

SUBJECTIVITY AND CONVERSION IN THE FOUCAULTIAN THOUGHT OF THE CARE OF SELF¹

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ABSTRACT. In this paper, we discuss issues related to Foucault's theoretical process which lay the groundwork for his later thought. Then, we discuss Foucault's notion of the descriptive category "conversion to the self" (*se convertere ad se*), as well as its influence on the ethical-aesthetic prism of subjectivation. We, then, introduce the notion of subject that is present in early Foucauldian ontologies, which, according to Deleuze (1986/2006), refer to the axis of knowledge and the axis of power. Within this theoretical framework, which encompasses man as an effect of subject/object, psychology is one of the main targets of Foucault's investigation and criticism and serves as an example of what modern science has conceived as a generalized idea of Man. Finally, we explore the conceptual web of The hermeneutics of the subject, in which Foucault describes a new dimension of subjectivity: "the relation to self". In the 1982 lectures, this dimension stems from a genealogy of Western practices that connect subject and truth and are determined by the precepts *epimeléia heautoû* (Care of the Self) and *gnôthise autôn* (Knowledge of the Self). The philosophical lines derived from each of these principles result in a specific idea of subject. Given this scenario, Foucault turns toward the "self-subjectivation" perspective of the Greco-Roman conversion to the self, which is part of the spectrum where the care of the self prevails.

Keywords: Subjectivation; conversion to the self; Foucault.

SUBJETIVIDADE E CONVERSÃO NO PENSAMENTO FOUCAULTIANO DO CUIDADO DE SI

RESUMO. No presente artigo, discutimos questões do fluxo teórico foucaultiano que preparam o terreno para seus trabalhos tardios, e analisamos, em seguida, o uso nocional que Foucault faz da categoria descritiva denominada conversão a si (*se convertere ad se*), bem como a sua influência no prisma ético estético do processo de subjetivação. Introduzimos a discussão da ideia de sujeito nas primeiras ontologias foucaultianas, referentes, segundo Deleuze (1986/2005), ao eixo do saber e ao eixo do poder. Neste contorno teórico, que abrange o homem como efeito de objeto/sujeito, a psicologia se destaca dentre os alvos da investigação e da crítica de Foucault, sendo utilizada como exemplo daquilo que as ciências modernas produziram enquanto ideia

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naturalizada de homem. Exploramos, por fim, a trama conceitual de A hermenêutica do sujeito, em que Foucault (1982/2010) alinhava uma nova dimensão da subjetividade, qual seja, a da relação consigo. Nestas preleções de 1982, ela aparece a partir de uma genealogia das práticas ocidentais de conexão entre sujeito e verdade, determinadas pela alternância entre os preceitos *epimeléia heatoû* (Cuidado de Si) e *gnôthi seautón* (Conhecimento de Si). Cada linha filosófica desdobrada destes princípios determina uma concepção de sujeito, e, nesse cenário, o filósofo se aproxima da perspectiva da “autossujeitização” encontrada na conversão a si greco-romana, esta última inserida no espectro de predominância do cuidado de si.

Palavras-chave: Subjetivação; conversão a si; Foucault.

SUBJETIVIDAD Y CONVERSIÓN EN EL PENSAMIENTO FOUCAULTIANO DEL CUIDADO DE SÍ

RESUMEN. En este artículo, discutimos cuestiones del flujo teórico foucaultiano que preparan el campo para sus trabajos posteriores, y analizamos, en seguida, el uso nocional que Foucault hace de la categoría descriptiva denominada conversión a sí (se convertere ad se), bien como la influencia en el prisma ético y estético del proceso de subjetivación. Introducimos la discusión de la idea de sujeto en las primeras ontologías foucaultianas, que hacen referencia, según Deleuze (1986/2005), al eje del saber y al eje del poder. En este soporte teórico, que incluye el hombre como efecto de objeto/sujeto, la psicología se destaca entre las metas de la investigación y de la crítica de Foucault, siendo utilizada como ejemplo de aquello que las ciencias modernas produjeron mientras idea de naturaleza del hombre. Exploramos, por fin, la trama conceptual de la hermenéutica del sujeto, en que Foucault (2001/2010) presentaba una nueva dimensión de la subjetividad, cual sea, la de la relación consigo. En estas clases de 1982 ella aparece a partir de una genealogía de las prácticas occidentales de conexión entre el sujeto y la verdad, determinadas por la alternancia entre los preceptos *epimeleia heatoû* (cuidar de sí) y *gnôthi seautón* (conocimiento de sí). Cada línea filosófica desdobrada a partir de estos principios determina una concepción de sujeto, y, en ese escenario, el filósofo se acerca de la perspectiva de la “auto subjetivación” encontrada en la conversión a sí greco-romana, en esta última inserida en el espectro de predominancia del cuidado de si

Palabras clave: Subjetivación; conversión a sí; Foucault.

