

Hanna Stępniewska-Gębik

Uniwersytet Pedagogiczny w Krakowie

ORCID: 0000-0003-1213-8827

DOI: [10.35464/1642-672X.PS.2020.4.02](https://doi.org/10.35464/1642-672X.PS.2020.4.02)

The Goal of Education: Spirituality or Intellectualism? An Alternative to -Self-Care

ABSTRACT: This article deals with the dilemma related to the purpose of upbringing. M. Foucault's concept of -self-care and J. Patočka's studies allow us to ask questions about the goal of education. Is it to become an intellectual or a spiritual being? The possibility of such a distinction is embedded in the ethics of -self-care, an ancient tradition, which even nowadays, among others, thanks to P. Sloterdijk or M. Foucault himself, has become an important category. An ethical attitude towards the self opens the way to spirituality through a set of appropriate practices. It becomes the basis for relations with others and with the world.

KEYWORDS: pedagogy, spiritual being, intellectual, truth, self-care, upbringing.

Introduction

The ethics of self-care focuses not only on the attitude or practice of caring but also on making a care-based relationship the basis of ethical reflection. In the area of ethics of self-care, there is an understanding of the human being that includes their subjectivity towards the self as well as to the other, contrary to a purely individualistic understanding. In its content, it overshadows the concept of man as an individual isolating themselves from others, whose development consists solely in the pursuit of full autonomy, i.e. maximum independence. Instead, the ethics of self-care presents how autonomy, self-fulfillment, self-finalization are exercised in the subject's relations with others and with the world. Arguments supporting the assumptions of the ethics of self-care are provided by the functioning of man

from the first years of life as a being dependent on others, and the inability to completely free oneself from this dependence until death, because satisfying human needs is largely linked to the actions of others. The ethics of self-care seems to combine an individualistic approach with an antagonistic relational perspective, concerning the formation of an ethical attitude towards the self, while this “self” is rooted in social and cultural relations. It seems impossible to practice self-care without the other, whether understood as a human being or a cultural and social context, regardless of whether attention is devoted to its effects in social relations (while caring for oneself, one cares for others), or the accumulation of relations with others and the world on the way to individual self-finalization.

The ethics of self-care refer to the spiritual dimension of human existence, indicating at the same time what life becomes without spirituality. The main aim of this article is to draw attention to the attitude of self-care with regard to the problem of spirituality in the works of Michel Foucault and Jan Patočka. The concepts of these philosophers generate a question about the purpose of modern upbringing, based on differences that exist between an intellectual and a spiritual being. The dilemma of how to achieve such a purpose remains unanswered. Can the ancient methodology of Hadot’s or Sloterdijk’s contemporary proposal be considered sufficient?

Ancient *paideia*

In his works, Foucault analyzes one’s relationship to oneself in a historical perspective while referring to the contemporary culture of the subject. Thus, self-care can be understood as a certain principle of rational functioning of an individual under the influence of a specific cultural reality. This means that in practicing self-care, an individual is subject to various understandings of the term and focuses on different areas of their activity. Foucault, in *The History of Sexuality* (2010) and *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* (2012), by describing the history of self-care, shows how the meaning of the term has changed. However, it has always been related to the work of the subject. According to the French philosopher, self-care began with Socrates, and had its heyday at the beginning of our era, reaching another milestone at the turn of the 4th and 5th centuries. Self-care became the basis of *paideia* at that time, defining the path to becoming an ethical subject of one’s behavior as a citizen, husband, wife, mother, father, etc. Initially, self-care referred to the way power was exercised and was based on the assumption that self-control could lead to the control of others. Emerging from a political and social context, it is also

embedded in education. The educational context is connected with critical or crisis moments: the first is the realization of one's insufficient knowledge, or ignorance, which generates the need to practice self-care; the second is the moment of passing subsequent development stages along with moving from the influence of educators to political activity, i.e. leaving adolescence.

