# Liberating Education: What From, What For?

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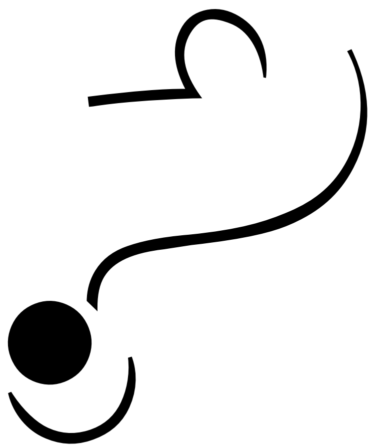

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Marija Velinov[1]

# Free Yourself from Yourself: The Ethics of the Self as an Emancipatory Educational Practice

When speaking about Foucault's interpretation of Seneca, discussions are primarily related to the second and third volume of *The History of Sexuality* (Foucault 1990b; Foucault 1986) and the lectures at the Collège de France published as *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* (Foucault 2005). It could be said that these books represent a turning point. Contrary to the original plans that Foucault presented following the publication of the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, he focused on the analysis of morality, i.e., ethics in Ancient Greece and Greco-Roman culture in the first two centuries CE (Foucault 1990b: 3–13). Foucault reinterprets his previous work and realizes that both the discourse and the power were modes of engaging in what he called the games of truth and subjectivation, i.e., specific relations with the truth through which the subject itself is created (Foucault 1990b; Foucault 1990a).[2]

In order to grasp the connection between the truth, the subject, and ethics, it is necessary to explain their role in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* (Foucault 1978), which Foucault considers the beginning of his ethical work, as well as their role in contemporary

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2 Regarding the question of whether this is a turning point in Foucault's thought or a matte of continuity of his work which is analyzed from a new angle, see Velinov 2018.

life, which leads him to considerations to which he committed himself. Furthermore, we must also present Foucault's understanding of morality and ethics, as well as the status and function of 'Seneca' in Foucault's thinking. In the context of these discourses, Seneca is chosen as a representative of Late Stoicism, but specifically as the representative who wrote the most and left behind an abundant source from which Foucault derived his depiction of this period, as the pinnacle of what he calls the attention to or the care of oneself (Sellars 2006: 12), the height of the specific 'culture' of the self (Foucault 2005: 179).

## 1. Ethics

Foucault attributes specific meaning to the relationship between ethics and morality. In his opinion, every morality has three aspects (Foucault 1990b: 25, 26): the first are moral rules or laws; the second is the behaviour of those 'subjected' to this rule; and finally, the third is the way that individuals are constituted as ethical subjects of the given moral code (rules or law), i.e., the way that they conduct themselves and lead themselves to conform with the set of prescriptions. Foucault's term 'ethics' is linked to the third of these morality aspects — to the aspect of subjectivation, the aspect of constituting oneself as the moral subject of the code (O'Leary 2002: 11). This is the relation to oneself "through which we constitute ourselves as moral agents" (Foucault 1984: 351). In line with this, Foucault defined ethics as the part of morality that is related to the relation of the self to oneself (Foucault 1984: 321–352; Davidson 2005: 126). Therefore, ethics is not a collection of rules and principles, but a field of our self-constitution as subjects (O'Leary 2002: 11).

Foucault believes that it is precisely in ethics that changes in morality through history are demonstrated. Laws remain more or less unchanged, but the modes of subjectivation change. Ethics is where changes occurred in the transition from the Greco-Roman to Christian morality, not in the law, but rather in the relation of the self to itself

(Foucault 1984: 355). For example, if we look at Foucault's detailed depiction of 'sexuality' and the problems surrounding it in the first two centuries CE, we will see that the rules and codes linked to it are very similar to subsequent ones. For example, there was a rule according to which sexual relations should be practiced exclusively within wedlock. What was different, however, were the reasons why people subjected themselves to this rule (Foucault 1986). During this period there was no notion of fidelity in the sense of obligation or living according to the law, but rather the idea of life without succumbing to one's passions, where energy is preserved, where neither the spirit nor the body should be squandered (which is defined as *stultitia*), where one commands oneself, but this domination is not permitted to anyone else, etc. Foucault noted that even the writings that discuss in the greatest detail the life of spouses do not lay down rules for discerning between what is allowed and what is prohibited, but rather a way of living, or a style of relations, is suggested. Therefore, through his research, Foucault wanted to demonstrate the transformations that occurred 'under' the laws and rules, in relations toward the self and the related practices of self (Foucault 1985: 356–358). He did not want to write the history of the moral law, but of the moral subject. Foucault defined the dominant contemporary idea of the subject as being the subject of desire, i.e., the subject whose truth can be discovered in the truth of their desire, the subject that is prevalent in psychoanalysis and philosophy, but has also reinforced its place as the dominant understanding of our present (Foucault 1990b: 6).

