

# Care of the Self or Cult of the Self?: How Philosophical Counseling gets Political

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**ABSTRACT:** How might philosophically based counseling avoid becoming just one more form of private therapy, to be set alongside all the others now sold to individual consumers? Although several practitioners of philosophical counseling have sought to distinguish their approach from psychotherapeutic models, Foucault's critique of the dominant modern model of ethical reflection might be used to argue for their essential continuity with one another, based on their common acceptance of the primacy of the imperatives of knowledge. Foucault turned in his late writings to ancient Greek models of ethics as 'care of the self', delineating a self-relation prior to knowledge. This paper argues for the interest and importance for philosophical counseling of the idea of ethics as 'care of the self' in articulating a model of ethical reflection distinct from both rationalist and irrationalist tendencies in modern thought and focussed on self-mastery conceived as addressing our relation to otherness rather than as authenticity or autonomy. Moreover, the 'aesthetics of existence' that Foucault prescribes to the present has a significant and affirmative relationship to political life; this distinguishes it from the private and individualistic project, dismissed by Foucault as 'the Californian cult of the self', for which philosophical counseling can all too readily be mistaken.

*“From the idea that the self is not given to us... there is only one practical consequence: we have to create ourselves as a work of art” (Foucault).*

*“What is philosophy if not a way of reflecting, not so much on what is true and false, as on our relationship to truth?... The movement by which one detaches oneself from what is true and seeks other rules - that is philosophy” (Foucault)*

## **Introduction**

Philosophical counseling is a newly emergent practice, informed by a variety of theoretical approaches, and it is being taken up in diverse ways in many different countries.<sup>1</sup> Yet the question I shall explore here is one that is pertinent across that range of differences, for it concerns the way in which this practice might avoid a fate for which the predominant modes of modern self-understanding seem to predestine it. This new movement prides itself on being the inheritor of a discipline that is more than two thousand years old. But how far can such a discipline be imagined to carry within it the resources to withstand the pressures endemic to the modern context into which it is being newly inserted as an ethical and spiritual teaching? Brought again to the market-place where, its practitioners are proud to remind us, Socrates once taught, is it possible that philosophers can hope to challenge their interlocutors in the way this mentor did? Or have the forces of the market-place increased in great and subtle ways since Socrates' time, such that the very terms of relationship between a Socrates and the polis to which he believed himself loyal as its staunchest critic, have disappeared? If philosophical counseling offers no more than daily sustenance for the narcissistic, who look to their counsellor for confirmation that they are truly interesting, original and fully justified in their self-concern; or if it only fills a need for comfort in all those who seek reassurance

against social indifference to their very existence as ethical beings, a recourse for individuals who seek to change themselves and not the circumstances of their isolation, it may yet have its virtues. But perhaps it is not quite entitled to lay claim to Socrates' legacy. In either of these aspects it is open to the charge that its practice is complicit with a '*cult of the self*' that constitutes a deeply problematic aspect of modernity, viewed both philosophically and politically.

The figure I shall turn to here in order to explicate the terms of that complaint, and to suggest ways in which the cult of the self might be challenged philosophically, is one who might appear - and has often been taken to be - entirely exemplary of it. Foucault is well-known for his critique of the 'normalising' and disciplinary aspects of the modern social sciences, particularly the theory and practical apparatus of psychiatry and psychology. In what are now thought of as 'middle period' works such as *The Birth of the Clinic* and *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault used a 'genealogical' approach to the history of the modern institutions of clinic and prison, showing how they arose on the basis of claims to knowledge structured by the distinction between normalcy and deviancy. His sceptical analysis of these institutions' claim to a moral legitimacy that derives from knowledge of the objects of their therapeutic treatment has obvious relevance for the emerging theory and practice of philosophical counseling, insofar as this begins from the premise that in modern psychology the person has been overly 'pathologised'.<sup>2</sup> Like this new movement, Foucault seems to be trying to recover individuality and difference from the sciences that have obliterated them. Moreover, Foucault's critique of the moralism that accompanies such terms of analysis led him in his late work towards a reconsideration of ancient Greek ethics, focussed on a self-relation he took to be

fundamental, the *'care of the self'*. This suggested a model of ethical life that was very different from and potentially opposed to the subsequent predominance of certain models of rationality. But since, like Nietzsche, Foucault spoke about it as a practice of self-creation, an 'aesthetics of existence' that countered the moralism of modernity, his views are very readily assimilated to certain existentialist themes - focussed on the importance of being true to oneself or 'authentic' in one's individuality. Thus it is often simply assumed that such interests align Foucault's work (as Nietzsche's has most frequently been aligned) with an irrationalist, subjectivist and relativist tendency in modern thought, and one highly favourable to what the rear-guard rationalists of modernity condemn as the very worst aspects of the cult of the self.<sup>3</sup>

