

**THE TRUTHFUL SELF: SUBJECTIVITY, TRUTH,
AND HERMENEUTICS IN DIALOGUE
WITH MICHEL FOUCAULT**

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Abstract

In the wake of the hermeneutical turn in Continental philosophy, the question of the interpretive agent has become a central feature in most discussions on hermeneutics. While schools of thought differ significantly in how they position themselves vis-à-vis the subjectivist-objectivist axis, few would deny that the delineation of the interpretive task must attend to the embodied character of human cognition. Taking such a broader framework as a starting point, I will tackle a specific aspect of this problematic by examining Foucault's conception of subjectivity and truth as it relates to issues of epistemology, moral responsibility, and *askēsis*. As I will argue, Foucault's "art of living" persuasively highlights the background or "unthought" aspects of hermeneutics. My particular approach will be to connect Foucault's brand of virtue epistemology with a broadly post-Heideggerian conception of engaged agency, and in so doing spotlight some assumptions as to what "having truth" or "arriving at it" might mean in the context of hermeneutical practice and being.

Keywords: Michel Foucault, hermeneutics, truth, subjectivity, *parrhesia*, *askēsis*

*Introduction**

"What is philosophy if not a way of reflecting, not so much on what is true and what is false, as on our relationship to truth?"¹

"My problem is the relation of self to self and of telling the truth. . . . My own problem has always been the question of truth, of telling the truth, the *wahr-sagen*—what it is to tell the truth—and the relation between 'telling the truth' and forms of reflexivity, of self upon self."²

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¹Michel Foucault, "The Masked Philosopher," in vol. 1 of *Ethics, Subjectivity, and Truth: The Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–1984*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: New Press, 1997), 327.

²Idem, *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977–1984*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman, trans. A. Sheridan et al. (New York: Routledge, 1988), 32–33.

Since its publication in 1987, Pierre Hadot's *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique* has exerted a significant influence on discussions within Continental philosophy and constructive theology.³ The focus point of such debates often pertains not only to the function of philosophy, that is, to what degree we might define it as a transformational and performative venture, but also wide-ranging questions concerning power, truth, subjectivity, and human flourishing. Invariably, such considerations impinge both on the understanding of the hermeneutical *task*—its nature, method, goals, and epistemic morphologies in which it trades—and the role of the hermeneutical *agent* for whom, as for any human being, interpretation is an essential modality of existence.⁴ With respect to the latter, reminders about the anthropological dimension of hermeneutics seem patently redundant. *Of course* it is a given that we bring ourselves into and out of the hermeneutical process; who would claim otherwise? Nevertheless, “the myth of the mental”—the privileging of methodological proceduralism at the expense of embodied agency—still holds sway over many a discourse concerning hermeneutical practice.⁵ I believe that such a reductionism carries a range of deleterious effects, including those concerning the life of the Church and its mission.

In order to explore some of these issues, I will turn to Michel Foucault's late thought, primarily his 1980–1984 Collège de France lectures. The discussion itself will juggle several levels of argumentation. First, I will push back against some popular misunderstandings of Foucault as a type of “relativist” or “postmodern subjectivist,” and instead present him as a virtue ethicist of a particular kind. Not that I agree with all or even most of his argumentations; much of what he says concerning human nature I find problematic and even contradictory. What I do consider helpful are certain fundamental gestures, certain spaces for constructive thinking about hermeneutics, that his philosophy helpfully opens up. Besides, my approach to Foucault in some ways approximates his strategy with respect to Nietzsche: “I prefer to utilize the writers I like,” he notes. “The only valid tribute to a thought such as Nietzsche's is precisely to use it, to deform it, to

³Pierre Hadot, *Exercices spirituels et philosophie antique*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Institut d'Études Augustiniennes, 1987); Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, ed. Arnold I. Davidson (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1995).

⁴I am well aware that the term hermeneutics carries a range of connotations ranging from “sound exegesis,” to a “series of epistemological problems concerning objectivity in interpretation,” to “assuming an anti-objectivist philosophical stance,” to “a methodology of the social sciences,” and to “an ontology of being.” On the various meaning of hermeneutics, see Nicholas H. Smith, “Taylor and the Hermeneutic Tradition,” in *Charles Taylor*, ed. Ruth Abbey (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 29–30.

⁵See Hubert L. Dreyfus, “Overcoming the Myth of the Mental: How Philosophers Can Profit from the Phenomenology of Everyday Expertise,” *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 79 (2005): 47–65. My considerations here are indebted to Charles Taylor, “Overcoming Epistemology,” in *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 1–19.

make it groan and protest. And if commentators then say that I am being faithful or unfaithful to Nietzsche, that is of absolutely no importance.”⁶ So, utilize Foucault we shall—albeit respectfully.

Second, I will show how his concept of “spirituality” that places “the care of the self” (*epimeleia heautou*) at the center of philosophical concerns offers helpful conceptual tools for rethinking the intersection of subjectivity and truth. In referring to “subjectivity and truth” I limn a semantic range that includes some of the following: being open and attuned to truth; caring about it; paying for access to it; becoming worthy of it; letting its impact be felt on life; embodying it in one’s comportment to the world; and telling it freely and courageously. By way of illustration, I will attend to Foucault’s treatment of *parrhesia* (frank speech) in order to interrogate, phenomenologically and otherwise, its relationship to virtue and human agency in general. As I will suggest, such an intersection of epistemology and philosophical anthropology is of enormous significance for Christian theology. Whether one speaks, let’s say, of the pursuit of wisdom, experiences of transformation (spiritual, cognitive, moral, etc.), or discerning “signs of the times,” questions of subjectivity and truth are always already at play.

Third, I will stress the significance of hermeneutical agency in relation to moral psychology and *askēsis* (formation, self-transcendence, etc.) when discussing hermeneutical principles.⁷ Such meta-hermeneutical explorations seek to bring to the foreground anthropological features within hermeneutical practice; features which one can never really bracket out or leave behind, and which account for the possibility of having any awareness of the world (and text) at all. While my approach will be mostly meta-conceptual in its focus, I trust that the implicit theological considerations will be more than inferential.

Foucault and the Care of the Self

In the acclaimed documentary *Foucault Against Himself*, the French philosopher and sociologist Geoffroy de Lagasnerie observes that, when considering Michel Foucault’s works in their entirety, “a question immediately springs to mind: how can we imagine that the same person wrote all of them? It seems incredible that in twenty-five years . . . there could be so many styles, subjects, theses, and rhetorical forms that were so scattered, broken up, and incoherent.”⁸ In view of this, can one even speak of Foucault? Is there an author, a voice, and an *oeuvre*? Is there some direction, some main question(s), some central drive to his work? What are the limits, the boundaries, the criteria of his thinking? *Ipsa facto*, what transpires in the act of quoting Foucault? Who (or what) is one referring to, and for what purposes?

