

# the ethic of care for the self as a practice of freedom

an interview with michel foucault  
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Q: First of all, we would like to know what is the object of your thought at this moment. We have followed your recent development, especially in your courses at the Collège de France (1981–1982) on the hermeneutic of the subject. We would like to know if your present philosophical research is still determined by the poles, subjectivity and truth.

MF: In fact, that has always been my problem, even if I have expressed in different terms the framework of this thought. I have tried to discover how the human subject entered into **games of truth**, whether they be games of truth which take on the form of science or which refer to a scientific model, or games of truth like those that can be found in institutions or practices of control. That is the theme of my book **The Order of Things**, where I've tried to see how, in scientific creation, the human subject will be defined as an individual who talks, who works, who lives. It is in my courses at the Collège de France that I tried to outline this problem in its generality.

Q: Is there not a “leap” between your previous thought on this problem and that of subjectivity/truth and specifically beginning with the concept of care for self?

MF: Up to that point, the problem of the relationship between the subject and the games of truth had been faced in two ways: either beginning with coercive practices—(as in the case of psychiatry and the penitentiary system)—or in forms of theoretical or scientific games, as for example, the analysis of the riches of language and of the living being. Now, in my courses at the Collège de France, I try to grasp the problems through what one might call a practice of the self, a phenomenon which I believe to be very important in our societies since Greek and Roman times, even though it has hardly been studied. In Greek and Roman civilizations these practices of the self had a much greater importance and autonomy than later on, when they were laid siege to, up to a certain point, by institutions: religious, pedagogical, or of the medical and psychiatric kind.

Q: There is now a sort of shift: these games of truth no longer are concerned with coercive practices but with the practices of self-formation of the subject.

MF: That is correct. It is what one might call an ascetical practice, giving the word “ascetical” a very general meaning, that is to say, not in the sense of abnegation but that of an exercise of self upon self by which one tries to work out, to transform one’s self and to attain a certain mode of being. I am taking the word “asceticism” in a wider sense than Max Weber, but it is much along the same line.

Q: A work of self upon self which can be understood as a kind of liberation, as a mode of liberation?

MF: I shall be a little more cautious about that. I’ve always been a little distrustful of the general theme of liberation, to the extent, that, if one does not treat it with a certain number of safeguards and within certain limits, there is the danger that it will refer back to the idea that there does exist a nature or a human foundation which, as a result of a certain number of historical, social or economic processes, found itself concealed, alienated or imprisoned in and by some repressive mechanism. In that hypothesis it would suffice to unloosen these repressive locks so that man can be reconciled with himself, once again find his nature or renew contact with his roots and restore a full and positive relationship with himself. I don’t think that is a theme which can be admitted without rigorous examination. I do not mean to say that liberation or such and such a form of liberation does not exist. When a colonial people tries to free itself of its colonizer, that is truly

an act of liberation, in the strict sense of the word. But as we also know, that in this extremely precise example, this act of liberation is not sufficient to establish the practices of liberty that later on will be necessary for this people, this society and these individuals to decide upon receivable and acceptable forms of their existence or political society. That is why I insist on the practices of freedom rather than on the processes which indeed have their place, but which by themselves, do not seem to me to be able to decide all the practical forms of liberty. I encountered that exact same problem in dealing with sexuality: does the expression “let us liberate our sexuality” have a meaning? Isn’t the problem rather to try to decide the practices of freedom through which we could determine what is sexual pleasure and what are our erotic, loving, passionate relationships with others? It seems to me that to use this ethical problem of the definition of practices of freedom is more important than the affirmation (and repetitious, at that) that sexuality or desire must be set free.

Q: Do not the practices of liberty require a certain degree of liberation?

MF: Yes, absolutely. That is where the idea of domination must be introduced. The analyses I have been trying to make have to do essentially with the relationships of power. I understand by that something other than the states of domination. The relationships of power have an extremely wide extension in human relations. There is a whole network of relationships of power, which can operate between individuals, in the bosom of the family, in an educational relationship, in the political body, etc. This analysis of relations of power constitutes a very complex field; it sometimes meets what we can call facts or states of domination, in which the relations of power, instead of being variable and allowing different partners a strategy which alters them, find themselves firmly set and congealed. When an individual or a social group manages to block a field of relations of power, to render them impassive and invariable and to prevent all reversibility of movement—by means of instruments which can be economic as well as political or military—we are facing what can be called a state of domination. It is certain that in such a state the practice of liberty does not exist or exists only unilaterally or is extremely confined and limited. I agree with you that liberation is sometimes the political or historical condition for a practice of liberty. Take for example sexuality. It is certain that a number of liberations regarding the power of the male were needed, that it was necessary to free one’s self from an oppressive morality which concerns heterosexuality as well as homosexuality. This liberation does not manifest a contented being, replete with a

sexuality wherein the subject would have attained a complete and satisfying relationship. Liberation opens up new relationships of power, which have to be controlled by practices of liberty.