Introduction

The last movements of Michel Foucault's thought are known as the foundations of an Aesthetics of Existence, or also of an Art of Existence. These conceptions often appear in the areas of current psychology that problematize the idea of subjectivity. Far from representing the sacredness of his work, or an ethical program left by the French philosopher, these notions can be understood, however, as references to a complex, unfinished theoretical web deserving detailed conceptual works. The theme of aesthetic existence is based on the philosopher's lectures on the conversion to the self, carried out in 1982, at Collège de France. These courses were published in the book entitled *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, and denote a basic exercise, on the part of Foucault, in the

construction of a new notion of subject ontologically insubordinate to the concepts of knowledge and power. In the present study, we discuss issues of the Foucauldian theoretical flow that prepare the ground for his later works, and then analyze the Foucault's notion of the descriptive category called conversion to the self *se convertere ad se*)⁴, as well as its influence on the ethical-aesthetic prism of subjectivation.

We begin with a brief discussion of the subject idea in the first two Foucauldian ontologies, referring, according to Deleuze (1986/2006), to the axis of knowledge and the axis of power. This requires dealing with the manner in which man was created as the object of knowledge and the epistemological basis of that creation; the way in which Foucault elaborated the idea of subject as an effect of the games of power and knowledge between modern science and disciplinary mechanisms; and finally, how the idea of resistance could open the way to the methodological transformation that the philosopher outlined in his later works. In this theoretical context, which covers man as object/subject, we will see psychology stand out as the target of investigation and criticism on the part of Foucault. It can be used as an exemplification of what the modern sciences have produced as a naturalized idea of man and as the dominant modality of subject/object relation.

We explore, from this, some fundamental principles involved in the conceptual web of *The hermeneutics of the subject*. From the point of view of these classes, Foucault aligned a new dimension of subjectivity, that is, the "relation to the self". In this course of 1982, still implicit, it appears from a genealogy of the Western practices of connection between subject and truth, determined by the alternation between the precepts *epimélēia heautoû* (Care of the Self) and *gnôthi se autôn* (Knowledge of the Self). Foucault presents three lines of analysis: a) Platonic texts as the matrix of both principles; b) the Hellenistic and Roman traditions, and the predominance of the care of the self; c) the devaluation of care and the sovereignty of knowledge in Christianity and modernity. We will see that each line determines a conception of subject, and that, in this scenario, Foucault approaches the perspective of the "self-subjectivation" derived from the Greco-Roman conversion to the self, the latter inserted in the spectrum of predominance of the care of the self.

At the end of our analyses, we draw considerations about the resonances of Foucault's work in psychology, especially with regard to the property of true discourse on the subject, given the difference between the subject/object mode of relationship consolidated in this science and the salient way in Foucault's thinking.

Man as object

Foucault's initial thinking problematizes the set of relations between certain discursive practices that have as result the creation of sciences, epistemological figures and formal systems of knowledge, each of the elements included in the singularity of its historical context and called together as *epistêmes* (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1995). From this perspective, man as a scientific object is not the fruit of a historical linearity, or the progress of a natural evolution. This idea diverges from the traditional conceptions of modern science, which have

⁴ The class of February 10th, 1982 begins most of Foucault's analyses of conversion, a category he found in every Western philosophy. Conversion to the self [*conversion à soi*] indicates a specific category of Greco-Roman culture. Foucault (2001/2005) explains that both conversion and conversion to the self have never been conceptually defined in Western philosophy. This also applies within Foucault's own theory, in which the terms do not appear as concepts. Starting from this background, we chose to call the conversion to self a descriptive category, conveying to it the term *se convertere ad se*, since, among the various historical forms of writing this category, Foucault privileged the one found in the texts of Seneca. This Stoic philosopher was the basis of Foucault's study of conversion to self and point of comparison in relation to the Platonic conversion [*epistrophê*] and to Christian conversion [*metánoia*].

resulted in the creation of the human sciences. Foucault moves through a series of modes of objectification of the human being: that of the subject of discourse, as in grammar and linguistics; that of the working subject, as in economics; and the objectification of the subject of nature, as the living being of biology. In this context, he demonstrates that specific elements of discourses about man, such as soul and thought, detach themselves from philosophy and, by means of a positivist enterprise, become a problem to be investigated “(...) by the human sciences in a clear, lucid and positive way” (Foucault, 1965/1999b, p. 200, our translation).

