

**Hanna Stępniewska-Gębik**

*Uniwersytet Pedagogiczny im. Komisji Edukacji Narodowej w Krakowie*

## **The care of the self as a condition for coping in a crisis situation. A practical aspect of M. Foucault's hermeneutics of the subject**

### **Streszczenie**

TROSKA O SIEBIE JAKO WARUNEK RADZENIE SOBIE W SYTUACJI KRYZYSOWEJ. PRAKTYCZNY ASPEKT HERMENEUTYKI PODMIOTU M. FOUCAULTA

Celem artykułu jest próba przedstawienia troski o siebie jako pewnej „praktyki siebie” urzeczywistnianej przez podmiot w sytuacji kryzysu. W artykule autorka odnosi się przede wszystkim do dwóch dzieł z ostatniego okresu twórczości Michela Foucault, tj. do *Historii seksualności* oraz *Hermeneutyki podmiotu*. Francuski filozof ukazuje w nich znaczenie troski o siebie (która uległa zmianom pod wpływem dominującego dyskursu naukowego) oraz podkreśla istotne znaczenie tej kategorii zawartej w hermeneutyce podmiotu. W tekście autorka przedstawia i interpretuje zarówno założenia teoretyczne analizowanej kategorii, jak i jej praktyczne implikacje wobec funkcjonowania ludzi w czasie kryzysu.

**Słowa kluczowe:** troska o siebie, hermeneutyka, podmiot, sytuacja kryzysu, Michel Foucault.

### **The care of the self in M. Foucault's works**

In his works, Foucault analyzes an approach towards oneself from a historical perspective, referring at the same time to the contemporary culture of the subject. And so the care of the self can be understood as a certain principle governing the rational functioning of an individual under the influence of a specific cultural reality. This means that an individual's care for oneself is subject to different interpretations of this concept and focuses on different areas

of his activity. In *The History of Sexuality* (1988), describing the history of the care of the self, Foucault shows how the meaning of the concept changed. However, it always remained related to the work of the subject. According to the French philosopher, the notion of the care of the self originated with Socrates and flourished at the beginning of our era, reaching an important point at the turn of the 5<sup>th</sup> century. The care of the self became at that time the basis of *paideia* specifying the way of becoming an ethical subject of one's conduct as a citizen, husband, wife, father, etc. Originally, the care of the self referred to the exercising of power and followed from an assumption that controlling oneself translates to controlling others. It is based on the political and social contexts, but is also part of the educational context. The educational context is connected with critical and crisis moments: the first one involves gaining awareness of the insufficiency of one's knowledge, or lack thereof, which generates the necessity of self-care, and the second one is the moment of undergoing subsequent developmental stages, including the transition from the influence of pedagogues to political activity, that is, leaving adolescence. According to M. Foucault, the care of the self is connected with another important element – the relation to erotica that disappears later. At this stage the care of the self differs considerably from other activities centered around the self, such as taking care of one's body or diet, since the care of the self concerns one's soul as the subject. Another distinguishing feature is a certain degree of mediation that occurs through a relationship with another person – a master, who plays an important role in the development of the care. According to Foucault, the care is associated with the knowledge of oneself, but also with the experience of oneself and the way in which the subject acts. In the subsequent stage of the development of the care of the self, it becomes the main and unconditional principle, that is, an imperative concerning everyone regardless of their social status. It also becomes detached from its previous objective: to exercise control over others. Now it refers to the aim that consists in an individual in such. Furthermore, the significance of knowing oneself decreases as it becomes merged with other numerous practices that serve a holistically perceived notion of care. The process of generalization and integration renders the care of the self the art of existence related to the entire life of every individual. The care of the self is no longer connected merely with the insufficiency of education or moments of crisis, but becomes an existential obligation of everyone. Practices related to the care no longer have a normative function only, but also corrective and liberating ones. A critical function of the care of the self also increases: "it has a more distinctly critical rather than training function" (Foucault 2005: 125) in relation to oneself, towards the cultural world

in which one lives, and towards others. An emerging meaning of the care of the self reduces the meaning of the transmission of values made by the family, and combines the care of the self with the criticism of the established order: the criticism of upbringing, masters, values, etc. Practices related to the care of the self are compared to medical activities. The third stage of the development of the care of the self coincided with the times of Christianity, when culture centered around issues connected with faith, revelation, and grace. This turned the care into a universal injunction directed to everyone, regardless of their status, nationality, and social standing. According to Foucault (2005: 120),

the relationship to the self, the work of the self on the self, the discovery of the self by the self, was conceived and deployed in the West as the route, the only possible route, leading from a universal appeal, which in fact can only be heard by a few, to the rare salvation, from which nevertheless no one was originally excluded.