Q: Could not liberation itself be a modality or a form of a practice of liberty?

MF: Yes, in a certain number of cases. You have cases where in fact liberation and the struggle for liberation is indispensable for the practice of liberty. As for sexuality, for example—I say this without a desire for controversy because I don't like polemics; for the most part, I think they are counterproductive—there was the Reichean model which was derived from a particular reading of Freud. It supposed the problem to be entirely in the order of liberation. To say the things somewhat schematically, there would be desire, pulsation, taboos, repression and interiorization. It is in lifting these taboos, i.e. in liberating one's self, that the problem would be solved. And there, I think that we are completely missing the moral problem—(and I know that here I am caricaturizing some very fine and interesting points of view of various authors)—the moral problem, I say, which is the practice of liberty. How can one practice freedom? In the order of sexuality, is it obvious that in liberating one's desires one will know how to behave ethically in pleasurable relationships with others?

Q: You say that liberty must be practiced ethically?

MF: Yes, for what is morality, if not the practice of liberty, the deliberate practice of liberty?

Q: That means that you consider liberty as a reality already ethical in itself?

MF: Liberty is the ontological condition of ethics. But ethics is the deliberate form assumed by liberty.

Q: Is ethics then the result of the search or care for self?

MF: The care for self was in the greco-roman world the manner in which individual liberty—and civic liberty, up to a certain point—considered itself as ethical. If you take a whole series of texts going from the first Platonic dialogue up to the major texts of the later Stoics—Epictetus, Marcus-Aurelius, etc.—you would see that the theme of **care for the self** has truly permeated all ethical thought. On the other hand, it seems that in our societies, beginning at a certain moment in time—and it is difficult to say when that happened—the care for self became something somewhat suspect. Caring for self was, at a certain moment, gladly denounced as being a kind of self-love, a kind of egoism or individual interest in contradiction to

michel foucault the care one must show others or to the necessary sacrifice of the self. All that happened during the Christian era, but I would not say that it is exclusively due to Christianity. The situation is much more complex because, in Christianity, achieving salvation is also a caring for self. But in Christianity, salvation is obtained by renunciation of self. There is a paradox of care for self in Christianity, but that is another question. Returning to the question you were asking, I think that both with the Greeks and the Romans—and especially with the Greeks—in order to behave properly, in order to practice freedom properly, it was necessary to care for self, both in order to know one's self—and there is the familiar *gnothi seauton*—and to improve one's self, to surpass one's self, to master the appetites that risk engulfing you. Individual liberty was very important to the Greeks— notwithstanding the platitude more or less derived from Hegel, according to which the liberty of the individual would have no importance when faced with the noble totality of the city—not to be a slave (of another city, of those who surround you, of those who govern you, of one's own passions) was an absolutely fundamental theme: the concern for liberty was a basic and constant problem, during eight centuries of ancient culture. We have there an entire ethics which turned about the care for the self and which gave ancient ethics its very particular form. I am not saying that ethics is the care for self, but that in Antiquity, ethics, as a deliberate practice of liberty has turned about this basic imperative: "Care for yourself."

Q: An imperative that involves the assimilation of *logoi*, truths?

MF: Naturally. One cannot care for self without knowledge. The care for self is of course knowledge of self—that is the Socratic-Platonic aspect— but it is also the knowledge of a certain number of rules of conduct or of principles which are at the same time truths and regulations. To care for self is to fit one's self out with these truths. That is where ethics is linked to the game of truth.

Q: You say that it is a question of making this truth which is learned, memorized, progressively put into action, a sort of quasi-subject which reigns supremely in you. What is the status of this quasi-subject?

MF: In the Platonic current, at least according to the end of the **Alcibiades**, the problem for the subject or for the individual soul is to turn its gaze on itself in order to recognize itself in what it is and recognizing itself in what it is, to recall the truths to which it is related and on which it could have reflected. On the other hand, in the current that one can call globally Stoic, the problem is to learn by the teaching of a certain number of

truths, of doctrines, some of which are fundamental principles and others rules of conduct. It is a question of having these principles tell you in each situation, and in some way spontaneously, how you should behave. It is here that we find a metaphor that does not come from the Stoics but from Plutarch. "You must have learned principles so firmly that when your desires, your appetites or your fears awaken like barking dogs, the *logos* will speak with the voice of a master who silences the dogs by a single command." You have there the idea of a *logos* who would operate in some way without your doing anything. You will have become the *logos* or the *logos* will have become you.

Q: We'd like to return to the question of the relationship between freedom and ethics. When you say that ethics is the deliberate part of freedom, does that mean that freedom can be aware of itself as an ethical practice? Is it at the very first and always a moralizing freedom, so to speak, or must there be work on one's self in order to discover this ethical dimension of liberty?

MF: The Greeks, in fact, considered this freedom as a problem and the freedom of the individual as an ethical problem. But ethical in the sense that Greeks could understand. *Ethos* was the deportment and the way to behave. It was the subject's mode of being and a certain manner of acting visible to others. One's *ethos* was seen by his dress, by his bearing, by his gait, by the poise with which he reacts to events, etc. For them, that is the concrete expression of liberty. That is the way they "problematized" their freedom. The man who has a good *ethos*, who can be admitted and held up as an example, he is a person who practices freedom in a certain manner. I do not think that a conversion is necessary so that freedom be reflected as an *ethos* that is good, beautiful, honorable, worthy and which can serve as an example, there is need of labor of self on self.

Q: And that is where you situate the analysis of power?

MF: I think that in the measure liberty signifies for the Greeks non-slavery—a definition which is quite different from ours—the problem is already entirely political. It is political in the measure that non-slavery with respect to others is a condition: a slave has no ethics. Liberty is then in itself political. And then, it has a political model, in the measure where being free means not being a slave to one's self and to one's appetites, which supposes that one establishes over one's self a certain relation of domination, of mastery, which was called *arche*—power, authority.

Q: The care for self, you said, is in a certain fashion the care for others. The care for self is in this sense also always ethical. It is ethical in itself.

MF: For the Greeks it is not because it is care for others that it is ethical. Care for self is ethical in itself, but it implies complex relations with others, in the measure where this *ethos* of freedom is also a way of caring for others. That is why it is important for a free man, who behaves correctly, to know how to govern his wife, his children and his home. There, too, is the art of governing. *Ethos* implies also a relation with others to the extent that care for self renders one competent to occupy a place in the city, in the community or in interindividual relationships which are proper—whether it be to exercise a magistracy or to have friendly relationships. And the care for self implies also a relationship to the other to the extent that, in order to really care for self, one must listen to the teachings of a master. One needs a guide, a counsellor, a friend—someone who will tell you the truth. Thus, the problem of relationship with others is present all along this development of care for self.

Q: The care for self always aims at the good for others. It aims at a good administering of the area of power which is present in all relationships, i.e., it tends to administer it in the sense of non-domination. In this context, what can be the role of the philosopher, of the one who cares for the care of others?

MF: Let us take for example Socrates. He is the one who hails people in the street or young boys in the gymnasium, by saying to them: Are you concerned with yourself? A god has charged him with that. That is his mission and he will not abandon it, even at the moment when he is threatened by death. He is truly the man who cares for others. That is the particular position of the philosopher. But let us say it simply: in the case of the free man, I think that the assumption of all this morality was that the one who cared for himself correctly found himself, by that very fact, in a measure to behave correctly in relationship to others and for others. A city in which everyone would be correctly concerned for self would be a city that would be doing well, and it would find therein the ethical principle of its stability. But I don't think that one can say that the Greek who cares for himself should first of all care for others. This theme will not come into play, it seems to me, until later. One must not have the care for others precede the care for self. The care for self takes moral precedence in the measure that the relationship to self takes ontological precedence.

Q: Can the care for self, which possesses a positive ethical sense, be understood as a sort of conversion of power?

MF: A conversion, yes. It is in fact a way of controlling and limiting. For, if it is true that slavery is the big risk to which Greek liberty is opposed, there is also another danger, which appears at first glance as the opposite of slavery: the abuse of power. In the abuse of power, one goes beyond what is legitimately the exercise of power and one imposes on others one's whims, one's appetites, one's desires. There we see the image of the tyrant or simply of the powerful and wealthy man who takes advantage of his power and his wealth to misuse others, to impose on them undue power. But one sees—at least that is what the Greek philosophers say—that this man is in reality a slave to his appetites. And the good ruler is precisely the one who exercises his power correctly, i.e., by exercising at the same time his power on himself. And it is the power over self which will regulate the power over others.

Q: Does not the care for self, released from the care for others, run the risk of “absolutizing itself”? Could not this “absolutization” of care for self become a kind of exercise of power on others, in the sense of domination of the other?

MF: No, because the risk of dominating others and exercising over them a tyrannical power only comes from the fact that one did not care for one's self and that one has become a slave to his desires. But if you care for yourself correctly, i.e., if you know ontologically what you are, if you also know of what you are capable, if you know what it means for you to be a citizen in a city, to be the head of a household in an *oikos*, if you know what things you must fear and those that you should not fear, if you know what is suitable to hope for and what are the things on the contrary which should be completely indifferent for you, if you know, finally that you should not fear death, well, then, you cannot abuse your power over others. There is therefore no danger. This idea will appear much later, when love of self will become suspect and will be seen as one of the possible roots of diverse moral faults. In this new context, the care for self will have as its primary form, the renunciation of the self. You discover this in a fairly clear fashion in the **Treatise on Virginity** of Gregory of Nyssa, where you find the notion of care for self “*epimeleia heauton*” defined essentially as renunciation of all worldly attachments. It is the renunciation of all that could be love of self, attachment to a worldly self. But I believe that in Greek and Roman thought the care for self cannot in itself tend to this exaggerated love of self which would, in time, come to neglect others or worse still, abuse the power that one can have over them.

Q: Then it is a care for self which, thinking of itself, thinks of others?

michel foucault MF: Yes, absolutely. The one who cares for self, to the point of knowing exactly what are his duties as head of a household, as husband or father, will find that he has relationships with his wife and children which are as they should be.

Q: But does not the human condition, in the sense of its finiteness, play there a very important role? You have spoken of death. If you are not afraid of death, you cannot abuse your power over others. It seems to us this problem of finiteness is very important: fear of death, fear of finiteness, of being hurt: all these are at the heart of care for self.

MF: Of course. And that is where Christianity, in introducing salvation as salvation beyond this life, will somehow unbalance or at least upset the whole theme of care for self. Although—and I recall it once more—seeking one's salvation will be precisely renunciation. With the Greeks and the Romans, on the other hand, beginning from the fact that one cares for self in his own life and that the reputation which we will have left behind is the only after-death with which we preoccupy ourselves—care for self can then be entirely centered on one's self, on what one does, on the place one occupies among others. It can be totally centered on the acceptance of death—which will be most evident in later Stoicism—even up to a certain point almost become a desire for death. It can be, at the same time, if not care for others, at least a care for one's self which will be beneficial to others. It is interesting to note in Seneca, for example, the importance of the theme: "let us hasten to grow old, let us hasten to the appointed time which will permit us to rejoin our selves." This sort of moment before death, where nothing more can happen, is different from the desire for death that we find among Christians, who expect salvation from death. It is like a movement to articulate one's existence to the point where there would be nothing else before it but the possibility of death.

Q: We would now like to shift to another subject. In your courses at the Collège de France, you have talked about the relationships between power and knowledge. Now you talk about the relations between subject and truth. Is there a complementarity between the two sets of ideas: power/knowledge and subject/truth?

MF: My problem has always been, as I said in the beginning, the problem of the relationship between subject and truth. How does the subject enter into a certain game of truth? My first problem was, how is it, for example, that beginning at a certain point in time, madness was considered a problem and the result of a certain number of processes—an illness dependent upon a certain medicine? How has the mad subject

been placed in this game of truth defined by knowledge or a medical model? And it is in doing this analysis that I noticed that, contrary to what had been somewhat the custom at that time—around the early sixties—it was not in talking simply about ideology that we could really explain that phenomenon. In fact, there were practices—essentially the major practice of confinement which had been developed at the beginning of the seventeenth century and which had been the condition for the insertion of the mad subject in this game of truth—which sent me back to the problem of institutions of power, much more than to the problem of ideology. So it was that I was led to pose the problem knowledge/power, which is not for me the fundamental problem but an instrument allowing the analysis—in a way that seems to me to be the most exact—of the problem of relationships between subject and games of truth.

Q: But you have always “refused” that we speak to you about the subject in general?

MF: No I had not “refused.” I perhaps had some formulations which were inadequate. What I refused was precisely that you first of all set up a theory of the subject—as could be done in phenomenology and in existentialism—and that, beginning from the theory of the subject, you come to pose the question of knowing, for example, how such and such a form of knowledge was possible. What I wanted to know was how the subject constituted himself, in such and such a determined form, as a mad subject or as a normal subject, through a certain number of practices which were games of truth, applications of power, etc. I had to reject a certain *a priori* theory of the subject in order to make this analysis of the relationships which can exist between the constitution of the subject or different forms of the subject and games of truth, practices of power and so forth.

Q: That means that the subject is not a substance?

MF: It is not a substance; it is a form and this form is not above all or always identical to itself. You do not have towards yourself the same kind of relationships when you constitute yourself as a political subject who goes and votes or speaks up in a meeting, and when you try to fulfill your desires in a sexual relationship. There are no doubt some relationships and some interferences between these different kinds of subject but we are not in the presence of the same kind of subject. In each case, we play, we establish with one's self some different form of relationship. And it is precisely the historical constitution of these different forms of subject relating to games of truth that interest me.

michel foucault Q: But the mad subject, the ill, the delinquent—perhaps even the sexual subject—was the subject which was the object of theoretical discourse, a subject shall we say “passive” while the subject of which you have been speaking for the last two years in your course at the Collège de France is an “active” subject, politically active. The care for self concerns all these problems of practical politics, of government, etc. It would seem that there has been a change in your thinking, a change not of perspective but of the problematic.

MF: If it is true, for example, that the constitution of a mad subject can in fact be considered as the result of a system of coercion—that is the passive subject—you know full well that the mad subject is not a non-free subject and that the mentally ill constitutes himself a mad subject in relationship and in the presence of the one who declares him crazy. Hysteria, which was so important in the history of psychiatry and in the mental institutions of the nineteenth century, seems to me to be the very illustration of the way in which the subject constitutes himself as mad. And it is not altogether a coincidence that the important phenomena of hysteria have been studied exactly where there was a maximum of coercion to compel these individuals to consider themselves mad. On the other hand and inversely, I would say that if now I am interested, in fact, in the way in which the subject constitutes himself in an active fashion, by the practices of self, these practices are nevertheless not something that the individual invents by himself. They are patterns that he finds in his culture and which are proposed, suggested and imposed on him by his culture, his society and his social group.

Q: There would seem to be a sort of lack in your problematic, namely, the concept of a resistance to power. That would presuppose a very active subject, very careful for self and of others and politically and philosophically sophisticated.

MF: That brings us back to the problem of what I mean by power. I hardly ever use the word “power” and if I do sometimes, it is always a short cut to the expression I always use: the relationships of power. But there are ready made patterns: when one speaks of “power,” people think immediately of a political structure, a government, a dominant social class, the master facing the slave, and so on. That is not at all what I think when I speak of “relationships of power.” I mean that in human relations, whatever they are—whether it be a question of communicating verbally, as we are doing right now, or a question of a love relationship, an institutional or economic relationship—power is always present: I mean the relationships in which one wishes to direct the behavior of another.

These are the relationships that one can find at different levels, under different forms: these relationships of power are changeable relations, i.e., they can modify themselves, they are not given once and for all. The fact, for example, that I am older and that at first you were intimidated can, in the course of the conversation, turn about and it is I who can become intimidated before someone, precisely because he is younger. These relations of power are then changeable, reversible and unstable. One must observe also that there cannot be relations of power unless the subjects are free. If one or the other were completely at the disposition of the other and became his thing, an object on which he can exercise an infinite and unlimited violence, there would not be relations of power. In order to exercise a relation of power, there must be on both sides at least a certain form of liberty. Even though the relation of power may be completely unbalanced or when one can truly say that he has "all power" over the other, a power can only be exercised over another to the extent that the latter still has the possibility of committing suicide, of jumping out of the window or of killing the other. That means that in the relations of power, there is necessarily the possibility of resistance, for if there were no possibility of resistance—of violent resistance, of escape, of ruse, of strategies that reverse the situation—there would be no relations of power. This being the general form, I refuse to answer the question that I am often asked: "But if power is everywhere, then there is no liberty."

I answer: if there are relations of power throughout every social field it is because there is freedom everywhere. Now there are effectively states of domination. In many cases the relations of power are fixed in such a way that they are perpetually asymmetrical and the margin of liberty is extremely limited. To take an example, very paradigmatic to be sure: in the traditional conjugal relation in the society of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, we cannot say that there was only male power; the woman herself could do a lot of things: be unfaithful to him, extract money from him, refuse him sexually. She was, however, subject to a state of domination, in the measure where all that was finally no more than a certain number of tricks which never brought about a reversal of the situation. In these cases of domination—economic, social, institutional or sexual—the problem is in fact to find out where resistance is going to organize. Will this be, for example, a working class which is going to resist political domination—in the trade union, in the party—and under what form—a strike, a general strike, a revolution, a parliamentary struggle? In such a situation of domination, one must answer all these questions in a very specific fashion, in function of the kind and the precise form

of domination. But the statement: “You see power everywhere, hence there is no place for liberty,” seems to me to be absolutely incomplete. One cannot impute to me the idea that power is a system of domination which controls everything and which leaves no room for freedom.

Q: A short while ago you were talking about the free man and the philosopher, as if they were two different modalities of care for self. The philosopher’s care for self would have a certain specificity and is not mistaken for that of the free man.

MF: I would say that it is a question of two different positions in the care for self, rather than two forms of the care for self. I think that care for self is the same in its form, but in intensity, in degree of zeal for self—and hence in zeal for others as well—the position of the philosopher is not that of any free man.

Q: Is that where one could expect a fundamental connection between philosophy and politics?

MF: Yes, of course. I think that the relationships between philosophy and politics are permanent and fundamental. It is certain that if one takes the history of the care for self in Greek thought, the relationships to politics is obvious. Under a very complex form: on the one hand, you see Socrates, for example—as well as Plato in the **Alcibiades**, as in Xenophon in the **Memorabilia**, who calls out to young people, “Hey, you, you want to become a political person, you want to govern the city, you therefore want to take care of others but you did not even take care of yourself, and if you do not take care for yourself, you will be a bad leader.” In that perspective, the care for self appears like a pedagogical, moral and also ontological condition, for the constitution of a good leader. To constitute one’s self as a subject who governs implies that one has constituted himself as a subject having care for self. But, on the other hand, you see Socrates who says in the **Apology**, “I, I hail everybody, because everybody must occupy himself with himself.” But he immediately adds, “In doing this, I render the greatest service to the city and rather than punish me, you should reward me more than you reward a winner of the Olympic games.” There is then a very strong affinity between philosophy and politics which will later develop itself, when the philosopher, in fact, will have not only the care of the soul of the citizen but also that of the prince.

Q: Could this problematic of the care for self become the center of a new philosophical thought, of another kind of politics than the one we are seeing today?

MF: I must admit that I have not gone very far in that direction and I would rather come back to some more contemporary

problems, in order to try and see what we can do with all that in the actual political problematic. But I have the impression that in the political thought of the nineteenth century—and we might even have to go beyond, to Rousseau and Hobbes—the political subject has been thought essentially as subject to law, either in naturalist terms or in terms of positive law. In turn, it seems to me that the question of an ethical subject does not have much of a place in contemporary political thought. Finally, I don't like answering questions which I have not examined. I would, however, like to take up once again those questions which I have raised through the culture of Antiquity.

Q: What would be the relationship between the path of philosophy which leads to the knowledge of self and the path of spirituality?

MF: By spirituality, I understand—but I am not sure that it is a definition which we can hold for very long—that which precisely refers to a subject acceding to a certain mode of being and to the transformations which the subject must make of himself in order to accede to this mode of being. I believe that, in ancient spirituality, there was identity or almost so between spirituality and philosophy. In any case, the most important preoccupation of philosophy revolved about the self, the knowledge of the world coming afterwards, and, most of the time, as a support to this care for self. When you read Descartes, it is striking to find that in the **Méditations**, there is exactly this same spiritual care to accede to a mode of being where doubt would not be allowed and where finally we would know. But in thus defining the mode of being to which philosophy gives access, we notice that this mode of being is entirely determined by knowledge, and it is as access to a knowing subject or to what would qualify the subject as such that philosophy would define itself. And from that point of view, it seems to me that it superimposes the functions of spirituality on an ideal based on scientificity.

Q: Should we actualize this notion of care for self, in the classical sense, against this modern thought?

MF: Absolutely, but I am not doing that in order to say: “Unfortunately we have forgotten the care for self. Here is the care for self. It is the key to everything.” Nothing is more foreign to me than the idea that philosophy strayed at a certain moment of time, and that it has forgotten something and that somewhere in her history there exists a principle, a basis that must be rediscovered. I think that all these forms of analysis, whether they take on a radical form by saying that from its point of departure, philosophy has been forgotten or whether it takes on a more historical form by saying, “See, in such

michel foucault    and such a philosopher something has been forgotten” are not very interesting. We cannot derive much from them. This does not mean that contact with such and such a philosopher cannot produce something but we would have to understand that this thing is new.

Q: That brings up the question. Why should we have access to truth today in the political sense, i.e., in the sense of political strategy confronting the various points of “blocking” or power in the relational system?

MF: That is in fact a problem. After all, why truth? And why are we concerned with truth, and more so than with the self? And why do we care for ourselves, only through the care for truth? I think that we are touching on a question which is very fundamental and which is, I would say, the question of the Western world. What caused all Western culture to begin to turn around this obligation of truth, which has taken on a variety of different forms? Things being what they are, nothing has, up to the present, proved that we could define a strategy exterior to it. It is indeed in this field of obligation to truth that we sometimes can avoid in one way or another the effects of a domination, linked to structures of truth or to institutions charged with truth. To say these things very schematically, we can find many examples: there has been an ecology movement—which is furthermore very ancient and is not only a twentieth century phenomenon—which has often been, in one sense, in hostile relationship with science or at least with a technology guaranteed in terms of truth. But in fact, ecology also spoke a language of truth. It was in the name of knowledge concerning nature, the equilibrium of the processes of living things, and so forth, that one could level the criticism. We escaped then a domination of truth, not by playing a game that was a complete stranger to the game of truth, but in playing it otherwise or in playing another game, another set, other trumps in the game of truth. I think it is the same thing in the order of politics, where we could criticize politics—beginning for example with the effects of the state of domination of this undue politics—but we could only do this by playing a certain game of truth, showing what were the effects, showing that there were other rational possibilities, teaching people what they ignore about their own situation, on their conditions of work, on their exploitation.

Q: Concerning the question of the games of truth and the games of power, don't you think that one can find in history the presence of a particular modality of these games of truth which would have a particular status in respect to all other possibilities of games of truth and of power and which would

be characterized by its essential openness, its opposition to all “blocking” of all power, to power in the sense of domination/bondage?

MF: Yes, absolutely. But, when I talk about relations of power and games of truth, I do not mean to say that the games of truth are but relationships of power that I would want to conceal—that would be a terrible caricature. My problem is, as I have already said, to know how games of truth can put themselves in place and be linked to relationships of power. We can show, for example, that the medicalization of madness, i.e., the organization of medical knowledge around individuals labeled as “mad,” has been linked, at some time or other, to a whole series of social or economic processes, but also to institutions and practices of power. This fact in no way impairs the scientific validity of the therapeutic efficacy of psychiatry. It does not guarantee it but it does not cancel it out either. Let mathematics, for example, be linked—in an entirely different way than psychiatry—to structures of power; it would be equally true, even if it were only in the way it is taught, the manner in which the consensus of mathematicians organizes itself, functions in a closed circuit, has its values, determines what is good (true) and evil (false) in mathematics and so on. That does not at all mean that mathematics is only a game of power but that the game of truth of mathematics is linked, in a certain way and without impairing its validity, to games and to institutions of power. It is clear that in a certain number of cases the links are such that one can write the history of mathematics without bearing it in mind, even though this problematic is always interesting and now historians of mathematics are beginning to study the history of their institutions. Finally, it is clear that the relationship which can exist between the relations of power and the games of truth in mathematics is entirely different from the one you would have in psychiatry. In any case, one can in no way say that the games of truth are nothing else than games of power.

Q: This question goes back to the problem of the subject, for, in the games of truth, the question is asked: who says the truth, how is it said and why is it said? For, in the game of truth, you can play at saying the truth. There is one game—you play at truth or truth is a game.

MF: The word “game” can lead you into error: when I say “game” I mean an ensemble of rules for the production of the truth. It is not a game in the sense of imitating or entertaining . . . it is an ensemble of procedures which lead to a certain result, which can be considered in function of its principles and its rules of procedures, as valid or not, as winner or loser.

Q: There is always the problem of the who. Is it a group, an ensemble?

MF: It can be a group, an individual. There is indeed a problem there. You can observe, insofar as the multiple games of truth are concerned, that what has always characterized our society, since the time of the Greeks, is the fact that we do not have a complete and peremptory definition of the games of truth which would be allowed, to the exclusion of all others. There is always a possibility, in a given game of truth, to discover something else and to more or less change such and such a rule and sometimes even the totality of the game of truth. No doubt that is what has given the West, in relationship to other societies, possibilities of development that we find nowhere else. Who says the truth? Individuals who are free, who arrive at a certain agreement and who find themselves thrust into a certain network of practices of power and constraining institutions.

Q: Truth then is not a construct?

MF: That depends. There are some games of truth in which truth is a construct and others when it is not. You can have, for example, a game of truth which consists in describing things in such a way. The one who gives an anthropological description of society does not give us a construct, but a description—which has, as far as it is concerned—a certain number of rules, evolving historically, so that one can say that up to a certain point it is a construct in relationship to another description. That does not mean that there is nothing there and that everything comes out of somebody's head. Of what we can say, for example, of this transformation of games of truth, some draw the conclusion that I said that nothing existed—I have been made to say that madness does not exist, although the problem was quite the contrary. It was a question of knowing how madness, under the various definitions that we could give it, could be at a certain moment, integrated in an institutional field which considered it a mental illness, occupying a certain place alongside other illnesses.

Q: Basically there is also a problem of communication at the heart of the problem of truth, the problem of the transparency of the words of speech. The one who can formulate truths also has a power, the power of being able to say the truth and to express it as he wishes.

MF: Yes, and that does not mean however that what he says is not true, as most people believe. When you point out to them that there can be a relation between truth and power, they say: "Ah good! then it is not the truth."

Q: That goes along with the problem of communication, for in a society where communication has a high level of transparency, the games of truth are perhaps more independent of the structures of power.

MF: You are posing a very important problem there: I think you are referring to Habermas as you say that. I am interested in what Habermas is doing. I know that he does not agree with what I say—I am a little more in agreement with him—but there is always something which causes me a problem. It is when he assigns a very important place to relations of communication and also a function that I would call “utopian.” The thought that there could be a state of communication which would be such that the games of truth could circulate freely, without obstacles, without constraint and without coercive effects, seems to me to be Utopia. It is being blind to the fact that relations of power are not something bad in themselves, from which one must free one’s self. I don’t believe there can be a society without relations of power, if you understand them as means by which individuals try to conduct, to determine the behavior of others. The problem is not of trying to dissolve them in the utopia of a perfectly transparent communication, but to give one’s self the rules of law, the techniques of management, and also the ethics, the *ethos*, the practice of self, which would allow these games of power to be played with a minimum of domination.

Q: You are far removed from Sartre who used to tell us “Power is evil.”

MF: Yes, and that idea has often been attributed to me, which is very far from what I think. Power is not an evil. Power is strategic games. We know very well indeed that power is not an evil. Take for example, sexual relationship or love relationships. To exercise power over another, in a sort of open strategic game, where things could be reversed, that is not evil. That is part of love, passion, of sexual pleasure. Let us also take something that has been the object of criticism, often justified: the pedagogical institution. I don’t see where evil is in the practice of someone who, in a given game of truth, knowing more than another, tells him what he must do, teaches him, transmits knowledge to him, communicates skills to him. The problem is rather to know how you are to avoid in these practices—where power cannot not play and where it is not evil in itself—the effects of domination which will make a child subject to the arbitrary and useless authority of a teacher, or put a student under the power of an abusively authoritarian professor, and so forth. I think these problems should be posed in terms of rules of law, of relational tech-

micHEL foucault      niques of government and of *ethos*, of practice of self and of freedom.

Q: Can we understand what you have just said to be the fundamental criteria of what you have called a new ethics? It would be a question of playing with the minimum of domination. . . .

MF: I think that in fact there is the point of articulation of the ethical preoccupation and of the political struggle for the respect of rights, of the critical reflexion against the abusive techniques of government and of the ethical research which allows individual liberty to be founded.

Q: When Sartre speaks of power as supreme evil, he seems to refer to the reality of power as domination. You probably agree with Sartre on that?

MF: I think that all those notions have been ill-defined and we don't really know what we are talking about. Myself, I am not sure, when I began to interest myself in this problem of power, of having spoken very clearly about it or used the words needed. Now I have a much clearer idea of all that. It seems to me that we must distinguish the relationships of power as strategic games between liberties—strategic games that result in the fact that some people try to determine the conduct of others—and the states of domination, which are what we ordinarily call power. And, between the two, between the games of power and the states of domination, you have governmental technologies—giving this term a very wide meaning for it is also the way in which you govern your wife, your children, as well as the way you govern an institution. The analysis of these techniques is necessary, because it is often through this kind of technique that states of domination are established and maintain themselves. In my analysis of power, there are three levels: the strategic relationships, the techniques of government, and the levels of domination.

Q: We find in your course on the Hermeneutic of the Subject a passage where you say that there is no other principal and useful point of resistance to political power than in the relationship of self to self.

MF: I do not think that the only point of possible resistance to political power—understand of course, as a state of domination—lies in the relationship of self to self. I say that governmentality implies the relationship of self to self, which means exactly that, in the idea of governmentality, I am aiming at the totality of practices, by which one can constitute, define, organize, instrumentalize the strategies which individuals in their liberty can have in regard to each other. It is free individuals

who try to control, to determine, to delimit the liberty of others and, in order to do that, they dispose of certain instruments to govern others. That rests indeed on freedom, on the relationship of self to self and the relationship to the other. But if you try to analyze power not from the point of view of liberty, of strategies and of governmentality but from the point of view of a political institution, you cannot consider the subject as a subject of rights. We have a subject who was endowed with rights or who was not and who, by the institution of a political society, has received or has lost rights. You are then thrown back to a juridical concept of the subject. On the other hand, the notion of governmentality allows one, I believe, to set off the freedom of the subject and the relationship to others, i.e., that which constitutes the very matter of ethics.

Q: Do you think philosophy has anything to say on the **why** of this tendency to want to determine the conduct of others?

MF: This manner of determining the conduct of others will take very different forms, will arouse appetites and desires of varying intensity according to societies. I don't know anything about anthropology but we can imagine that there are societies in which the way one determines the behaviour of others is so well determined in advance, that there is nothing left to do. On the other hand, in a society like ours—it is very evident in family relationships, for example, in sexual and affective relations—the games can be extremely numerous and thus the temptation to determine the conduct of others is that much greater. However, the more that people are free in respect to each other, the greater the temptation on both sides to determine the conduct of others. The more open the game, the more attractive and fascinating it is.

Q: Do you think philosophy has the duty of sounding a warning on the danger of power?

MF: That duty has always been an important function of philosophy. On the critical side—I mean critical in a very broad sense—philosophy is precisely the challenging of all phenomena of domination at whatever level or under whatever form they present themselves—political, economic, sexual, institutional, and so on. This critical function of philosophy, up to a certain point, emerges right from the socratic imperative: “Be concerned with yourself, i.e., ground yourself in liberty, through the mastery of self.”

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