Self-care is very different from various self-focused activities, such as caring for one's body or nutrition, because self-care concerns the soul as its subject. The second characteristic of self-care is a kind of mediation, which appears through a relationship with someone else – a master who has an honorable place in the development of care. According to Foucault, concern is connected with getting to know oneself, but also with experiencing oneself and the subject's lifestyle. In the next period of its development, self-care becomes a general and unconditional principle, i.e. an imperative that applies to all, regardless of their social status. Its purpose is not so much to exercise power over others as the individual himself or herself. The importance of knowledge of the self is also diminished when it is combined with some practices that serve a comprehensive notion of care. The process of generalization and integration makes self-care an art of existence concerning the whole life of every individual. Self-care is no longer linked only with insufficient education or critical moments but becomes a life-long obligation for every person. Practices related to care no longer have only a formative, but also a corrective and liberating function. The critical function of self-care is also increasing; its practice is based on critical activity in relation to oneself, to the world of culture, and other people (Foucault, 2010, 2012). The emerging new meaning of self-care reduces the importance of transmission of values by the family and combines self-care with criticism of the existing order: of upbringing, masters, values, etc. At this time, practices related to self-care are compared to medical interventions. The third period in the development of self-care falls on Christianity, and this is a time when the culture of self-care concentrates on issues related to faith, revelation, grace. This gave care a universal appeal to everyone, regardless of their status, nationality, or marital status. According to Foucault, the relationship to the self, the discovery of the self led to a "universal summons", a "rarity of salvation" from which no one is originally excluded (Foucault, 2012). Care becomes a process the goal of which is to be oneself, but this goal is achieved only by few.

It can be said that self-care comes from education, from the relationship with the master whose aim is to be oneself, or from crises in the life of an individual. The first example shows the formative, liberating, and corrective functions of self-care, emphasizing its importance in development. The second

source of self-care, represented by crisis situations, mainly emphasizes its protective importance by referring to the corrective function. Of course, in crises, the subject works on themselves from a developmental perspective, but the primary task is to protect the resources at their disposal in order to be able to increase them accordingly. As long as self-care remains beyond *paideia*, educational and cultural discourse, the most common catalysts and triggers to work on the self will be the critical situations that appear in human life.

Hermeneutical recognition inscribed in self-care is always closely related to the relationship to the other. Foucault refers to the example of Alcibiades, who, in order to govern a *polis*, must govern himself effectively. He must direct his attention towards himself, reflect on himself, get to know himself. “Dealing with oneself” presupposes and results from the individual’s will to exercise political power over others (Foucault, 2012). Alcibiades also reveals deficiencies in upbringing, which, at this stage of the deliberations, allow the self-care to be embedded on the axis of education – knowledge. The French philosopher also refers to Seneca, saying: evil does not come from outside, it is inside us. Therefore, when practicing self-care, one should work on one’s composure, weeding out the evil, freeing oneself from it, which leads one to develop care around the axis of correction – freedom and where a relationship with another person is slightly different than in the first case. When an individual is in a state of discomfort, or suffering, the other becomes a source of support, just like Seneca did for Lucilius. The common element of self-care is the presence of the other, without whom this practice would not be possible. The other is a teacher, a master, etc. Another axis on which one can describe self-care is the subject and the other. On the one hand, self-care, closely connected with care for others in Plato’s works, later becomes an intrinsic goal that does not lead to the other or others. A person can take care of oneself for oneself. When practicing self-care, one deals with a certain degree of absolutization of self as a subject of care and its “self-finalization” (Foucault, 2012). Thus, different ways of practicing self-care in relation to the different roles of the other become apparent. However, in Foucault’s opinion, self-care should lead to care for the other and at the same time, the latter is not possible without the former. In *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, he refers to the advice Epictetus gives to a father who has left his sick daughter. He did it because he loved his daughter very much and was devastated by her condition. According to Epictetus, he made a mistake because he only took care of his daughter, only thought about her, and finally could not stand the pressure of the situation. But in striving to take care of his daughter, he should take care of himself. Working on himself would require him to understand

the meaning of his feelings towards his daughter, the sense of his role towards her, and her meaning for him as a father. Foucault concludes that if a father learns to take care of himself properly, his daughter's illness will not put him off balance and he will stay to take care of her (Foucault, 2012).

Spirituality and truth in self-care

Foucault understands self-care as taking care of oneself, nurturing oneself, as a virtue. It is also the principle from which the recommendation stems: know thyself. It provides the framework, the basis for justifying this imperative. The French philosopher also describes self-care as a kind of *spiritus movens*, the principle of movement, the constant anxiety felt by the individual, the "sting of human existence".