The care of the self becomes a process the objective of which is to be yourself; however, this objective is reached only by a few.

It could be said that the care of the self follows from education, the relation with one's master aimed at being oneself, or from crisis moments that take place in an individual's life. The first example is indicative of formative, liberating and corrective functions of the care of the self, focusing on its developmental meaning. The second example of the care of the self, manifesting itself in crisis situations, stresses first and foremost its protective meaning, referring to its corrective function. Needless to say, in crisis situations the subject works on himself from a developmental perspective, however, the primary task is to protect resources he has at his disposal, so as to increase them accordingly. As long as the care of the self remains outside of *paideia*, educational and cultural discourse, the most common factors stimulating and encouraging work will be the crisis situations occurring in an individual's life.

### **The hermeneutics of the subject as the basis of the care of the self**

Foucault understands the care of the self as taking care of oneself, nurturing oneself, a virtue. It is also a rule based on the recommendation: know yourself. It provides a framework and a basis for justifications of this imperative. The French philosopher describes the care of the self as a certain *spiritus movens*, the driving force and constant restlessness experienced by an individual, "the sting of human existence".

Foucault describes the care of the self as a general standpoint, a way of perceiving things and behaving in the world, acting and interacting with others: in other words, as an attitude towards oneself and other people. It forces one to direct one's attention away from the outside and other people and towards oneself. Thus the care of the self implies the kind of attention directed inwards at the thoughts that come to one's mind. The care of the self always refers to certain activities that one carries out on oneself and thanks to which he takes responsibility for oneself and by which one purifies and transforms oneself. Hence the series of practices: meditation, examination of conscience, verification and checking representations which appear in the mind. Therefore we deal with an attitude towards the world, towards others and towards oneself, in which an important role is played by an insight into oneself that allows to undertake actions leading to the transformation of the subject.

The care of the self as described by M. Foucault constitutes the basis for the imperative of *gnothi seauton* (know thyself), thus taking an important place in the relation of the subject to the truth about oneself. Access to the truth is mediated through spirituality, understood as "the search, practice, and experience through which the subject carries out the necessary transformations on himself in order to have access to the truth" (Foucault 2005: 15). Thus understood spirituality has three characteristics: firstly, truth is never owed to the subject.

Spirituality postulates that the subject as such does not have right of access to the truth and is not capable of having access to the truth. It postulates that the truth is not given to the subject by a simple act of knowledge, which would be founded and justified simply by the fact that he is the subject and because he possesses this or that structure of subjectivity. It postulates that for the subject to have right of access to the truth he must be changed, transformed, shifted, and become, to some extent and up to a certain point, other than himself. (Foucault 2005: 15)

The first feature implies the next one: gaining access to truth is not possible without the transformation of the subject, without conversion which can be achieved in various ways. Foucault refers here to the movement of *eros* that negates the current status of the subject and causes the subject to rise to the truth, or the truth to descend on the subject to enlighten him. The second method of the subject's transformation is through self-work, self-formation for which one takes responsibility: a prolonged work of ascetics.

The third quality of spirituality is associated with the truth effect which is the result of the subject's effort in searching for truth and the truth's rebound impact on the subject.

The truth enlightens the subject; the truth gives beatitude to the subject; the truth gives the subject tranquility of the soul. (...) In and of itself an act of knowledge could never give access to the truth, unless it was prepared, accompanied, doubled, and completed by a certain transformation of the subject, not of the individual, but of the subject himself in his being as a subject. (Foucault 2005: 16)

In other words, in access to the truth there is something that transforms the subject himself and completes him in his being as a subject. The care of the self determines a set of spiritual conditions and self-transformations that are necessary for gaining access to the truth. In the modern way of thinking of the subject's access to the truth there appears one condition: the condition is to know oneself and nothing more than that. According to Foucault, it is the "Cartesian moment" that changed the history of the truth, the access to which can be gained through cognitive acts without the necessity of the transformation of the subject, that is, without additional conditions related to spirituality. Other conditions appeared: intrinsic and extrinsic conditions connected with cognitive aspects. The former include rules, formal and objective conditions, methods, the structure of the object, which allow access to the truth. The latter conditions include e.g. convictions that in order to gain access to the truth one needs to study, be educated, operate within a certain scientific consensus, not pretend anything, not let one's career conflict with the norms of an objective study, etc. All these conditions, the list of which may be very long, "do not concern the subject in his being; they only concern the individual in his concrete existence, and not the structure of the subject as such" (Foucault 2005: 19). Access to the truth is possible through the fulfillment of specific conditions operating in the subject's culture. However, this method, not related to the self-work and effort of the subject, does not bring about transformation but merely provides a possibility to verify the ways of gaining access to the truth and perhaps encouragement to expand one's possibilities so as to fulfill a greater number of conditions. This is somewhat reminiscent of the necessity to increase one's competences in terms of knowing oneself and caring for oneself. A question arises as to whether the subject who fails to fulfill these conditions stands a chance of gaining access to the truth about oneself? Is such knowledge unconditional?