⁶Michel Foucault, “Prison Talk,” in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 53–54.

⁷For a helpful yet accessible introduction to the field of moral psychology, see Mark Alfano, *Moral Psychology: An Introduction* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2016).

⁸François Caillat, *Foucault Against Himself*, trans. David Homel (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp, 2015), 122.

A prime example of such an interpretive challenge concerns the apparent difference between the middle period of his work and the so-called “ethical turn” in the late 1970s and early 1980s. During the middle period, we see Foucault problematizing the notion of moral agency in the context of modern disciplinary societies to the extent that the concept of free human action becomes virtually unintelligible.⁹ On this count, even seemingly emancipatory gestures are already co-opted, in a *Matrix*-like fashion, by various mechanisms of identity formation. Foucault refers to these synergistic mechanisms as *dispositifs* or apparatuses; as “heterogeneous ensemble[s] consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions—in short, the said as much as the unsaid.”¹⁰ Giorgio Agamben unpacks and expands the idea of Foucauldian apparatuses to include anything

that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviors, opinions, or discourses of living beings. Not only, therefore, prisons, madhouses, the panopticon, schools, confession, factories, disciplines, judicial measures, and so forth (whose connection with power is in a certain sense evident), but also the pen, writing, literature, philosophy, agriculture.¹¹

It is by means of such apparatuses, argues Foucault, that the capillary forces of power inculcate subjects into “certain modalities of life . . . getting them to do things while believing they want them.”¹²

Maurice Blanchot perceptively notes how in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, as well as Foucault’s other works from the middle period, one can find “many a formula from negative theology. Foucault invests all his talent in describing with sublime phrases what it is he rejects: ‘It’s not . . . , nor is it . . . , nor is it for that matter . . . ,’ so that there remained almost nothing for him to say.”¹³ Other writers as well have picked on this element of epistemic

⁹On this point, Gilles Deleuze notes: “What happened during the fairly long silence following *The History of Sexuality*? Perhaps Foucault felt slightly uneasy about the book: had he not trapped himself within the concept of power-relation?” (Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, trans. Sean Hand [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995], 94). For this reference, I am indebted to Daniela Vallega-Neu, *The Bodily Dimension in Thinking*, The SUNY Series in Contemporary Continental Philosophy (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2005), 114.

¹⁰Michel Foucault, “The Confession of the Flesh,” in *Power/Knowledge*, 194.

¹¹Giorgio Agamben, *What Is an Apparatus? and Other Essays*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella, Meridian: Crossing Aesthetics (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 14.

¹²Jonathan Tran, *Foucault and Theology*, Philosophy and Theology (New York: T&T Clark, 2011), 23.

¹³Maurice Blanchot, “Foucault as I Imagine Him,” in *Foucault/Blanchot*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman and Brian Massumi (New York: Zone, 1987), 74. For the initial reference to this source, I am indebted to Alexander Nehamas, *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault*, Sather Classical Lectures 61 (Berkeley:

austerity or immanent apophaticism concerning anything approximating a fixed conception of human nature and purpose.¹⁴ Behind his rejection of aspirational thought, in other words, lies a deep unease towards any type of discursive essentializing or utopian thinking, including the language of subjective self-realization in whatever shape or form.

And yet a marked change is afoot in his writings from about 1980 on.¹⁵ Suddenly, it seems, the brutalized self, pulped into submission through capillary forces of control, gets a second lease on life. The image of an autonomous agent with capacities to create heterotopian spaces of resistance rises out of the ashes, and there, in the person of Foucault, seemingly emerges a run-of-the-mill Enlightenment thinker hinting at a post-critical *Mündigkeit* (I. Kant).¹⁶ In that regard, Foucault notes:

I do not think that a society can exist without power relations, if by that one means the strategies by which individuals try to direct and control the conduct of others. The problem, then, is not to try to dissolve them in the utopia of completely transparent communication but to acquire the rules of law, the management techniques, and also the morality, the ethos, the practice of the self, that will allow us to play these games of power with as little domination as possible.¹⁷

That notwithstanding, an exclusive emphasis on volte-faces in Foucault's assumptions invariably misses the life-long cohesion of his concerns.¹⁸ While strategies and approaches continually change, and with them investigative

University of California Press, 1998), 174.

¹⁴Foucault's reticence in that regard came on display during the famed 1971 debate with Noam Chomsky, where Foucault repeatedly refused to speculate about the possibility of emancipated subjectivity in some future society. See Noam Chomsky and Michel Foucault, *The Chomsky-Foucault Debate: On Human Nature* (New York: New Press, 2006).

¹⁵Nehamas correctly notes that, following the completion of volume one of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault "began to think about it in drastically new terms. The next two volumes were totally different from what had been earlier announced in subject, style, and approach" (Nehamas, *The Art of Living*, 175).

¹⁶On Foucault's relationship to the Enlightenment, see, for example, Lois McNay, *Foucault and Feminism* (Cambridge: Polity, 1992), 5.

¹⁷Michel Foucault, "The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom," in vol. 1 of *Ethics, Subjectivity, and Truth: The Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–1984*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: New Press, 1997), 298.

¹⁸On this point, see Timothy Rayner, "Foucault, Heidegger, and the History of Truth," in *Foucault and Philosophy*, ed. Timothy O'Leary and Christopher Falzon (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 69–70. I am aware that Foucault's thought is much more complex than what I can do justice to here. In general, I agree with Hubert Dreyfus's contention that to properly understand Foucault we need to "triangulate him among phenomenology, hermeneutics, and structuralism" (C. G. Prado, *Searle and Foucault on Truth* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006], 66). Prado, in this connection, references Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

emphases and rhetorical styles, the underlying thematic subtext remains consistent during much of his career: the fundamental problem of subjectivity and truth, or how relations of power and truth regimes construct subjects, and how subjects, in turn, construct themselves through modalities of resistance.¹⁹ Foucault himself indicates as much when he stresses that the goal of his life-work “has not been to analyze the phenomena of power, nor to elaborate the foundations of such an analysis.” Instead, his primary objective “has been to create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects,”²⁰ in the sense of the bidirectional character of *assujettissement* or subjectification: the engendering of the subject through relations of power and the (partial) reversing of these processes by means of autonomous agency.²¹ In that regard, I agree with Alexander Nehamas, who views Foucault “as a philosopher who had always been concerned with the care of the self and whose project, despite its general applications, was essentially individual.”²² That point is brought home further in Foucault’s coinage of the term “subjectivation” (or sometimes translated as “subjectivization”) dating from around 1980. In distinction to *assujettissement*, subjectivation refers to the “procedure by which one obtains the constitution of a subject or, more precisely, of a subjectivity which is, of course, only one of the given possibilities of organization of a self-consciousness.”²³ In other words, the focus here shifts from the production of subjects in the context of power relations to the self’s relation to self through practices of self-constitution or *ethopoetics*.²⁴ Again, the opening of such an agential space (or the possibility of such an opening) is embedded in Foucault’s understanding of subjectivity as that which is

¹⁹Foucault’s conception of truth is both complex and controversial. On this count, I side with Prado, who suggests five “uses” of truth in Foucault: criterial, constructivist, perspectivist, experiential, and tacit-realist. On the last point, he argues that “the only option is to try to understand how truth is wholly discursive, hence is a product of power, but without its being so entailing a denial of objective reality” (Prado, *Searle and Foucault on Truth*, 100).