Foucault defines self-care as an attitude towards perceiving things and finding oneself in the world, acting and establishing relationships with others, that is, an attitude towards oneself and others. It requires a distraction from the outside, from others, from the world and directing it towards the "self". Therefore, self-care implies a kind of attention directed to what one thinks, what comes to mind. Self-care always refers to certain actions that one carries out on oneself, through which one takes possession of oneself, purifies oneself and transforms oneself, changes oneself. Hence the whole series of practices: meditation, examination of conscience, verification of representations appearing in the mind. Thus, we are dealing with an attitude towards the world, others and the self, in which a kind of introspection plays an important role, allowing one to undertake practices leading to the transformation of the subject.

Foucault's self-care is the basis of the *gnothi seauton* imperative, thus occupying a unique place in the subject's relationship to the truth about the self. Access to truth is mediated by spirituality understood as research, practice, and experience through which the subject makes necessary transformations on the self (Foucault, 2012). Spirituality understood this way has three characteristics. First of all, the truth never belongs to the subject; the subject has no access to it. Spirituality assumes that truth is not made available to the subject in a simple act of cognition. To gain access to the truth, the subject must transform, change, shift and "become, to some extent and in some sense, different from the self" (Foucault, 2012). The first feature implies the next one – achieving the truth is not possible without the transformation of the subject, without a conversion that is achievable in different ways. Foucault refers here to the movement of the eros, which denies the current status of the subject and makes the subject rise to the truth or the truth descend upon

the subject themselves to enlighten them. The second way of transforming the subject is to work on the self, shaping the self for which one is responsible – the long-term work of asceticism. The third characteristic of spirituality is related to the effect of truth, which is the result of the subject's effort to get to the truth and to reverse the influence of truth on the subject. In other words, there is something in access to the truth that changes the subject themselves, complements them in their own being. Self-care is defined by a set of spiritual conditions, transformations of the self that are necessary for access to the truth.

In the modern way of thinking about the subject's access to the truth, there is one condition: cognition itself and nothing else. According to Foucault, it was the "Cartesian moment" that changed the history of truth, which can be reached by cognitive acts without the necessity of changing the subject themselves, i.e. without additional conditions related to spirituality. Other conditions have arisen – internal and external conditions concerning the cognitive act. The former include rules, formal and objective conditions, methods, and the structure of the object, allowing access to the truth. The latter conditions are, e.g. beliefs that to have access to the truth one needs to study, have an education, fit into a certain scientific consensus, not pretend anything or allow career considerations to contradict the norms of objective research, etc. Access to the truth is possible through the fulfillment by the subject of culturally specified conditions. However, this method, not connected with the subject's own work or effort, does not cause a change, but only becomes an opportunity to verify ways of achieving the truth and a possible incentive to broaden one's possibilities to meet as many conditions as possible. This reminds us of the need to increase one's capacity to know oneself and take care of oneself. The question then arises as to whether a subject that does not meet these conditions has a chance to know the truth about themselves? Is this cognition unconditional?

Foucault argues that the modern era is characterized by the assumption that the subject as it is is not capable of the truth, while the truth itself is not capable of redeeming the subject. The principle of access to truth has dissociated itself from the spiritual practices of work on the self, carried out by the changing subject expecting the truth of enlightenment and transformation. Of course, this is not about truth in the form of scientific knowledge, the achievement of which is not connected with spirituality and ethics of self-care. According to Foucault, however, there is a kind of knowledge that is not scientific in nature and yet there are some elements of spirituality present – Lacan's psychoanalysis. Certainly, there are some external conditions here as well, so that the subject can be transposed in access to the truth, but the

fundamental issue that Lacan took up is related to spirituality. His question concerned the price that a person has to pay to be able to speak the truth, as well as the effect on that person of being able to speak the truth about themselves. The subject's striving for truth is not only an effort that ends when they learn it but continues with the effort of confronting the effect of the truth. It can be said that the subject, to know the truth, must be capable of such work. Capable of making a certain effort, which becomes a condition for cognition and transformation.

According to Foucault, working on the self by seeking the truth, understanding the self, develops when confronted with ignorance, which does not know about itself or appears because of accumulated mistakes, habits, addictions, or difficult situations, which are unforeseen and generate the need to change functioning.