## 1.1. Subject, Truth and Technologies of the Self

Over time, through his work Foucault became aware of the existence of a type of technique that allows individuals to use their own means to carry out a certain number of operations on their own body, soul, on their own thoughts or their own behaviour, with the aim of transforming themselves. Foucault calls these techniques the *technologies of the self* (Foucault 1990b: 31–32; Foucault 1988: 17–18). He turned

to exploring the techniques of the self, which entail a set of commitments to the truth: finding the truth, the obligation to be enlightened by the truth, to tell the truth. Foucault considers all this to be of crucial importance for the development as well as the transformation of the self (Foucault 1988: 18).[3]

For example, for Foucault the unique characteristic of modern sexuality is precisely its relation to *truth*-telling. This relation produces a given relationship to the self, as a specific game of truth that is institutionalized in the idea of confessing and speaking the truth, which spreads to legal, medical, educational, familial, and romantic relationships (Foucault 1990b: 27, 28). Expressing or confessing one's truth is most commonly linked to the *liberation* of one's hidden desire and *true* nature. However, Foucault strives to show that speaking the truth does not liberate, but rather subjugates: "And this discourse of truth finally takes effect, not in the one who receives it, but in the one from whom it is wrested" (Foucault 1978: 62).[4] Therefore, confessing one's (hidden) truth gains certain value and becomes the basic manner of our self-construction as an individual and the basic form of relationships with others. In this way, the contemporary western man becomes a 'desiring man'— the desire that must be revealed, which must be set free and in line with which we must define ourselves as the subject of its truth. Precisely this 'desiring man' and his relationship with the

3 In one of his reinterpretations of his previous work, Foucault specifically defines games of truth as the basic thread that has existed from the beginning to the end of his research. Namely, he links the first phase of his work to the consideration of games of truth in their mutual relations (for which certain empirical sciences from the 17th and 18th centuries were used as an example), in the second phase he addresses the relation between games of truth and relations of power (through the example of punishment practices), while the third phase is linked to researching games of truth in the relation of the self to oneself and the constituting of the self as a subject (the phase in which the field of analysis is most closely tied to the history of the "desiring man") (Foucault 1990b: 6). Considering that in Foucault's philosophy the relation of the self to oneself is defined as ethics, we see that his ethical considerations are best defined in the relation of the truth to the constitution of the subject.

4 The power that the production of truth provides can be seen in the example of documentarity, which is most often considered as the proof of the truth of an event. About the analysis of documentarity as the production, and not the reception of truth, and the power over the reception and even resistance, that is, the government of others, see Velinov 2020.

truth is what led Foucault to attempt to problematize its domination, by exploring other forms of subjectivation, i.e., other forms of relationships to ourselves or other forms of ethics.

In his lectures and seminars titled *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, Foucault establishes the difference between Late Stoicism and Early Christianity and indicates precisely this moment as the crucial transition or point of discontinuity (discontinuity in the way of subjugation to the rules, but continuity of the rules themselves), as a historical circumstance that will in time create the 'desiring man'. On the other hand, in the preceding period—in the Greco-Roman culture—Foucault discovers what he would call the *art of living*.

## 1.2. Ethics of the Self and Care of the Self

Foucault is interested in the history of the changes and relationships to what was called *epimeleia heautou* in Greek, or *cura sui* in Latin, and translates as the "care of the self", "attending to oneself", "being concerned about oneself", "the fact of attending or occupation with oneself", "nurturing oneself", etc (Foucault 2005).

It is necessary to bear in mind that this principle represents multiple things (Foucault 2005: 1–19). It is primarily an attitude toward oneself as well as toward others and the world. It also represents a certain form of attention and view. Caring for oneself includes redirecting one's gaze from others and the world to oneself and attending to what we think about and what takes place in our thoughts, i.e., both exercise and meditation. Finally, *epimeleia* always also implies a certain number of actions that a person exercises on the self, by which they change, reshape, transfigure, or purify, actions through which one cares for oneself.

Etymology refers to a series of words such as *meletan, meletē, meletai*, which are often used with the verb *gymnazein*, which means to prac-

tice and train. So, much more than a spiritual attitude, this is a form of activity that is vigilant, continuous, diligent, and regular. It entails an entire set of practices and exercises such as meditation techniques, techniques of remembering past moments, techniques of testing the conscience, etc. (Foucault 2005: 81–105).

Foucault differentiates between four groups of expressions linked to the practice of caring for oneself and the 'culture' of the self (Foucault 2005: 81–105): some indicate acts of cognition and are related to the attention or gaze directed toward oneself—the reverse gaze to oneself (Seneca 2007a), exploring oneself; others are related to the movement of the entire existence that revolves around itself and directs or returns (Seneca 2007a)[5] to the self—withdrawing to the self (Seneca 2007a), secluding one's self (Seneca 2010b), descending to the greatest depths of one's soul, gathering composure, immersing oneself in the self, settling in the self (Seneca 2007b); then there is a third group of expressions that are related to special behaviour in regard to oneself, which is behaviour of a medical type (care for oneself, treating oneself, etc.), a legal type (making demands, pointing out one's rights, separating oneself from debts and obligations, setting oneself free) (Seneca 1918: 1,4), as well as a religious type (expressing a cult to oneself, honouring oneself, respecting oneself (Seneca 2007a), being ashamed before oneself) (Seneca 2010b; Seneca 2007a);[6] and finally, there are expressions that indicate a certain type of permanent relation to oneself, in the form of overcoming and supremacy (having power over oneself) (Seneca 2007a), in the context of experience (enjoying oneself) (Seneca 2007b), experiencing joy in oneself (Seneca 2007a Seneca 2007b), being happy in the presence of oneself, admiring oneself (Seneca 2007a), being satisfied with oneself, etc.

5 One should be like a deity or nature, which direct their activities at the outer world, but return to themselves from all sides.

6 The link between shame and respect, on the one hand, and the aesthetics of existence, on the other, is very important. Seneca defines a life worthy of respect and a beautiful life, as the life that should serve as an example and the one that we should emulate, while defining the life that we should be ashamed of—as the ugly one.