Foucault holds that "the modern age of the relations between the subject and the truth begin when it is postulated that, such as he is, the subject is capable of truth, but that, such as it is, the truth cannot save the subject" (Foucault 2005: 19). The principle of gaining access to the truth has been detached from spiritual practices connected with self-work which the transforming subject carried out in his expectation that the truth would ensure enlightenment and

transformation. Obviously this does not refer to the truth in the form of scientific knowledge, the access to which is not associated with spirituality or the ethics of the care of oneself. According to Foucault, there is a type of knowledge which is not scientific in nature and yet includes certain elements of spirituality; namely, Lacanian psychoanalysis. Here, too, there are bound to be certain extrinsic conditions which allow the transposition of the subject in his access to the truth; nevertheless, the main issue addressed by Lacan is related to spirituality. His question concerns the price “the subject must pay for telling the truth, and the effect on the subject of the fact that he has said, that he can and has said the truth about himself” (Foucault 2005: 30). Searching for the truth is not only an effort that ends upon its discovery, but it continues in the form of difficulty that accompanies the confrontation with the truth. It could be sad that in order to know the truth, the subject must be capable of such efforts: efforts that become the condition underlying recognition and transformation.

Foucault further claims that self-work in the form of searching for the truth and self-understanding occurs upon the confrontation with the lack of knowledge that is ignorant of itself or appears as a result of accumulated mistakes, habits, addictions, or difficult situations that are unpredicted and generate the necessity to change one’s mode of functioning. A hermeneutical recognition inscribed in the care for the self always remains closely related to the other. Showing this relation, Foucault refers to the example of Alcibiades, who, in order to be able to manage *polis* first needs to effectively manage himself. He has to direct his attention to himself and know himself. “Taking care of oneself is entailed by and inferred from the individual’s will to exercise political power over others” (Foucault 2005: 36). Alcibiades also discloses certain deficiencies in terms of upbringing which in the course of reflections allow to place the care of the self on the education – knowledge axis. Additionally, the French philosopher refers to Seneca, claiming that evil does not come from the outside but is placed inside us. In the practice of the self we should therefore work towards gaining control over and getting rid of evil, which inclines one to focus one’s attention on the correction – liberation axis; here the relation with the other is slightly different than in the first case. When the individual is in distress or discomfort, the other becomes the source of support, as Seneca was in relation to Lucilius. One of the common elements of the care of the self is the presence of the other, without which such practice would not be possible. The other can be a teacher, a master, etc. Another axis presenting the care of the self refers to the subject and the other. The care of the self, on the one hand, strictly connected with the care for

others, later to become in Plato's thought a goal in itself, not leading to others. Man can care about the self for the self. "There is both (...) an absolutization (...) of the self as object of care and a self-finalization of the self by the self in the practice we call the care of the self" (Foucault 2005: 177). This presents different practices of the self in relation to different roles of the other. However, according to Foucault, the care of the self should lead to the care of the other and at the same time the latter cannot be realized without the former. In *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* he refers to the advice that Epictetus gives to a father who left his ill daughter. He did it because he loved his daughter very much and was devastated by the condition of her health. According to Epictetus, the father made a mistake because he took care of and thought about his daughter only, and thus in the end he could not cope with the pressure. In his willingness to take care of the daughter, he should have taken care of himself instead. Working on himself he would be encouraged to probe the feelings he had for his daughter, understand the meaning of his role in relation to her as her father. Foucault concludes that should the father learn to take care of himself properly, the daughter's illness will not throw him out of balance, and he will stay to take care of her.

### **The meaning of the care of the self in experiencing and solving crisis situations**

Crisis situations generate or emphasize the need to work on the self and care for oneself. However, they do not imply this necessity *per se*, instead, as it were, creating a situation in which one can learn to work on oneself and care for oneself, provided that the subject is capable of interpreting and understanding the meaning of new, often difficult and tragic, life circumstances. In case of the individual who fails to take care of himself and does not seem willing to learn the practice, various ways of behavior can be considered, such as escape, evasion, or intrapsychic processes (e.g. repression), which fail to resolve a crisis situation (James & Gilliland 2013, Dattilio & Freeman 2010). Another aspect that hinders or in fact makes it impossible for the individual to care for oneself is a substantial escalation of a crisis or a state of shock, rendering the individual unable to take any activities for oneself.