Spirituality and intellectualism

The spiritual man became the central theme in Patočka's paper entitled *The spiritual being and the intellectual* (Patočka, 1998) and can be understood from the perspective of care for the soul that Patočka presented in *Péče o duši* (1999). The Czech philosopher wonders who the spiritual being is, what are the differences between them and the intellectual, what is their situation in the world. According to Patočka, an intellectual is a being with some education or skills, based on which they work and receive gratification (Patočka, 1998). They can be a cultural activist, an employee, or a creator who, by performing their work, enter into economic dependencies, which qualify their activity among other types of human work. It is also worth adding that it is possible to define and analyze the intellectual in an objective way from a sociological perspective. The situation is different for a spiritual person, who cannot be described based on external observations, because "on the outside" these people function in the same way as intellectuals. They are also teachers, writers, lawyers, etc. To explain the difference, Patočka turns to Plato, pointing out that for the Greek philosopher it was the spiritual being who was a transparent and clear figure, but who for him "represents a huge problem". Patočka brings closer the essence of the spiritual being by referring to a certain type of spiritual life which is a philosophy of "the inverted world". It is the philosopher who inverts the world for non-spiritual people, because for a philosopher "the world is not something obvious" (Patočka, 1998, p. 214). In general, we live in a world that is given to us and obvious, a fact that is the basis of our life. We have learned how to react, how to function in social life, thanks to education we

have learned various theories, mechanisms, rules. Even when doubts arise, one refers to what one already knows, and “life, somehow taken over, does not encounter any obstacles” (Patočka, 1998, p. 214). Sometimes, however, one’s experiences show something different from the accepted obviousness of this world. The people one knows, the people one works with are inconsistent, abandon their faith, their life plans. One experiences the deaths of people close to them, suffering, the breakdown of societies. Such events show that “life, which seemed so obvious, is actually somehow problematic, that something is wrong with it, something is not right” (Patočka, 1998, p. 215). First, it seems that these minor inconveniences, unpleasant events, and contradictions do not matter and it is possible to live life as one always has. After all, the world constantly speaks, gives meaning. According to Patočka, if one consistently followed the negative, one would reach a vacuum in which nothing would hint at a certain reaction, but this is where spiritual life begins. Using the example of Socrates, who tries to examine in an interview whether people in different situations could maintain their identity and be consistent. The conclusion is that it is extremely difficult to find such a strong person. Even Socrates himself is not convinced that his attitude is fully consistent, but he tries – he is on the path. It is worth noting that a spiritual being is someone who finds themselves on the path in just this way (Patočka, 1998). The spiritual being does not avoid confronting life-threatening, negative experiences. Unlike an ordinary person, they do not try to forget about them, they do not set out to bear life in any way. A spiritual being is a person exposed to the negative, drawing from these experiences by questioning apparent safety. The experiences one goes through are mainly those that show us the specificity of one’s life, in which nothing is obvious, even the fact that one is alive. They contain a certain “strangeness” which, according to Patočka, makes one stop, unable to go on and function, and encounter a blockade that changes lives forever. In what sense? A critical moment does not change the world, people, or things. The world is as it was, but something appears that is neither a thing nor a fact. “The new way of life is that we live by accepting life not only as such but by accepting its problematic nature” (Patočka, 1998, p. 218). The need to be embedded in negative experiences creates new opportunities, opens up a new sphere – active life expressed through responsibility, fidelity, generosity, etc., and creating specific social institutions.

The modern world in which Patočka lived seems completely non-spiritual and in a way reconciled with this lack of spirituality. It is filled with various kinds of nihilism, from joyful nihilism that recognizes that reality does not make sense, so it can be shaped freely, through nihilism of self-

subordination to a certain power, to the nihilism of resignation consisting in the total rejection of everything and internal paralysis. It has experienced wars, revolutions, cruelty in various forms. But can this reality be a reason for withdrawal for a spiritual being? Patočka answers unequivocally – the spiritual being must stop being afraid in a way that prevents them from acting. A spiritual being is able to defend their position which conflicts with what is common, and act consistently and in accordance with their agenda of a spiritual life.

A spiritual being as a leader of their life

The ethical attitude, which is care for the soul, leads to the confrontation of the subject with the most difficult, often negative, reality to which they are not indifferent, with the impossibilities that cause a stir. A person cannot simply live – they have to lead their life towards the good, towards what is better.

According to Sloterdijk, what leads towards the impossible is asceticism, which the philosopher compares to acrobatics in the sense that the latter appears wherever something is impossible, although it seems easy. It is becoming possible. This is how a person takes up asceticism as part of self-care, starting from the intuitive pursuit of the better. In this way, they get in the middle of a whole series of exercises that change the person's "nature" in order to fulfill it. It is then that they become the animal that is doomed to lead, exercise, think (Sloterdijk, 2014). The postulated pedagogical goal, referring to a medieval maxim, would therefore be *non scholae sed vitae discimus*. Learning for life would mean, in this case, that what matters is not adapting to the existing order but an expedition to the summits.

