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## **Care of the self as a challenge for modern man. Towards unbridled consumption or constructive self-training?**

**Troska o siebie jako wyzwanie dla współczesnego człowieka.  
Ku nieograniczonej konsumpcji czy konstruktywnemu  
ćwiczeniu siebie?**

**Abstract:** In this article, I discuss the issue of the meaning of care of the self as a challenge for modern man and for education. I present this category both in its ancient understanding and in the understanding of Michel Foucault and Zygmunt Bauman. Care of the self becomes particularly important in a world of uncertainty, undefined threat, and change, which is not based on permanent moral, axiological, and semiotic foundations. In this chaos, a question emerges of how the journey from the self to the Self looks like and how this “second” Self is understood. The considerations in the article will focus on the thesis that openness to dialogue with oneself and others, which is based on parrhesia, plays an important role in constructing the identity of a modern man. In this dialogue, an individual can get to know himself and be himself at the same time. By conducting a dialogue with others, we show who we are, what values are important to us, and at the same time we learn to recognize other perspectives presented by our interlocutors. This is a manifestation of the care of the self and others, which the ancient world called for. However, in the modern world, this is a difficult task to accomplish due to the lack of clear moral references, the ubiquitous phenomenon of contempt and hatred for differences, and the loss of the ability to conduct

argument-based dialogue. In this aspect, education plays a key role, as it should prepare individuals for constructive self-training.

**Keywords:** care of the self, the subject, education, Michel Foucault, Zygmunt Bauman.

“Identity today is a matter of negotiation”

(Bauman, 2007, p. 106)

## **Introduction**

The question of who we are in today's world, which is characterized by change, ambiguity, impermanence, and, as Zygmunt Bauman (2011) claimed, liquidity, currently poses a significant challenge for individuals and for humanity as a whole. Are individuals able to find their Selves in the mess of information, the chaos of experience, and the unending pursuit of novelty? Do we possess tools for developing our Selves? If so, are we able/willing to use them? Perhaps we should forget about permanent self-definitions and the drive to finalize the process of self-creation, focusing instead of the endless struggle with ourselves and the surrounding world. As Michał Januszkiewicz (2009) writes: „In a world where everything has become problematic, people cannot cease to painstakingly search for meaning (though it will always seek to elude them)”.

The aim of the current article is to attempt to decode the meaning of the concept care of the self, which traces back to antiquity, in contemporary culture and to present it as a challenge for today's education. It seems especially pertinent to ask about the Self in an era which, as Peter Sloterdijk (2014) notes, focuses on work, production, and consumption rather than perfection and practice, which were the goals of antiquity. A lack of comfort in possessing time for exercising oneself is a key aspect of the contemporary resignation from ethics, understood as working on one's self and one's subjectivity (Kołakowski, 2000).

The theoretical background of the considerations in the article is Zygmunt Bauman's concept of identity and Michael Foucault's concept of subjectivity. Based on them, I propose the thesis that care of the self, which is expressed in openness to dialogue with oneself and with the Other, plays an important role in constructing the identity of a modern man. The basis of this dialogue is parrhesia, which requires courage, honesty of the subject not only towards others but above all towards himself, and the ability to oppose immoral practices. Creating conditions for practicing oneself in this area depends on

the process of education, both institutional and non-institutional, which covers the entirety of human life.

### **Self as a challenge for modernity**

Z. Bauman (2007) claims that contemporary society is universal and permanently changeable. It avoids identifying goals and values, thus facilitating unpredictability and uncertainty. It is also an element precluding the formation of stable identities. "A coherent, tightly welded together and solidly constructed identity could prove to be a burden, obligation, or a limit to freedom of choice" (Bauman, 2007, p. 50). Thus, a model of a complete identity is an aspect that is impossible to approve for liquid modernity. In this context, a certain process emerges which is postulated in contemporary culture - the process of unfinishing, openness, and constant change. In some aspects, it is close to the process of subjectification postulated by ancient thinkers. However, subjectification involves a kind of journey from the self to the Self, crossing one's own boundaries, or transcendence. This is related to the culture of the Self, which results from values, norms, and practices aimed at self-development. Contemporary culture also involves a process of subjectification. However, in this case, it does not have a defined goal, or rather, there are too many possible goals - which also presents a problem. As Tomasz Szlendak and Krzysztof Olechniki (2017) write, the contemporary culture is characterized by inventiveness, passing from one event to another without end. Each subsequent event should (must) be more interesting and provide more stimulation. The transience of these events and an orientation towards the future fosters an unreflexive attitude focused on new experiences, with a simultaneous lack of time to analyze prior activities and a lack of insight, which are significant aspects of the practice of care of the self.

