

# Affirming the Human? The Question of Biopolitics

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## Abstract

This article stages a rhetorical encounter between Heidegger and Foucault, positing the *topos* of care to critique the recent turn to “affirmative” biopolitics. For both thinkers, “the question of the human” redounds upon a subject whose being is constituted tropologically, yet “affirmative” biopoliticians misunderstand the rhetoricity of the human question and are caught within a neoliberal ethic. Reading Heidegger’s use of a first-century CE fable in *Being of Time* alongside Foucault’s final lectures on the fabled death of Socrates and the care of the self, this article explores their rhetorical strategies of self-constitution as a relation of *chresis* and care.

## Keywords

biopolitics, care, *chresis*, ethics, Michel Foucault, Martin Heidegger, neoliberalism, ontology, thanatopolitics

## I. The Question of the Human

“The question of the human” falters on the ambivalence of its genitive. To whom does this question belong? Is it a question that belongs to one who is unquestionably human, a question that only the human can pose, a human question? Or, is it a question that problematizes this very belonging, a question posed or imposed from some other *topos*? In *Being and Time*, Heidegger contends that human being is “distinguished by the fact that, in its very Being, that Being is an *issue* for it.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, the human is that being

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1. M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), p. 32.

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for whom its own being is in question. Only the human experiences such self-reflexive ambivalence; only the human is poised to (im)pose the question, and is destined to do so unto death.

This article offers a critical commentary on neoliberal biopolitics and the doomed ontology of the human, a being, it seems, who no longer lives questioningly. I suggest that within the frame of neoliberal biopolitics, the ontology of the human subject has been assimilated to a savagely cruel political ontology, and the question of the human can no longer be voiced. While Margaret Thatcher notoriously inaugurated neoliberalism by declaring that there is no such thing as society, today we might add that there is little left of her liberal individual, one once celebrated as autonomous, rational, and free. It is not merely that we find ourselves adrift between the individual and society, the citizen and the state – a space once mediated by law and policy. Rather, this space has further been coopted by a pernicious biopolitical ontology. Under this worldview, the public and the private have become hollow and almost interchangeable categories. The public good and the commons have been commodified and “privatized,” while private citizens are profiled and consolidated according to metadata measuring and monitoring risk, tendency, health, consumer habits, political allegiance – private lives the objects of an elaborate and secret security-surveillance apparatus. States, corporations, and corporate interests are themselves increasingly indissociable, jointly driven by profit and paranoia. As corporations enjoy the status of legal personhood, persons themselves come to matter only insofar as they are corporatized – voluntarily fashioning themselves as human capital, entrepreneurial subjects, substitutable members of a particular population, group, race (but never a “people”).

By “neoliberal biopolitics” we must understand neoliberalism and biopolitics as inextricably convergent phenomena. It is hard to tell where the means of one become the ends of the other; it is difficult today to conceive a biopolitics that is not implicitly neoliberal, and vice versa. Foucault’s prescient characterization of neoliberalism and biopolitics in his 1978–1979 lectures<sup>2</sup> has taken on global proportions, and diverse modalities, in the last thirty-five years. His early formulation of biopolitics as “the power to ‘make’ live and ‘let’ die”<sup>3</sup> can no longer be understood outside a vast and anonymous global network – it is no longer a mere “apparatus” (*dispositif*) – that defines, regulates, counts, exposes, and encloses human life on our planet, from Davos to Darfur: “information” economies, “creative” economies, austerity, surveillance, big data, high-frequency electronic trading and transactional capitalism, the global debt market, the petroleum industry, war and the military-industrial complex, human migration, famine, HIV, the pharmaceutical industry, cloning and genomics. In David Harvey’s words, neoliberalism “has pervasive effects on ways of thought to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world.”<sup>4</sup> It is our shared frame of

2. M. Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979* (New York: Picador, 2008).

3. M. Foucault, “*Society Must Be Defended*”: *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–1976* (New York: Picador, 2003), p. 241.

4. D. Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 3.

intelligibility, penetrating all facets of the social. Neoliberal biopolitics thus constitutes a way of life, a normalized onto-logic, that is beyond the state, “in excess of sovereign right,” as Foucault remarks, but more than this, he warns, “beyond all human sovereignty.”<sup>5</sup>

Operating in a near totalizing manner, neoliberal biopolitics produces an ethic of human existence, a particular experience and conception of human nature, projected as a *bios* that is ostensibly real. Although grammar forces us here to place “neoliberal biopolitics” in the position of grammatical subject, and while this locution enjoys a certain agency – producing a cascade of vital and mortal effects – there is no obvious agent, no clear location of action or illocution or responsibility, no Sovereign subject who speaks. The network is diffuse; its power is transitive, perlocutionary; its effects performative through and through. It is an ethic without ethics. The terms that circulate and the modalities in and through which we might question ourselves have become anchored to anonymous conceptions of the *bios* – human “life” as it is articulated through neoliberal pursuits, captured in networks of production and consumption (or “prosumption”), economies of health, risk, securitization. These anonymous conceptions of “life” literally have no name, and so it is no longer possible here to name the human as the subject or object of these rhetorics. If the hallmark of neoliberal biopolitics is its postsovereignty, the absence of sovereign agency or decisionism, who or what remains to make and execute these fatal decisions, to judge the living from the dead?

I wish to think rhetorically about this situation, and to challenge current biopolitical theorists – biopoliticians, we might call them – who cede to the inevitability of our increasingly biopolitical and neoliberal futures. Roberto Esposito suggests that this trend is “irreversible,” but this does not mean, he claims, “that another kind of democracy is impossible, one that is compatible with the biopolitical turn.”<sup>6</sup> Indeed, he argues that we have no choice but to choose between biopolitics and totalitarianism, and that biopolitics is the only “democratic” option.<sup>7</sup> Esposito is not alone in embracing an “affirmative biopolitics.”<sup>8</sup> However, I remain somewhat less sanguine, unconvinced that an affirmative biopolitics could affirm what we call the human, or what answers that call, democratically or otherwise. These theorists have overlooked the rhetorical conditions in and through which we must pose the question of the human. In other words, to affirm biopolitics is to affirm a politics whose project mobilizes the power to “make live” and “let die.” If we take seriously Foucault’s conjunctive “and,” killing is the condition and the consequence of biopolitical life. As Foucault remarks, “When I say ‘killing,’ I obviously do not mean simply murder as such, but also every form of indirect murder: the fact of

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5. Foucault, “*Society Must Be Defended*”, p. 254.

6. R. Esposito, *Terms of the Political* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), p. 110.

7. Op. cit., pp. 110–11.

8. R. Esposito, *Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), p. 157. Also see, for example, M. Hardt and A. Negri, *Multitude* (New York: Penguin, 2005); N. Rose, *The Politics of Life Itself* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006); T.C. Campbell, *Improper Life* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2011); E.L. Santner, *The Royal Remains* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

exposing someone to death, increasing the risk of death for some people, or, quite simply, political death, expulsion, rejection, and so on.”<sup>9</sup> To affirm biopolitics is to disavow death, which is the biopolitical condition of “making live,” and to disaffirm death as the rhetorical condition in and through which the human might be called into question.

In what follows, I stage an encounter between Heidegger and Foucault in order to sketch an ontology of care as one critical response to the “affirmation” of neoliberal biopolitics. The point is neither to resurrect the Sovereign nor to exhume the liberal subject. Rather, I seek another *topos* from which we might question the human – and I turn to the *topos* of care described by Heidegger and Foucault, a *topos* that finds in the performative turns of language a manner in which we might fashion a name for the human in question. For Foucault, the care of the self calls for critical reflection on the terms of human being, much as Heidegger proposed in his existential analytic of Dasein. And as Heidegger remarks, everything depends on how we enter the hermeneutic circle, how we are reflexively swept up into and by the interpretive question of the human, for there is no Archimedean point from which to levy a critique. “Inquiry,” Heidegger writes, “as a kind of seeking, must be guided beforehand by what is sought. So the meaning of Being must already be available to us in some way.”<sup>10</sup> Thus, for Heidegger, while we might not know empirically (*erkennen*), ontological inquiry is nevertheless guided by a “pre-ontological” understanding (*verstehen*) – “an essential tendency-of-Being” that is “radicalized”<sup>11</sup> through the structure of care. It is in care, then, that we approach the question of the human, and through care that we affirm a death that is disaffirmed – and yet produced – by an “affirmative” biopolitics.

