



The Art of Self-Cultivation in Nietzsche: An Antecedent of the Aesthetics of Existence

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Abstract: The notion of self care whether or culture, framed in the wider context of the configuration of Life as a work of art or aesthetics of existence has as its immediate precursors names like Michel Foucault. However, its most illustrious family relation can be found in the Gay Science Nietzsche and his posthumous *Fragments* as expressly recognizes Michel Foucault.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The notion of self-care or occupation over oneself has accompanied philosophical reflection since its origins. Wherever man has seen metaphysical preoccupations arise within himself, wherever he has turned to the analysis of ethics, or what today we would call "philosophy of praxis", there has also arisen, generally, the idea of *work on oneself*, in its various variants.

If we go back to the origins of philosophy, the fundamental role that the so called "cura sui" or "tasks on oneself" occupied in classical philosophy has been highlighted - from a contemporary point of view - by philosophers such as Pierre Hadot or Michel Foucault.

The latter author, in particular, carries out a very detailed analysis of the way in which this notion was considered in antiquity. This analysis is inscribed as part of an immense work with diverse sources that is exposed in his book *History of Sexuality*¹, in which the author makes an epistemic turn in philosophy: he breaks with the notion of subjectivity proper to modernity, to think the construction of subjectivities and forms of life through history.

However, when it comes to naming his specific task within philosophical reflection, a task that is defined by the philosopher himself as the elaboration of an aesthetics of existence, Michel Foucault will refer us to the name and philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche: "I have only limited myself to following a path once opened by Nietzsche"²

It is therefore worth asking to what extent Nietzsche's philosophy, which has sought throughout its development to break explicitly and critically with almost the entire philosophical tradition that precedes it, has taken up the idea of care or cultivation of the self, and what place this idea occupies within its unique philosophical system.

2. METHODOLOGY

In principle, we could speak of a qualitative research of documentalist character, where the consultation of bibliographic materials and the analytical documentation generated by the scientific community are the argumentative basis of the research, with the corresponding analysis of the arguments of authority.

¹ FOUCAULT, M. *History of sexuality III. La inquietud de sí*. Buenos Aires: Siglo XXI Editores Argentina, 2004.

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3. THE ART OF LIVING: THE AESTHETICS OF EXISTENCE IN NIETZSCHE

In aphorism 290 of *The Gay Science*³, Nietzsche shows us that the occupation of the self occupies a central place in his philosophical thought, although this notion is understood in a particular way, intimately linked to art.

"Only one thing is necessary, to give a form to one's own self, to imprint a style to the character, is an act that we rarely encounter. It is practiced by one who perceives as a whole the sum of strengths and weaknesses that his nature offers and then adapts them to an artistic plan, so that each thing results with its art and its reason for being and until the weaknesses bewitch the eyes"⁴.

As can be seen, a first approach to this brief aphorism (in which the essential quest of our research is condensed and shows us the starting point of our work) allows us to observe how Nietzsche intimately and practically indissolubly links his own notion of care or occupation of oneself with art.

The task of taking care of oneself, and of shaping one's own self, is for Nietzsche a daily and arduous task, which must be carried out on the basis of an artistic plan that materializes from the singularities of each character. It is these characteristics, the sum of weaknesses and strengths offered by each character, each human singularity, that must be used as possibilities of creation, without judging them, without trying to eliminate them, shaping them as a work of art.

This idea of working on one's own strengths and weaknesses with the aim of creating one's own life as a work of art is the one that most directly refers us to the concepts of self-work and self-occupation, which can be considered as philosophical conceptual legacies of classical antiquity.

One's own strengths and weaknesses are the mortar with which the artist will work, propitiating in an aesthetic terrain all that set of forces that were always the exclusive terrain of reflection and moral practice. This change of framework from the moral to the aesthetic implies a profound "commotion" in Nietzschean terms of everything that the philosophical tradition postulated as unquestionable.

