



Open Library of Humanities



Part of the Ubiquity
Partner Network

Le foucaldien

Open Access Journal for Research along Foucauldian Lines

Research

How to Cite: Svoboda, Toby. "Foucault on Correspondence as a Technique of the Self." *Le foucaldien* 6, no. 1 (2020): 1, 1–19. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/lefou.69>

Published: 30 January 2020

Peer Review:

This article has been peer reviewed through the double-blind process of *Le foucaldien*, which is a journal published by the Open Library of Humanities.

Copyright:

© 2020 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

Open Access:

Le foucaldien is a peer-reviewed open access journal.

Digital Preservation:

The Open Library of Humanities and all its journals are digitally preserved in the CLOCKSS scholarly archive service.

RESEARCH

Foucault on Correspondence as a Technique of the Self

Toby Svoboda

Fairfield University, US

tsvoboda@fairfield.edu

This paper begins with a discussion of Foucault's examination of Seneca's epistles in his late essay, "Self Writing." I argue that Foucault offers an accurate and interesting account of the practices Seneca employs in his epistles pursuant to his art of living. This paper then considers Foucault's interpretation of Seneca's art of living as an aesthetics of existence. I argue that this interpretation is unsatisfactory, instead suggesting that Seneca's art of living is a plausible response to the problem of suffering. I close by arguing that such a conception of Seneca's art of living makes it relevant for present-day human beings, who, like Seneca, are subject to the problem of suffering.

Keywords: aesthetics of existence; care of the self; philosophy; seneca; writing

In his later work,¹ Michel Foucault offers an interesting characterization of Greco-Roman philosophy as a tradition concerned primarily with "the care of the self" (*le souci de soi*) or "art of living" (*tekhne tou biou*). One sees this especially in the Pythagorean, Socratic, Stoic, and Epicurean schools. Foucault argues that all these traditions were concerned essentially with the constitution of the self rather than with theoretical speculation. As some have critically pointed out,² Foucault interprets the art of living as an aesthetic enterprise, its goal being to produce a "beautiful" self capable of leaving beautiful memories to posterity. Whether appropriate or not, this unique interpretation of ancient philosophy deserves more attention. The purpose of this paper is to give a close reading of part of Foucault's late article, "Self Writing," showing how it relies on treating the art of living as an aesthetic phenomenon. There is not sufficient space here to consider whether that aesthetic interpretation adequately describes the Greco-Roman *tekhne tou biou* as a whole, so I close by considering whether that interpretation at least appropriately characterizes the figures and texts dealt with in "Self Writing." I conclude that Foucault's aesthetic interpretation does not capture the spirit of these texts and figures taken on their own terms, although it does offer an interesting point of access for present-day readers of those ancient sources.

1. Foucault on Self-Writing

In this particular article, originally published in 1983, Foucault claims that the act of writing was an important *askesis*, or "training of the self by the self," for those who practiced the art of living in late Greco-Roman philosophy. Although writing does not appear to have been an especially important *askesis* early on in this tradition, "the texts from the imperial epoch [the first two centuries CE] relating to practices

¹ Such as his three volumes of *The History of Sexuality* (esp. the third volume, *The Care of the Self*), his 1981–82 course of lectures at the Collège de France (published as *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*), his 1983 lectures delivered at Berkeley (first published as *Fearless Speech*), and numerous late interviews and articles.

² See Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, trans. Michael Chase, ed. Arnold Davidson (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1995), 206–213.

of the self placed a good deal of stress on writing."³ This practice contributed to the primary goal of the *tekhne tou biou*, which was "the fashioning of accepted discourses, recognized as true, into rational principles of action."⁴ Writing for this purpose took two important forms. The first is the composition of *hupomnemata*, which were informal notebooks in which one freely wrote her thoughts, transcribed quotes from others, and recorded events and actions she had observed. The point was to use *hupomnemata* as aids to the art of living, to treat them as "material and a framework for exercises to be carried out frequently."⁵ In other words, *hupomnemata* "make one's recollection of the fragmentary *logos* transmitted through teaching, listening, or reading, a means of establishing a relationship of oneself with oneself, a relationship as adequate and accomplished as possible." *Hupomnemata* bring together these "scattered *logoi*."⁶ By letting one write, *hupomnemata* allow one to discriminate amongst various oral and written teachings, transcribing only what one deems of use to oneself and thereby avoiding being pulled in multiple directions by various schools of thought. This is an important step in beginning to cultivate oneself. Having these notebooks always near at hand served two functions. First, they helped one remain conscious of certain material, encouraging a daily life that honored the examples and maxims contained in them. Second, one could literally consult *hupomnemata*, whether for the sake of boosting one's own morale or of assisting one's deliberation concerning a practical dilemma. Hence, the purpose of *hupomnemata* was "nothing less than the shaping of the self."⁷

Although Foucault's treatment of *hupomnemata* is quite interesting, I want to focus on his consideration of philosophical correspondence among practitioners of the *tekhne tou biou* in the imperial period, which comprises the second half of "Self Writing." Foucault argues that the writing of epistles shares some similarities with the writing of *hupomnemata*, but the former go beyond the latter by

³ Michel Foucault, "Self Writing," in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, trans. Robert Hurley et al., ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: The New Press, 1997), 208.