Starting from this theory of knowledge, we can visualize the following panorama: in the first moment, the human sciences are marked by the conceptions of the natural sciences and the man is described by the way of biological laws like a being endowed with innate and objective characteristics. Within this framework, certain ontological conceptions of naturalizing content emerge, such as those found in psychology: “the individual”, the “personality”, the “soul” (Foucault, 1957/1999a, our translation) emerge. Secondly, a range of thinkers question the determinant role of nature and defend the “(...) discovery of a text to be interpreted, the discovery of a kind of absolute soil (...)” (Foucault, 1965/1999b, p. 203, our translation) of what would be truly human. From this new theoretical framework, psychoanalysis, structuralism, phenomenology and hermeneutics seem to stand out for Foucault (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1995).

Such currents of thought appear in these first movements of Foucault for two reasons: for their importance in the formation and development of the human sciences, and for their difference with Foucault’s own thought. In short, they all emphasize the perspective of a man who is at once the object and subject of knowledge. They postulate formal regent laws of mankind behavior and creations as well as an inner and interpretable sense of being, in addition to situating the subject as the autonomous center and donor of all senses (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1995). Foucault’s research, from the beginning, does not establish any kind of universal about the subject, but, instead, innovate and postulate the human object as a creation of modern knowledge.

From *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1975/1995) goes beyond the relation between the knowledge, which comes to be articulated to the concept of power. We now deal with a kind of co-relation, co-creation between power and knowledge: in the nineteenth century, the sciences went through an “(...) epistemological ‘thaw’ through a refinement of power relations (...)” and generated certain “(...) multiplication of the effects of power through the formation and accumulation of new forms of knowledge” (Foucault, 1975/1995, p. 224). In order to formulate this theory, Foucault deals with the change generated in the criminal technique from the humanistic reform and investigates the “dividing practices” (Foucault, 1995, p. 231, our translation), which produce dichotomies that end up objectifying man: insane/sane, normal/delinquent etc. In *Discipline and Punish*, we read that modern legal power has renounced the simple task of manipulating the body of the condemned in favor of sophistication and the moralization of punishment, direct consequences of the reform. To this end, this power is used by a series of technicians of the emerging sciences, who replace the executioner of yesteryear. The technicians perform the function of mediating the justice/criminal relationship, acting directly on the bodies and breaking the legal power to punish. As Foucault sums up:

(...) it is this whole technology of power over the body that the technology of the “soul” – that of the educationalists, psychologists and psychiatrists – fails either to

conceal or to compensate, for the simple reason that it is one of its tools. (Foucault, 1975/1995, p. 29).

From this game between knowledge and power, in modernity, it is outlined the consolidation of the disciplinary society (Foucault, 1975/1995), and with it a kind of mutation in the vision about the offender who moves from the analysis of the intentions and wills of the so-called delinquents and goes to the examination of its natural quality, its past, its genetic history. The subject is then individualized, naturalized as an object by scientific discourses under the rubric of the notion of delinquency. In the forging of this naturalization, the clinical sciences are highlighted, especially those referred to by the “psycho” radical, to which Foucault refers incessantly as an example. Their mechanisms rescue biographical data of the inmates in search of the psychological, genetic and natural causalities of their life condition, their acts and thoughts. It establishes in this knowledge a type of subject/object bond, in which the “psy” professional has the ability to unveil and tell the truth about the symptom and the psychological structure of the subject, which, without the help of this Other, would be unable to know itself.

The subject as effect

So far, we have followed Foucault’s movement of conceptual demythification of the hegemonic status of modern man, by postulating it as something different from any essence of nature or knowledge, since it is the creation of a mechanism of knowledge/power. With the publication of *History of Sexuality volume I*, known as *The Will to Know* (Foucault, 1976/1978), Foucault’s research on the clinical sciences converges to the analysis of the sexual sciences. These, according to Foucault, adopt aspects of the disciplinary device such as examination, clinical hearing and the production of psychological dossiers, but also inherit and use mechanisms of Christian thought. The connection between clinic and sexuality is correlated with the spiritual direction of the Catholic pastoral, within which the exercise of putting into discourse properly “mental” contents that later are transformed into pathology by science. This is because the Christians of the Counter-Reformation period understood the body from the idea of the flesh and understood it as the source of the sins, which were “psychologized” at the moment when the importance was not given to the act itself, but to the poorly defined restlessness of “desire” (Foucault, 1976/1978).