In the words of Wilchems⁵, this fragment opens a fundamental path within Nietzsche's philosophy: it is about the philosophical and artistic creation of the self, in which the bases of this art of living are exposed, taking care of oneself as a work of art, so that the philosopher becomes fundamentally an artist of himself.

Indeed, the need to endow oneself with one's own style, and the specifically artistic dimension of this task, in which one's own strengths and weaknesses are molded and subjected to an artistic plan, generating a work of art consummated on the basis of a law that is one's own, raise the identity between artist and work of art.

"And when, at last, the work is finished, it will be noticed how what has dominated and molded the great and the small has been the pressure of the same taste (...) The strong and dominating spirits are those that find the most subtle delight in that pressure, in that subjection and that perfection under a law of their own."⁵

Thus, under the notion of subjection and the idea of perfecting oneself under one's own law, Nietzsche proclaims the identity or indistinction between subject-object. In the creation of one's own subjectivity, understood as a stylized individuality on the basis of a normativity of an artistic nature, man is both subject and object, just as his life is simultaneously objective and subjective creation. In this way the frontiers that have essentially defined modern philosophy on the basis of a metaphysics of duality (between *res cogitans* and *res extensa*) are erased.

Based on these guidelines, then, we will attempt to analyze the notion of Nietzsche, the place that this idea occupies in his work, the place that this idea occupies within his philosophical system, and how in this concept the philosopher takes up and at the same time breaks with the philosophical tradition that precedes him.

³ NIETZSCHE, F. *La gaya ciencia*. Valencia: F. Sempere y Compañía Editores, 1886.

⁴ Ibid. p. 143.

⁵ NIETZSCHE, F. *La gaya ciencia*. Valencia: F. Sempere y Compañía Editores, 1886. P. 143.

4. THE SELF AND THE SELF: THE WORK OF ART

In Nietzsche's philosophy, art has a capital importance insofar as it stands as the foundation of life itself. It is famous, on the other hand, the affirmation of Nietzsche in *The Origin of Tragedy* according to which art appears as the true "metaphysical activity of man"⁶.

It is permissible, therefore, to consider Nietzsche's conception of art in substantially totalizing terms. Nietzsche is not interested in the elaboration of an aesthetics as a particular philosophical domain within a broader metaphysical system. On the contrary, for Nietzsche art is itself a philosophical-metaphysical problem: in artistic activity the meaning of life itself is at stake.

"There is no 'autonomy' of art with respect to the philosophical, just as there is no 'autonomy' of the philosophical with respect to art. Art and philosophy appear perennially united in that deconstruction of the European metaphysical tradition that constitutes the objective of the total Nietzschean critique."⁷

Now, beyond our analysis of the role of art in Nietzsche's metaphysics, it is now necessary to investigate in what way the artistic is linked to the notion of self-care in the philosophical work of this author. We are interested in investigating, then, in what way the work on one's own existence can be thought of as a work of art.

In this sense, in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* it is possible to trace a path that associates this idea of the self as a work of art with the notion of a creative self-self of its own values, its own existence, its own being. Insofar as man is a creator, the occupation of the self becomes an artistic, creative labor, and the self is then both artist of itself and work of art. Man as creator of himself is the most complete manifestation of the meaning of life.

"Create: therein lies the great relief from pain, that is how life becomes lighter."⁸

Thus, it is possible to visualize in all its depth the displacement that Nietzsche makes from the moral to the aesthetic terrain. The cultivation of the self, which in the preceding philosophical tradition was associated with the development of ethical virtue and the following of moral norms, becomes in Nietzsche an artistic, creative labor, in which the self is both subject and object of art.

The character of Zarathustra (who, as we shall see later, exhorts men to surpass themselves until they create the Superman), enunciates himself as a creator of new values, and manifests his search for other men who can accompany him on this journey, which goes from the destruction of the preceding philosophical morality, which rejects life, to a new artistic-philosophical attitude that exalts all that is vital and enhances it.