²⁰Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” in *Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, 208.

²¹On the meaning of *assujettissement* as “subjectification,” see Nikolas Rose, *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). For this reference, I am indebted to Alan Milchman and Alan Rosenberg, “The Aesthetic and Ascetic Dimensions of an Ethics of Self-Fashioning: Nietzsche and Foucault,” *Parrhesia Journal* 2 (2007): 55.

²²Nehamas, *The Art of Living*, 168.

²³Michel Foucault, “The Return of Morality,” in *Politics, Philosophy, Culture*, 253. For a helpful discussion of how the notion of subjectivation might be applied to the field of education, see Jean-Pierre Audureau, “Assujettissement et subjectivation: réflexions sur l’usage de Foucault en éducation,” *Revue française de pédagogie* 143 (2003): 17–29.

²⁴On Foucault’s concept of *ethopoetics*, see Edward F. McGushin, *Foucault’s Askēsis: An Introduction to the Philosophical Life*, Topics in Historical Philosophy (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 53.

always already underway, always already in the process of composition and recomposition.

During his 1980–1984 Collège de France lectures in particular, the central category through which Foucault repeatedly revisits the truth-subjectivity dialectic is in the principle of the “care of the self” (*epimeleia heautou*). Summarizing a key focus of those presentations, he notes:

Since my project was concerned with the knowledge of the subject, I thought that the techniques of domination were the most important, without any exclusion of the rest. But, analyzing the experience of sexuality, I became more and more aware that there is in all societies, I think, in all societies whatever they are, another type of techniques: techniques which permit individuals to effect, by their own means, a certain number of operations on their own bodies, on their own souls, on their own thoughts, on their own conduct, and this in a manner so as to transform themselves, modify themselves, and to attain a certain state of perfection, of happiness, of purity, of supernatural power, and so on. Let’s call this kind of techniques a techniques or technology of the self.²⁵

In ancient philosophy, Foucault argues, the concept of self-care comes to us through a variety of expressions: “taking care of the self,” “withdrawing into oneself,” “remaining in the company of oneself,” “being the friend of oneself,” etc.²⁶ They all imply the adoption of a *technē tou biou* (*ars vivendi*, lat.) or “art of life” via a set of “spiritual exercises” (P. Hadot). To the degree that these various *technai* aid us in overcoming self-destructive passions and other forms of existential ennui, they are vital for the art of living or “autoplasticity” (Peter Sloterdijk’s neologism for the ascetical work on oneself).²⁷ Accordingly, Epictetus, for instance, maintains that “from this time forth, the material that I must work upon is my own mind, just as that of a carpenter is wood, and that of a cobbler is leather.”²⁸

²⁵Michel Foucault, “Subjectivity and Truth,” in *About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self: Lectures at Dartmouth College, 1980*, ed. Henri-Paul Fruchaud and Daniele Lorenzini, trans. Graham Burchell (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 25.

²⁶For a list of synonyms to “care of the self,” see Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981–1982*, ed. Frédéric Gros, trans. Graham Burchell, Lectures at the Collège de France 9 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 12.

²⁷For instance, Peter Sloterdijk, *You Must Change Your Life* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), 149.

²⁸Epictetus, *Discourses, Fragments, Handbook*, trans. Robin Hard, Oxford World’s Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 183. Foucault notes the following on Epictetus: “In fact, the idea of a missionary of the truth coming to give men the ascetic example of the true life, recalling them to themselves, putting them back on the right path, and announcing to them another catastasis of the world, this personage is, of course, up to a point, part of the modified Socratic heritage, but you can see that, up to a point, it also comes close to the Christian model” (Michel Foucault, *The Courage of Truth—The Government of Self and Others II: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1983–1984*, ed. Frédéric Gros, trans. Graham Burchell, Lectures at the Collège

Foucault is not suggesting here, I should add, an uncritical buy-in of these ancient practices of self-transformation; according to him, that would neither be possible nor desirable. Nor is he forgetting for a moment that such practices can all too easily turn into “strategies of coercion or domination.”²⁹ What he finds in them, instead, is a template that, once shorn of ancient cosmological and universalist dimensions, might enable us to concretely approach the constitution of human identity vis-à-vis the all-pervasive effects of disciplinary power. Such an ethics of liberation or “art of freedom,” we could say, names a type of intentionality aiming at voluntary subjectivation through practices of subjectivation.³⁰ In other words, the practices of the *technē tou biou* attune us to the conditions of our existence by performing both a critical (i.e., they have a moving-away-from element) and a formative function (i.e., the relationship of self to itself by which the subject constitutes herself as a moral agent).³¹

Two things of importance emerge in the “art of living” or aesthetic of existence so conceived. For one, we can see how Foucault defines self-realization primarily as continual “straying afield of oneself;”³² an activity that aims at creating spaces of freedom within ever-changing arrangements of power relations. He writes:

The three elements of my morality are: [first] the refusal to accept what is proposed to us as self-evident; second, the need to analyze and to know (*savoir*), because we can do nothing without reflection as well as knowledge (*connaissance*), this is the principle of curiosity; and third, the principle of innovation, that is to say, not being inspired by a pre-existing program, looking for what has not yet been thought, imagined, or known in elements of our reflection and the way we act. So, refusal, curiosity, innovation.³³

To that end, even micro-gestures such as laughter, irony, and a range of other everyday practices can assume an emancipatory sway by which we might fashion alternative identities in the face of oppression.³⁴ And second, Foucault

de France 11 [New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011], 316).

²⁹Foucault, “Subjectivity and Truth,” 25.

³⁰Arnold I. Davidson, “Introduction,” in *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, xx. For the term “art of freedom,” see Timothy O’Leary, *Foucault and the Art of Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 170.

³¹See Davidson, “Introduction,” xix.