Here I shall also oppose the modern 'cult of the self', but I shall argue for the importance of a more accurate delineation of the implications of Foucault's work in the 'genealogy of ethics' for articulating a point of view that is both critical of dominant modern images of rationality *and* avoids the irrationalist alternatives. Whilst Foucault is virulent in criticising the dominance of the model of the autonomy in modern moral thought, which sets up a figure he calls the 'juridical' subject as alone pertinent to moral and political life, he does not take the conventional recourse of linking the project of self-creation which ensues from the thought that 'the self is not given to us' either to radical freedom or to the ideal of authenticity. In these respects he seeks to distinguish the ethical practice of 'care for the self' from the existential versions dismissed by him as fostering only the 'Californian cult of the self' (GE, EF1: 271). Thus, I shall argue, it is not true that in displacing the centrality of the image of the rational life from ethical reflection and counterpoising to it the idea of an 'aesthetics of existence', Foucault simply opens the

way to subjectivism, relativism or egocentrism. Rather, he seeks to re-locate the 'ethical' subject in political life alongside juridical models of subjectivity. Foucault's 'aesthetics of existence' is not a purely private one, seeking only the beautiful stylisation of oneself as an individual. For although individuality is important, as is the idea that one turns to this kind of ethics out of personal choice, not out of some higher or universally valid imperative (GE, EF1: 254), the aesthetic pertinent to existence does not only have what, following Nietzsche, we can call an 'Apollonian' aspect; in addition, there is a 'Dionysian' aspect to aesthetics which relates the individual to various forms of 'otherness' causing its 'self-centeredness' to be lost. Becoming 'master of oneself' - in the face of desires, fears, or death, as well as in one's relations with those over whom one has power - is an important element of this aesthetics of the self, and suggests a very different pattern of ethical reflection from that implied by the ideal of 'autonomy' which links freedom with self-determination, or by 'authenticity' which links it with truth to oneself. 'Care for oneself', according to Foucault's description, was pursued in pre-Christian times within a highly structured social, political and moral context and in relation to a concern with others and with 'otherness' as such; it marries Apollonian and Dionysian aspects. It is in its capacity to acknowledge this embeddedness of persons in a relational context, from which individual subjectivity is inextricable, that the significance of Foucault's approach to ethics lies.

If it is an appropriate challenge for philosophical counseling to find ways of distinguishing its practice from the commodification of human relations that accompanies simply flattering individuals about their capacities and rights as subjects of freedom, then Foucault's late thought may be a valuable resource. In Foucault's version of 'self-

creation' there is no image of 'authenticity', no truth to oneself opposed to socially constituting factors. Unlike certain existentialist appropriations of Nietzschean ideas then, there is, for Foucault, no truth of 'authenticity' available to implicitly *legitimate* the primacy of the individual's decision. Thus the problem of the legitimacy of one's choices and actions, far from being dispensed with altogether or rendered strictly subjective by the refusal of universalist morality, is revealed by genealogical method to be highly complex, and answerable to many different compelling factors. The "kind of ethics which is an aesthetics of existence" (GE, EF1: 255) does not seek to transcend such difficult issues altogether, but attempts rather to engage with them in imaginative and vital ways, in the spirit of what Foucault describes as 'the practice of freedom', aimed at *mastery of oneself in the face of the claim of otherness*. And this, I take it, might provide us with a valuable image of the task of philosophical counseling on terms significantly different from its Californian cousins.