## II. Towards a Radical Ontology of Care

As Care crossed a stream one day, she saw some clay;  
 She thoughtfully took up a piece and began to shape it.  
 While she was meditating on what she had made, Jupiter came by.  
 Care asked him to give it spirit, and this he gladly granted.  
 But when she wanted her name to be bestowed upon it,  
 Jupiter forbade this, demanding that it be given his name instead.  
 While Care and Jupiter were disputing, Earth arose and asked that  
 Her own name be conferred on the creature, since she had furnished it with part of her body.  
 The three asked Saturn to settle the matter, and he made the following decision, which seemed  
 a just one:  
 “Since you, Jupiter, have given its spirit, you shall receive that spirit at its death;  
 And since you, Earth, have given its body, you shall receive its body.  
 But since Care first shaped this creature, she shall possess it as long as it lives.  
 And because there is now dispute among you as to its name,  
 Let it be called ‘*homo*’, for it is made out of *humus* (earth).”<sup>12</sup>

9. Foucault, “*Society Must Be Defended*”, p. 256.

10. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 25.

11. Op. cit., p. 35.

12. Gaius Julius Hyginus, *Fabulae*, ccxx ‘Cura’ (ca. 70 CE), translation modified from Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 242.

This first-century CE fable appears at the crucial midway point (§42) of Heidegger's *Being and Time*, the only moment in the entirety of the text when he turns expressly to narrative, mythological or otherwise. It is intended to illustrate in a primordial, pre-ontological manner "Dasein's interpretation of itself as 'care',"<sup>13</sup> "unaffected by any theoretical Interpretation and without aiming to propose any."<sup>14</sup> It is included as a necessary supplement, it would seem, after a long section of dense philosophical prose in which Heidegger sets out an existential-ontological interpretation of care, and before proceeding to Division Two on temporality and death.

Although Heidegger cannot resist proposing an interpretation of the fable, he offers a rather straightforward reading; his silences, however, are compelling, and need to be critically unfolded. We must ask: why the uncharacteristic and radical shift in rhetorical registers, and what might the fable say beyond its manifest content? It is a creation myth, of course, and Heidegger suggests that it points to an ontological understanding of human life prior to the derivative (ontico-theoretical) forms-of-life posited by biology, technology, or the positive sciences. The fable interrupts these discourses with a more primordial truth, one that engages the question of the human without quite proposing the terms, or the modalities, within which such an interrogation might be carried out. The narrative interrupts as well conventional mythological expectations, informed by similar creation myths. In Genesis and in Ovid, for example, the human is created "in the image and likeness" of the divine, whereas here it will find in itself no such mimetic form.

Yet, in addition to the fable's "content," its performative language might itself be allegorical, and open for us a topology within which the human can be called into question. Naming is a performative and creative act, akin to the manner in which Care crafts the human, and no less in the manner in which the human reader reflexively crafts him- or herself in the act of reading this story. The human is reflected, then, in the creative capacity of speech, semiosis, and allegory. In this respect, Heidegger not only interrupts his own discourse but also implicitly raises the question of language, and thus, of the means, the modalities, in and through which we could begin to ask the question of the human. Human life is possessed and dispossessed by language, much as it is by Care herself – through "anxious exertion," "carefulness," "devotedness."<sup>15</sup> And the human is said to provoke a dispute amongst the gods, a *gigantomachia*, concerning which of the gods will claim rightful ownership and the right to name it.

What is the rhetorical purpose of the fable, as Heidegger deploys it? Myths do not have a single author; *mythoi* circulate culturally, are essentially iterative across time, and allude to a collective wisdom, a narrative voice *in illo tempore*, an "origin" whose horizon ceaselessly recedes from view. The fable does not effect an empirical truth, but taries with the significant power of semiosis, and with the meaning that emerges through the narrative itself, without appeal to the autarchic authority of an external speaker. As such, we might say that the fable matters for Heidegger because its voice cannot index the coherent singularity of the liberal author-subject; the narrative neither begins here, as its *arche*, nor does it seek its *telos* in the rational constitution of its addressee. Rather, the

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13. Op. cit., p. 242.

14. Op. cit., p. 241.

15. Op. cit., p. 243.

fable calls the human into question without quite releasing us of our responsibility for our iterative and interpretive activities. Its genitive ambivalence is generative.

In speaking the fable's words, even silently, we undergo an experience of language that is allegorical of our own "making" – as both created and creative creatures. In a later essay, Heidegger writes: "the experience is not of our own making; to undergo here means that we endure it, suffer it, receive it as it strikes us and submit to it."<sup>16</sup> The play on "making" is perhaps unintentional, but the making of the human no more belongs to us than the making of the language in which we might say we are made, and made to live. We endure, suffer, submit. As a meditation on human making, the fable's language conveys an experience of care, and so the fable is surely intended to be performative, to effect and allegorize through its language the experience that it names and to name an experience that is not ours – or ours alone – to make. "In order to be who we are," Heidegger writes, "we human beings remain committed to and within the being of language, and can never step out of it and look at it from somewhere else. Thus we always see the nature of language only to the extent to which language itself has us in view, has appropriated us to itself."<sup>17</sup>

We mistake the nature of language if we look to the fable in order to extract "information"; its meaning basculates on its many figural registers. The human belongs to these movements, we are captivated but not captive to the smooth surface of a horizontal plane, to the two-dimensional universe of information and utility. The goddess Care possesses us, so long as we live, much as the fable's saying, its language, gathers and appropriates us to its care. Like language, we can see the nature of Care only to the extent to which she has us in view, has appropriated us in her care. Heidegger continues: "That we cannot know the nature of language – know it according to the traditional concept of knowledge defined in terms of cognition as representation – is not a defect, however, but rather an advantage by which we are favored with a special realm, that realm where we, who are needed and used to speak language, dwell as *mortals*."<sup>18</sup> The *mythos* of the fable cannot seamlessly be translated into the *logos* of conceptual knowledge, but situates us in relation to human corporeality and mortality. "Mortals are they," Heidegger writes, "who can experience death as death."<sup>19</sup>

Alive under the conditions of neoliberal biopolitics, however, we no longer experience death as death, and in this, no longer live questioningly. Biopolitics is premised on the disavowal of death, where killing is figured as merely "letting die." In this sense, biopolitics represents a perversely "affirmative" ontotheology, a fraudulent victory over death that radically reinterprets what it means to die. For some, this will represent a biotechnological failure to continue to "make live," a halt in productive biopower and its moral imperative to livingness. Others more simply will be exposed to death – those we "let die," almost passively, indirectly, as the "collateral damages" or "negative externalities" of a pernicious and cruel system. No life is grievable. In this light, Heidegger's

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16. M. Heidegger, *On the Way to Language* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 57.

17. Op. cit., p. 134.

18. Op. cit., p. 134.

19. Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, p. 107.

fable prompts a meditation on the relation between life and death, decided here by Saturn (Time, the Roman equivalent of the Greek god Kronos), just as it is Saturn who names the human (from *humus*) for that matter of which it is composed, and into which it will decompose. Possessed by Care so long as it shall live, it is Care who unites the elements of the human – body and spirit, earth and air (from Jupiter, god of the sky) – and who sustains human life; death is the undoing, the dissolution, of Care’s work.

Judith Butler’s work on precariousness and corporeal vulnerability<sup>20</sup> helps us to grasp the performativity of care. Hers is a question of loss, of death, and of the normative conditions under which life is grievable, and death can be experienced *as* death. In this, she offers a critical rejoinder to the cruelty of neoliberal biopolitics, and poses anew the question of the human. Butler is instructive because like Heidegger her ontology, if we might call it that, is not founded upon a “substance” or hypostatization. Rather, it is intimate with her early theory of performativity, which “suggests that it [the body] has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality.”<sup>21</sup> In some sense, Heidegger anticipates later thinkers, like Butler, for whom performativity is vital. Glossing Scheler, Heidegger writes: “Acts are something non-psychical. Essentially the person exists only in the performance of intentional acts, and is therefore essentially *not* an object.”<sup>22</sup> Heidegger then pushes Scheler’s insight into an ontological frame, asking: “What, however, is the ontological meaning of ‘performance’?”<sup>23</sup> His answer is care, treated in his existential analytic of *Dasein* and thematized in his rhetorical turn to the fable, which, we might say, is performative of its own performativity. I wish to suggest that Butler’s work on precariousness and corporeal vulnerability is also performative of care. It grapples with an ontology of care, in the ethical realm, as it struggles with an ontology of the human subject, between the poles of autonomy and relationality,<sup>24</sup> or, in the terms above, between the individual and society, the citizen and the state. Unfortunately, however, recognizing a “common” or shared corporeal vulnerability is not enough to secure the conditions of an ethical encounter. Indeed, neoliberal biopolitics depends on and exploits the differential production of corporeal vulnerability – and arguably, grief itself – as the means by which it will distinguish those who will be “made” to live from those we shall “let” die. Installing itself as a false yet powerful origin, neoliberal biopolitics regulates and normalizes the terms, the modalities, within which any sort of “common” or shared recognition could be intelligible. It produces the fiction of a hyperautonomous subject, whose freedom (always in marketized terms) is the ruse by which that subject is dispossessed, and the process itself is displaced from view.

In this respect, we must attend not merely to those lives that are grievable, but how grief is affectively manufactured, assigned, and, in a more sinister vein, mobilized as a productive – and perhaps even “affirmative” – tactic of neoliberal biopolitics. For grief and grievability cannot, in the end, be the sign of human ontology or nature. As Butler

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20. J. Butler, *Precarious Life* (London: Verso, 2006).

21. J. Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 173.

22. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 73.

23. *Ibid.*

24. Butler, *Precarious Life*, pp. 24–8.

points out, there will be those who are easily grieved, and those who appear to us as ungrievable. It is not enough to render the ungrievable, finally, as grievable; we must account for this movement. We might, then, ask what it would mean to grieve the loss of a language of care, beyond the melancholic remainders of human making. Can we mourn the loss of a language that might have permitted us to critique the totalizing thrust of neoliberal biopolitics, to have dwelt momentarily in another *topos*? In an earlier essay, I asked what it might mean if the dead could speak, and I offered an analysis of the suicide bomber.<sup>25</sup> I called this insurrection by the name “thanatopolitics,” which I understand in a very different sense from those “affirmative” biopoliticians for whom thanatopolitics is just the deathly dimension of a biopolitics that “makes live,” as if death could somehow be mitigated, sanitized, or separated from biopolitical production. For me, thanatopolitics rises up within the frame of biopolitics, and exposes death as its constitutive ontologic, as necessary, and not a mere “letting die.” This proposes a discourse on death as the rhetorical condition of care, and as a critical *topos* from which to (im)pose the question of the human, or, in Heideggerian terms, to figure a language in which we might undergo, endure, suffer, and submit to an experience of death *as* death.

### III. The Care of the Self

Meditating death is placing yourself, in thought, in the situation of someone who is in the process of dying, or who is about to die, or who is living his last days. The meditation is not therefore a game the subject plays with his own thought ... A completely different kind of game is involved ... a game that thought performs on the subject himself.<sup>26</sup>

Only months before his death, and with failing health, Foucault devoted his last lectures at the Collège de France to meditating death, turning to the fabled death of Socrates before concluding his lectures with a hurried treatment of Cynic philosophy. At stake is the kind of relation one has to oneself, a counterintuitive relation or game that “thought performs on the subject himself.” What is crucial throughout is the manner in which this thought is performed – its terms, its tropes. It calls for a care of the self (*epimeleia heautou*) that would be the condition of truth-telling, free speech or *parrhesia*.

Reading Plato’s *Alcibiades* and *Laches*, Foucault characterizes the Socratic care of the self as a relation of *chresis*. Typically translated as “use,” *chresis* is the manner in which Socrates conceives the self’s relation to itself (*auto to auto*). Foucault is adamant in his lectures, however, that *chresis* – “use” – must not be understood in the modern sense of the noun “use” or the verb “to use,” which implies a liberal subject who takes up and uses a tool or an object. By *chresis*, Socrates “does not want to designate an instrumental

25. S.J. Murray, “Thanatopolitics: On the Use of Death for Mobilizing Political Life”, *Polygraph: An International Journal of Politics and Culture* 18 (2006), 191–215. This is also the subject of my current book project, tentatively titled, *Disaffirming Biopolitics*.

26. M. Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981–1982* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 357–8.

relationship of the soul to the rest of the world or to the body.”<sup>27</sup> Nor is it a relation of conceptual knowledge. Rather, it is foremost an “attitude” or “behaviour” towards oneself and to others. The term is polysemic. Foucault’s classical examples take the “use” of the passions, anger, and pleasures (*epithumiais chresthai*, *orge chresthai*, and *chresis aphrodision*). We do not “use” our passions for something, nor do we “use” our anger or pleasures. Instead, we “give way” to them, somewhere between mastering and submitting to them, as the occasion demands. The same holds true, he says, when we “use” a horse: good horsemanship requires a listening, a reciprocal relation with the horse. We cannot just do with it as we please. And so, too, when we “use” the gods: when we make an offering or ask the gods for something, we do so in understanding how to be a proper supplicant, knowing how to ask, what to ask, and when. In phenomenological parlance, we might describe *chresis* as a being-in-the-world that grasps *and* yields to that which is ready-to-hand. And we might recall Heidegger’s “use” of the fable, the manner in which its language needs and “uses” us to speak its truth. His “use” is meditative, rather than instrumental, just as the iteration of Care’s meditation on her creation is performative of human making.

Meditating death, Foucault offers an extended analysis of Socrates’s last words. Here, as in Heidegger, the gods are present, and so too is the “use” we make of them. Socrates says: “Crito, we owe a cock to Asclepius. Pay my debt, don’t forget.”<sup>28</sup> Why, with death imminent, does Socrates demand an offering to Asclepius, the god of healing? Foucault is unsatisfied with conventional readings that propose death as a “remedy” for the ills of life itself, suggesting that death could not be experienced *as* death. Expanding on Georges Dumézil’s work, Foucault argues that Socrates and his disciples have been “cured” of the false opinions that make the soul sick, and the self unable to care for itself. We see the debt as communal when Socrates speaks to Crito, saying, “we owe . . .” Foucault continues: “it is a feature which marks the dramatic art of all the Platonic dialogues that, whatever their subject, everyone ends up jointly committed to the undertaking of discussion.”<sup>29</sup> Because the texts are dramatic, they are not just logical demonstrations of truth, but they rhetorically recruit the reader to the joint undertaking, which they do here, iteratively, in Foucault’s own deployment of them, for us.

It is in this vein that Foucault concludes his lectures on the death of Socrates, saying: “As a philosophy professor one really must have lectured on Socrates and the death of Socrates at least once in one’s life. It’s done. *Salvate animam meam*.”<sup>30</sup> These final words are not unironic, invoking the ritualized Latin words of the Christian confessional, *dixit et salvavi animam meam*, but here imploring salvation from his audience: Foucault says *salvate* (the second-person plural imperative), and omits *dixit*, which would refer to the illocutionary power of one’s own speech in the rites of confession and redemption. It is as if Foucault wishes to distance himself from his words; if they echo the final words of

27. Op. cit., pp. 56–7.

28. Plato, *Apology* (118a), qtd. in M. Foucault, *The Courage of Truth: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1983–1984* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 96.

29. Foucault, *Courage of Truth*, p. 109.

30. Op. cit., p. 153.

Socrates, he reminds us that they belong to the ages, to the fabled story of Socrates, and not to him. If the words are in part jocular, they nevertheless suggest that Foucault has fulfilled a serious duty, and they tacitly acknowledge that duty, that debt, as part of a joint undertaking with his audience. It is worth recalling that Foucault opened his lectures by sharply distinguishing Socratic truth-telling from the speech of the professor, whom he characterized as a mere technician. “Everyone knows,” he quipped, “and I know first of all, that you do not need courage to teach.”<sup>31</sup> The irony is classically Socratic; it hides a truth. It is not just speech that takes courage, but care, too, unto death: “It is the mission concerning the care of oneself that leads Socrates to his death.”<sup>32</sup> If the story of Socrates’s death inaugurates Western philosophy, as Foucault claims, it continues to animate philosophy across its countless iterations, including Foucault’s, in the final days of his life, and my own here. Philosophy is a form of veridiction, of truth-telling under the specter of death, and it demands a courage that “cannot take place on the political platform.”<sup>33</sup> Telling the story transports us, then, to another *topos*.

Significantly, Foucault’s last lectures do not end with death. They mine Cynic philosophy as a sort of parallel history to Western philosophy, the road not quite taken. Cynic philosophy has less to do with conventional philosophemes or doctrinal schemas, less to do with dogmatic teaching or some epistemic “content”; rather, Cynicism is about form, and it is passed on traditionally through stories, anecdotes, examples, and sayings – *chreiai* – whether or not these are veridical. True to their etymology, *chreiai* are “useful,” but they are not exactly instrumentalizable. *Chreiai* are said to emerge from a character’s life and are anecdotal of the manner in which that life is lived, aestheticized, or stylized. Those who read or hear these sayings may find in them a modality, a manner, a model by which to stylize their own lives – and question themselves. “So it is neither the chain of rationality, as in technical teaching, nor the soul’s ontological mode of being, but the style of life, the way of living, the very form that one gives to life.”<sup>34</sup> What is relevant for my argument here is the stylistic dimension, the ontology of oneself that Foucault refers to as a *tropos* of life. This ontology of care is an ethical practice, a question of living questioningly, and of stylizing the self in such a manner that is irreducible to the *bios* of neoliberal biopolitics. Indeed, as Michael Hardt speculates, Foucault’s turn to the Cynics could be read as advocating a kind of “militant life” as a powerful rejoinder to neoliberalism.<sup>35</sup>

Finally, although Foucault claims that a professor is more of a technician than a *par-rhesiastes*, what we say and write is nonetheless often performative – it is what we do and emerges (at its best) from who we are, which calls for courage. In this *tropos* of life there are indeed attendant risks, sometimes-lethal ones. Heidegger’s involvement in National Socialism is a case in point: was he unable to resist the seduction of Nazi

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31. Op. cit., p. 24.

32. Op. cit., p. 113.

33. Op. cit., p. 114.

34. Op. cit., p. 144.

35. M. Hardt, “Militant Life,” *New Left Review* 64 (2010), 151–60.

biopolitics, and did a perverse “care” become an affirmation of the Third Reich? Reading Heidegger alongside Foucault, as I have, is not to suggest that we ought to “return” to an earlier time. Remembering is distinct from nostalgia. Rather, I seek to adopt and adapt some of their language for our time and our time to come, as a language that might critique the ostensibly “irreversible” thrust of neoliberal biopolitics and its “affirmative” futures. To be sure, ontology has fallen out of favor, but I suspect that this has less to do with philosophical fashion and more to do with a politics that operates ontologically as it hypocritically decries the violence and virulence of ontological thinking. The ontology of “affirmative” biopolitics is obscured by its utilitarian mien: maximizing life and minimizing loss, or, in neoliberal jargon, maximizing production and minimizing costs. An ontology of care, on the other hand, would risk itself to expose how neoliberal biopolitics makes live and lets die – how it kills in the name of life, and relies on the differential production of corporeal vulnerability and death as our *modus vivendi*. Such an ontology, as I have sketched it, would not seek recourse in the “substance” or hypostatization of human nature or *bios*. It would open, instead, onto a *topos* in which we might raise the question of the human as a *modus loquendi*, a voice that speaks (to) death as the rhetorical condition of care.

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