The idea of desire is a pillar for the kind of thinking that conceives the truth as located in the inner reaches of being and that restricts the ability to know it to some figure who holds the specific knowledge for it. This conception is used by sexual science as the point of connection between truth and subject, and as an object of investigation and control. From this mixture of Christian confession and modern sexual science comes the device of sexuality, that is, a technology of action of power/knowledge in the modern West. It brings the whole “perversion-heredity-degenerescence” (Foucault, 1976/1978, p. 118) - notions linking sexual pathologies to hereditary issues - for the family nucleus as an extension of “sexual technologies” (Foucault, 1976/1978, p. 118), and consequently generates positivities. These would be the very subjects of sexuality, for example, the woman saturated with sexuality, called hysteric; the child and the evils of masturbation; or the correct form of procreative conduct.

In short, the whole mechanism that encompasses legal forces, sciences and medical, psychiatric, psychological and psychoanalytical practices is understood by Foucault as a source of production of subjects: “The immense labor to which the West has submitted generations in order to produce - while other forms of work ensured the accumulation of

capital - men's subjection: their constitution as subjects in both senses of the word" (Foucault, 1976/1978, p. 60).

We observe in Foucauldian thought that up to volume I of *History of Sexuality* the question of subjectivation is conditioned to its relation to power. This book delineates what he describes as his third research plan, which would be the subject (Foucault, 1995), but still locates it within the second ontological axis postulated by Deleuze (1986/2006) for the Foucauldian theory, power, between the axis of knowledge and the axis of the self.

From resistance to deadlock

Power is defined by Foucault (1976/1978) as a diversity of relations of force that constitute the domain where they appear and at the same time are constituted by it. However, the French philosopher abstains from a strictly repressive definition of this concept and elucidates its creative character. In this direction, the analysis of the productions of power must start from "local centers of power-knowledge" (Foucault, 1976/1978, p. 98), which would be the subject/object relations where they are transmitted, in a constant come and go, modes of subjection and forms of knowledge, as for example in the relation of the psychologist with a patient or in the relation of the master to the subordinate.

At the same time as the production of subjects as effects of the action of power appears in his works, we read Foucault's talk of the idea of resistance. It plays an important role in the processes of subjectivation and in the creation of power itself: "(...) where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power." (Foucault, 1976/1978, p. 95). Hence, it is the movement of the centers of clash of power with the resistance that would perpass the bodies of the individuals and register modifications in them. The subject can thus be considered a "derivative" of this set of forces (Deleuze, 1990/1992a, our translation).

Nonetheless, if we think of subjects as forms established by power, we can conceive them as well, and from resistances, as modifiable forms. It is as if this notion appears in *The Will to Know* as an active force, but still dependent on the action of power. The origin of the points of resistance is not clear (Deleuze, 1990/1992a; 1986/2006, Cardoso Jr., 2005), and in the quest for what might escape from power, Foucault (1977/2003) comments on his own thinking: "(...) always the same inability to go beyond the line, to move to the other side (...) always the same choice, on the side of power, what it says or what it means to say (...)" (Foucault, 2003/1977, p. 04-05, our translation). And it is this conceptual philosophical deadlock, described by the philosopher himself that leads us to Foucauldian lectures on the practices of self.

Modifications: subjectivation as a practice of self

The introduction to volume II of *History of Sexuality*, book published in 1984, eight years after volume I, contains the item *Modifications*. In this section, Foucault (1984/1985) presents aspects of his previous course and the changes in his new project. According to the author, the analyses of knowledge allowed him to dispense with the dichotomy between science and ideology, and the thinking of devices and relations of force contributed to a comprehensive view of power. However, for Foucault (1984/1985), "(...) It appeared that I now had to undertake a third shift, in order to analyze what is termed "the subject" (p. 06). In the wake of *The Will to Know*, but to distinguish from it, his research focus shifted from the genealogy of the "desiring man" (Foucault, 1984/1985, p.12) to the analysis of

subjectivation practices that extrapolate the sphere of sexuality. In the course *The hermeneutics of the subject* (Foucault, 2001/2005), we deal mainly with activities such as reading, writing, listening and dialogue. The latter concern the modes of discursive relation between master and disciples, and serve for Foucault to problematize the self-Other ties in the process of Western subjectivation.