³²Foucault asks: “After all, what would be the value of the passion for knowledge if it resulted only in a certain amount of knowledgeableness and not, in one way or another and to the extent possible, in the knower’s straying afield of himself?” (*The History of Sexuality: The Use of Pleasure*, trans. R. Hurley, vol. 2 [New York: Vintage, 1990], 8).

³³Idem, “Interview with Michel Foucault (3 November 1980),” in *Hermeneutics of the Self*, 127.

³⁴On the importance of micro-practices as a form of “tactical” resistance, see Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984) 91–110.

proposes a thoroughly Nietzschean recasting of authenticity by means of self-creative expressiveness or self-stylizing. Indeed, the notion of “style” or “stylizing” in reference to self-realization is central to Nietzsche’s idea of the *Übermensch* as the ultimate self-care exemplar. Such a person sculpts or stylizes herself as “an *oeuvre* that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria.”³⁵ Or as Nietzsche puts it:

To “give style” to one’s character—a great and rare art! It is practiced by those who survey all the strengths and weaknesses of their nature and then fit them into an artistic plan until every one of them appears as art and reason and even weaknesses delight the eye. Here a large mass of second nature has been added; there a piece of the original nature has been removed—both times through long practice and daily work at it. . . . In the end, when the work is finished, it becomes evident how the constraint of a single taste governed and formed everything large and small. Whether this taste was good or bad is less important than one might suppose, if only it was a single taste!³⁶

While a conception of anything transcending the confines of individual creativity and autonomy is absent here, we nevertheless find in Foucault an account of chastised self-transcendence. After all, the subject in question is capable of assessing things, responding to them, envisioning a course of action, establishing a set of practices, evaluating the extent and success of her self-crafting, and even commending to others the beneficence of such an intentionality. For Foucault, a prime example of such a self-transcending subjectivity is the *parrhesiastes*—an authentic truth-agent for whom *parrhesia* or frank speech comprises a way of life.

On Being a Parrhesiastes

In his discussion of the art of living, Foucault frequently highlights the tension in ancient philosophy between *epimeleia heautou* and the paradigmatic Delphic apothegm *gnōthi seauton* (“know yourself”). In Plato’s *Alcibiades*, for instance, “the requirement ‘know yourself’ completely covers over and occupies the entire space opened up by the requirement ‘take care of yourself.’ Ultimately ‘take care of yourself’ will mean: ‘know yourself.’”³⁷ Correlatively, Foucault employs these categories—*gnōthi seauton* and *epimeleia heautou*—as epigrams for two types of philosophizing: “philosophy,” which places self-knowledge at the center of its attention, and “spirituality,” which gives primacy to the self-crafting of human agents. The increasing dominance of the former over the latter comprises the warp and woof of Foucault’s

³⁵Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 10–11. Here I follow Thomas G. Guarino, who interprets Nietzsche’s *Übermensch* as someone “who welcomes pluralism and understands the lack of final structures. This is someone who can don many masks, live in many cultures, the one who can renounce foundations even while accepting the risk and historicity of human life” (Thomas G. Guarino, *Vattimo and Theology*, Philosophy and Theology [New York: T&T Clark, 2009], 36).

³⁶Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), §290, 232.

³⁷Foucault, *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 419.

lapsarian genealogy of Western philosophy.³⁸ Central to Foucault's narrative is the treatment of *gnōthi seauton* as a shoo-in for objectivized, epistemic proceduralism—methodological or definitional criteria for accessing truth (hermeneutical or otherwise)—at the expense of approaches that put a premium on the epistemic worthiness of the agent. Its primacy is on display whenever a philosopher, or anyone else for that matter, claims to have access to truth “through his activity of knowing, without anything else being demanded of him and without him having to change or alter his being as subject.”³⁹ It is this shift that Foucault has in mind when he writes about the “Cartesian moment” in Western intellectual history, naming the moment—any moment actually—when “philosophy” becomes detached from “spirituality,” and with it, unwittingly buys into an “undeveloped theory of the subject.”⁴⁰ It stands to reason, therefore, that any understanding or practice of hermeneutics that operates on subject-less presuppositions—“subject-less” here denoting a “forgetfulness of being” in favor of disengaged proceduralism—becomes yet another instance of “philosophy” in Foucault's sense of the term.

In response to such transmutations of the philosophical task, Foucault articulates several points of critique. To begin with, we must not reduce access to truth to “a simple act of knowledge (*connaissance*)” or some procedural methodologism that sets aside the subject's existential coordinates. Instead, an approach is needed that recognizes that the (hermeneutical) subject “must be changed, transformed, shifted, and become, to some extent and up to a certain point, other than himself.” To wit, the pursuit of truth and self-transcendence are essential corollaries. Thus, we ask: What price needs “to be paid for access to the truth?”⁴¹ How does one become worthy of it? What does letting go of oneself in this sense mean? How does self-care produce or shape people who are capable of “having” truth—being open and attuned to it, caring about it, being capable of perceiving it, embodying it in one's comportment to the world, etc.? What is at stake here, then, is truthfulness—the task of turning ourselves into the kind of persons (and community of persons!) who not only desire to know the truth, but also have the courage and capacity to accept it and be changed by it.⁴²

³⁸See *ibid.*, 461. Davidson recollects Foucault's remark during a conversation that “Spinoza is one of the last ancient philosophers and Leibniz one of the first modern philosophers” (“Introduction,” xxv).

³⁹Foucault, *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 15.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 461. Rayner rightly notes that this “is precisely how Heidegger read the history of truth. Heidegger presents a distinguished example of how to misread the history of truth, presupposing the constancy of self-knowledge in the form of the pre-ontological understanding of being” (Rayner, “Foucault, Heidegger,” 70). Foucault himself states: “I have tried to reflect on all this from the side of Heidegger and starting from Heidegger” (*Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 189).

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 15.

⁴²I have elsewhere explored this subject matter as it relates to Iris Murdoch's moral epistemology. See Ante Jerončić, “Loving the Good: Iris Murdoch's Ethical Realism,” *Biblijski Pogledi* 21 (2013): 101–114.