In the next section I first argue that in seeking to distinguish itself from neighbouring disciplines such as psychotherapy, the theory of philosophical counseling typically makes the conventional gesture of opposing autonomy to heteronomy, contrasting its own knowledge-based approach which respects the client as an equal, with the technologies of control exercised upon the patient with a view to restoring health. Thus it trades on an opposition that Foucault seeks to reveal as two sides of an antithesis constituting a single model of the moral subject. Foucault's suspicions concerning that model led him to an interest in the ancient Greek ideal of self-mastery. In the light of that ideal the task of self-creation and the notion that ethics could be an aesthetics of existence take on a very different cast from that lent to them by the ideal of authenticity; and, as I

argue in the final section, the potential political significance of philosophical counseling as a practice concerned to enhance ethical subjectivity begins to emerge.

### **Care of the Self as a Practice of Freedom**

One respect in which philosophical counseling has sought to distinguish itself from other therapies, or indeed, from therapy as such, is in terms of its intellectually direct methods as opposed to what are presented as the indirect methods of psychology, held to ‘objectify’ the patient who is to undergo a cure. Lou Marinoff’s slogan ‘*Plato not Prozac*’ encapsulates this point. However, the crudeness of much of the polemic against psychology in some recent writing makes one suspicious that it conceals both a certain lack of differentiation between psychological and philosophical approaches and the absence of a clear articulation of what philosophical counseling as a practice does perform if *not* therapy. This latter issue is not adequately addressed by pointing at the centrality, for example, of ‘conceptual clarification’ in philosophical approaches.<sup>4</sup> The significant question is how these are imagined to work towards some end; how that work can be distinguished from a therapeutic process and how the end itself differs from the ends of psychotherapy.

A careful treatment of this question appears in Roger Paden’s discussion of how to define philosophical counseling.<sup>5</sup> Paden takes it that both the methods and the ends of philosophical counseling differ significantly from psychotherapeutic approaches. Whereas the latter are governed by the ideal of restored health and thus the ‘normality’ of a patient (which he refers to as the ‘medical model’) philosophical counseling addresses an autonomous partner in dialogue: “*the client must... be treated as a fellow rational*

*being, one who must necessarily make claims about the world, understands that those claims might be true or false, and values truth*" (1998:13-14). Philosophical counseling is concerned with the reasons governing a client's action, not the causes, and offers a critical interrogation of their truth-value, consistency and implicit commitments (1998:10). A therapeutic process is, however, described as a proper supplement to this reflective exercise, in acknowledgement of a gap between insight into truth and the capacity to make that insight influence one's behaviour and emotions. Moreover, the client who fails to fit the description of the autonomous subject "should be referred to other types of counsellors" (1998:13). Where problems are the result of "psychodynamic, social or organic causes" (1998:13) these must be addressed before the client becomes a fit subject for philosophical exercises in reflection.<sup>6</sup>

This description of the distinctive character of philosophical counseling is structured by the conventional dichotomy of autonomous versus heteronomous conditions of subjectivity. What is claimed for philosophical counseling is its ability to enhance autonomy by applying the techniques of knowledge proper to an epistemically and morally responsible individual. From Foucault's point of view, however, the contrast drawn between a medical model, centred on the value of normality and a philosophical model, centred on the value of autonomy are two sides of the same coin, where normality serves as a precondition of autonomy. It is, in his view, the very terms of the *contrast* between the heteronomous subject of pathological forces and the autonomous subject of self-directed reflection (a subject liberated from the influence of power through his relation to truth) that need to be questioned. Following Foucault's lead, we might be more interested in the continuum between the modern medical model, which makes the patient



the ‘object’ of medical knowledges in the interest of restoring normality and the form of self-relation implicit in autonomy, which is also based upon a thorough knowledge of oneself and seeks conformity to reason. The interest of philosophical practitioners in encouraging clients to move towards the formation of a rational life plan, one that is internally coherent and true to the deepest values or most genuine aspects of oneself, seeks to establish or enhance the subject’s autonomy as a free and self-determining being. This is little different from what is sought in the most obvious reading of Freud’s remark on the purposes of psychoanalysis: “*Where id was, there ego shall be*”. Whether based on a medical or a philosophical model the aim is the restoration of the individual to himself, and the means are techniques of knowledge addressed variously at the pathological limitations of selfhood and the reflective conditions of the development of truth-based self-understanding.