The precept 'to be concerned with oneself' was even in the case of the Greeks one of the main rules of conduct and the art (skill) of life. However, this principle was overshadowed by the Delphic *principle gnothi* seauton (know yourself) (Foucault 1988: 19). Foucault believes that our philosophical tradition has disregarded the basic principle of concern with oneself and overemphasized the simple technical advice of the oracle of Delphi.[7] In Foucault's opinion, the relationship between the need to learn who we are, to learn our true self and the principle of concern with oneself, as the basic rule of the art of life or skill of creating a beautiful life, i.e., aesthetics of existence, was reversed at the point of transition from Greco-Roman to Christian morality. In time, this reversal has created practices of confession and admission that have become part of our everyday life. Knowledge of the self in Greco-Roman culture represents one of the consequences of concern with oneself, while in the modern world it constitutes the fundamental principle (Foucault 1988: 22).

## 2. Seneca

Foucault believes that the first two centuries CE represent the golden age of the culture of the self, of the cultivation of oneself, or of the care of oneself (Foucault 2005). Foucault designates the care of oneself as one of the central notions of Seneca's philosophy (Foucault 2005). He reminds us of the beginning of Book 7 of Seneca's work *On Benefits* (Seneca 2009: 297) in which he gives priority to the rules that guide our behaviour over issues that are related to exercising one's intellect. Seneca believes that we should turn to matters that are related to ourselves and our behaviour, i.e., to a certain number of rules through which we can guide our actions (Foucault 2005, Seneca 1918: 88). Also, in *On the Happy Life* (Seneca 2007a) he explicitly suggests that we should withdraw to the self and pay attention to the self. Finally, Seneca starts the first letter to Lucilius, with the advice that he should

7 For more on the relation between the principle of care for oneself and knowing oneself in the context of western thinking, see Foucault 2005: 1–24.

attend to himself (Seneca 1918: 1,1).

### 2.1. Two Dimensions of the Generalization of the Care of the Self

Foucault detects a specific generalization of the care of the self in the 1st and 2nd centuries CE—a generalization that is manifested in two dimensions (Foucault 2005: 81–106). On the one hand, unlike Plato's link between the care of the self and certain key moments of transition into maturity (Plato 2001), the care of the self later becomes an obligation that should extend throughout one's life. It could even be said that the care of the self is linked more to maturity and old age than to the transition from adolescence to maturity.

The second difference compared to Plato's understanding of the care of the self lies in its educational function. Namely, contrary to professionally oriented education (which was primarily related to the skill of governing others), the practice of the self in the Hellenistic and Roman periods develops a certain educational and critical function of the care of the self, which is not related to preparations for any given profession. This is rather a matter of creating an individual so that they can properly endure all possible accidents, misfortunes, disgrace, and setbacks that may befall them (Foucault 2005: 81–106). Therefore, this is a matter of developing a safety mechanism, an armour, a protective layer separating one from the rest of the world, an assembly that we encounter most commonly in regard to the idea of being equipped and armed (Seneca 1918: 24,5, 61,5, 109,8; 133,28). Even though during this period there was apparently still a connection between the care of the self and education, it was now primarily linked to freeing oneself of misapprehensions and bad habits, which means that this link was more about specific corrections and liberation than traditional education related to knowledge (Foucault 2005). The practice of the self should improve, not educate, or only educate (Foucault 2005).

Considering the fact that the practice of the self took on the role of improving and correcting, it increasingly veered toward medicine (Foucault 2005). For example, at the beginning of the work *On the Tranquillity of the Mind*, Serenus addresses Seneca—whom he compares to a doctor—and asks him for a treatment for his ailment (Seneca 2007b: 112). Also, the idea of treating the soul against passion is the basic idea of the text *On Anger* (Seneca 2010b). Finally, the word *cura*— as part of the expression *cura sui* (care of the self)—can be used as care, but also as treatment, attendance, etc. (Đorđević 2004: 383). The connection to medicine further leads to the advent of the body as the subject of care and the further care of oneself is associated with the soul (self, reason), as well as with the body. Foucault primarily distinguishes this connection in Seneca's slightly hypochondriac letters. They are full of examples of care directed at health, nutrition, discomfort, and distress (Seneca 1918: 8, 55, 57, 78; Seneca 2010b: book 2, 20,1-3; book 3, 9, 4; Seneca 2007a: 3).[8]

The second dimension of generalization of the care of the self is a particular quantitative expansion of care, which is reflected in the idea of attending to oneself as a general principle that is directed at everyone (Seneca 1918: 31,11, 47,15; Seneca 2007b: 116).[9] It is no longer necessary to care for the self solely for the purpose of the possibility of governing others. It has now become its own goal, in a way.

This general principle should not be understood to be a universal law that everyone should abide by, but rather as a universal invitation for everyone to care for themselves. This invitation, however, can be answered by only a few—only those who have enough strength, determination, patience, courage, and resilience (Foucault 2005: 107–124;

8 In addition to letters 55, 57, and 78, we should add Letter 8, *On Anger*, which speaks about the suppression of anger with lighter food, avoiding amorous delights, and rest, as well as Section 3 of the dialogue *On the Happy Life*, where Seneca says that a person living a blessed and wise life attends to their body and its needs.

9 "Each man acquires his character for himself, but accident assigns his duties" Seneca 1918: 47,16.

