

CARE OF THE SELF IN THE GLOBAL ERA¹

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In modern thought, care of the self covers a wide area of self-creation and self-interest. Within the problem framework of philosophical anthropology, inquiry into care of the self begins from a general observation of the state of crisis in contemporary culture. Philosophical anthropology analyses the possibilities a person has to overcome conflicts in value systems and the contingency of life's conditions by maintaining a sustainable degree of openness to risk, using creativity to solve conflicts, and developing the ability to transcend the existing state to fulfil the destiny of man as mankind. Attempts at cultural diagnostics bring together research on the original results of human self-knowledge and fixed self-shaping practices as well as ways of re-establishing them in culture and explicating them in contemporary philosophizing. *Care of the self: Ancient problematizations of life and contemporary thought* is an ongoing project at the Institute of Philosophy, University of Prešov, which is aimed at obtaining a better understanding of the sources and forms of subjectivity (or more precisely, at revealing unknown and neglected sources), methods of integration in society's functional systems, (especially in culture's symbolic systems), and consequently at recognizing the crucial "attractors" axiom (normative values) asserted during the formation of the present *conditio humana*.

The evolution of care of the self from Socratic to Stoic problematizations of life has led historians of knowledge to believe that the Greeks and Romans created a "culture of the self" which influenced later early-Christian practices (cf. Foucault, 1988, 2001; Veyne, 1993, 2008; cf. also Davidson's critical note, Davidson, 1999). The culture of the self is based on the relationship people consciously form with themselves and the practices they apply to their own lives—all in an effort to govern their own life. Greeks referred to working on the self as *askēsis* ("practice", "exercise"), which is both physical and mental in extent. *Askēsis* is aimed at a life formed through mental judgements that are not pre-given and therefore require constant practice. Pierre Hadot called them "spiritual exercises", that is, practices

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we apply to ourselves with the help of others or through our own endeavours in an effort to change ourselves (Hadot, 1987). The paradigmatic example of a spiritual exercise is the “Socratic dialogue”. Understanding ethics as the effort to become the other has its origins in Socrates. As has been much discussed, Socrates and his followers—as Pierre Hadot and Michel Foucault claimed for instance—established a new type of thinking which prefers the style of life to knowledge of the world (Hadot, 1987; Foucault, 1988).

Socratic problematizations of life influenced almost all streams of ancient thinking (Cynics, Stoics, Skeptics, Pyrrhonists). Even those often described as “theoretical” (Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, Philo, Pythagoreans, etc.). The history of ethics understood as the history of various forms of *askēsis* provides a unique framework for reinterpreting ancient thought and simultaneously enabling a new approach for understanding the phenomenon of the individual, moral and political autonomy of the human being.

The Greek moralists did not create a universally valid theory of moral progress (although, until recently, the ancient ethics were interpreted exclusively in this sense). They put practices of the self first. Working on one’s life was contingent on forming a truthful picture of the self. One of the most important themes in Greek ethical thought was *parrhēsia* (literally, “telling the truth”; figuratively, “the courage of the truth”). Without the ability to form an internally truthful representation of one’s self, we cannot govern our own life, that is, set its direction (*telos*) and meaning (*eudaimonia*).

Practices of the self lack theoretical status—from a theoretical perspective, they can seem banal. These practices are established in response to the situations in which acting individuals find themselves. Techniques of the self can be described, but cannot be defined, because they acquire meaning only in relation to the efforts of the individual. Practices of the self generate an autonomous field of life that is not identifiable with ethics or with politics, or any other “practical knowledge” field. The opposition between the theoretical and the practical, producing an overall tension throughout Western metaphysics, loses its significance in the hermeneutics of the self, since it is impossible to approach one’s life with theoretical detachment. Such a life would become strange and insentient.

The unprecedented increase in global interactions is a huge challenge for the realisation of care of the self. Although there is no clear or single definition of globalization, it may be characterized as the process of forming a single world community through common modes of communication and the proliferation of a complex network of economic, cultural, and ecological relationships. While there can be no doubt that the global ties between the different cultures and civilizations have accelerated at an unprecedented rate in recent years, it can be difficult to gain an adequate understanding of them, since the processes of globalization are often multidimensional and contradictory. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify at least two crucial features: the intensification of various negative impacts of global capitalism and the increase in global interactions in cultural encounters, such that we can now speak—in some sense—of a “new” Axial Age.

Moral philosophy analyses the possibilities individuals have for dealing with conflicts between the competing value systems and the contingencies of life. These contingencies demand a sustainable degree of openness to risk, problem-solving creativity as well as an ability to transcend the existing state of affairs to attain a certain mode of being. The task of performing an adequate cultural diagnostics thus involves studying the original results

of human self-knowledge and self-shaping practices, the possibilities for their realization in culture as well as their philosophical elucidation. As is well known, the global processes have many negative impacts, especially with regard to the (nation) state's ability to secure sufficient (pre)conditions—as a framework—for adequate care of the self. Therefore, we have tried to link various inquiries into care of the self with critical social theory. The Frankfurt School of Critical Theory represents one of the most influential philosophical schools of the 20th century, and philosophers, humanists, and social scientists around the world continue to work on the emancipatory task introduced by its founders. In a nutshell, the aim of the Frankfurt School—and following Axel Honneth—was to promote a more just social order, one which could on the one hand successfully avoid potential social pathologies (aberrations, crises or even disasters), but on the other hand also enable individuals—through the proper organization of society—to live a fulfilling life (*ein gelingendes Leben*). Honneth emphasizes that “no critical theorist has ever abandoned the Hegelian idea that cooperative practice, along with the values attendant to it, must possess a rational character” (Honneth, 2009, p. 28). A transition to liberating practices of cooperation should not therefore result from an affective bond, or from a feeling of affiliation or approval, but rather from a rational perspective: “The tradition of Critical Theory thus differs from both liberalism and communitarianism by virtue of a particular kind of ethical perfectionism. [...] Unlike the liberal tradition, Critical Theory holds that the normative aim of society should consist in reciprocally making self-actualization possible. At the same time, it understands its recommendation of this aim to be the well-grounded result of a certain analysis of the human process of development” (Honneth, 2009, p. 28).