The modern practices which, as Foucault puts it, relate ‘subjectivity and truth’, whether they use the techniques of psychotherapy, psychoanalysis, or of philosophical reasoning are alike in sharing this assumption about their essential task; for moderns, the imperative ‘know thyself’ is assumed to be primary in ethical reflection. By contrast, in ancient therapeutic writings, Foucault claims, knowledge of oneself was thought to follow from ‘care of oneself’, that is, from one’s ethical practices of ‘self-relation’. Foucault aims to recover that other perspective in order to question the assumption that self-knowledge exists in abstraction from what he calls ethical ‘self-relation’ and the techniques that have been developed to form, transform or disrupt subjectivity. It is, he writes,

*“a matter of placing the imperative ‘know thyself’ - which to us appears so characteristic of our civilization - back in the much broader interrogation that serves as its explicit or implicit context: What should one do with oneself? What work should be carried out on the self? How should one ‘govern oneself’ by performing actions in which one is oneself the objective of those actions, the domain in which they are brought to bear, the instrument they employ, and the subject that acts?” (ST, EF1: 87)*

Because he seeks to challenge the ethical primacy of the question and imperative of self-knowledge, Foucault does not ask whether it is *true* that, for example, we are subjects of ‘disguised desires’ as psychoanalytic theory holds. Rather, he is interested in the question of how the terms of such self-understanding themselves function in practices that *shape* our desires and constitute our identities.<sup>7</sup> His primary emphasis, then, is on how we ourselves are constituted in the pursuit of certain kinds of knowledge, or how these function as ‘technologies of the self’, rather than taking for granted that we pursue truth through, and for the sake of an autonomy that strictly desires and requires the objectivity of self-knowledge. It follows that there is considerable performative complexity to activities of ethical reflection, of which it must be possible to say that we are both constituted by them and that they provide us with resources for constituting ourselves. What Foucault carefully specifies as the *practice* of freedom requires adopting a creative stance towards the ‘knowledges’ - the forms of self-understanding - one has inherited or acquired and which *practically* constitute the form of subjectivity one lives out. A practice of freedom seeks to overcome what has become ‘frozen’ in the ethical self-relation, a wooden rather than an enlivening performance.

So in what ways would an approach to ethical life modelled in terms that placed ‘care of oneself’ prior to knowledge of oneself differ from the psychotherapeutic and philosophical models that make self-knowledge primary? Foucault places the question of what one ‘knows’ - or believes to be true - of oneself in immediate relation to the tasks of forming oneself as a person with a particular identity, or transforming oneself through ethical reflection and techniques of self-mastery. Knowledge thus becomes one aspect of a performatively complex process; it cannot ground an understanding of that process as if the recovery of a truth would ‘liberate’ the subject from false, and thus externally determining factors. The ideal of autonomy appears compelling against the background assumption that such liberation *restores the subject to itself*, enabling personal responsibility. Similarly - for it takes over exactly the same structure of reasoning - the ideal of authenticity appears compelling against the background assumption that the ends of life can only be set by looking within to find what is truly one’s own desire - and not a desire that has been falsely imposed upon one from outside. By contrast, to seek self-mastery on the terms Foucault suggests belonged to the ancient Greeks, is to aim neither at full responsibility for oneself, one’s actions and decisions, nor at the purification of one’s choices until these are based on strictly internal motivations, free from external influence. The problem of self-mastery appears as inextricable from the complex relations of power in which subjectivity is embedded, and to which the question of whether an influence comes from ‘within’ or ‘without’ is rarely fundamental. If the subject desires another, for instance, the problem is not to discern the ‘*truth*’ of that desire - to establish its origin either within the self proper or in influences upon the self, to discern whether it disguises or is disguised by another order of interests etc. - but rather to discover a

technique through which one will be able to take up an appropriate attitude to that desire in its relation to acts and pleasures. Thus not only are certain questions *not* raised about the desire which would seem pertinent from a modern perspective but the ethical relationship with a desire exists within a complex order of powers; and this is an order within which the *response* to the desire also remains. In other words, one is not required by ethical reflection to rise above the desire and analyze its parts according to the schema self *or* other, knowledge *or* power. One *does* attain by reflection a distance from oneself that is the space of potential self-transformation, but the knowledge of oneself gained in this context is to be regarded as emerging out of a broader set of ethical orientations and creative activity and not as the pure revelation of reason.