According to Michel Foucault (2014), the process of passing from the self to the Self is a key element of shaping subjectivity. However, this does not only involve specific actions - this would not be enough. Rather, it involves the establishment of a specific relationship towards oneself, which can have a cognitive form or be a kind of exercise of the self (Foucault, 2005). These forms will be examined in subsequent parts of this article.

It is worth considering what the self and the Self are. The first refers to a certain prior, impaired state in which the subject is troubled by external life and its contemporary problems. As Plato points out, this may result from flaws in upbringing, which should be remedied by practices of care of the self. Self, capitalized, is the aim which completes the process of subjectification.

In antiquity, care of the self was a privilege which was not accessible to everyone. This is because care of the self required time and competence. However, it was also partially the result of inadequate pedagogy (inadequate preparation of young people for governing themselves and others). Care of the self was aimed at the person's internal sphere, their soul, which constitutes the Self. The soul is the subject of activity. It uses and governs the body. However, this use takes the form of *chraomai*, which can be reduced to a certain attitude towards oneself, governing oneself, and relating to others (Foucault, 2005).

Care of the self is related to another important category, namely, knowledge of the self. This is another important aspect in Greek, Hellenistic, and Roman thought. According to Plato, self-knowledge is a key element of care of the self. To know oneself is to turn away from external sensations. This requires immobilizing the soul to make it resistant to external distractors and able to turn towards the divine element. The turning of the soul towards this element will allow it to see oneself and perceive its own nature.

### **Care of the self - what is it and what purpose does it serve?**

In "The hermeneutics of the subject," M. Foucault analyzes the concept of "care of the self" (*epimeleia heautou*) and "knowledge of oneself" (*gnothi seauton*). The first concerns working on oneself (Foucault, 2005). The second rather concerns the acceptance that one is mortal, not divine, and thus one should not overestimate their capabilities. Referring to Defradas, M. Foucault shows that this notion rather involved the modesty that an individual should exhibit with respect to oneself and divinity. It is worth noting that *epimeleia heautou* is a principle superior to *gnothi seauton*.

Care of the self, as understood by Socrates, involves three aspects. First, it involves encouraging others towards self-care. Second, care of the self is related to the problem of neglecting it by the philosopher, who is instead concerned with stimulating this need in others. Third, the notion of awakening from a dream is also important. M. Foucault (2005, p. 7-8) claim that "The care of the self will be looked upon as the moment of the first awakening. It is situated precisely at the moment the eyes open, when one wakes up and has access to the first light of day". It is a certain form of constant unease, aimed at preventing the cessation of working on the self and comprehending the mystery of one's own existence. According to Epicurus and Epicurean philosophy, this process should be constant (Foucault, 2010). M. Foucault (2005) points out that care of the self is a significant principle of rational behavior within Hellenistic thought. It manifests itself in several aspects.

First, it is a certain attitude that should be perceived in the relationship of the subject with themselves, others, and the world. Second, *epimeleia heautou* requires the subject to turn inwards and cease attending to what is external. Third, care of the self is related to activity and behaviors that an individual undertakes in order to change and govern themselves (Foucault, 2005). What can be seen in this principle is an almost excessive focus on oneself and self-development. The surrounding world, its attendant problems, and the temptations awaiting the individual remain somewhat in the background. *Epimeleia heautou*, as a positive principle of life, paradoxically became the basis for constructing the most rigorous systems of shaping morality, such as Christianity (Foucault, 2005). These systems were intended to aid the subject's transcendence only on a surface level. In reality, they subordinated the subject in the pursuit of an unreachable ideal and in the feeling of being insufficiently good and moral.