At this juncture, it is hard to miss links to Nietzsche's perspectivism, both regarding Nietzsche's influence on Foucault, and the way in which Foucault's "spirituality" might help us reread some of Nietzsche's arguments.⁴³ As is clear from his (posthumously published) 1872–1873 essay, "On Truth and Lies in an Extra-Moral Sense," Nietzsche views both the pursuit and articulation of truth as inseparable from the jagged topography of virtues and vices, emotions and experiences, influences and presuppositions. There is always more to knowing than simply *knowing*; inevitably, all kinds of motives, sensibilities, tastes, and affects—all of which figure into Nietzsche's conception of "drive" (*Instinkt*)—also get thrown into the mix in a way that eludes our clear comprehension.⁴⁴ Accordingly, we must admit that

the intellect, as a means for the preservation of the individual, unfolds its chief powers in simulation. . . . In man this art of simulation reaches its peak: here deception, flattery, lying and cheating, talking behind the back, posing, living in borrowed splendor, being masked, the disguise of convention, acting a role before others and before oneself—in short, the constant fluttering around the single flame of vanity is so much the rule and the law that almost nothing is more incomprehensible than how an honest and pure urge for truth could make its appearance among men.⁴⁵

In light of such an epistemic fallibility and the pervasiveness of self-deception in human agents, both Nietzsche and Foucault assume the mantle of virtue epistemologists broadly construed.⁴⁶ In a way that resonates with our cultural situation in the West, they recognize that ignorance has a personal and "political geography, prompting us to ask: Who knows not? And why not? Where is there ignorance and why? Like knowledge or wealth or poverty, ignorance has a face, a house, and a price: it is encouraged here and discouraged there from ten thousand accidents (and deliberations) of social

⁴³In one interview, Foucault describes himself as "simply Nietzschean." See Michel Foucault, "The Return of Morality," in *Politics, Philosophy, Culture*, 251. The interview itself took place on 29 May 1984. For a helpful discussion of Foucault's project in relationship to Nietzsche, see Hans Sluga, "I Am Simply Nietzschean," in *Foucault and Philosophy*, ed. Timothy O'Leary and Christopher Falzon (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 36–59.

⁴⁴For a helpful discussion of drives in Nietzsche's moral psychology, see Paul Katsafanas, *The Nietzschean Self: Moral Psychology, Agency, and the Unconscious* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 77–107.

⁴⁵Friedrich Nietzsche, "From 'On Truth and Lie in the Extra-Moral Sense,'" in *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Penguin, 1976), 43. For a helpful discussion on the "discipline of veracity" and pragmatism in Nietzsche's "On Truth," see Robert Brigati, "Veracity and Pragmatism in Nietzsche's 'On Truth and Lies,'" *Parrhesia Journal* 25 (2015): 78–102.

⁴⁶On reading Foucault as a virtue epistemologist, see W. Jay Wood, "On the Uses and Advantages of an Epistemology for Life," in *Postmodern Philosophy and Christian Thought*, ed. Merold Westphal, Indiana Series in the Philosophy of Religion (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 24–26.

fortune.”⁴⁷ That is to say, ignorance does not just have a narrative, a story of how things happen to us. It also comes with a burden of intentionality, or better yet, moral responsibility, in that there are things we could have known had we so desired. Of course, the deeper question of how I become a person in whom such a desire is absent is precisely the point at which virtue ethics and epistemology intersect.

Anyone interested in actual hermeneutical practice, where “actual” stands in for the concern of how fallible human beings *actually* go about their interpretive endeavors, will be hard-pressed to take the above stated anthropological considerations seriously. In other words, if Nietzsche is correct about the priming effect of human drives—priming in the sense that drives predispose us to perceive and take in texts and situations in a certain way—then we need to consider more carefully what is at stake in being an authentic interpretative agent. Such a task receives additional warrant when we take to heart insights from contemporary neuropsychology and cognitive science. While those disciplines either question or refine Nietzsche’s account of “drives,” his basic intuition that there is always more to knowing than simply knowing has become a common coinage. As when Graham Ward reminds us that

there is a mode of liminal processing, related to embodiment and affectivity, which “thinks” more quickly and reacts more instinctively than our conscious rational deliberation. Beneath and prior to interpretation, and conflicts of meaning, lie sets of remembered associations and assumptions woven tightly into the processes of how we *make* sense. These associations and assumptions have been taught and arrived at; they are not innate, they are not genetic—but they are not always articulated. These assumptions constitute what some social anthropologists (Pierre Bourdieu, for example) have called “habitus”—encultured dispositions, socialised mindsets and biases.⁴⁸

I believe that we gain much when we refract the Foucauldian problematic of subjectivity and truth through such a broadened conception of human cognition, one which seriously troubles disembodied and objectivist narrations of hermeneutic agency.

To bring this point home from another angle, let us briefly consider Foucault’s discussion of *parrhesia* (frank speech) as the true mother of

⁴⁷Robert Proctor and Londa L. Schiebinger, eds., *Agnology: The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008).

⁴⁸Graham Ward, *Unbelievable: Why We Believe and Why We Don’t* (London: Tauris, 2015). See also Timothy D. Wilson, *Strangers to Ourselves: Discovering the Adaptive Unconscious* (Cambridge: Belknap, 2002); Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009); James K. A. Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works*, Cultural Liturgies 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013); David Eagleman, *Incognito: The Secret Lives of the Brain* (New York: Pantheon, 2011); and John A. Bargh, *Before You Know It: The Unconscious Reasons We Do What We Do* (New York: Touchstone, 2017).

“spirituality.”⁴⁹ In *Fearless Speech*, for instance, he delineates several components of the *parrhesiastic* act.⁵⁰ First, the speaker ought to present his views without undue embellishments or rhetorical trickery. Second, *parrhesia* rests on the speaker’s conviction that what he professes is true. “Such truth-having,” furthermore, “is guaranteed by the possession of certain moral qualities;”⁵¹ qualities both to come to know the truth and to communicate such a knowledge to others. Third, he attests to that conviction by speaking courageously in the face of danger. “The speaker uses his freedom and chooses frankness instead of persuasion, truth instead of falsehood or silence, the risk of death instead of life and security, criticism instead of flattery, and moral duty instead of self-interest and moral apathy.”⁵² It is this moral quality of courage that is a critical litmus test as to whether one is a *parrhesiastes*. Fourth, *parrhesia* always aims at critique, either of oneself or another. Accordingly, the *parrhesiastes* is a speaker who says everything he or she has in mind, who opens himself up to other people in an entirely transparent way, free from any prevarications, even if what he says flies in the face of the crowd and powers that be.⁵³ And finally, fifth, the *parrhesiastes* speaks the truth as someone who puts himself under the obligation to obey it.⁵⁴ He is not a theoretician of truth in the sense, let’s say, professors of ethics are, who do not see the obligation to live out what they teach in the classroom.⁵⁵ In sum, *parrhesia* is a personal commitment to “say what has to be said, what we want to say, what we think ought to be said because it is necessary, useful, and true.”⁵⁶

⁴⁹Michel Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1982–1983*, ed. Frédéric Gros, trans. Graham Burchill, Lectures at the Collège de France 7 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 342. One of Foucault’s main intents for the recovery of “spirituality” lies in the fact that he sees it as a progenitor of philosophy as critical theory.