In distinguishing ‘the cult of the self’ - structured by the Sartrean value of authenticity (finding one’s true self) - from the ‘ancient culture of the self’ or ‘care for the self’ Foucault writes:

*“In his analyses of Baudelaire, Flaubert, and so on, it is interesting to see that Sartre refers the work of creation to a certain relation to oneself - the author to himself - which has the form of authenticity or inauthenticity. I should like to say exactly the contrary: we should not have to refer the creative activity of somebody to the kind of relation he has to himself, but should relate the kind of relation one has to oneself to a creative activity”* (GE: EF1:262).

So we should not make the question of ‘who one is’ a sort of bottom line - an inner nature or basic truth to which a person ought, in their ‘creative activity’, to refer as an essential limit or core of being. Rather, the articulation of ‘who one is’ takes place in relation to both knowledges and practices of asceticism without either of these providing it with an

ultimate grounding. “*Take care of yourself*” - and, on Foucault’s account, *this* is Socrates’ injunction, means: “*Make freedom your foundation through the mastery of yourself*” (ECSPF EF1: 301). But a further, and most important implication we can draw here is that the art of ‘self-creation’ is a practice performed in and through relations of power with others, for on Foucault’s view this is the *only* domain in which creativity becomes possible for the non-transcendent subject. The aesthetics of existence, on Foucault’s understanding, is an ‘elaboration of oneself as an ethical subject’, and that has far more to do with exploring the terms and possibilities of one’s relation to various forms of ‘otherness’ - other people, sociality, relations of power, domination, death - than it does with discovering the core of one’s own ‘inner truth’. This gives Foucault’s idea of what is at stake in the apparently strictly individual project of ‘the creation of oneself as a work of art’ an importantly political dimension.

### **Care of the Self as Relation to Otherness**

Let us first set the problem of the individual as subject of a therapeutic ‘cult of the self’ in its social context. On a genealogical reading of its conditions of emergence, the ideal of individual authenticity can be viewed as a response to the problem of a social order experienced as a form of domination. This experience is typically read as unduly constraining individuals’ capacities to be ‘truly’ themselves, but we might also read it as thwarting the individual’s capacities for playing an active role in negotiating the social terms of ethical life. As a response to the problem of domination, the ideal of ‘authentic life’ suffers from the fact that it accepts the terms of social relationship which alienated the individual from the social body in the first place, forcing him to consider himself as

primarily an isolated unit. This problem is compounded by the crisis of rational legitimation in modern societies which throws the individual back upon himself for the terms of ethical justification. If moral rules are not to be falsely imposed on him from the outside, the individual must seek legitimation for his actions and beliefs wholly from within; at the extreme his only criterion for judging action becomes the question of whether it *feels* right. This position is often identified with an 'aesthetic' orientation, where aesthetics is associated with pure subjectivism and the 'work of art' the self seeks to make of its life lends a subjectively pleasing order to what would otherwise appear as the sheer incoherence of desires. That picture, however, owes more to the terms of ethical reflection derived from the image of the 'rational life plan' and appropriate to the juridical subject of autonomy, than it does to the 'aesthetics of existence' described by Foucault or by Nietzsche before him.<sup>8</sup> In the image of ethical reflection derived from the blueprint of the 'rational life plan', it seems that the determination of valuable ends must be non-arbitrarily established; and where belief in the truth of those ends derived from faith in a higher order of being is lacking, faith in the inner truth of the authentic self fills its place, thus legitimating free decision as if this formed the whole of the subject's autonomy. The experience of finding a certain imperative compelling is automatically interpreted as though the subject were himself somehow responsible for this, or if he cannot so assume responsibility, that he exists in bad faith.