Foucault reactivates in his work the character of essay, defined by him as an “(...) exercise of oneself in the activity of thought (...)” (Foucault, 1984/1985, p. 13). This style comes from the philosopher’s emphasis on the notion of “spirituality” (Foucault, 2001/2005, p. 17), which consists in exercising thought to generate transformations in the modes of existence and to demarcate this activity as a function of philosophy. The focus of the analysis of these classes of 1982 was also chosen through the concept of “event in thought”, which establishes “(...) when a cultural phenomenon of determinatescale actually constitutes within the history of thought a decisive moment that is still significant for our modern mode of being subjects” (Foucault, 2001/2005, p. 09). These statements are important because they indicate two qualities of *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*: both its content presents massively questions of philosophy from the angle of spirituality, a historically innovative perspective and that removes Foucault from traditional historiography, as well as the position of the philosopher in ministering the course demonstrates an exercise of problematization that aims to modify the forms of existence rather than to perform some ideal theoretical program (Muchail, 2009, 2011).

The content and form of *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* are therefore a genealogy (Foucault, 2001/2005): the initiative of investigating the continuities and discontinuities of the present in relation to practices and thoughts that underlie our ways of living and pointing for the possible ruptures in relation to these same conditions of subjectivities, ruptures that are only pertinent and desirable as they are reflected on the history itself. The specific movement of the course of 1982 is the comparison between two social and philosophical principles that have become different paths of access of the subject to the truth in the West: *epimeléiaheatoû* (Care of the Self) and *gnôthiseautón* (Knowledge of the Self). When saying that Foucault reconfigured the perspective of the history of philosophy, it is under the idea that: a) the tradition of Western thought valued the path of the Knowledge of the Self to the detriment of the pathway of the Care of the Self (Foucault, 2001/2005); and b) Foucault, strategically, placed the latter in focus (Foucault, 1984/2006a; Muchail, 2009, 2011). It is from this study that we can gather elements to think about an idea of subjectivation proper to Foucauldian thought and to understand where conversion to selfis introduced.

In order to perform the work of relating and comparing *epimeléiaheatoû* and *gnôthiseautón*, we start with what Foucault (2001/2005) calls the “paradox of Platonism” (p. 77). This sentence indicates that Plato’s texts made possible the creation of Care of the Self and boosted the exercise of a philosophy as spirituality, but at the same time directed this spirituality to subordination by the imperative of the Knowledge of the Self. It can be observed two paths: one starting from this Platonic matrix, distancing from care and resulting in Christian and modern philosophies, where knowledge predominates; another that comes from this same matrix, gains strength in the first two centuries of our era, has long been discredited by hegemonic Western thought and yet seems to be revived by a group of thinkers in which we can insert Foucault (Foucault, 2001/2005; Muchail, 2009, 2011)⁵. Each of these ways constitutes a specific conception of

⁵ According to notes of the own Foucault (2001/2010), we can include in this group of thinkers authors such as Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Hegel, Marx, Lacan, Heidegger, and his contemporary Pierre Hadot, who had great importance in his latest research.

subject and, consequently, determines a kind of relationship with truth and practice, as well as a type of subject/object relationship.

The starting point of *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* is the appreciation of elements taken from the Platonic text *Alcibiades*, indicated by Foucault as the first global theory of care of the self (Foucault, 2001/2005, p. 31). In this text, Socrates appears as a fundamental figure. He has the function of inciting the other Athenian citizens to take care of themselves, or to occupy themselves with themselves, as it does with *Alcibiades*. Here, care of the self precedes the government of the city and the government of others. It is a practice that complements certain deficits in the education of young people and depends on the erotic relation with some master. It has, therefore, an ethical, pedagogical and political dimension. From the Socratic image, we can also say that care of the self is a function, a position and a role. Muchail (2009) lists these traits as delimitations of this old principle, and that determine its purpose, its recipient and the amplitude of possible relations. In the foundations of this care it can be found, in *Alcibiades*, a characteristic that later will give forces to *gnôthiseautón*, causing it to surpass the *epimeléiaheatoû*. It can be identified in the following comment by Foucault (2001/2005): "(...) the movement by which the soul turns to itself is a movement in which one's gaze is drawn to "aloft" - towards the divine element, towards essences and the supra-celestial world in which they are visible" (p. 495). In this philosophical line, therefore, care of the self means recognizing the divine in itself and seek to overcome ignorance.

Such an objective causes care to point, in the last, to knowledge. However, in the Platonic texts, the relation between both principles is still inextricable, so that the question of the truth of the subject is not separated from its practices of life. Knowledge and conduct, until then, are connected. After Platonism, in the Hellenistic and Roman period, care of the self reached its peak as the main driver of technologies of the self. This precept underwent, however, a series of devaluations that ended by almost erasing it.