We can find various ways of defining the Self in philosophy. The Platonic and Stoic ethics claimed that defining the Self is a specific aim, a realized state of perfect subjectification, which self-work should lead the individual towards. In Platonic ethics, this state meant a return to the world of ideals. On the other hand, in Stoic philosophy, reaching the Self meant reaching a state of wisdom, or a skilled differentiation of that which the individual is responsible for from that which they are not (Badiou, 2009). Both approaches are based on the idea of *le soi*, understood as something that is not given, like "myself," but which is dictated. This is a task which the subject faces in order to "become themselves" (Warbier, 2014).

For Cynics, the Self was a kind of a threshold for the individual to cross. Afterwards, another threshold would appear, and so on. Here, the subject is in a constant process of becoming, which is accompanied by progress. M. Foucault points out that in Cynic ethics, the focus is on a kind of avoidance, escape from the machinations of power which seeks to tame the subject by granting them a given identity. Thus, identity can be understood here as a counter-organization (Rudnicki, 2019). An act of resistance, opposition against attempts to define the subject and tame it by implicating them into given identity frames defined by social roles, takes place here.

A somewhat different understanding of the Self was shaped in Christian ethics. It rejects the focus on oneself by the subject. Thus, it transcends the egoistic practice of the individual. In Christian ethics, the Self has to be rejected in favor of focusing on God. Through this ethical activity, the subject becomes a new Self - experiences redemption and transcendence (Rudnicki, 2019).

Regardless of which ethics we assume, ethical behaviors should lead to the replacement of the nonsubject (self) with the subject (Self), “defined by the fullness of the self’s relationship to the self” (Foucault, 2005, p. 129). This relationship is delineated by the attitude of the subject towards themselves, the Other, and the truth. The first of these is the most important and it serves as the foundation for the second one - the relationship of the Self with Others. This relationship is linked to power and is essential for care of the Self. Caring for another person involves caring for the care that another subject has for themselves. This is a selfless care that a teacher can feel towards a student (Foucault, 2005) to help them leave the state of *stultus* (lack of care of the self) and progress towards wisdom, which is related to freedom. According to M. Foucault, to develop wisdom, the relationships of power must be suspended (Foucault, 2014). The last relationship which the Self enters concerns wisdom and is related to parrhesia. The term *parrhesia* denotes an honest expression. One who engages in parrhesia openly expresses the beliefs that they consider to be true. Such an attitude requires bravery and honesty (Foucault, 1983), which again points us to the subject’s ability to resist. Discussing Foucault’s beliefs on this point, Maksymilian Chutorański (2013, p. 178) notes that: “The truth revealed in parrhesia is able to cause pain, irritate, or anger those against whom who speak critically and on whom we are somehow dependent (politically, socially, emotionally, etc.)”. Parrhesia requires bravery and engagement, and thus, it is related to care of the self as well as to care for one’s *ethos*. Parrhesia requires courage and commitment, so it is related to caring for oneself and caring for one’s *ethos*. It is based on specific values that are important for a given entity and which Charles Taylor would describe as good. For this author, defining oneself meant adopting a given position on a specific issue, which required referring to recognized values (Taylor, 2012). It is worth emphasizing that parrhesia is also a key element in the formation of the public sphere, which in turn is related to care for others. Thus, we see here the merging of the three relationships described above, which are fundamental for the process of progressing from the self to the Self.