Against the background of this troublesome modern picture, one might consider how Foucault describes the agency of the 'self-forming' individual in the following remark:

*“If I am now interested in how the subject constitutes himself in an active fashion through practices of the self, these practices are nonetheless not something invented by the individual himself. They are models that he finds in his own culture and are proposed, suggested, imposed upon him by his culture, his society, his social group”* (ECSPF: ER1:291)

For Foucault, this relationship to one’s culture does not automatically suggest the individual’s domination by society as it does for the proponents of the ideal of ‘truth to oneself’. On the contrary, such relations of power are the medium through which practices of freedom can appear. The ‘models’ or ‘practices of the self’ variously ‘*proposed, suggested, or imposed*’ by cultural forces do not make the individual the means to social ends, thus compromising his sovereignty as end-in-himself; rather, they are to be understood as the conditions of any practice of freedom. Here we should note that Foucault’s analysis of domination suggests that whilst *power-relations* are ever-present and irreducible (so that we should not suppose that our freedom lies in transcending them), it is proper to speak of *domination* when the terms of interaction have become fixed and immovable. In a relation of *power* the relative positions of the parties are fluid and reversible; as Foucault remarks to his young interviewer in illustration of such reversibility - ‘you may begin by feeling nervous and intimidated because I am older and more authoritative than you - but in the course of the interview the positions may be reversed, and I find myself intimidated because I am old and you are young’. In a relation of *domination*, on the other hand, it is not merely the case, as we normally assume, that one party is a means to the other’s ends (an interpretation which derives its force from the ideal terms of autonomy for each individual); rather, the

problem lies in the way in which it has become impossible to *transfigure* the terms of the relationship. Thus, on this account, the form of ethical reflection associated with the ideal of authenticity and the ‘Californian cult of the self’ would perpetuate a form of domination; for, by withdrawing from the social contexts of responsibility and obligation, from the multiform sources of what the subject experiences as compelling, and from all the ways in which he or she is embedded in relations of power, this ethical practice of reflection on how to be true to oneself renders the terms of relation to others fixed and non-negotiable. This diagnosis has important ramifications for the ethical and political character of philosophical counseling.

The ‘care of the self’ that Foucault believes to be the central category of Ancient Greek ethical thought and practice (and thus a constituting feature of philosophy) is intimately bound up with a person’s relations to others. In explaining how it was that ‘self love’ as an element of such care could be treated without a moment of the suspicion that Christianity would later lavish on it, Foucault remarks on how care for oneself is linked in the pagan world with understanding who one is in the context of a social order; it could thus be believed that the person who ‘took proper care of himself’ would also not abuse his power over others (ECSPF: EF1: 288). If we connect this with the above remarks it seems that Foucault must implicitly regard the discipline of ‘care for oneself’ as a form of ethical reflection and practice which ensures that *the terms of power-relations are rendered negotiable and reversible*, hence structures within which agency is possible. Without making that connection quite explicit, Foucault again and again links his account of ‘care of the self’ to the terms of resistance implicit in relations of power, and thus to



the reduction of domination - thereby giving the practice a highly contemporary relevance.

For Foucault - and he is explicit on this point - philosophy is inseparable from politics (ECSPF EF1: 293). But he points to the way in which for the modern era, which understands society and individual as having inherently antagonistic interests, the place of the *ethical* subject in political life has been lost. Instead, from Hobbes onwards the dominant socio-political model is one in which the relations between state and individual are deliberately given fixed, inflexible forms of legitimacy; the modern subject of politics is conceived on the juridical model as a subject of rights and duties (ECSPF EF1: 294). In this political context, a renewed interest in ethical practice as 'care of the self' ought to concern itself with issues of '*governmentality*' a term Foucault uses to highlight the potential for re-conceiving what can take place between individuals or institutions who stand in irreducible relations of power to one another and to themselves (ECSPF: EF1: 300). We can say, then, that the ambition of re-introducing a notion of ethical subjectivity embedded in relations of power with others would lend a significant political edge to the practice of philosophical counseling. Moreover, we might use Foucault's 'aesthetic' model to lend this greater form.

In such a political context, to create oneself as a 'work of art' requires an interest in generating disturbance in the terms of conventional self-understandings and within relations of power; in ensuring a certain fluidity of practices is maintained, keeping open the chances that the terms of relationship can be renegotiated, reversed and transfigured. Foucault's own practice of the 'bias of paradox' is pertinent here, a practice that seeks to shake commonsensical assumptions and open the lives they constrain out towards the

possibility of aesthetic re-evaluation. The worst thing that one could do in an ethical practice of self-reflection, if these Foucauldian thoughts are correct, would be to pursue the truth of the self in the mode of reassurance for the legitimacy of one's freedom of choice; this is not an 'aesthetic' that Foucault could endorse for both theoretical and political reasons. On the contrary, his Nietzschean aesthetic of self-creation has far more to do with *maintaining the self in a creative relation to 'otherness'*, to all that binds the self or claims the self from without and is thus *constitutive* of the experience of subjectivity, setting terms we must work within and thereby master rather than striving to transcend. Subjectivity thus conceived is not, at its core, something whose 'truth' can be discovered; it is, rather, an on-going engagement with forces that shape and compel a person, forces that are open to resistance, to creative shaping, to mastery, but which are never entirely left behind. It is the relationship between such forces and the appearance of a consistent identity over time that a 'genealogy' studies, observing that whilst responsibility for such consistency indeed exists, it is a product of a certain effort on the part of the individual together with established patterns of interpretation of identity, rather than existing as the core of that individual's being, independently of history, experience and creativity. In this model, ethical reflection does not aim at the *reassurance* of the subject (as to the validity of choices emanating from what is 'authentically oneself') but at *empowerment* of the subject in its capacities to engage with all that is *other* to itself - death being a central topic of such ancient discourses as well as all the questions of self-relation that bear on one's relations with others. Moreover, we might note that the process of ethical reflection is essentially mediated by communicative interaction with another: "*one could not attend to oneself without the help of another... The care of the self ...*

*implies a relationship with the other... One needs a guide, a counsellor, a friend, someone who will be truthful with you” (ECSPF: EF1: 287).*

I would suggest that the role of the ‘other’ must be imagined here on terms somewhat different from those with which we are familiar in contemporary counseling practice; the ‘truthful’ other is not merely a non-interventionist ‘midwife’ to the subject’s own inner thoughts, but must actively challenge the subject from without by suggesting possibilities, images, or questions that the subject cannot regard as coming only from him or herself. The terms of relationship between these ‘friends’ in ethical reflection will not be governed by the mutually respectful distance of autonomous subjects; moreover, if this is not to be a relation of domination, the terms of relationship cannot be fixed and irreversible. The authority of the ‘guide, counsellor, or friend’ must be open to challenge; it must be possible that they themselves be called into question by the one whom they counsel.

In all these respects, the ancient model of ‘care for the self’ - interpreted perhaps less with a view to strict historical accuracy and more with a view to contemporary concerns, as *a practice of reducing domination by working within relations of power* - would provide an interesting challenge to some of the conventional terms upon which philosophical counseling understands itself. It is a more audacious demand than that placed upon the practice of philosophical counseling by a self-description in terms of the clarification and evaluation of life-plans as ‘rational’, or as ‘authentic to oneself’, to imagine a practice that sought freedom in the aesthetics of living as a subject of power, both responsive and creative in relation to the experience of the multiform claims of others, and of ‘otherness’ as such. This conception of the practice, however, also raises

questions of ethics that we would perhaps rather not face because of their difficulty in view of many of the assumptions that we ordinarily accept about how to judge relations of power; to regard 'counseling' undertaken on the terms sketched above as an *active* and *transfigurative* engagement between counsellor and client, never fully under the governance of some impartial 'reason' is disturbing to many of our most cherished ideas about the way in which both parties to such interaction maintain their independence and autonomy, and this raises issues that would deserve much more extensive examination than is possible here.

What I would stress, however, is the importance of the thought that, in the Nietzschean/ Foucauldian practice of philosophical counseling I have outlined, it is far from being the point that the client should emerge reassured about 'who he is' as an individual in isolation. The point, rather, is that he should have been brought to think creatively and responsively about his relation to others and to 'otherness'; it is in this activity that 'care for oneself' appears. Moreover, the possibility of the client's transformation through exposure to a 'discourse' - together with the possibility of the counsellor's also being transformed - appears as something to be affirmed. We should notice how that transfigurative moment is disguised by the idea that rational reflection is a quest for truth distinct from the transformation of habits, emotions and so forth that are required if the truth is to be incorporated into one's life (as in Paden's model). Indeed, it seems significant that much of the ethical sub-text of the current rules establishing the terms of appropriate interaction between counsellor and client can be read as governed by the imperative of *avoiding* such transfiguration. The counsellor is required to establish a kind of self-effacing presence, both for herself and for her discourse: You may not *change*