The Foucauldian attempts to understand such devaluation can be separated into two sets of hypotheses. The first concerns the moral aspect and concerns some incongruities that have affected the care of the self. For Foucault (2001/2005, 1984/1985), the terms and vocabularies used in the spectrum of this precept provided the confusion made by the philosophical tradition, which related them to the character of an individualism, a valuation of private life. By this bias, rejected by Foucault, it was postulated the idea that the West of the first and second centuries emphasized individual freedom as a restraint to the fall of the philosopher's political and social role, fruit of the crises and conflicts of the time. In agreement with Foucault, the view was expressed that Hellenism would have sedimented a philosophy unconcerned with politics. Another aspect of this problematic is that the increase of the austerity of the practices of occupying themselves with themselves has subsequently generated two opposing extremes, which are the Christian's renunciation of the self and the modern collective obligation, which have long buried the *care of the self*.

The second group of hypotheses refers to the plane of the history of truth in philosophy under the imperative of knowledge, which indicates the "Cartesian moment" (Foucault, 2001/2005, p.22) as the epistemological rise of the *epimeléia* (care). From this standpoint, it is in Descartes that the notion is fixed that the subject does not transform, but reaches the truth of its essence by the ways of rationality, by the ways of knowledge. This would be the milestone from which all Western modernity is directed. From this perspective, which goes back to the tradition of consolidated thinking about the knowledge of the self, we can affirm that the subject is defined by the ways of a representative philosophy and has as

characteristic to be bearer of the truth within its own structure. The subject thus appears as a subject endowed with an essence linked to an act of knowledge (Foucault, 2001/2005).

Unlike this philosophical domain, where knowledge prevails, the techniques of the self of the first and second centuries of our age carry characteristics that give rise to another conception of subject. Knowledge no longer appears as the north or the center of care practices, and the question of overcoming ignorance is left behind. Disregarding this background, the exercises serve for liberation and for correction, converging for the subject to overcome what is considered the worst state of servitude, the voluntary servitude (Foucault, 2001/2005; Muchail, 2009). To be occupied with oneself, in this period, is a practice that has for objective the very act of the exercise. In relation to what emerged in the figure of Socrates, change the purpose, the recipient and the range of possible relationships (Muchail, 2009). Taking care of the self does not mean reaching anything like the other or the city. This practice is no longer restricted to young people, since it is now conceived as a lifelong way of life. In the Culture of Self, in addition, relationships come out of duality and eroticism involving master and disciple, and begin to permeate other spheres such as friendship, family, and professions, both individually and institutionally and collectively.

In this context, the connection between subject and truth occurs in another way: it starts from the need to construct "truth-telling" (Foucault, 2001/2005, p. 231) similar to equipment and armor, capable of helping us according to the advent of the vicissitudes of life. It should be specified that such discourses do not cover the deciphering of thoughts, representations or desires; are fruits of our relationship with the world; are only at our disposal according to the state in which we find ourselves to dispose of them, and only come through a growing appropriation. All the facets of this path of access to the truth distance us from the subject's subjection to a primordial law and to a figure of maximum wisdom. Foucault (2001/2005) states:

It involves coming together with oneself, the essential moment of which is not the objectification of the self in a true discourse, but the subjectivation of a true discourse in a practice and exercise of oneself on oneself (p. 333).

We understand, therefore, that according to the philosophy of the first and second centuries, the subject accesses the truth through the elaboration of something that does not have *a priori*. The tools of this creation are correlated by Foucault with the notion of "*askésis*" (Foucault, 2001/2005), which he sometimes called philosophical askesis and which determines the specific technologies of that time.

The methods used in this philosophical askesis include the importance of hearing, the value of writing, and the relevance of memorization exercises. There are three types of function of this askesis: criticism, where correction comes in; the struggle, where truth-telling are inserted; and the therapeutic function, which brings philosophy closer to medicine rather than pedagogy, and directs it to the task of curing the "diseases of the soul" (Foucault, 2001/2005, p. 496). We can say that this division consists of a form of organization of Foucault's analyses on the specificities of the practices of the Culture of Self. From these themes other discussions arise that either only cover one of the techniques of the self or are shown as essential points to think all the construction of Western ethics. Among the latter, stands out the question of conversion, which is described by Foucault as one of the most important practices of our tradition, and, more specifically, the conversion to the self (*se convertere ad se*) characteristic of the Hellenists and Romans.