A colloquium entitled “Care of the Self in the Global Era” held at the University of Prešov on June 26-27, 2017, sought to refresh the debate on care of the self in relation to the impacts of globalization by linking to certain stimuli from the project described above on *Care of the self: Ancient problematizations of life and contemporary thought* and to certain contemporary conceptions of critical social theory. However, since critical social theory also has deficits or rather lacks “global” perspectives, the participants attempted to begin a conversation with other philosophical schools and traditions (pragmatism, hermeneutics, Chinese philosophy, environmental philosophy, etc.).

This monothematic issue of *Human Affairs* begins with an opening paper by Hans-Herbert Kögler (“Reflexivity and globalization: Conditions and capabilities for a dialogical cosmopolitanism”) which can be seen as the point of departure for the papers and discussions that follow. In his paper, Hans-Herbert Kögler asks whether we need to transform the objective condition of globalization into a reflexive consciousness of a cosmopolitan connectedness. He proposes that a dialogical cosmopolitanism should be developed which is not based on a new meta-level of abstract universal norms, but grounded in agentic capabilities. These capabilities would allow the situated agents themselves to understand the objective forces that define current globalization.

In his paper (“Aesthetic cultivation and creative ascesis: Transcultural reflections on the late Foucault”) Fabian Heubel emphasizes that Foucault's understanding of the history and contemporary significance of ascetic practices or exercises of cultivation (*ascesis*) differs significantly from those which consider the renewal of asceticism in spiritual or even religious terms. Heubel's paper attempts to show that Foucault thought about related

problems from the perspective of aesthetic cultivation. The first part discusses his analysis of sexuality within the broader context of Foucault's theory-formation and elaborates on the theoretical structure of the concept of self-cultivation. In the second part Fabian Heubel situates the idea of creative *asesis* in its broader historical context. The third part offers a preliminary perspective on the transcultural significance of relating Foucault to contemporary Chinese philosophy.

Gordon C.F. Bearn's essay ("Careful becomings: Foucault, Deleuze, and Bergson") argues for a convergence between Foucault's characterization of care of the self as a way of overcoming the traps of anthropological sleep and Deleuze's characterization of initiating becomings as a way of fleeing the traps of organization, a line of flight, becoming becoming. This convergence is defended on the basis of a Bergsonian ontology of becoming, and in particular, Bergson's opposition to what he calls the retrograde motion of truth. One result of this convergence is that a Wittgensteinian approach to the sense of life floats to the surface. A kind of mysticism.

Kurt C.M. Mertel ("Self-Appropriation vs. self-constitution: Social philosophical reflections on the self-relation") begins by asking how we can theorize the relation of the self to itself. He reacquaints us with some recent post-Kantian approaches to the problem, and attempts to argue that the Kantian paradigm is ultimately inadequate because its methodological individualism makes it incapable of accounting for the irreducibly social dimension of the self-relation. An adequate ontology of the self-relation is possible only as a social ontology.

Roman Madzia ("Care of the *S*: Dynamics of the mind between social conflicts and the dialogicality of the self") occupies himself with the theory of moral reconstruction in the thinking of George H. Mead. The paper begins with a broad description of Mead's theory of social psychology, and then highlights some problematic areas such as the hypothesis that social conflicts should be seen as the root of reflective thinking.

In his paper, Richard Stahel ("Self-limitation as the basis of environmentally sustainable care of the self") makes reference to the media-driven society in which the self is formed within the framework of the culture-ideology of consumerism. In the era of the global environmental crisis, self-identity should be based on the culture-ideology of human rights and conscious self-limitation which realizes that a person's prosperity and security cannot come at the expense of others.

Vladislav Dudinský and Anna Polačková ("The deficits of critical thinking") focus on the consequences of recognizing plurality in all areas of life associated with accepting individual freedoms in all their manifestations, including independent thinking, action and creativity. They emphasize that at a practical level the self-declared freedom of the "cogito" does not automatically lead to the realization of "I am"; individual and independent thought is increasingly manifested in the form of mass consciousness in its "voluntary" subordination to the general standards of society. They conclude that these determinants fundamentally shape the nature of contemporary education.

Lubomír Dunaj's paper ("The inner conflict of modernity, the moderateness of Confucianism and critical theory") is divided into three parts. The first deals with Johann P. Arnason's interpretation of Patočka's writing on the super-civilization and focuses on the concept of moderateness. The second part looks at aspects of Confucian philosophy in which

moderateness is an integral part of that philosophical tradition. The third part emphasizes the importance of critical theory for obtaining a better understanding of diverse social contexts in which various forms of suffering can be identified.

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