The moment of crisis should direct the subject's attention towards himself, as this is important in terms of experiencing crisis as well as acting in crisis, both for the individual affected by the crisis and the one who helps him. Focusing

on oneself, along with the hermeneutic work of the subject, may protect the individual from accepting extrinsic meanings, applying ready solutions to a crisis, or understanding events occurring in his life. Work on the self allows to generate the subject's own interpretations and strategies. There are also situations when the entity experiencing the crisis and offering help are the same person, as in Epictetus' example concerning the father.

A crisis requires the individual to focus on the self; consequently, we are approaching what Foucault refers to as the absolutization of the individual, yet placing the care on the subject – the other axis shows how these categories interweave, and how the attention focused on the self is limited. Firstly, we should consider the dependence of the care of the self on the master – the French philosopher often indicated that the master, or teacher, plays an important role in the development of practice as we learn from him the culture of the self. Also in the area of preventive actions we can refer to a certain type of leadership, without which the individual succumbs to a chaos of thoughts and emotions. Secondly, the aim of our actions often transcends the framework of existence and reaches towards others with whom we live, whom we help, and whose life depends on our functioning. Intervention activities in a crisis clearly emphasize the aspect of the care of the self, the aim of which is not the individual, but others. Rescue services are familiar with the saying that a good rescuer is a living rescuer, as the dead one cannot save anyone. All strategies are developed and conducted in the way designed to keep rescuers safe as their safety conditions the life of others. In the area of crisis intervention it is necessary to take care of one's needs and psychological wellbeing, which on the one hand serves to improve relations with others in crisis situations, and on the other hand protects against burnout and professional boredom. Therefore, it could be argued that the field of experiences related to crisis intervention generates premises for understanding the concept of the care of the self in a purely Platonic way: I care for myself in order to care for others. While people intervening as part of the activity they carry out may be more aware of the necessity of working on the self as a condition for working with others, people who in their lives see helping others and focusing on others as something natural often fail to reflect upon the work on the self. In consequence, this often adversely affects themselves and their goals as they are incapable of dealing with them in an adequate manner, or else they lose themselves in this activity and in other people, living outside themselves, outside self-knowledge and self-understanding. It is also worth considering a crisis situation in which the care for the self leads to the other in a very limited way, reducing this mediation. It is the confrontation with one's



death which the individual experiences in life-threatening moments, e.g. during terminal illness. With the gradual loss of independence and increasing suffering, the individual becomes more and more dependent on others. His care of the self assumes an adaptive function in relation to the approaching death. It seems that this situation brings us close to the absolutization of the individual in the aspect of maximal concentration on the self, accompanied by the finalization of the care of the self for the self. Of course, even in the face of death we are not devoid of relations with others, and the care for the self may dictate the care for the other who will live with a sense of loss. Parting with the loved ones, explaining the approaching death of the parent to the child, serve as the manifestations of the care for the other. Therefore, it could be said that in such extreme life-threatening circumstances we do not deal with explicit absolutization and self-finalization of the individual from the perspective of the care of the self, but rather with a certain rapprochement to such a radical dimension of the care. Depending on a crisis situation, the care of the self will assume different, case-specific positions on the subject – other axis, as well as on other axes: education – knowledge and correction – liberation. Oscillation of the care between knowledge and education seems to be subordinated to the developmental goal; this aspect constitutes an important educational issue as it presents the meaning of both knowledge and education in carrying out the care of the self. The care of the self is based on education and knowledge (including the knowledge of oneself), which allows the individual to undertake actions fostering his development and indicates that such behaviors can be learnt, which again seems effective in crisis situations. This means that what fosters development can also have a protective function as it consists in accumulating a certain potential and resources that individual can use. Depending on the type of a situation and the type of a crisis, the care of the self may fulfill diverse functions, ranging from corrective, through protective, to liberating and developmental functions.

## References

- Dattilio F., Freeman A. 2010. *Cognitive–Behavioral Strategies in Crisis Intervention*, The Guilford Press, New York–London.
- Foucault M. 1988. *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 3, trans. R. Hurley, Vintage Books, New York.
- Foucault M. 2005. *The hermeneutic of the subject: lectures at the College de France 1981–1982*, trans. G. Burchell, Palgrave Macmillan, New York.
- James R., Gilliland B. 2013. *Crisis Intervention Strategies* (7<sup>th</sup> international edition), Brooks/Cole, Cengage Learning.