Referring to acrobatics on the tightrope, Sloterdijk explains that walking on the rope represents the accumulation of everything that has been in the present. Only in this way can the imperative "you have to change your life" be transformed into a daily series of exercises. "Acrobatic existence subtracts the trivial from life, putting repetition at the service of the unique. It transforms all the steps into first steps because any one of them can be the last one. There is only one ethical action for these acrobatics: to undercut all relationships by conquering the improbable" (Sloterdijk, 2014, p. 287). Acrobatic existence requires giving up one's life, thanks to involvement in the practice of exercises. Both Foucault and Sloterdijk refer to ancient practices that make existential acrobatics a reality. Of course, modern times do not eliminate such practices; they create other opportunities. Examples include the psychotherapeutic

systems that developed during the 20th century, which stimulated the ancient practice of practicing introspection without being generally aware of their kinship with the old models. When around 1980 Foucault brought back to the contemporary narrative the ancient discourse on “self-care”, it was a signal to expand the consciously applied techniques. From then on, the generalized consciousness of exercise was restored from sources of ancient philosophy, and the modern practice of art and body. It began to be noticed that “20th century therapeutism was, for its part, only a phenomenon covering an epochal turn in trend” (Sloterdijk, 2014, p. 294). What is the practice of *homo repetitivus*? It can be said to primarily consist in “uprooting from the first life”, a departure from ordinary reality. In the creation of heterotopia, i.e. spatial creations of “different places” that are inscribed in social structures at the same time oppose the logic of the whole. Such a *hereotopia* is for Sloterdijk the other bank of Heraclitus’ river. It is a place where practitioners reach, “coming out of the customary current, creating the first bridgeheads of eccentricity” (Sloterdijk, 2014, p. 307). The mission of shaping one’s own existence requires the separation of what is one’s own from what is connected with the world. Such a “basic subject-forming exercise” is a retreat from common situations we call life or the world. From now on, “to be in the world” means *suum tantum curare*: to self-care, against all distraction in the non-self – and only that” (Sloterdijk, 2014, p. 287). Working on the self consists in what the Stoics described as distinguishing between what is dependent and independent. It starts by ridding the inner space of the non-self. This “withdrawn subjectivity comes closest to the truth of its situation when it questions the reasons for its embarrassment in relation to the whole, frozen as a complex of external facts” (Sloterdijk, 2014, p. 314). In such an enclave, the subject, using loneliness techniques, experiences self-doubling. A second self appears, which, in a symmetrical or asymmetrical relationship, is a participant in the internal dialog. In the ancient tradition of self-care, many techniques were used, such as mindfulness, meditation, the examination of conscience, etc., to help shape ethical attitudes (Hadot, 2018). Life in an exercise, moved by the image of the goal, is about existence oriented towards the purpose, towards perfection. This kind of goal-orientation, by moving, implies the activation of an ideal or a promise of reward.

All ancient philosophical schools had a similar goal – to improve and fulfill themselves through conversion (Hadot, 1992, 2018). Spiritual exercises helped to free oneself from excruciating passions and worries, helped to access real life, to improve oneself. They were an essential area of *paideia*, which teaches living according to human nature understood as reasoning.

All of *paideia* and contemporary applications of spiritual practice are based on a basic assumption – only a free person has the possibility of self-modification, improvement, self-fulfillment. By working on the self, reaching the truth, indicating problems, exercising, the subject becomes an ethical, spiritual being, participating in socio-cultural life and being in relation to the other and to the world.

References

- Foucault, M. (2010). *Historia seksualności*. Gdańsk: Wydawnictwo słowo/obraz terytoria.
- Foucault, M. (2012). *Hermeneutyka podmiotu*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN.
- Hadot, P. (1992). *Filozofia jako ćwiczenie duchowe*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo PAN IFiS.
- Hadot, P. (2018). *Czym jest filozofia starożytna?* Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Aletheia.
- Patočka, J. (1998). *Eseje heretyckie z filozofii dziejów*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Aletheia.
- Patočka, J. (1999). *Péče o duši*. Praha: Wydawnictwo OIKOYMENH.
- Sloterdijk, P. (2014). *Musisz życie swe odmienić: o antropotechnice*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN.