The selfhood and the ascetic ideal of the modern subject: the art of living from Friedrich Nietzsche to Michel Foucault

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THE SELFHOOD AND THE ASCETIC IDEAL OF THE MODERN SUBJECT: THE ART OF LIVING
FROM FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE TO MICHEL FOUCAULT

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Abstract

Conceived as an analysis of the reception of Nietzsche’s ethics, assumed as a project for an aesthetic of existence, at the crossroads of modernism and postmodernism, this article explores the way in which the whole art of living could be interpreted following two significant moments: the “death of God”, proposed by Nietzsche, and the “death of the Author”, mentioned by Michel Foucault. More precisely, I investigate the way in which the two moments will test common assumptions exploited in different philosophical directions. In this regard, I suggest understanding the manner in which the death of God develops philosophy as an art of transfiguration, endowed with a metaphysical nostalgia meant to influence Foucault’s perspectivism and genealogy.

This paper is an attempt to criticize the modern subject – considered through the theme of the selfhood – and the ascetic ideal as elements submitted to the art of living that Foucault inherited from Nietzsche. Thus, I advocate for the development of Nietzsche’s ascetic ideal assumed as part of the aesthetics of the existence in which self-denial suggests not only a dynamic conception of discipline, achieved through the equivalence between giving life a meaning and surviving to the weakness, but also a narrative method, dramatized, of opening the subject as an exponent of consciousness. I assume the fact that such a statement proposes accepting a subject consisted in the heritage of “morality of mores” practices, from Nietzsche’s construction, resignificated by Foucault in his “practices of the self”. This kind of approach seems to present the impasse of the aesthetics of existence caused by the perennial returning at a model of ascetic ideal, adjusted, upgraded, in such a form that modernity is announced, in the light of this movement, as a dimension consacrated to the constituting of the self as a work of art tributary to ethical reforms of the art of living.

Keywords: Nietzsche, Foucault, art of living, morality of mores, practices of the self, selfhood, ascetic ideal, self.

This article is devoted to an analysis of Nietzsche’s ethics at the crossroads of modernism and postmodernism, assumed as a project for an aesthetic of existence, built as a revival of the “art of living”, as it was perceived in the ancient grid. This approach constitutes a space in which the tension

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between ethics and aesthetics could be abolished, following the canons of “the
great style”, using the formula proposed by Nietzsche.

Thus, I will observe the manner in which the aesthetics of existence
allows, at the limit, under this structure, assuming the sublime as the will to
power. Such an exposure is possible conceiving not what, in the spirit of
Shusterman, could mean the program of a “pragmatic aesthetics”, consumed as
“art in the living state”, but questioning the legitimacy of such a project, by
exposing its problems developed on a double tier of investigation, for which I
will deliver potential tools and solutions.

(1) In the first instance, I propose setting up a general framework for
analyzing which one of the two canonical moments of a (post)modern program
of the aesthetics of existence, raised by Nietzsche’s “death of God” and by
Foucault’s “death of the author”, can test common assumptions exploited in
different philosophical directions. In this regard, I suggest understanding the
manner in which the death of God develops philosophy as an art of transfiguration, endowed with a metaphysical nostalgia meant to influence Foucault’s perspectivism and genealogy. Assuming this formula, I will base a
critical treatment of modernity approaching it through the constitution of the
subject on the border between the “morality of mores” practices, created by
Nietzsche, and the “practices of the self”, constituted by Foucault. In order to
draw the conclusion of the first level of my research, I will suggest a possible
way of taking into account the philosophical dimension of modernity, by
considering Nietzsche’s ascetic ideal a source of inspiration for Foucault’s
aesthetics of existence, as art of living between two main coordinates: to give a
sense or a meaning to life, and to survive the weakness.

(2) Secondly, I will support this first part of the paper by a return to
Nietzsche, delivering a formula for understanding the manner in which the
“Self-creation” requires the principal resort for the aesthetics of existence,
consuming the report between art and artist as a possible way to regard the
philosopher as a “poet of life”, able to discern “the style as a rare science” of a
vital practice, both Apollonian and Dionysian. In this section there will be
evaluated all the possibilities to transform the modern subject of Nietzsche, into
a construct of a relational-self, constituted as a result of self-creation power,
developing a thesis which attests the fact that the modern subject, as an actor of
the aesthetics of existence, additionally requires a structure that destroys the
illusion of a Christian-artist, but recognizes a sense of value’s measure and a
process of normalization dedicated to those who are weak. This last part will
inspire Foucault’s project of self-government. Thus, I advocate for the
development of Nietzsche’s ascetic ideal assumed as part of the aesthetics of the
existence in which self-denial suggests not only a dynamic conception of
discipline, achieved through the equivalence between giving life a meaning and surviving to the weakness, but also a narrative method, dramatized, of opening the subject as an exponent of consciousness, following the terminology of Crary and Wall, applied in the project of self-creation art’s critique.

§1. Nietzsche’s Modern Subject and the Relational Model of the Selfhood. 
The Practices of the Morality of Mores and the Ascetic Ideal

Nietzsche develops a game of affirmation and negation of the modern subject, inaugurated as the source of a metaphysical criticism of modernity. This is the tool that Nietzsche applies in order to create the difference of shade between aesthetics and aestheticism\(^2\), that operates as a way of preserving a theory of power. Here, the resistances of a slavery and subjection moral grow, and at the end, “Nietzsche enthrones the yes and the no of the taste”\(^3\). Especially between ethics and aesthetics, Nietzsche lies a common core designated by values managed in a registry that measures attitudes and interpretations that not only recovers a discourse of the similarities and the differences between ethical and aesthetical values, but also a integration of “knowledge, moral and ascetic ideal”\(^4\) in a project created by genealogical instruments. At the limit, it can be argued that the development of Nietzsche’s aesthetics of existence as art of self-creation starts from the same original point of modern ethics, announcing the destruction of Kantianism\(^5\).

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\(^2\) Dominant in this register is the gap between aesthetics and aestheticism, articulated by Habermas as a construct equivalent to “the distance between the value’s autonomy and the value’s dominance. If Kant’s aesthetic is described as an autonomous aesthetic judgment, by autonomy understanding the self-legislating freedom, Habermas concludes that the aesthetic that became aestheticism promises the opposite: it legalize all the valuable sources through the aesthetic ones, plus de causal dependence of the aesthetic phenomenon of other influences: social, psychological ori biological”. Maftei Ştefan-Sebastian, *“Geniul artistic”: Nietzsche şi problema creaţiei artistice. Între romantism şi avangardă germană* [“The artistic genius”: Nietzsche and the problem of artistic creation. Between Romanticism and German avant-garde] (Cluj-Napoca: Casa Cărţii de Știință, 2010), 22.

\(^3\) Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. Tr. by Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1987), 128-129.


\(^5\) “After Nietzsche, Kant’s questions – *What can I know?*, *What to do?*, *Why am I allowed to hope?* – are not questionning skills from which they originate. For this reason, their ‘objects’ have become simple human ideals. They should represent the origin of any critic. (...) Questioning the Kantian philosophy, Nietzsche observes something totally unexpected: his criticism, Kant made a simple inventory of existing values. Trapped in taxonomic habituals, criticism comes down to understanding and ordering meanings already given. The only stake lies in clarifying values already imposed” (Bondor, 2008, 117).
Axiological pluralism proposes, following the Kantian modern perspective and the moral project of Nietzsche, to accept the value as “part of life’s optic and perspective” (KSA, 5, 26). This is the moment when Nietzsche’s genealogical excursion begins as a creator of values, dynamic, propelling a will to create which relates to the manner of assuming and understanding the truth by analogy with the interpretation that makes possible the reception of the aesthetic truth by a spectator. From this point, genealogy cultivates the art of the axiological criticism, understood as a preliminary step of the aesthetics of existence. Before deconstructing the „grand style” of „self-creation”, represented by the modern subject, Nietzsche states a first approach to the aesthetics of existence: “we need a critique of moral values; first, it is necessary to evaluate their values, and this requires the knowledge of the conditions and the circumstances in which they were born, developed and deformed (moral as therefore, as a symptom, as a mask, hypocrisy, illness, misunderstanding and morality as cause, cure, stimulants, as drug and poison), knowledge that there has not been any so far and was not even required” (GM, §6, 294-295). Furthermore, the moral, discerned as a forum of interpretations, imposes the abolishment of a mask. There is no doubt about the existence of a split between “the good mask” and “the bad mask”, as Vattimo announces them, but they are related to “a sequence of events (of moral nature) enslaving, more or less deep” (GM, 356), which allows the theater of active and reactive power of the forces to give “this ultimate affirmation, exhuberant and impetuos, addressed to life” (KSA, 6, 311).

Therefore, is this a good life, consumed as plastic history? According to Bondor, some of those who live like this “take no risks and do not tend to more, but they are calculating their chances, silently and reactively. They convert anything to an instrument, even their existence. They have nothing artistic in their becoming. In fact, this is just a reactive existence. It is a ‘no’ calculated, said to the growth, to the artistic experiment, to life itself” (Bondor, 2008, 126). Nietzsche insists in accepting that “the living does everything not to preserve, but to become more”. In order to reconcile what is apparently an unequal struggle for power, the solution comes from building a resentful ethic, proposing the reaction of the slave as morality pure formal. It has no exercise, no tradition, no practice, apart from a perennial denial of self, which lies to the dipole of a supreme “yes”, part of the moral of the masters, an affirmative one, adversative, even combative. In this dimension of aristocratic morals, moral agents can not be beings of resentment: slavery means a nuclear model of self-cultivation that must control instincts.

In fact, between master morality and slave morality, differences are generated by a certain model of selfhood. For the second one, typological becomes a negative self, which despite its inconsistencies will have the power to appoint, enunciate and even postulate an adverse self, positive, that takes possession of the morality of masters. Simply assumed, “the one endowed with
affirmative will expresses itself every moment, as it is born and crashed according with a Dionysian method. The other one, the weak, constructs the self imagining, before anything else, based on what it felt previously and kept in a corner of its being, a ‘non-me’, a non-Ego, a sort of negative self (an evil enemy). Based on this projection, he invents, through an antithesis, the “good’ self, assuming it as its own self” (GM, I, §10, 316).

More precisely, the double model of selfhood cultivated by Nietzsche exposes a critical project of constituting the modern subject from a metaphysical perspective, but processed in the horizon of resentment and aesthetics of existence. Generating antithetical types of self which are mutually defined as refractory constructs, it seems that the model of a “relational-self” inspires “the effect of the Nietzschean power of self-creation”⁶. The only amendment that I consider necessary in the development of this exposure is asserting that the whole process of “creating” a “relational-self” associates the constitution of the modern subject with a hermeneutical construct, which precipitated the Nietzschean vision of interpreting the moral phenomena as elements which lose the original meaning, once that there are so many significances related to them. Not accidentally, Nietzsche says that „there are no moral facts. (...) Moral is only an interpretation (Ausdeutung) of certain phenomena, and more precisely, a distortion, assumed as a reinterpretation (Missdeutung)” (KSA, 6, 98) at the end of which “there is no moral phenomena, but only a moral interpretation of these phenomena. Only this interpretation has an extramoral origin” (KSA 12, 2 [165], 149).

However, resentful ethics is not a project without rest. There is a component of the “genealogy of morals” that Nietzsche cultivates as a hybrid of self-creating and reaffirming the moral values, which represents exactly “the morality of morals”. From this fact there can be developed, under the genealogy of morals, at least four coordinates that realize, in their unified and monolithic formula, the founding premises of moral practices in the key of Nietzsche’s interpretation, that will inspire the structure of an ascetic ideal.

At the beginning, we find that “morality of morals” (die Sittlichkeit der Sitte) subsumes the moral practices of a whole structure consisting in habits, customs, interpretative processes and actions that dissolved elements that don’t manifest a purely moral form. In the background, the moral tone of these practices require the acceptance of a subject that in order to produce the discipline of mores, poses the portrait of a “human built with a sense of measure” (KSA, 5, 293), with a self-consciousness detached from his power and freedom. Moreover, as a moral subject, before becoming the actor of the

⁶ For Ansell Pearson (1991), 275&281f, see Anna-Lena Carlsson, Ethical Aspects of Nietzsche and Foucault’s Writing on Self-Formation, NSE Conference in Århus, Denmark, May 31-June 3, 2007, 4.
aesthetics of existence, the human being “has his own sense of value” which allows, on the one hand, operating with the genealogical instrumentary, on the other hand, constituting an axiological complex beyond “the good and the evil” of the morality of morals, taken away from the processes of normalization of a culture of slave morality” (Carlsson, 2008, 3).

§2. An Ascetic Ideal: the Nietzschean Inheritance of Foucault. Modernism and Postmodernism Regarded through a “Graecization” Phenomenon

Nietzsche is operating a culture of “vital practices of exposing the self in a complete denial of morals themselves, practices referring, for example, to solitude, wandering on its own way without following or being followed by someone, forgetting, rather than memorizing the past, questioning old values simultaneously with the creation of the new continuous assessment and ordering hierarchies, in all these there is always a voice asking his own self: “the lack or the overflow is here creative?”

Carlsson, for example, militates for accepting an authentic perspective for investigating the modern and postmodern culture of the aesthetics of existence depending only on a certain typology of the subject which requires a special ethics. In this respect, Carlsson presents a contrast between the Nietzschean and the Foucauldian programs of the aesthetics of existence, relevant by the fact that their mediation is understood as expressing a common sense through two possible ways of constituting the project of “self-creation”. Thus, both Nietzsche and Foucault adopt a culture of selfhood and subjechthood that manifest three similarities, as it follows:

1. If the age of Nietzsche’s “death of God” “develops two essential elements – life-affirming and denying the existence of life by artistic types of existence”, Foucault will extend these immersions on the border of self-practices that are individually self-sufficient with self-care practices, managed in a system of rules, norms and standards of conduct and behavior.

2. Even if the influence of the Greek culture on assuming the aesthetics of existence inspired both the Nietzschean and the Foucauldian paradigms, there are differences between them regarding this aspect.

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7 In this direction, I recommend in order to be consulted, Genealogy of Morals.
8 See Friedrich Nietzsche, The Case of Wagner.
9 “We can distinguish between a life-affirming and life-negating type of artistic existence in Nietzsche’s writing. This two-feature perspective can also be detected in Foucault’s thinking, when he distinguishes the practices of self-formation that are self-sufficient, yet depending on others, from the self-negating caring for oneself in adjustment to a system of rules” (Carlsson, 2008, 7).
Nietzsche retains remnants of a pre-Socratic interpretation in cultivating two lifestyles – Apollonian and Dionysian – the first one relying on a form of an individualized subject, by adapting the Delphic maxim – *gnōthi seauton* –, taking into account that “nothing should be in excess” (KSA, 1,40), while Foucault will remark individualization as “self-government”, renouncing, in this part of its construction, at the primacy of an ascetic ideal in cultivating the aesthetics of existence.

(3) Both Foucault and Nietzsche are writing an aesthetics of existence inspired by an ethical program projected to dispel individualized “ways of life”\(^{10}\).

Definitely, the ascetic ideal figure keeps a pre-Socratic counter. The mission of the ascetic-priest, related in the *Genealogy of Morals*, is developed between the quack and the curator impostures, becoming, by its very being, a pharmakon for humanity. The disease suggested is hiding a manner of existence that presents a biological criticism of the subject in the paradigm of the Nietzschean modernity. First, the ascetic-priest is a patient, a subject that needs for its own becoming to postpone an ideal of existence in order to cross all the thresholds that are succeeding in the evolution of the spirit, till the moment when it gets self-control. In this case, the model of a relational-self increases by the blind confession of the “oppressed”, as Nietzsche calls them. The ascetic-priest keeps under his control both good and evil in the same helm, “because at such a thing is good, (...) being a tamer of beasts, around whom everything healthy inevitably gets sick” (GM III, §15, 411). He sends the patient\(^{11}\) to himself by a personal example, the disease being recognized as a unique and canonical fault of a suffering who is changing the resentment’s direction to the moral subject.

“In this respect, the ascetic ideal operates on the same model of faith in an immutable truth that is embraced even by science (GM III, §24, 435). Chronologically, the ascetic ideal was the first guarantor of an immutable truth, science assuming much more latter this function. Here comes genealogy. It is called to dismantle this imagined ‘fact’, put into things by an interpretation which, over time, has forgotten its status, being taken as reality itself.” (Bondor, 2008, 130-31)

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\(^{10}\) In the sense proposed by Lother Bredella in “Aesthetics and Ethics: Incommensurable, identical or Conflicting?”, in *Ethics and Aesthetics: The Moral Turn of Postmodernism*, eds. Gerhard Hoffmann and Alfred Hornung, Heidelberg: C. Winter Universitätsverlag, 1996.

\(^{11}\) According to Bondor, it may be inferred that ascetic practices can not be located in a remote area of the discursive register, because “here could be seen his qualities, the grace of a teacher (the priest’s grace). The power of seduction and persuasion only here reaches its goal. In a word, it changes the usual habit of patients, which is to seek out why they are suffering outside themselves, in an alleged perpetrator not only guilty but also alive and, according to this quality, being so accessible.” (Bondor, 2008, 129).
Thus, in line with this approach, two are the coordinates that I propose in the analysis of Nietzsche’s ascetic ideal:

1. Questioning the asceticism “conversion” to a form of manifestation of the aesthetics of existence, evaluating the correspondences, the areas of compromise and the distinctions between the figure of the ascetic priest and the Case of Wagner.

2. Investigating how the model of a relational-self is responsible for producing, by its finalities, “the Death of God” as a source of inspiration for Foucault’s Death of the Author regarded as an end for the whole humanity.

§3. What Does It Mean When a Philosopher Believes In an Ascetic Ideal? The Case of Wagner

Regarded as a double prehistory of good and evil, as Nietzsche called it himself, the *Genealogy of Morals* announced, after the polemics entertained with Paul Ree, a fundamental split between the origin and the value of morality, dimension in which is gradually constructed the model of an ascetic ideal, endowed with a social function which will inspire the Foucauldian program of the aesthetics of existence, and more specifically, its self-government practices. Nietzsche assumes that „ascetic processes and ways of life are means to remove those ideas from competition with all the other ones, making them “unforgettable” (GM, 339).

Nietzsche’s third dissertation begins with an excursion that allows the transition from the ascetic ideal to the aesthetic one, by commuting the perspective of the ascetic-priest with the vision specific to an endeictical speech, tributary to *The Case of Wagner*:

“What do ascetic ideals mean? For artists, nothing or too much, for philosophers and scholars, something like a feeling and an instinct for the most favorable high spirituality (...). What does it mean this change of the ‘meaning’, this radical reversal of direction? Because this happened, Wagner is passing by only one step into its opposite. What does it mean when an artist passes into the opposite?” (GM, 381).

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12 Nietzsche himself admits: “The weaker was the humanity’s memory, the more terrible is always the aspect of its mores; more precisely, the harsh character of the penal laws demonstrates us the measure of the effort meant to defeat the forgetfulness and to maintain untouched in the mind of these slaves, dominated by cravings and passions, the few primitive demands of the social life” (GM, 339). These aspects are part of a set of “fixed ideas” that complicate decoding a moral model which must break the pact with the Kantian tradition to promote, as far as possible, a morality of mores, treated also in a hermeneutical way.
No matter the interpretative valences of the ascetic ideal, I consider that it has the quality to express in the same time the affirmation of a human will and the morphology of a teleology which involves the becoming of the modern subject. The Nietzschean ascetics proposes an exuberant vital attitude in writing by its own existence, “a malicious parody of tragic itself”\(^{13}\), continued by the fact that “this it would have been worthy, as I said, for a great tragic who, like any other artist, reached the last peak of his greatness only when he can see himself and the art above him, when he knows to laugh at himself”\(^{14}\). The Case of Wagner conceals deep roots in the philosophy of Feuerbach. Artists are disclosing an exemplary human category of those who preserve their independence in a direction developed against all the instincts, even if those are creative ones\(^{15}\).

However, “what does it mean when a philosopher pays tribute to the ascetic ideal?” \(^{16}\). “Here we find at least a hint: he wants to get free from a torture”\(^{16}\). The aesthetics of existence becomes the poor limit between a way to happiness and another one to power. Apparently, Nietzsche’s ascetics is not “a cult of virtues” but “a better way to get to the good life, an intellectual one, always intended to build a bridge to independence”\(^{17}\). Between power and happiness the asceticism seems to be the result of a human conduct: “Any animal, and therefore ‘la bête philosophe’ tends toward favorable conditions in which it is able to carry out all the force in order to achieve its maximum power. Any animal hates instinctively and develops its intuitions with alacrity, more than it could with its reason, all kinds of problems or obstacles that are or might be on the path to this optimum (this way is not its way to happiness but is the path to power and action, to intense work and – in many cases – a true road to the evil)”\(^{18}\). Virtue is condemned by Nietzsche to remain “a comedian of the spirit”\(^{19}\). In this paradigm, Nietzsche inquires, not rhetorically, the sense of the ascetic ideal assumed in the custody of a project dedicated to the aesthetics of existence, as it follows: “What is, therefore, the ascetic ideal for a philosopher? My answer – probably much guessed, is as I write it: regarding his own image,

\(^{13}\) Ibiden.
\(^{14}\) Ibiden.
\(^{15}\) Nietzsche developed Schopenhauer’s perspective in the horizon of opera and drama, suggesting a significiation for the musician status, by transforming Wagner’s history into a Case: “With the tremendous increase of the value of music, as it seemed to emerge from Schopenhauer’s philosophy, it increased from once the appreciation of the musician himself; he now became an oracle, a priest, someone more than a priest, a witness of the ‘essence’ of things, a call of the underworld- from now on, this ventriloquist of God talked not only trough music, but also through metaphysics, and then, what sense in wondering why it ended speaking in one day even through ascetic ideals?” (Ibiden).
\(^{16}\) Ibiden.
\(^{18}\) See *The Case of Wagner*, 389.
\(^{19}\) Ibiden.
the philosopher is enchanted by an optimum of conditions for a high and bold spirituality – by this, he does not deny the ‘existence’, but rather affirms his existence and only his, perhaps even to the limit that it is not too far from a wicked desire. Even if the aesthetics of existence gets negative values, the whole project being inspired from the construction of genealogy, which consumes a destructive process of any values, it remains a source for Foucault’s construction of an ascetic ideal, involving alert but creative resignation, hypocrisy, an unmasked subject and the returning of an original criticism of values. According to Foucault, “Nietzsche is the author of a criticism dedicated to an ideal depth of reason, a depth of consciousness, which he denounces as an invention of philosophers. This depth would be a pure and inner search of the truth. Nietzsche shows how much it assumes resignation, hypocrisy, mask, so that the interpreter is obliged, when he follows the depth’s signs in order to denounce them, to descend on the vertical line revealing that this depth of interiority is, in reality, something different of what it says it is. Depth, restored now as a secret absolutely superficial, is just a game, a fold of the surface. As the world becomes more profound, we realize that everything that exercised the human depth was merely a game for children.”

A true innovation consists in the transition from the genealogical method as an instrument applied into the moral discourse, to the genealogy of asceticism, once that Nietzsche recognizes that “making the genealogy of values, morality, asceticism and knowledge will not mean therefore a start for searching their origin, neglecting all the episodes of the history as being inaccessible, but instead, it will mean the only position against the thoroughness and the hazards, waiting to see masks finally fallen below the image of the other.” In this manner, it is easy to understand the manner in which gradually, the ascetic ideal is regarded not only through genealogical methods but also as a criticism of the metaphysical modern subject. Nietzsche’s Death of God is recognized in the same way in which the German philosopher asserts “the ruin of a God, a God who becomes a thing in itself.”

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20 Ibidem.
21 Michel Foucault, Theatrum Philosophicum, Cluj-Napoca: Casa Cărții de Știință, 2001, 84.
22 Ibidem, 187.
23 In the seventeenth dissertation of The Antichrist, Nietzsche explains the ruin of God reminding that his Death remains an important moment for the born of morals, once that they represent “not an expression of life or a frame for the vital instincts, but an abstract construct, hostile to the life, the moral as a bad guard for our imagination.”
§4. From the Death of God to the Death of the Author. Foucault’s Ascetic Ideal

For Foucault, the birth of the modern subject is “the human’s death” as a phenomenon that doubles posthumously and without regret Nietzsche’s “death of God”\(^{24}\). Huijer notes that: "Echoing Nietzsche’s ‘God is dead’, in Les mots et les choses Foucault announced the death of man. There were two levels to Foucault’s argumentation. He noted retrospectively that before the end of the 18\(^{th}\) century, ‘man’ was an unknown figure; not until the late 18th and early 19\(^{th}\) century did he appear on stage. Prospectively, Foucault felt that this figure was disappearing and the void of vanished man was ‘nothing more, and nothing less, than the unfolding of a space where it is ultimately possible to think again’ (Foucault, 1966: 353)\(^{25}\)."

The ascetic turn, as it is called by Nehamas, begins at Foucault by building a nucleus in which the Self conversion is possible in order to make truth the fact that “the self transforms itself for self-fulfillment”. Both Nietzsche and Foucault understood philosophy as an art of living. Nietzsche’s influence on Foucault’s work will be felt, therefore, not only on configuring the theoretical and practical aspects of genealogy and perspectivism, but also in constituting a way of life for the modern subject which crossed a cultural and historical crisis in order to create itself and allowing the humanity to become what Nietzsche recognized as “the poet of your own life”\(^{26}\). The ascetic ideal processes both in Foucault’s and Nietzsche’s version a cultural crisis that reestablishes moral considerations of aesthetics of existence on Greek foundations. Following the letter of the Greco-Roman philosophy, Foucault will thus distinguish between self-knowledge and self-care, assuming the ancient world in two steps: firstly, by making the Socratic maxim – gnothi seauton – a canon of life, and secondly, by regarding epimeleia heautou – the self care – as a way of destituting the modern project of philosophy as a game of truth, creating from the aesthetics of existence a project that incorporates three

\(^{24}\) “Foucault’s analysis of the aesthetics of existence is presented as an instrument to practice ethical thought without the presupposition of an autonomous subject. The implications of Foucault’s aesthetics of existence for ethical thought are traced to the work of Nietzsche. In Foucault’s work, experiences of oneself are not a given, but are constituted in power relations and true-and-false games. In the interplay of truths and power relations, the individual constitutes a certain relationship to him- or herself. Foucault designated the relation to oneself and one’s existence as the main area of ethical concern and the most important field where aesthetic values are to be applied. In his aesthetics of existence, he invited the individual to problematize the relationship with the self and by using ‘self-techniques’ to transform it into a work of art. The relation to intimate others, shaped as friendship, is crucial to this ethical-aesthetic approach”.

\(^{25}\) Ibidem, 62-63.

\(^{26}\) Friedrich Nietzsche, The Gay Science, § 125, 181-82.
ontologies: “the ontology of power, the ontology of knowledge and the ontology of selfhood”\(^27\). It is clear that Foucault discovers the art of living as aesthetics of existence following the principle of constituting a “*techne tou biou*”. Life as a work of art involves regarding the aesthetics in a paradigm that attaches its meanings to an ethical dimension, but in this sense, aesthetics is treated in a Greek manner being re-significated through the term of “*techne*” in expressions such as “*techne tou biou*”, developing in conclusion, the art of living.

“However, for Foucault, the death of the humanist subject, that heir to the Christian subject, also created the possibility of an ethics of self-fashioning, entailing both an aesthetics of existence and a vision of asceticism rooted in the Greco-Roman world, and pointing to an overcoming of the crisis brought on by the death of man, a crisis explicitly linked to his understanding of the momentous implications of Nietzsche’s proclamation of the death of God”\(^28\). Thus, Foucault adds to the ancient equation of self-care and self-knowledge a resignification of truth\(^29\). I observe that the task of separating the elements of selfhood’s art from the Greco-Roman model of those pertaining to the dominant Platonic or Christian perspective requires the contrast between the subject’s objectivity and the relation of subjectivity and truth regarded as sources of a spiritual work understood as *askesis*. In conclusion, the *askesis* is accepted in a larger dimension of conversion, in which the ethics and the aesthetics of selfhood, with Epicurean, Stoic or Christian\(^30\) influences, are formulated as an exercise of salvation and ennobling the soul through “the conversion of the self to itself during a narrative process”\(^31\).

§5. Conclusions: Modernity, from the Practices of the Morality of Mores to the Practices of the Self

I assume the fact that such a statement proposes both to modernity and postmodernism accepting a subject constituted by the heritage of „morality of mores” practices, from Nietzsche’s construction, re-significated by Foucault in his “practices of the self”. This kind of approach seems to present the impasse of the aesthetics of existence caused by the perennial returning at a model of ascetic ideal, adjusted,

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\(^29\) According to McGushin, Foucault understands the truth “not in the quality of a judgment, nor as a particular truth of known objects, but as a fullness of the being that gives itself only to those who were able to work with themselves” (McGushin, *Foucault’s Askesis*, 39).
\(^30\) Jeremy Carrette explains: “Christianity is a fascinating immersion into the manner in which the self was formed and educated in a paradoxical act of self-denial. What Foucault was to prove later on was that religious discourses were involving “self-government” both at the macro level of institutional order and the micro level of the individual subjectivation”. Jeremy Carrette, *Foucault and Religion: Spiritual Corporality and Political Spirituality* (Routledge: London and New York, 2000), 149.
upgraded in such a form that the postmodernism is announced by itself, in the light of this movement, as a dimension consecrated to the constituting of the self as a work of art tributary to ethical reforms of the art of living.

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