”<sup>49</sup> namely without any meaning, leads to an entirely different purpose than the liberation of the self.

## Conclusion

Throughout this paper, I have discussed the notion of *cura sui* as it emerges in the second chapter of Foucault’s *The Care of the Self: “The Cultivation of the Self.”* Accordingly, I have provided a critical assessment of how his account of self-care in *HS* can be traced back to Hellenistic-Roman Stoicism. Secondly, I have considered the fruitfulness of his reflection in the framework of the contemporary neoliberal order.

The exhortation precept of *epimeleia* originated in the Socratic doctrine and was inherited by Stoicism, which turned it into a series of practices capable of radically modifying the individual’s life. In this way, the Stoic subject accesses a new truth, produced by his conversion and determined by the total exercise of his freedom. In

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<sup>48</sup> Giovanni Leghissa, *Neoliberalismo: Un’introduzione critica* (Milan: Mimesis, 2012), 128.

<sup>49</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Kapitalismus als Religion,” in *Gesammelte Schriften: Fragmente*, Vol. 6 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1985), 100.

this sense, the precept of *epimeleia* is configured not only as an attitude, a posture, a universal *habitus*, but also as an activity, a commitment and an *occupatio* insofar as it is pursued daily, with solicitude and for one's entire life. It is by concentrating on the perennial and radical character of the practice of self-care that I defined *epimeleia*, in line with Foucault, as a technology of the self, namely the set of techniques (experiment, writing, meditation, etc.) that the subject uses strategically in view of the transformation of his own subjectivity. Furthermore, I identified this art of existence—*tekhne tou biou*—by the term *technologies of the self*, that is, the particular practices required for anyone interested in reshaping his own existence and ready to practice life itself.

Among the ancient accounts of the culture of the self, Foucault identifies an ethical paradigm that he calls *aesthetics of existence*, because of the centrality it bestows on the practices of self-constitution and self-invention in the process of philosophical construction of subjectivity. In the last section of this text, I developed an in-depth discussion on this very point in order to evaluate whether and to what extent Foucault's argument of the ethical relevance of self-care is still fruitful for our contemporary culture.

The reference to certain authors who developed criticisms of neoliberalism has allowed me to emphasize that precariousness and uncertainty are the main points of similarity between contemporary culture and Stoicism. Subjected to an ontologically different but equally inexplicable *logos*, the notion of *cura sui* testifies, both for the ancients and contemporary people, the need to govern contingency by curbing its senselessness through self-control. However, the core difference between Stoicism and contemporary culture is to be found in the transformation of the trust once placed in providence into the current faith in capitalism. As a result, the "economic" management of the self described by Seneca is totally betrayed by the idea of the "natural" and voluntarist incarnation of the laws of profit.

In conclusion, the liberation of the Stoic wiseman or the complete subjugation of the neoliberal subject to the inscrutable logic of the cosmos, regardless of the the laws that govern it, both derive from the radical polyvalence of *ethopoiesis* that characterizes *epimeleia* like any other human praxis. Indeed, as Agamben maintains—

recalling Epictetus's extraordinary intuition—the modes of being do “the gymnastics (*gymnasai*) of being.”<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Giorgio Agamben, “Absolute immanence,” in *Potentialities: Collected Essay in Philosophy*, (tr.) D. Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 235.