the client; You may only *facilitate* her in discovering herself. Admirable though that principle is in many ways, to the extent that it is implicated in a wider picture of the ethical life of radically separate individuals, believing that self-fulfilment and avoiding social domination are served alike by becoming more authentically oneself, it deserves for both ethical and political reasons to be questioned. To the extent that this principle aims to resist authoritative relations of dominance entering into the counseling practice it is valuable - though we should note that the gesture of self-effacement may simply function to withdraw the counsellor's practice from the question of the re-negotiability of relations of power inherent in it. To the extent, however, that this principle allows more broadly political conditions of domination to remain entirely unchallenged, or indeed, to be fostered by the 'private' practices of ethical reflection, philosophical counseling governed by an ideal image of autonomy or authenticity may be open to some characteristically Foucauldian charges: that it is rather more performatively complex than it would like to admit, and that it is implicated with a politics centred entirely on juridical subjects to the neglect of a potential for ethical development in this wider field. The self-creation Foucault describes can only take place in relation to a world that *exceeds* the individual self and its powers; thus the task of philosophical counseling, if we may draw on Foucault to suggest something of its radical potential, must seek to equip the self to engage with such a world. In this respect at the very least, it should aspire to go far beyond anything that can be imagined within, or assimilated by, the consumer-driven 'cult of the self'.

## Abbreviations:

EF1 = *Michel Foucault, Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth: Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984, Volume One* Ed. Paul Rabinow, Penguin Books, London, 2000

*All in the above volume:*

GE = '*On the Genealogy of Ethics*'

TS = '*Technologies of the Self*'

ECSPF = '*Ethics of the Concern for the Self as a Practice of Freedom*'

HS = '*The Hermeneutic of the Subject*'

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>See in particular Ran Lahav and Maria Da Venza Tillmans (1995) *Essays on Philosophical Counselling* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America) for an overview of the discipline.

<sup>2</sup> Lou Marinoff makes a particularly forceful use of this point in his (1999) *Plato not Prozac* (New York, Harper Collins)

<sup>3</sup> Habermas' diatribe against Foucault and Nietzsche in the *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* is exemplary of this interpretation, basing its argument on the claim that these thinkers remain within the terms of a 'subject-centred reason' they repudiate yet cannot escape. Yet this response says more about the assumption that the vision of autonomy in Kant's philosophy offers the only morally responsible version of selfhood in modern times, than it does about the necessary inadequacy of the idea of ethics as an 'aesthetics of existence' and the creation of one's life as a work of art. For contestation of Habermas' arguments see, for instance, the collection: eds. Maurizio Passerin D'Entreves and Seyla Benhabib (1996) *Habermas and the Unfinished Project of Modernity*, (U.K, Polity Press). Also Rudi Visker (1992) "Habermas on Heidegger and Foucault: Meaning and Validity in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*" *Radical Philosophy* 61 pp.215-20.

<sup>4</sup> See Ran Lahav (1993) 'Using Analytic Philosophy in Philosophical Counselling', *Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 10:2 for this characterisation of the differences between 'standard psychological' and 'philosophical' approaches.

<sup>5</sup> Roger Paden (1998) 'Defining Philosophical Counselling' *International Journal of Applied Philosophy* 12:1

<sup>6</sup> Compare Martha Nussbaum's account of the techniques of transfiguration as 'supplementary' to reason itself in (1994) *The Therapy of Desire* pp. 34-5

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<sup>7</sup> 'Techniques of the self' are described by Foucault as "the procedures, which no doubt exist in every civilization, suggested or prescribed to individuals in order to determine their identity, maintain it, or transform it in terms of a certain number of ends, through relations of self-mastery or self-knowledge" (ST, EF1: 87). Judith Butler is probably the most significant and interesting theorist to have developed this idea. See *Bodies that Matter*, Routledge 1993, for her most sophisticated version of how one might use this thought to interpret 'gender' as a category of identity.

<sup>8</sup> See my argument, Fiona Jenkins (1998) 'Performative Identities: Nietzsche on the Force of Art and Language' in eds. Salim Kemal, Ivan Gaskell and Daniel Conway *Nietzsche, Philosophy and the Arts* (U.K, Cambridge University Press).