"Companions for his walk the Creator seeks, and not corpses, nor flocks and herds and believers. The creator is looking for collaborators to write new values in new tables. (...) Companions, seek the creator, who know how to sharpen their sickles. They will be called wreckers, and despisers of good and evil. But they will reap and celebrate the feasts. Partners in creation seeks Zarathustra..."⁹

The care or cultivation of the self in Nietzsche's work is then this path that man must travel in order to become both creator and work of art. And this creation can only be achieved with a new valuation of the world that enhances life, that does not reject the sensible, corporeal world, as the sterile and extinct philosophies and morals of tradition have traditionally done.

It is a journey that man must make for his own overcoming, rebelling against the spirit of heaviness proper to the previous philosophy, denying and destroying all that preceded, in order to be able to say yes to life, and to create his own values and his own self. This is the path that Zarathustra suggests when he tells the parable of the three transformations of the spirit: the camel, the child and the lion.

⁶ NIETZSCHE, F. *The birth of tragedy*. Madrid, Ed. Alianza, 2001. P. 86.

⁷ CACCIARI, MASSIMO. "Essay on the non-existence of Nietzschean aesthetics". In: *Desde Nietzsche. Time, art, politics*. Trad. Monica B. Cragnolini and A. Paternostro, Biblos, 1994. P. 83-98.

⁸ NIETZSCHE, F. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. SARPE, 1983. P. 105.

⁹ Ibid. p. 39.

The man against whom Nietzsche elaborates his critique, the one who responds to the values of traditional philosophy, is a camel, who in his spirit possesses all the heaviness of one who rejects life and finds in it -nor in himself- neither lightness nor beauty. "All these very heavy burdens the suffering spirit takes upon himself; like the camel that walks loaded in the desert, so he marches towards his desert"¹⁰

The burdens of this camel-man are none other than the very heavy baggage of restrictive morality, which hides its rejection of life behind the supposed search for Truth. The creators of those ancient moral values, the philosophers lovers of "pure knowledge" who dictate transcendental laws to regulate and deny life are, for Nietzsche, lascivious hypocrites, who deny their own humanity, their corporeality, and the inscrutable fact of being - like all men - governed by their own instincts.

"You also you also love the land y the earthly, I know you too well! But there is shame in your love, and a bad conscience. (...)Your spirit has been persuaded to despise the earth, but not your intestines, which are the strongest part of you. Now your spirit is ashamed to be at the command of your bowels. And because of its own shame, it walks crooked and deceitful paths. "¹¹

Here, again, we find as a substratum of the critique of the preceding morality that false dissociation between body and spirit, which for Nietzsche is a manifestation of the decadence of man and his lack of love for life. This man, the one who seeks pure knowledge, the philosopher as he has been understood since antiquity, is for Nietzsche the exact opposite of the philosopher-artist, creator of his own self.

"O lewd, sentimental hypocrites! You lack innocence in desire, and therefore you slander desire! You do not love the earth as creators, or begetters, or joyful of becoming. Where is there innocence? Where there is the will to engender. And he who wants to create above himself has for me the purest will. Where is there beauty? There where I have to want with all my will (...) But you want to call your squinting and emasculated gaze contemplation. And what can be touched by faint-hearted eyes seems beautiful to you. How you prostitute even the noblest words!"¹²

Thus, as we have said, on the back of this man-camel sits the weight of morality, that old restrictive tradition that legislates values and postulates them as transcendental, without allowing man to be the creator of himself, of beauty, of his own good and his own evil.

"The 'thou shalt' comes out at him like a scaly animal refulgent in gold (...) Millennia-old values glitter on those scales, and the most overbearing of all dragons spoke thus: 'All the values of things shine in me'. All values have already been created. I am all values. Therefore, there must no longer be an 'I will!'"¹³

So, in the face of this powerful "must be"¹⁴ which stands as the complete embodiment of all possible valuation, which restricts man without allowing him to want to or want to to create, it is necessary for the spirit of man to transform itself into a lion, "to create freedom for itself and to oppose a sacred no to duty"¹⁵.

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 42.

¹¹ Ibid. p. 142.

¹² Ibid. p. 144.

¹³ Ibid. p. 42.

¹⁴ It is striking the relationship that can be established in this mythological dragon that Nietzsche creates to represent morality, with the notion of "ought to be" proper to psychoanalysis Freudian. Indeed, it is possible to establish a certain parallelism between these three narrative elements - the duty to be, the lion that denies and destroys, and the child that creates - and the notions of the superego, the ego and the self, proper to psychoanalysis. The superego is that absolute and restrictive duty; the ego is the unrestrained drive that conquers and destroys everything; the self is that overcoming that makes man a being situated in the world, capable of relating to the real, choosing and constructing his life. Naturally, this analogy exceeds the limits of the present research work, but nevertheless we believe it is interesting to mention it for future reflections.

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 43.

However, the lion is not yet capable of creating new values. All his strength is still directed against the "thou shalt", everything in him is negation and destruction, conquest of the freedom necessary to create. Then man can finally become a child. And in this image of the child is condensed all the affirming and vital power of the man who is the creator of himself, who becomes the artist of his own existence and makes of his self a work of art.

"Yes, my brothers, for the divine game of creating it takes a holy saying yes: the spirit now fights for its own will, he who withdrew from the world now conquers his world." ¹⁶

And this man is precisely the one who can create his own self insofar as he denies in a single movement the contempt for the body proper to tradition and the dualism established between *res pensante* and *res extensa*, with which Descartes initiated the modern tradition.

5. CONCLUSIONS

In this way, Nietzsche inaugurates a new conception of subjectivity, which simultaneously breaks with both traditions (the ancient and the modern), and is fundamental if we want to understand what Nietzsche is thinking when he exhorts to make of one's own existence a work of art.

Faced with the "I" as consciousness, the maximum expression of the modern subject, Nietzsche opposes the concept of the Self, starting from corporeality and the will to power.

Nietzsche is interested in thinking "how one becomes what one is", that is, in what way that which has been defined as man's identity -his subjectivity- is necessarily contingent, open. In the words of Zarathustra, who exhorts himself under the motto "Become what you are!", it is possible to think that the greatness of human existence is not a matter of an essence, defined once and for all, but of a transit, a mediation, a becoming.

The ultimate meaning of the human being would thus consist in "becoming", in transcending oneself, in "being a bridge and not a goal"¹⁷. It is a constant movement of self-improvement, which is the principle of the will to power.

Nietzschean philosophy thus points to two points of view about the human being: on the one hand, egoity; on the other, selfhood. Both, however, are founded on one and the same "great reason": the body. Thus, although both perspectives differ, they have corporeality as their material and governing substratum.

In this way, Nietzsche breaks with almost the entire preceding philosophical tradition, from Plato to Kant. No one in the history of philosophy had ever before dared to subordinate the soul or spirit to the body in the way that Nietzsche's critique does¹⁸.

Indeed, this exaltation of the corporeal in Nietzsche should not be understood as an empiricist reductionism. It is not a matter of accepting sensible reality without mediation, uncritically enthroning the world of the empirical.

For this philosopher, the body is not only the senses and their perceptions, but above all instincts, passions, and will to power. This is the Self, eminently distinct from the category of the modern "subject," and it is this Self that must be cultivated artistically.

In this sense, after the ego proper to modernity and the ancient tradition, associated with reason, soul or spirit, Nietzsche discovers the Self, which is nothing other than corporeality and will to power.

Now, the road to the cultivation of the Self is arduous and difficult. The herd, those men who accept the heavy burden of restrictive morality, will point with bad eyes to anyone who proclaims his own corporeality, who denies the existence of a transcendental world beyond materiality, who is willing to break with traditional precepts in order to create his own values and also his own "I".

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 43.

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 32.

¹⁸ As we have seen, only Spinoza had followed a path that comes relatively close to such a transgression, when he dared to equate the spiritual and the corporeal on the same level.

However, the main obstacle that one faces in this process of self-cultivation is none other than the Self. But at the end of the path, this cultivation of self has no other destination than to become a creator, that is, an artist. At the end of the journey the Self is free to shape the self as a work of art, dictating its own law and creating its own values.

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