Seneca 2007a), as well as those who belong to certain groups, schools, or — as in Seneca's case – at least to some social relation (like a friendship).[10] Therefore, the other is necessary in order for the practice of the self to attain the self to which it aspires (Foucault 2005: 125–148). This need for the other is based, in a way, on the fact that there is some ignorance (therefore we need a teacher), but 'ignorance' is based on the idea that a person — as mentioned previously — is malformed or deformed, full of flaws, trapped in dangerous habits or has an ailing soul, i.e., *doesn't know how to live*. In addition to this, it also applies to the individual not inherently approaching virtue, morality, and righteous acts. To become good is a skill (Seneca 1918: 90,44). Therefore, the individual should not only aspire to knowledge, but to a new status of subject that is defined by a complete relationship of oneself to the self (Foucault 2005: 125–148). And to become constituted as a subject, the mediation of the other is necessary. The role that the teacher now plays is not to teach their student something, nor to demonstrate to them that they don't know something, but to create their student, in a way, to help them change in order to constitute themselves as a subject.

### 2.2. *Stultitia*

In order to depict the necessity of the presence of a teacher in the practice of the self, Foucault draws attention to one of the most important notions of stoic philosophy—the notion of *stultitia*. This notion, which is sometimes translated as folly (Seneca 1918: 52,2) can at first glance be perceived as a lack of certain knowledge, however, this is a particular distress of the soul, indecisiveness (Seneca 2007b: 115), inconsistency and discontent (Seneca 1918: 52,2), and not ignorance. At the beginning of the work *On the Tranquillity of the Mind*, Serenus does not address Seneca with the desire to gain knowledge from him,

10 See: Foucault 2005. The need for the other stands in particular tension with the individuality that Seneca demands (See: Seneca 2007a), but it is important to bear in mind that this individuality is defined in its contrast to the crowd that we let make decisions for us, i.e., against the life in which we follow others, instead of ourselves, and not against friendship. For more on Seneca's views on friendship see Seneca 1918: 3.

but to become very close to the state of being a god: to be unshaken, tranquil (Seneca 2007b: 115).

On the other hand, *stultitia* is the state of the one who has not taken the path of philosophy, someone who does not attend to oneself, who has not started exercising the practice of the self (Foucault 2005: 125–148). This is a person who is susceptible to every wind, open to the outer world, restless and not satisfied with anything. Seneca notes that persons in this state can never escape from themselves (Seneca 2007b: 117,118). Therefore, we could say that the goal of the educational practice described as such is liberation or emancipation from the self. This is not an idea of being free from the influences of others but escaping from one's own nature.

*Stultus* is without aim and constantly changing their mind (Seneca 1918: 32,2).[11] As such the one who "veers from plan to plan" (Seneca 1918: 52,1) does not have and does not want free, absolute will—they don't aspire toward that which is eternal. Therefore, the will of the *stultus* is not free, it is not an absolute will, they are in a way not capable of desiring properly (Foucault 2005). For their will to be free, what they desire must not be determined by an event, idea, or affection. On the other hand, in order for their will to be absolute, it must be a will for one and only one thing—they cannot desire multiple contradictory things at the same time. Finally, their will must not be indolent, full of interruptions or changes (Foucault 2005). Contrary to the state of *stultitia* — in which will is limited, relative, fragmentary, and changing — is the state whose features are free, absolute, and constant desire.

What object can be the subject of desire—freely, absolutely, and always? To what object can will be directed without any external limitation and without the desire for something else? The only object that fulfils these conditions—the only thing that is truly our own—is the self

11 Carelessness and indecision reveal an inner struggle and disagreement with oneself. Compare: Seneca 2007a.

(Foucault 2005; Seneca 2007a). Contrary to this absolute desire directed toward the self, *stultus* is the one that does not want oneself, whose will is not directed towards the self. There is a notable paradox in the escape from oneself directed precisely at the self. The development or education of subjectivity, therefore, implies liberation (not of one's nature but from it) in order to create space for the full reconstitution of the self.

The abandonment of this state—i.e., the direction of one's will toward oneself or initiation of the practice of the self, the practice of caring for oneself—cannot be achieved independently, because being in the state of *stultitia* means not wanting to leave it, not wanting to care for oneself. For this reason, Seneca says that no one is strong enough on their own to extricate themselves: "he needs a helping hand, and someone to extricate him." (Seneca 1918: 52,2) Therefore, establishing a relationship of the self to oneself is merged with the relationships of the self to the Other (Foucault 2005: 149–168).

The role of the person that helps us extricate ourselves from the *stultus* state and start caring for ourselves is not the (classic) role of a school teacher, nor the role that the lover assumes in relation to their loved one, as is the case in Plato. Seneca's idea of the 'teacher' is linked to the particular idea of 'counsellor' that is realized within the relationship that can exist with one who is at the same time a client seeking a service from a professional philosopher, but also a friend, family member or protégé. In any case, this is an *intimate* relationship that exceeds mere professional guidance.

## 2.3. Turning to Oneself and Knowledge

The idea that a person must turn their gaze to themselves, to look at themselves, to always keep their eyes on themselves (the first category of expressions related to caring for oneself mentioned previously), often seems to approach the Delphian principle of 'know yourself', which

held a key position in Plato's understanding of caring for oneself. However, is the invitation to turn our gaze to ourselves the same as the invitation to constitute ourselves as the object of contemplation? Should we observe ourselves in order to discover the truth about ourselves?

Foucault believes that the principle of turning to oneself and observing oneself differs both from the Platonic idea of knowing oneself and from examining oneself which belongs to monastic spirituality (Foucault 2005: 205–228). In his opinion the gaze that we turn to ourselves is at the same time turned away from other things and precisely this turning away is the key aspect of turning to oneself. We turn the gaze away from other people and worldly things (Foucault 2005: 205–228; Seneca 1918: 17,5). Turning our gaze away from worldly things represents a complex and especially significant issue that is at the centre of Foucault's examination of the relationship between the truth and the practice of subjectivity (Foucault 2005: 229). In other words—which are closer to our topic — what is the relationship between the knowledge of things and the contemplation of oneself?

A part of the answer to this question could be that Seneca has a specific measure of usefulness: disregard knowledge and skills that are useless and inapplicable in genuine struggles in life and retain those that are easily applicable in different circumstances and that serve to treat the soul and create virtue, i.e., favour skills or arts of living (Seneca 1918: 88). However, this does not imply rejecting knowledge about nature as completely useless.[12] In that case, what comprises this knowledge's relation to the art of living?

Seneca primarily provides criticism of the vanity of knowledge, which is reflected in interest primarily directed toward collecting books rather than toward their content (Seneca 2007b: 127), as well as in the recommendation not to read too many different books, i.e., not

12 In contrast, stoic thinking links morality, logic and physics into a totality (compare: Sellars 2006: 52–54), where physics is defined as the theoretical basis for ethics, Hadot 2002.

to dissipate curiosity. One should take only a few books, study them thoroughly and only keep a certain number of proverbs from them (Seneca 2007b: 127; Seneca 1918: 2,4-5). This technique of approaching knowledge represents an *exercise in contemplation of the truth* and is based on wise proverbs that form the element of philosophical deliberation, and not the cultural field which is based on the entire knowledge (Foucault 2005). Seneca himself often practiced this exercise, most commonly extricating Epicurus' wise words (Seneca 1918: 2,5). Furthermore, Letter 88 includes a criticism of liberal skills (sciences and arts) that deals with the relationship of music, grammar, geometry, etc. to philosophy and their influence on a person. He points out that it is inconsequential to analyse whether, for example, Homer is older than Hesiod, where Odysseus had travelled, whether Penelope had recognized him, how to measure our estate, how to bridle a horse, etc.[13] Instead, we should engage in philosophy, as the only true liberal skill that sets a person free. We should be interested in fostering virtues, because the spirit improves solely through the knowledge of good and evil. In order to engage in this, we must create space in our soul.

Despite such an attitude toward all sciences that are not philosophy in the strict sense, Seneca still wrote *Natural Questions* (Seneca 2010a), in which he engaged in describing the world — while at the same time raising the issue of why he would address topics that are so far from us. It was his intention to describe the world and figure out its causes and secrets, but he also strived to figure out the purpose of such endeavours. Considering the fact that he was already quite old and that he had wasted a lot of time, Seneca believed that it was necessary for him to attend to himself. As his life slipped away, he needed to turn his gaze to the contemplation of himself. However, when defining the area that should be disregarded for the sake of working on oneself, he found it not in nature—but in history. Instead of describing other's passions, he needed to overcome and defeat his own. Instead of researching what

13 Even though he admits the positive effects of liberal skills on mitigating anger. Seneca 2010b.

had been done, he needed to discern what should be done: overcome the faults, be calm when misfortune strikes, resist pleasure, not seek passing pleasures, and be prepared for death (Seneca 2010a: book 3,1–5).

Yet, in that case, why does Seneca engage in an extensive description of the world and its secrets? Seemingly paradoxically, the reason for these explorations is liberation from the slavery to oneself. Therefore, following the claim that the self is what one should aspire to, what should always be kept in sight, etc. we return to the idea of liberating ourselves from ourselves. However, this is not about freeing oneself from the self as such, but from a specific relationship with oneself, which is reflected in imposing excessive labour, as well as a specific relationship of obligation, i.e., a duty to oneself (Seneca 1918: 1,4–5). A person imposes on themselves certain duties from which they try to extract certain gains, such as money, fame, reputation, satisfaction, etc.—that is to say they subject themselves to something that is not themselves, something that is alien to their being (Seneca 1918: 8). Also, Seneca defines gazing at the future (the view of the *stultitia*, who must constantly live anew and desire something new) as what composes the slave's soul (Seneca 1918: 6). This forms a relationship to the self that one should rid oneself of, and this liberation is made possible by the study of nature (Seneca 2010a: book 3,16). In what way?

By freeing ourselves from faults and flaws we elevate ourselves to the level of divine reason. This ascension is not related to some other world, but to the elevation to the highest point of this world and turning one's gaze to the world and ourselves within it, which will enable us to discover nature's hidden depths and secrets. It could be said that it is a type of recession considering the point where we are, a recession that will enable us to see and understand the lie and unnaturalness of everything that previously seemed good to us. Wealth, pleasures, glory, etc. now acquire their true dimension.[14] Raising up to the point of

14 Compare: Seneca 2007a: 28. Here Seneca speaks of the relation between "fleeing" flaws and rising up; Seneca 2010a book 3,9–15.

view from the roof of the world enables us to dismiss all false values, but also to assess who we are, to evaluate our existence (Seneca 2010a, book 3,18). Therefore, describing nature does not only serve to extricate us from the world, but to enable us to consolidate ourselves as to where we are (Foucault 2005: 229–246). The gaze aimed at nature's entire system allows us to accept ourselves as what we are, as a point in the general system of the universe (Foucault 2005: 229–246, Seneca 2010a: book 3,18).