⁵⁰Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, ed. Joseph Pearson (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2001), 11–20. See also idem, *The Government of Self*, 66–67.

⁵¹Idem, *Fearless Speech*, 15.

⁵²Ibid., 19–20.

⁵³See *ibid.*, 12.

⁵⁴For a helpful discussion of Judith Butler’s engagement with Foucault’s *parrhesia*, see Anita Brady and Tony Schirato, *Understanding Judith Butler*, *Understanding Contemporary Culture* (London: SAGE, 2011), 130–134.

⁵⁵There is a significant body of literature examining this phenomenon. As the argument sometimes goes, it would be unfair to expect from an ethicist to have higher moral standards just by virtue of him or her being an ethicist. See, for example, Eric Schwitzgebel and Joshua Rust, “The Moral Behavior of Ethics Professors: Relationships among Self-Reported Behavior, Expressed Normative Attitude, and Directly Observed Behavior,” *Philosophical Psychology* 27.3 (2014): 293–327.

⁵⁶Foucault, *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 366. Although not the subject of our exploration here, *parrhesia* so defined yields itself to a number of contemporary applications. A quick search through citation indexes resulted in a list of following research topics: “Teacher Political Disclosure as *Parrhesia*,” “Nursing as ‘Disobedient’ Practice,” “*Parrhesia* and Democracy,” “Quakers and *Parrhesia*,” “Philosophy

As we coalesce these various strands of Foucault's thought, what emerges is a particular type of experiential philosophy, in other words, a "philosophy as a way of life." Its existential spaciousness commends a certain kind of "moral perfectionism" (in Stanley Cavell's and Cora Diamond's sense of the term when discussing Wittgenstein's ethics of self-transformation), a moral vision that "wishes to prevent understanding which is unaccompanied by inner change,"⁵⁷ including understanding that emerges in the context of hermeneutical engagement. By committing to such a perspective, Foucault places himself within a tableau of thinkers who, significant differences notwithstanding, share certain resonances when it comes to critiquing the "ontologizing of rational procedure."⁵⁸ Any number of experiential philosophers comes to mind in this regard: Søren Kierkegaard, Henry David Thoreau, William James, Martin Heidegger, Iris Murdoch, (later) Ludwig Wittgenstein, Charles Taylor, and others.⁵⁹ In that sense, Foucault's *Bildung* philosophy—one that connects "truth" and "virtue" with the pursuit of human flourishing—moves rhizomatically and intertextually into all kinds of fecund directions which, unfortunately, cannot be explored at any length here. What does interest us and has been our focus so far are the implications Foucault's self-care might have for how we are to understand the agential dimension of hermeneutics.

Hermeneutics and Truthfulness

So far in this article, I have examined two central moves in Michel Foucault's philosophical opus. I began with relating his ethical turn to the category of *epimeleia heautou*. There I noted how Foucault samples ancient practices of self-transformation not in order to uncritically emulate them but rather to articulate a discursive space for situated or engaged (and thereby embodied)

with Children as an Exercise in *Parrhesia*," "Practicing *Parrhesia* in Self-Managing Community," etc.

⁵⁷Stanley Cavell, "The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy," in *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays* (New York: Scribner, 1969), 72. For the initial reference to Cavell, I am indebted to Davidson, "Introduction," xxvi. In Cavell's usage, "moral perfectionism" broadly refers to efforts that stress the moral responsibility of self-knowledge and the difficulties associated with it. Put differently, it "captures the thought that persons are always on the trembling edge of the unexpected, on the verge of becoming themselves through shedding what is less than perfect. . . . All this an *unending* process of becoming, a forever *unfinished* striving" (Edward F. Mooney, *Lost Intimacy in American Thought: Recovering Personal Philosophy from Thoreau to Cavell* [New York: Continuum, 2009], 115; emphasis original). For an additional development of this theme, see Stanley Cavell, *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism*, Paul Carus Lectures 19 (La Salle: Open Court, 1990).

⁵⁸Charles Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 61.

⁵⁹For a helpful comparative study, see Jörg Volbers, *Selbsterkenntnis und Lebensform: Kritische Subjektivität nach Wittgenstein und Foucault* (Friedland: Bielefeld, 2009).

agency, one that makes the experience of freedom possible within the context of personal, historical, and disciplinary contingencies.⁶⁰ I then turned to Foucault's delineation of *parrhesia* to illustrate how the relationship between subjectivity and truth plays itself out in this quintessential political (and communal) practice. Such an account of truth-speech, as I have highlighted, troubles all types of epistemic reductionisms that unwittingly operate on some form of self-neglect. By now it should be clear that this should have an enormous significance for how we conceive of hermeneutical practice. The interpretive agent—irrespective of whether we reference textual interpretations more narrowly or a fundamental modality of human existence more generally—by his or her very being determines the range of perceptual possibilities. As we will see in the paragraphs below, such possibilities pertain not only to getting at what a text (or a situation) says, but also to the range of meaningful appropriations in the sense of what can be “done” by such-and-such interpreted “truth.” In that sense, the *parrhesiastes* who is able to “see” and “do” certain things because he is a certain kind of moral agent who stands in as a type of authentic hermeneutical enactment.

But before I turn to the unpacking of these claims a bit more, let me highlight some reservations I have with respect to Foucault's approach. To begin with, I side with Pierre Hadot's objection that Foucault's reading of ancient philosophy mobilizes a notion of self fundamentally at odds with Hellenistic or classical ideas of what it is that one ought to care for.⁶¹ Specifically, he faults Foucault for superimposing a flattened and individualist sense of the self on ancient sources, one devoid of any normativity, thus resulting in a “new form of Dandyism, late twentieth-century style.” As the critique goes, one cannot, for instance, simply demythologize the Stoics by setting aside the correlation of human flourishing and a life according to *physis* (nature) central to their writings. You reject the belief in the universal *Logos*, the moral structure of the universe, the implied universalism of it all and, suddenly, technologies of the self, such as the Stoic *prosochē* (attentiveness, vigilance), lose their intended meaning. Therefore, yes, “all spiritual exercises are, fundamentally, a return to the self, in which the self is liberated from the state of alienation into which it has been plunged by worries, passions, and desire.” But at the same time, “the ‘self’ liberated in this way is no longer merely our egoistic, passionate individuality: it is our *moral* person, open to universality and objectivity, and participating in universal nature or thought.”⁶² Consequently, an entirely different type of self-transcendence is operative in these classical writings when compared to Foucault's aesthetics of freedom. That this should be the case is hardly surprising. After all, he seeks to purge philosophical thinking of all transcendence; transcendence in the form of trans-historical normativity

⁶⁰On the notion of embodied agency, see Charles Taylor, “Embodied Agency and Background in Heidegger,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger*, ed. Charles B. Guignon, Cambridge Companions to Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 317–336.