It is interesting that contemporary culture also turns to *epimeleia heautou* to a certain extent. However, in liquid modernity, the egoistic dimension of this principle rather involves a narcissistic love of the self and a belief that an individual is either unique or otherwise is nobody (Haffner, 2017). Z. Bauman highlights that: “Only one who has ceased to be who they were can become someone else. One has to constantly reject their current self. Faced with endless new possibilities, the current self quickly becomes

antiquated, constraining, and unsatisfying” (Haffner, 2017, p. 110). To avoid being nobody, the contemporary individual is forced to become an attractive commodity which must constantly prove their uniqueness and novelty. Identity has become a matter of marketing and permanent putting together and dismantling a jigsaw puzzle (Bauman, 2007). The final effect of this puzzle is not always satisfying and permanent. However, it requires care of the self, which, in this case, can be related to consumerist ethics. This ethics is manifested in the drive towards increasingly intense consumption of increasingly expensive goods and services. It seems that the contemporary nonsubject is in a permanent state of *stultus* and becomes susceptible to the multiplicity of constantly appearing offers and services to be mindlessly consumed, without considering their quality, meaning, and significance for the process of subjectification. Lech Witkowski terms such people *amoebas* (2011, p. 39) that do not care for their own development by reading books and treatises, but rather let themselves be unreflexively carried by the waves of consumerism. They are strangers to the development of the soul and are only concerned for the external indices of existence. As L. Witkowski (2011, p. 35) writes: “Food for the soul, which does not give pleasure to narcissists and consumers, is not in vogue. Increasingly often, culture finds itself in the trashcan of overlooked things...” It is worth emphasizing that the author is talking about the so-called high culture, which is now dominated by popular culture, based on pleasure and entertainment rather than on working on oneself as an entity. In such conditions, self-care is much more difficult because there is no externally established relatively stable frame of reference.

### **Governing the self (exercising the self)**

Citing Seneca, M. Foucault claims that nobody can recover from the state of *stultitia* by themselves. This requires the help of someone (a teacher, a master) who has experience in practicing *epimeleia heautou*. The return to oneself is related to the culture of the Self, which can be identified with the group of practices termed *askesis* (Foucault, 2005).

In working on oneself, discourses (*logoi*) which are conscious and real, become particularly important. They allow the subject to cope with anxieties and misfortunes, the past, the present, and the future. The nature of these discourses is expressed in our relationship with the world. Their internalization makes it so that we can refer to them if needed. In turn, acquiring these discourses involves practice. Three methods are important in this aspect: listening, writing, and memorizing. The first is related to the ability to focus attention and absorb the master’s, or the teacher’s, words. On the other hand,



the practice of writing involves creating notes from meetings, conversations, readings, and reflections which concern important matters, and returning to these writings to become better acquainted with them. This is a form of personal writing, which should be reflective. One form of such personal writing is autoethnography, which is currently gaining in appreciation as a research method (Szwabowski, 2019). The third form of internalizing discourses is memorizing. It is related to returning to oneself, to what one was thinking in the situation in which they were creating the notes. This is a kind of a ledger which the subject should create and recreate in themselves. As M. Foucault (2005, p. 501) claims: "...it is a question of arming the subject with a truth that he did not know and that did not dwell within him; it involves turning this learned and memorized truth that is progressively put into practice into a quasi-subject that reigns supreme within us". It is about the process of constructing truth within oneself, a system of recognized values that constitute a guide in relations with the Other and the surrounding world.

Two forms of exercises which are crucial for care of the self can be distinguished. One is developing resilience/restraint. This aspect of the culture of the Self concerns the establishment and maintenance of independence from the external world. These practices are intended to confirm the individual's character and they also have cathartic power. They focus on overcoming human desires, lust, and lack of restraint. They are intended to train a strong will and self-control, as well as to help recognize one's own strong and weak points. The second form of exercise is done in one's thoughts and using thoughts. In this aspect, the individual practices coping with future misfortunes in their thoughts. This involves imagining the worst possible scenarios in a given situation and locating them in the present rather than the future. This practice is intended to lead the individual to consider that these misfortunes are not real, but rather, it is the individual's attitude towards them which makes them appear as traumatic. It is worth noting that between these two forms of exercises, there is a broad variety of other possible practices intended to test oneself.

These practices are difficult to realize in the context of the contemporary culture of pleasure and immediacy. They require restraint and reflection, which are not typical for a culture of flat excitation (Szlendak and Olechnicki, 2017). They require the subject to undertake an effort which, as Thomas Robert Malthus writes, is a human duty. "The more often this duty is exercised, the more wisely is one's activity directed, and the more effective it is, the greater will be the presumed development of mind and soul..." (Malthus, 2016, p. 29). In turn, exercising the soul leads to freedom



of the individual, as Antoine de Saint-Exupéry claims (2012). This freedom can be understood as a process of subjectification, the road towards the Self, which is manifested in practices of counter-ordering rather than ordering, as the logic of the market, typical for contemporary culture, would point to.

Practices of counter-ordering are based on the subject's resistance. For resistance to be possible, the subject must resist something or someone (Hollander and Einwohner, 2004). The key element here is the lack of consent (Babicka-Wirkus, 2018). Lack of consent by the subject also requires the courage to resist. This refers to honesty of self-expression which is central for the concept of parrhesia. Although contemporary culture does not leave much room for reflection - since it presents meaning in ready-made (easy to internalize) messages - resistance movements or practices based on a lack of consent can be found which break away from the established system of interpretation. Literature, art, including street art, music, as well as the internet have a significant role in this aspect. They represent spaces of expressing disagreement, revolt, and resistance. Individuals engaged in these spheres of activity do not consent to the framework delineated by the culture of fluid modernity and pleasure. They undertake the effort to cease everyday pursuits and engage in reflection to look inwards into their souls, to search for their selfhood (*sobość*), which Barbara Skarga (2009) writes about, and which is constructed in relation to the world, cultures, language, places.

## **Conclusion**

In the modern world, care of the self has a different character than in antiquity. It has become less of an exercise of the soul, and more of consumption of the body and through the body. Z. Bauman (1966, p. 439) claim that "A person is themselves when they consume. The individual's >>freedom<< is freedom of consumption. The world of consumption and the world of things thus become attractive to an unprecedented degree. They are the last and only bastion of freedom. Individuals become persons through the consumption of serially produced products". An individual's freedom is manifested through their relationship with things and services which govern them, in the sense that Foucault ascribed to this term. The process of subjectification has become mediated by purchased goods and services. Thus, according to Z. Bauman (1966), to gain access to objects, an individual must become an object themselves. This no longer means a person-person relationship, but rather an object-object one. Individuals become objects through others' decisions. Thus, it is not an individual's free choice (Bauman, 1966). An individual's value is determined by the quantity

and value of the goods and services they purchase. The more an individual possesses, the more valuable they become. A strong egocentric attitude can also be seen here, which was also typical for *epimeleia heautou*. However, in the contemporary understanding of care of the self, egoist individualism has become humanity's special characteristic. Paradoxically, the contemporary subject feels free, but in reality, they are subordinated to the invisible hand of the market mechanisms. To describe this kind of subordination, M. Foucault (2009) uses the term *subditus*, which means total submission to someone else's power and rule.

The contemporary individual is in a state of crisis. On the one hand, the all-pervading consumerism and its attendant malaise, and on the other hand - the spectra of moral, ecological, and economic destruction have led to the crisis of the individual as a subject. It can be said that the contemporary individual is in a situation of crisis. However, crises should not be perceived as strictly negative. As M. Januszkiewicz points out, crises are situations of struggle. They require decision-making and activity which cannot be put off anymore. A crisis situation may lead to the creation of new solutions or to the revival of what was considered dead or old or incompatible with current conditions.

We are living in a culture of limitless possibilities and choices. However, as Z. Bauman (2011, p. 72) writes, „(...)fate shows us the possibilities, but character makes the choices”. Currently, education (in a broad sense) faces the challenge of creating opportunities for people (regardless of age) to exercise themselves and search for their identity, based on the developed axiological hierarchy described by Taylor (2012). It is not about the final crystallization of identity, but about its construction and reconstruction in response to conditions external to the individual while maintaining what Paul Ricoeur (2003) calls the *idem*. The construction of contemporary identity should take place not only within the framework of the subject-subject relationship but also the subject-thing relationship, as the latter play an important role in postmodern culture.

The situation of crisis of the subject that we are dealing with opens the way to searching for new solutions or resorting to existing but forgotten techniques of self-training. These techniques require not only individual but also collective effort to construct the entities' relationships to themselves, to Others and to the truth.

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