Self-cognition understood in this manner does not represent knowledge of a person's soul, it is not an analysis of the self and its secrets, which need to be studied and explained, but rather the contemplation of the self in the world, as a part of the world. In this way, while gazing at the entire world, we do not lose sight of ourselves at any moment. The virtue of the soul is based on the inclusion in the world, in the exploration of the world's secrets—not the secrets of the soul (Foucault 2005: 229–246).

Analysing Seneca's contemplation of the world through which the subject returns to oneself,[15] Foucault points out certain characteristics of such contemplation (Foucault 2005: 278–314). We primarily observe that it is necessary for the subject to move, to withdraw from the place where it is so that it may reach it; then, the place that the subject holds allows it to simultaneously see things as they are, as well as their value in relation to the person; in this cognition we can see ourselves, comprehend ourselves within our reality, and finally, through it, the subject discovers its freedom and finds a way to exist that is inherent to perfection and happiness.[16]

> In sum, knowledge involving these four conditions (the subject's change of position, the evaluation of things on the basis of their reality within the *kosmos*, the possibility of the subject

15 On the relation between the idea of returning to oneself and the truth see Seneca 2007a: 5, 8.

16 Compare: Seneca 2007a.

> seeing himself, and finally the subject's transfiguration through the effect of knowledge) constitutes, I believe, what could be called 'spiritual knowledge' which was gradually limited, overlaid, and finally effaced by a different mode of knowledge which could be called [...] "intellectual knowledge". (Foucault 2005: 308)

A characteristic of intellectual knowledge—as opposed to spiritual knowledge—is that it establishes the subject as another possible object of knowledge. However, Foucault wants to point out that in the moment that we are discussing, the relationship between the subject and the cognition did not have this form and could not have had it (Foucault 2005: 315–330). Namely, as we see in this description, the relationship of the subject and the cognition is unrelated to the possibility of objective cognition (of the subject). Rather, the knowledge about the world gains a specific spiritual form and a specific spiritual value for the subject. Therefore, this is a particular spiritual modalisation of the subject through the cognition of the world.

## 3. *Askesis* as the Practice of Truth

After depicting cognition of the world as a spiritual knowledge in its specific relation to the constitution of the subject (as the ultimate goal of the practice of the self), Foucault addresses the concept of turning to oneself and turning one's gaze to oneself in one more way. He wonders what form of practice or type of activity, by oneself on oneself, encompasses this turning, i.e., what exercise (*askesis*) of oneself on oneself is in question (Foucault 2005: 315), because just as no technique can be perfected without practice, the skill of living (*techne tou biou*) cannot be perfected without *askesis* (Foucault 1997a). This *askesis* or exercise entails creating an armour or a weapon, by means of which individual prepares for various unforeseen life events that may befall them in the future. This armament, or in Seneca's words *instructio* (building, placing in order) (Đorđević 2004: 759) should be adapted to what might befall us, precisely at the moment when it befalls us, in the event that it befalls us (Foucault 2005). Therefore, the askesis in ques-

tion is not self-denial, as it is commonly understood, but the constitution of the subject through given exercises that prepare them for life.

*Askesis* has several basic characteristics. Firstly, like (physical) exercise (Seneca 2009: 297) it consists not of learning all the possible moves and holds but learning the basic moves that we may need often, as well as practicing the moves with which we have the most problems. Being strong is not what is important, but rather not to be weaker than what may happen (Foucault 2005). Also, it consists of speeches (*logoi, decretal*) (Seneca 1918: 95,1) that represent truthful attitudes as well as acceptable principles of conduct (Foucault 2005). These are sentences that have been etched into the spirit and urge action. These material elements of reasonable speech are permanently inscribed in the subject and their actions (Seneca 1918: 50,8). They are at the same time the citadel that we retreat to and the weapons with which we defend ourselves. In a way, they are always 'at hand'. As we have mentioned before, Foucault calls this preparation *exercising contemplation of the truth.*

> The askesis is what enables truth-telling—truth-telling addressed to the subject and also truth-telling that the subject addresses to himself—to be constituted as the subject's way of being. The askesis makes truth-telling a mode of being of the subject. (Foucault 2005: 327)

*Askesis* is the practice of truth, it is a way for the individual to connect to the truth, because – as Seneca says – blessed is the one who wants nothing more and fears nothing, but *not the one who stands beyond the truth* (Seneca 2007a).

It could be said that

> [...] on the one hand ascesis is what makes possible the acquisition of the true discourses we need in every circumstance, event, and episode of life in order to establish an adequate, full, and perfect relationship to ourselves. On the other hand, and at the same time, ascesis is what enables us to become the subject of these true

> discourses, to become the subject who tells the truth and who is transfigured by this enunciation of the truth, by this enunciation itself, precisely by the fact of telling the truth. (Foucault 2005: 332)

Accordingly, Foucault defines the purpose and aim of philosophical *askesis* as the *subjectivation through the discourse of truth* (Foucault 2005: 333). Therefore, philosophical askesis — askesis of the practice of the self —

> [...] involves rejoining oneself as the end and object of a technique of life, an art of living. It involves coming together with oneself, the essential moment of which is not the objectification of the self in a true discourse, but the subjectivation of a true discourse in a practice and exercise of oneself on oneself. (Foucault 2005: 333)

Foucault finds the idea of subjectivation of the discourse of truth in Seneca's work, related to knowledge, reading, writing, etc. He says that we should assimilate, make our own (*facere suum*) (Seneca 1918: 119,7) the things we know, the discourses we hear, the discourses that we recognize to be true, or which have been passed on to us as true through philosophical tradition. Therefore, the essence of philosophical askesis is making the truth our own and becoming the subject of enunciation of the discourse of truth. Instead of enunciating one's own, it is a matter of assimilating 'another's' or a previously enunciated truth. Therefore, precisely opposite to the customary ideas of emancipation and freedom—we reject ourselves and give in to the influence of others.

### 3.1. Listening, Reading, Writing

The first step—but also the permanent basis of askesis as the subjectivation of the discourse of truth—are all the techniques and all the activities that are related to the skills of proper listening, reading, and writing (Foucault 2005: 331–354). First of all, in order to be able to receive the discourse of truth, our listening must be proper. In order to illustrate this, Foucault illustrates Seneca's discussion of hearing

through the ambiguity of its passivity (Seneca 1918: 108; Foucault 2005: 331–354). Namely, on the one hand, it is a great advantage that our ear does not require will in order to listen, because that means that even when we are not focused or don't understand the lecture, something will always stay in our head. Considering the fact that the *logos*, which enters through the sense of hearing, acts on the soul — whether it is willing or not — even simply being present at a lecture on philosophy will benefit us. However, if we do not pay attention to what is being conveyed in the philosophical discourse, i.e., if we direct our attention to an unsuitable object or goal, we can be left without any benefit. This is why it is necessary for us to master the skill of the appropriate method of listening. This skill may contain a vow of silence, like the one in Pythagoras' school,[17] but also a criticism of inappropriate behaviour during lectures. Inappropriate gestures and squirming represent the physical version of *stultitia*, as the constant restlessness of the spirit and attention, the soul that leaps from topic to topic, whose attention is constantly wandering, and which is always restless. On the other hand, philosophy should enjoy only silent adoration (Seneca 1918: 52,13). "In sum, good philosophical listening involves a necessary work of attention, of a double and forked attention." (Foucault 2055: 351). Furthermore, the aim of actively and correctly directed listening is for us to attain the rules of action bit-by-bit, i.e., the general rules of living, based on a single sentence, claim or statement that we actively contemplate and which we completely transform, which will allow us to etch that statement into memory.[18]

A similar formula is transmitted further — to the rules related to reading. Namely, one should not bury oneself in a vast quantity of different works (like the *stultus*, i.e., the one whose attention cannot be occupied for very long by anything). Rather one should select not only a small number of authors and a small number of their works, but also only a certain number of their sentences that we consider useful (like

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17 Compare: Seneca 1918: 52,10.

18 Compare: Seneca 1918: 108.

an athlete learning basic holds that they will most likely need) (Seneca 1918: 2,4–5). These sentences should be assimilated, and one should become their speaking subject (Foucault 2005). For example, Seneca recorded quotations by certain authors and sent them to his correspondent, with the advice that they should meditate on the given statement (Seneca 1918: 2,5, 3,6, 4,10, 7,11, 8,7–8). Therefore

> [...] the object or end of philosophical reading is not to learn an author's work, and its function is not even to go more deeply into the work's doctrine. Reading basically involves—at any rate, its principal objective is—providing an opportunity for meditation. (Foucault 2005: 356)

We listen and read for the purpose of meditation.

The Latin word *meditation* (translated from the Greek word *melete*) also represents a type of exercise—exercising in thought (Foucault 2005: 356). Meditation is the exercising of making thoughts one's own, in the sense that when encountering a text, we should not engage in its meaning, its analysis, but rather just its assimilation. The goal of meditation is to convince ourselves that the thought is correct and to etch it — as truthful — in our memory, so that we may repeat it when the opportunity arises. Therefore, we transform it into the principle of action which we always have before us or at hand.

> It is an appropriation that consists in ensuring that, from this true thing, we become the subject who thinks the truth, and, from this subject who thinks the truth, we become a subject who acts properly. (Foucault 2005: 357)

We are not interested in what the author wanted to say, but rather we are interested in creating a "collection" of sentences, through reading, which would then become part of ourselves. They become our rules, our principles of conduct.

Therefore, this is a matter of assimilating and reproducing knowledge that resembles school education. This is not a matter of interaction or dialogue, or contemplation or criticism, but of memorizing and reproducing.

Reading is further extended, reinforced, and reactivated through writing, which is also an element of meditation. As Seneca advises (Seneca 1918: 84,2), we should not only read nor only write, but use writing to give form to what reading has collected. Reading collects discourses that writing shapes. Thus writing, through collecting thoughts that have been read as well as one's own thoughts while reading, represents a mental exercise that stands opposite to the great lack of *stultus,* which endless reading can support (Foucault 1997a). Therefore, through reading, writing (and going back to what has been written) we assimilate the discourse of truth that we have *found as our own.* During this period, writing — as an assimilation of discourse — developed in two forms: notebooks and correspondence.

Namely, the thinkers of the time created notebooks (Greek *hupomnēmata*[19]), which represented a type of guide to conduct, where they wrote down quotations, fragments from books, as well as examples that they had witnessed or thinking that they had heard (Foucault 1997a). As such, they represented material for future meditations, as well as systematic collections where they accumulated arguments and means by which to struggle against weakness or to overcome difficult circumstances in life. However, they were not only reminders that were to be consulted on occasion, but rather material and a framework for exercises that should be frequently performed: reading, meditation, conversation with oneself and with others. That way, they become embedded in our soul and become part of ourselves or precisely us. One should bear in mind that these are not personal journals where they described private states of the soul, they are not "a narrative of the self," in them, they did not write the truth of the self.

19 Accounting books, public registers, individual notebooks. Foucault 1997a.

> The movement they seek to bring about is the reverse of that: the intent is not to pursue the unspeakable, nor to reveal the hidden, nor to say the unsaid, but on the contrary to capture the already-said, to collect what one has managed to hear or read, and for a purpose that is nothing less than the shaping of the self. (Foucault 1997a: 210–211)

The objective of the notebooks was to make the already spoken discourse a means of establishing a link between the self and oneself (Foucault 1997a: 211). By transforming — through writing — things that had been seen and heard "into tissue and blood," the writer develops their own identity (Foucault 1997a).[20] This is a collection of practices through which the truth is acquired, assimilated, and transformed into a permanent principle of action. That way notebooks — having fixed the acquired elements and developed part of the past that a person can go back to, which it can withdraw to — represented a resistance to the dispersal characteristic of the *stultitia* (Foucault 1997a). Therefore, notebooks were a safe place where writers kept all the thoughts that in some way constituted them, and which they could then subsequently also share with others through correspondence.

Correspondence, through which we share discourses of truth with others, represents an interesting cultural phenomenon of Seneca's time. This was an individual practice between two people, and accordingly had a free and flexible form that was adapted to every correspondent (Foucault 2005: 395–412). This correspondence could be called a spiritual correspondence between two subjects, in which they would exchange news of themselves, their soul and the progress that they have been making and provide advice to one another.[21] Within

20 On this trail, one of the basic criticisms of Foucault's interpretation of Seneca, which stems from Hadot's analysis, is that when Seneca differentiates between pleasure and happiness (Seneca 1918: 23), he does not associate happiness with the self, but rather with the best part of oneself, which Hadot defines as reason (Hadot 1995: 207). Accordingly, it is his belief that writing cannot be linked to the creation of identity, but to the liberation from individuality and turning to the universal (reason) (Hadot 1995: 209).

21 Even though a correspondence starts between a person seeking advice and another providing advice, it cannot remain unidirectional for long. Compare Seneca 1918: 34,2, 35, 109,2.

the correspondence, the adviser uses their notebooks to help the other, but at the same time helping themselves, primarily by going back to what they had written, but also by acting upon themselves through the act of writing the letter, as well as on the person receiving it — through the act of reading. The reason for this is that writing — as Seneca notes — also includes reading what has been written, therefore becoming reactualized (Seneca 1918: 84,9–10). Seneca's letters therefore primarily serve to guide the other, but through them Seneca also exercises himself (Seneca 1918: 7,8). In addition to this, writing letters helps the one writing them to also practice their weapons. "A commander never puts such trust in peace that he fails to prepare for a war" (Seneca 2007a: 108). The thinking that we give others also prepares ourselves for similar circumstances (Foucault 1997a). In this way reading, writing, writings notes for ourselves, correspondence, and even going back to old letters comprise a very important action of caring for oneself and others, and transforming the truth into *ethos.*[22]

## Conclusion

Through the analysis of the notions and practices of stoic philosophy—such as *stultitia* and *askesis*, and their relationship with the truth or speaking the truth, and the specific relation to listening, reading, and writing — we can observe that this is not a classic educational practice. However, this is a practice of educating the ethical subject that is freed of the inner and turned to the outer truth. It relies on cognition of the world (i.e. on natural sciences, which at the time were encompassed under the name *physics*), which defines us in relation to the world, but at the same time moves us from the place where we started. By leaving the state of *stultitia*, we become independent, autonomous, and prepared for life.

Ethics is therefore the conscious practice of freedom that in Antiquity relied on the fundamental imperative: the care of oneself.[23] Fou-

22 On the etho-poetical function of writing see Foucault 1997a.

23 Compare: Foucault 1997b: 285.

cault was especially drawn to the vision of the 'culture' of the self in the Greco-Roman world as a decision, a choice that was not imposed.[24] Therefore, he proposed a new ethics where the games of truth would exist without or with minimal domination.[25] Foucault, by his own self-understanding, was guided in this research by the fact that "our etho-poetic practices have become oriented to discovering our true or essential nature" (Rajchman 1986: 170) and that an analysis of ethics should now guide us to the separation of our ethics and self-forming practices from the obligation to tell the truth about our nature. Foucault's philosophy would therefore offer us a choice of way of life and experiences outside of the previous knowledge or truth of oneself, and in this sense, we can claim that it sets us free or emancipates us. However, such an emancipation does not imply freedom of the influence of the other. It is clear that the other is included in such a form of education—not only as a necessary teacher, but also as a basis for developing the subject. Namely, this is precisely a matter of acquisition and assimilation of other's thinking, through which the subject is created, while escaping oneself in a way. Taking this into account, how does the subject become emancipated? It becomes free of oneself, of one's truth, of its speaking. The person turns to themselves in order to become free of themselves, in order to become independent of themselves, in order to become emancipated of themselves. With the help of the idea of freedom, Foucault's descriptions of development and education of the self in a certain way become linked — precisely and only seemingly paradoxically — to the overcoming of the self.

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24 Compare: Seneca 2007a.

25 Compare: Foucault 1997b: 298, 299.

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