⁶¹Hadot, *Philosophy*, 211.

⁶²Ibid., 103.

or discourse about essences. In Foucault's "art of living," there isn't, and there can't ever be, an *erôs* for perfection (*pace* Iris Murdoch); an *erôs* for a transcendent, normative source.

I find this problematic not only because I take umbrage at Foucault's "immanent frame" (C. Taylor), as a Christian theologian, but also because any account of human flourishing along Foucauldian lines necessitates at least two components. First, Foucault's *ethopoetics* is unintelligible apart from the specification of basic human goods correlating to the kind of beings we are—exactly the task he strenuously avoids. A *parrhesiastes*, for instance, utilizes not only a variety of tools such as interpretation, communication, repetition, and agitation, but she also does so as a person to whom, in the course of her development, certain basic human goods have been placed, more or less, at her disposal. She was able to acquire language, form ego identity, develop physically, and otherwise actualize her existence, which then, in turn, enabled her to become a *parrhesiastes*. That is not to say that the specification of such goods—whether understood in terms of needs, desires, interests, goals, or capabilities—is free from disagreements and even controversies.⁶³ But what it *does* mean is that such a conversation is to be had in order to make Foucault's account intelligible.⁶⁴ Second, the practice of *parrhesia* implies a range of *capacities*, such as the ability to live in a state of practical consciousness, assign causal attributions, engage in interest formation, remember, and experience intersubjective understanding, all of which are, to some degree, at work in any act of self-formation.⁶⁵ With that in mind, does not Foucault's *parrhesiastes* require such capacities, and couldn't they, in principle, be discussed in some fashion that does not amount to oppressive subjectification? And if that indeed is possible, wouldn't such a delineation amount to presenting a vision of "human nature," one that entails at least some normative features?

⁶³Theorists, such as John Rawls, Roy Baumeister, Hans Jonas, Kai Nielsen, Erich Fromm, John Finnis, and others, define basic goods in different yet complementary ways. For an excellent account of these and other proposals, see Christian Smith, *To Flourish or Destruct: A Personalist Theory of Human Goods, Motivations, Failure, and Evil* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 160–180. Smith's synthetic account proposes the following groupings of basic goods: bodily survival, security, and pleasure; knowledge of reality; identity coherence and affirmation; exercising purposive agency; moral affirmation; social belonging and love. See *ibid.*, 181–182. Also helpful in this regard is William Schweiker's classification of human goods: (1) pre-moral goods that constitute material well-being, (2) reflexive goods that constitute personal well-being, (3) social goods that constitute communal well-being, and (4) the intrinsic ethical good of integrity that one generates by ordering the previous goods by respecting and enhancing the integral relation between them. See *Responsibility and Christian Ethics*, New Studies in Christian Ethics 6 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); *idem*, *Dust that Breathes: Christian Faith and the New Humanisms* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

⁶⁴For a related critique of Foucault, see Maria Antonaccio, *A Philosophy to Live By: Engaging Iris Murdoch* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 136–137.

⁶⁵See Christian Smith, *What Is a Person? Rethinking Humanity, Social Life, and the Moral Good from the Person Up* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 25–89.

Which leads me to the qualms I have with Foucault's aesthetics of existence in general. By insisting that we are to see ourselves as unrestrained artisans of self-inventing possibilities, he commits to a perpetual table-clearing; a *tabula rasa* return-loop, so to speak. On such terms, we can move from one existential location to another, from one pursuit of authentic expressiveness to another, by the mere fiat of inventive subjectivity. That such possibilities are at times self-canceling, that they predispose the individual to some options but not others, that they differ in their potentiality for human flourishing, seems to be muted in Foucault's approach. Thus, his Dionysian celebration of existential flux elides the brute fact that actions over time sediment into a range of habitual orientations in individuals. Must there not be a possibility for their critical comparison, and wouldn't such an exercise demand recourse to something like human nature, as pointed to above? With that in mind, I side with Charles Taylor, who points to Foucault's failure to provide an "order of human life, or way we are, or human nature, that one can appeal to in order to judge or evaluate between ways of life."⁶⁶ It commits him to question-begging assertions about the need for autonomy and the importance of self-realization without specifying what it is about human life that should command or justify the recognition of such values *qua* values. That is why, in the end, I find it hard to see how Foucault's Nietzschean aesthetics of the self, with its non-teleological self-stylizing and kaleidoscopic impermanence, could ever "produce" a state of character required for the *parrhesiastic* act and existence.

So much in terms of critique. On the positive side, I have affirmed Foucault's basic intuition that, for a *parrhesiastes*, truth is more than a representational phenomenon—her possessing mental images mirroring factual states or "reality." Indeed, the *parrhesiastes*, or an authentic hermeneutical agent in general, has a certain life orientation and possesses a certain character on the basis of which she is not only equipped to know the truth in a representational sense. She, furthermore, sees the truth *as it is for* a course of action or a way of being. That is, truth for her is an existential force that demands obedience and responsible agency. For her, metaphorical notions of the "depth," "height," "width," and "length" of truth represent more than merely a rhetorical pull. The *parrhesiastes* hermeneuticizes texts and situations, and discerns problems and possibilities in a way that leads to the unveiling or "unconcealment" (M. Heidegger) of truth for that specific time and context—what it means, whom it addresses, what course of action it commends, what self-perceptions it changes, how it opens new horizons of understanding, and how it restructures imagination and attention.⁶⁷ Quite

⁶⁶Charles Taylor, "Foucault on Freedom and Truth," in *Foucault: A Critical Reader*, ed. David Couzens Hoy (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 93. He additionally remarks on how Foucault's self-imposed strictures prevent him from accepting "the rival notion of a deep or authentic self that arises out of the critical traditions of Hegel and, in another way, Heidegger or Merleau-Ponty" ("Overcoming Epistemology," 16).