The descriptive category of the conversion to the self

We are then taken to a “central nucleus” (Foucault, 2001/2005, p. 206) of the Western texts of the first and second centuries to which Foucault (2001/2005) refers, most often from Seneca, on the basis of the expression “*se convertere ad se* (converting to the self)” (p. 207). This nucleus is composed of images that converge to an exercise of curve, of folding towards the self from the attention, the look, or the whole being. The philosopher points out that conversion is not a constructed and systematized concept but, ultimately, a kind of practical scheme that perpetuates its effects from philosophy, from moral thinking to political experience.

According to Foucault (2001/2005), the conversion to the self demarcates the moment in which “practice of the self is identified and united with the art of living itself (*a tékhnetoû bíou*)” (p. 205), that is, with aesthetic existence. It is something different from what is found as conversion both in Platonism, the *epistrophé* (Foucault, 2001/2005, p. 209), and in Christianity, the *metánoia* (Foucault, 2001/2005, p. 211).

Starting from the comparison between conversion to self and Platonic *epistrophé*. The latter seems to be guided by the dichotomy between the earthly world and the divine world. It determines an attempt to liberate the soul in relation to the body that imprisons it and is directed towards the knowledge of the truth. This leads the subject to reminiscence, by which one can recall the “fundamental” about the self and, as Foucault (2001/2005) indicates, allows the subject to be able to “returning to one’s homeland (to one’s ontological homeland)” (p. 209). The action of this conversion begins with the need to move away from appearances, from earthly illusions. Conversely, the conversion found in the Epicureans and Stoics leaves the axis of opposition between the divine world/earthly world and moves strictly in the immanence of our world. If there is displacement and liberation, they occur only in relation to what dominates us, and directs us toward what we can master in ourselves. Its feature is not, therefore, a split of the relation of the subject with the body, but of the establishment of an ideal relation of self to self. The knowledge factor is important, but it plays a secondary role with respect to exercise, training, and practice (*áskesis*), which is, in fact, the most valued aspect of Culture of Self.

On the other hand, we can oppose conversion to self against Christian *metánoia*. *Metánoia* means both penance and transformation (Foucault 2001/2005). The change caused by it must be drastic and sudden. It can only occur through an event which is historical, but which must transcend history, inasmuch as it completely modifies the being of the subject at once and at the same time. There is therefore no trace of an ancient subject or marked by history itself, which determines something so misrepresentative of Christian philosophy, that is, the subject who is converted by self-renunciation, demarcated by the decision of total rupture in relation to that it was. To this Foucault (2001/2005) called “trans-subjectivation” (p. 214). Very different from the conversion to the self, in which the rupture does not occur within the subject, but with reference to what surrounds it. It is a break for the self, around the self and for benefit of the self. In speaking of these characteristics, Foucault (2001/2005) presents, for example, a metaphor of Seneca in which the spin around the self is compared to the spin performed by an ancient slave in his liberation ritual. Other important factors of this same movement are the need to have the self always within the eyes and the duty to put oneself as direction and goal. *Se convertere ad se* would be, then, an exercise of “self-subjectivation” (Foucault, 2001/2005, p. 214).

From self-subjectivation via the conversion to the self, it is possible to expand a specific point, dear to the present thought of subjectivity: the self is an always unfinished

composition, and can be compared to a work of art (Muchail, 2009, 2011; Candiottto, 2008). To the extent that it is placed as a goal to be achieved, a distance is established between the ethical self that moves and that self strived to attain. The self is then duplicated, unfolded in the form of a path that goes from self to self. Conversion to the self is thus not conceived as a mere movement of introspection (Candiottto, 2008), since, when looking for a point where to fix the subject continues to unfold in new distances. The self-self interstice is the always unfinished work of art, since it transforms and creates itself as it moves. Recall Foucault (2001/2005) indicating that it is in this period that the practices of the self coincide with an aesthetic process.

Final considerations

In an interview in 1984 entitled *An Aesthetic Existence*, Foucault (1984/2006) indicates that his interest in antiquity intends to respond to the devaluation, in the present day, of rules of moral conduct, and with that, to resume the search for an ethical life through an aesthetic existence. For Cardoso Jr. (2005), this ethical-aesthetic character could be conceived from the understanding that in the Greeks, the pleasure was not something to be regulated, but rather managed by the elaboration of an autonomous way of life. According to Muchail (2011, 2009), it is evident that Foucault sought to requalify certain questions that were characteristic of the philosophies of the first and second centuries. More specifically, as synthesized by Foucault (2001/2005): "How can the subject act as he ought, how can he be as he ought to be, not only inasmuch as he knows the truth, but inasmuch as he says it, practices it and exercises it?" (p. 318). In this same context, another statement by Cardoso Jr (2005) seems very significant and refers us directly to the unfolding of the self in a distance of self to self never completed, therefore, always different, as is the process of subjectivation in the conversion to the self: in Foucault, "(...) subjectivity is differentiation and not identity" (p. 348, our translation).