⁶⁷Unfortunately, I cannot fully explore here a deeper connection between *parrhesia* and Heidegger's treatment of truth as *aletheia* or "unconcealment." For an illuminating

possibly, she exhibits an array of attunements, aptitudes, sensibilities, and epistemic pliability that others with a similar repository of factual information might not possess. If one were to give a Thoreauvian inflection to Foucault's account of the *parrhesiastes*'s relationship to truth, we could say that seeing is "ultimately dependent on the individual's *ability* to see and create, and the world as known is thus radically dependent on character."⁶⁸

None of this is novel or even controversial. Most would grant that hermeneutics always concerns a specific human agent with specific existential coordinates engaging in a specific quest within a specific context and purpose with a specific range of ingrained skills, experiences dispositions, and biases—in short, to borrow from Pierre Bourdieu, an agent with a *habitus*.⁶⁹ In that regard, the interpreter might be honest or dishonest, open or intransigent, careless or attentive; she might have certain aptitudes and competencies, but not others; certain life experiences or decisions might have led her to the point where she cares about certain ideas or topics, but is indifferent to others; she might have vested interests that concern her financial well-being and status, or be impervious to them; she most certainly partakes in specific cultural practices and inhabits a historical context that closes off certain epistemic horizons, but opens up others; and on top (or bottom?) of it all, traditioned linguistic practices and imaginaries shape her consciousness and meaningful inhabitation of the world. In other words, her encounter with the world (and text) is intensely "carnal"; she has a *body* which always orients her perceptual sphere and corresponding saliences—what it is that stands out as interesting, important, threatening, emotionally charged, and so on.⁷⁰

Such a triangulation of truth, experience, and praxis as we have it in the example above relates to the ontology of truth as found in the Scriptures. For

account of *aletheia* in Heidegger, see Mark A. Wrathall, *Heidegger and Unconcealment: Truth, Language, and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

⁶⁸Alfred I. Tauber, *Henry David Thoreau and the Moral Agency of Knowing* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 5; emphasis original.

⁶⁹See Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 52–65. Much more could be said on this point, including early Heidegger's "hermeneutics of facticity" which structures his existential phenomenology and speaks to the incomprehensibility of being. For an insightful discussion of these issues, see Scott M. Campbell, *The Early Heidegger's Philosophy of Life: Facticity, Being, and Language*, Perspectives in Continental Philosophy (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012). Additionally, for a helpful treatment of the task and focus of philosophical hermeneutics vis-à-vis human experience, see the following: Nicholas Davey, *Unquiet Understanding: Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics*, The SUNY Series in Contemporary Continental Philosophy (Albany: SUNY Press, 2006); Donatella Di Cesare, *Utopia of Understanding: Between Babel and Auschwitz*, The SUNY Series in Contemporary Continental Philosophy (Albany: SUNY Press, 2012).

⁷⁰My references to the role of the body are in the vein of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (New York: Routledge, 2012). Broadly understood, I utilize the concept of the body and its synonym "carnal" to signify the centrality of temporality, spatiality, movement, and so on for the structuring of perception.

instance, Paul tells us, in Rom 1:18, ESV, about the unrighteous who “by their unrighteousness suppress the truth,” which then resulted in a lifestyle profoundly at odds with the will of God. In that context, one might argue, matters of the heart—“their senseless hearts were darkened” (1:21, LEB)—decisively trump both truth and the means of “getting at it.” No refinement of hermeneutical procedures would have been of use in the face of such a frontal refusal to know the truth. As Paul puts it elsewhere, “the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel” (2 Cor 4:4, ESV). On the other hand, 2 Peter highlights how certain “qualities” of mind and character—self-control, brotherly love, etc.—help us to be effective and fruitful in the knowledge of Jesus Christ (1:8). Again, “getting at the truth” here also encompasses something more than pure proceduralism, especially the kind that assumes the proverbial “view from nowhere.”⁷¹ Thus, unless we repent of our hardheartedness, we will neither “see” nor “hear” the truth (Mark 8:17–21).

At this point, it might appear that in so arguing I have thoroughly subjectivized the hermeneutical task, dissolving it into a morass of subjective biases. After all, is it not the case that efforts to “overcome epistemology” (C. Taylor) predictably come to a standstill in some anti-realist or even nihilist territories?⁷² At the very least, am I not committing to a form of noncognitivism in favor of emotivism of sorts? I would hope not. I most certainly do not side with approaches that revel in endless chains of signification—approaches “unfettered by anything in the nature of a correct interpretation or an irrecusable meaning of either life or text.”⁷³ That is, I do not subscribe to forms of subjectivist hermeneutics that exhibit a neurotic tic when faced with demands for clarity, attempts at interpretive adjudication, or efforts at getting to the *Sache* (H. G. Gadamer) of interpretation. In that sense, John D. Caputo’s (somewhat) critical realist adage that “interpretations go all the way down but some interpretations are better than others” strikes me as basically correct.⁷⁴ What I do question is the way in which discussions about hermeneutics at times assume a dwarfed or atomistic conception of agency, one buttressed with an ambit of mechanistic and dualistic

⁷¹Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986). He writes: “The attempt is made to view the world not from a place within it, or from the vantage point of a special type of life and awareness, but from nowhere in particular and no form of life in particular at all” (*Mortal Questions* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979], 208). For this reference, I am indebted to Taylor, “Lichtung or Lebensform,” 66.

⁷²Taylor’s major complaint is that modern epistemology presents us with a disengaged agent comprised of the following three facets: (1) atomism of input, (2) computational picture of mental functions, and (3) neutrality (*ibid.*, 63).

⁷³Idem, “Overcoming Epistemology,” 18.

⁷⁴John D. Caputo, *Hermeneutics: Facts and Interpretation in the Age of Information* (London: Pelican, 2018), vii. For a similar argument, see Umberto Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation*, *Advances in Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

(subject/object) metaphors more proper to various Cartesianisms and their forms of disengaged agency rather than the Bible.

Of course, due to space constraints, much of importance has been left unsaid. For one, I have articulated my position on the primacy of embodiment in too oblique a manner. Also, I wish that my indebtedness to and engagement of Charles Taylor's thought amounted to a bit more than an intertextual nod, as his (post-Heideggerian) influence is palpable throughout. Finally, I might have left a wrong impression that in stressing the themes of *askēsis*, virtue, authenticity, and so on, I have unduly neglected the role of broader cultural and historical givens—communities, social imaginaries, social location, political context, etc.—in the shaping of hermeneutical agency. Such was not my intention. While I do resist cliché-ridden critiques of individuality, I understand my account to be decidedly *non*individualistic and in tune with intersubjective and historicist sensibilities common to personalist accounts of the human self. Such and other matters demand a careful hearing, of course. However, in lieu of a non-achievable finality, let me close with Iris Murdoch's sagacious observation that accurately sums up the basic intuition behind this article: "Truthfulness, the search for truth, for a closer connection between thought and reality, demands and effects an exercise of virtues and a purification of desires. The ability, for instance, to think justly about what is evil, or to love another person unselfishly, involves a discipline of intellect and emotion. Thought, goodness and reality are thus seen to be connected."⁷⁵ On that point, I cannot but concur!

⁷⁵Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (New York: Penguin, 1993), 399.