Foucault, in the introduction of *The Use of Pleasures* (1984/1985), referred to the idea of relationship of self with self as the field of practices in which the subject is constituted. Deleuze (1986/2006) associates this "discovery" of Foucault with his reading of the Greco-Romans and mentions the idea of a fold⁶, which in *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* only appears in the heart of the conversion to the self, in the center of definition of subjectivation. In fact, in both Foucault and Deleuze, this new ontological dimension could only be thought from the real plays found in the Culture of Self, from which arises the necessity of a relation previous to the relation with the others. It is the relationship of self with self that allows the affection of the force of self upon self, or the fold of the force of self upon self, and the production of the subject as a work of art. Deleuze comments: "The most general formula of the relation to oneself is the affection of self by self, or folded force. Subjectivation is created by folding" (Deleuze, 1986/2006, p. 104). Both, fold and relation with the self, seem to come from the topic of conversion to the self, from which the principle of the need to bend force toward itself arises, in order to establish an ideal relation of self to self⁷. In the classes

⁶The fold [*repli*] appears in the class of February 17th, 1982 (Foucault, 2001/2005) and then in Deleuze's text about the end of Foucault's work (Deleuze, 1986/2006).

⁷"Shift, trajectory, effort, movement: all of this must be retained in the idea of conversion to self. [...] What does it mean to return to the self? What is this circle, this loop, this falling back that we must carry out with regard to something, yet something that is not given to us, since at best we are promised it at the end of our life?" (Foucault, 2001/2005, p. 248).

of 1982, these definitions are not so obvious; the fold does not appear as a concept, but as a question. In the 1984 interview (Foucault, 1984/2006a), and even in the definitions given by Deleuze (1986/2006), no direct connections were made between the concept of subjectivation and the lessons about the conversion to the self. We can therefore consider the fertility of this descriptive category for examining the articulation of concepts and figures proper to the question of subjectivity in the last Foucault. The idea of an Aesthetic Existence as an ethical proposal for present times can be understood as unfinished, just as it intends to define the subject, both in constant motion.

At last, it is necessary to consider the points of contact between the genealogy of the idea of aesthetics of existence from the theme of the conversion to the self in Foucault, as performed by us, and the field of psychology. Starting with our own conceptual work. Given the value that the subject of subjectivity has for contemporary psychology, we think that it is the task of the psychologist to deal with questions related to the theoretical domain related to this thematic field, using tools of conceptual analysis and historical-philosophical investigation, without simply delegating this work to the philosophers. This mode of research also has critical implications for the action, technique, and technologies of psychology. We think that this is the social role of conceptual work in psychology: elucidation, criticism, development and the diffusion of philosophical and psychological thoughts. In the case of the idea of aesthetics of existence from the theme of conversion to the self, it is expected that theoretical research on the theme will have repercussions on the discussions about subjectivity, as well as on the critical analysis of the technical dimension of psychology.

Taking into account the necessary judiciousness in using philosophical concepts within “psy” practices, we see that the web of *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* may resonate in an interesting way in this field of psychology. In the works prior to the 1980s, Foucault shows how much the predominant subject/object relationship in the psychological field takes from the subject the ability to tell the truth about itself, insofar as this knowledge would come from some able authority to do so. Migrating to the course of 1982, if we consider the conversion in the amplitude of the predominance of knowledge of the self, which encompasses modernity and consequently psychology, we will perceive the maintenance of the same type of self-Other relationship, in which the self subjugates itself to the master, scientific text or the sacred text to ascend to the enlightenment of the truth about the self. When analyzing the conversion to the self, characteristic of the care of the self, on the other hand, we perceive that the discourse of the Other serves only to provide the self with the necessary tools for the constitution of its autonomy. The master, when addressing the disciple, tries to persuade this disciple not to renounce himself, but to all that surrounds him, which makes him dependent, and that the disciple withdraw from the immanence of his relation to the world and his daily practices the knowledge concerning the truth of his soul. Foucault does not consolidate the definition of a framework of ethical precepts for current relations, but we know that his genealogy intends to use history to think of the present. In view of the emphasis given to the care of the self, especially in what differentiates it from knowledge of the self, we think that the same look can be left to psychology and its current productions with regard to discourse about the self.

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