⁴ Foucault, "Self-Writing," 209.

⁵ Foucault, "Self-Writing," 210.

⁶ Foucault, "Self-Writing," 211.

⁷ Foucault, "Self-Writing," 211.

involving another person with oneself in a very direct manner. In the act of writing such a letter, one brings "into congruence the gaze of the other and that gaze which one aims at oneself when one measures one's everyday actions according to the rules of a technique of living."⁸ One observes this in Seneca's letters to Lucilius. As Foucault notes, Seneca kept two principles in mind while composing his letters: (1) one must train oneself throughout one's whole life, and (2) one needs the assistance of others in carrying out this project. The epistolary "technique of living" activates both these principles. In proffering philosophical advice to Lucilius, Seneca also works toward his own self-improvement, because he must write well in order to be of service to his younger friend. Foucault compares this to "soldiers in peacetime practicing the manual of arms," because the counsel Seneca offers Lucilius may become relevant in the future for Seneca himself.⁹ Foucault cites letter 99, which is a copy of a letter sent to Marullus on the occasion of the latter's son's death. Seneca offers Marullus "logical arms" by which he might guard against unbecoming sorrow. Seneca reminds Marullus of the tenets of the Stoic school, attempting to convince him that death is not a tragedy, that one should retain self-mastery in the face of capricious misfortune, and that this might be achieved through specific ethical practices, such as meditation and memorization. While this guidance is meant to help Marullus, Foucault argues that it is also meant to help Seneca and Lucilius. Whereas the epistle serves as *consolatio* for Marullus, attempting to help cure him of his sorrow, it serves as a *praemeditatio* for the other two, letting them practice for future misfortunes in the hope that they might face future perceived difficulties with courage and philosophical self-mastery.¹⁰ Hence, principle (1) is activated for Seneca in the case of letter 99, because in consoling his friend he also reminds himself what kind of person one should be, reflects on possible obstacles to achieving such a care of the self, and mentally prepares himself by reciting helpful advice to another.

⁸ Foucault, "Self-Writing," 221.

⁹ Foucault, "Self-Writing," 215.

¹⁰ Foucault, "Self-Writing," 215.

But for an obvious reason, Seneca's writing of letter 99 also activated principle (2), because it required a recipient in order to be performed. Lacking an interlocutor or at least an auditor, there can be no correspondence, and the best one can do is write *hupomnemata* to oneself. While this is a worthwhile enterprise, Foucault thinks that the writing of correspondence presents an opportunity that is absent in the case of *hupomnemata* precisely because the former permits the activation of principle (2). Part of what makes writing the epistle such a serious endeavor is the fact that it is not private—it will be relied upon and scrutinized by others, so more care must be taken to offer good advice. In this regard at least, correspondence offers an advance on *hupomnemata*. Yet this difference is more than just a matter of degree. Foucault claims that epistolary self-writing "also constitutes a certain way of manifesting oneself to oneself and to others. The letter makes the writer 'present' to the one to whom he addresses it."¹¹ This presence consists of more than merely reminding the other of one's qualities and behavior, because it entails an "immediate, almost physical" manifestation of oneself. It establishes a sort of communion of the writer with her reader and with herself. Foucault again cites Seneca, who tells Lucilius that "you are revealing yourself to me" (*te mihi ostendis*) and that their written correspondence establishes "recognition."¹² Foucault states that writing a letter allows one "to project oneself into view, to make one's own face appear in the other's presence." For this reason, "the letter is both a gaze that one focuses on the addressee [...] and a way of offering oneself to his gaze by what one tells him about oneself." This being the case, correspondence is an intimate affair, being more than a business-like transaction of instruction. The communion between writer and reader is one of friendship, establishing a "reciprocity of the gaze and the examination."¹³ According to Foucault, the writer injects himself into the life of the reader. By admonishing or counseling the reader in a very personal way, the writer makes the reader perceive her "gaze." The reader's conduct becomes fair game for the observation and judgment of the writer, the former being examined by the latter's gaze. But the reverse relation also

¹¹ Foucault, "Self-Writing," 216.

¹² Foucault, "Self-Writing," 216.

¹³ Foucault, "Self-Writing," 216.

holds, the writer being examined by the reader's gaze, and this is how reciprocity is maintained. Just as Seneca judges Lucilius' conduct and offers instruction on how to improve himself, so does he submit the details of his own conduct for the judgment and gaze of Lucilius. Such reciprocity must be in evidence if Seneca is to remain faithful to the two guiding principles. Since (1) self-cultivation in the *tekhne tou biou* is a lifelong process, and since (2) the help of others is necessary for making any progress in this process, one must always have friends who are seriously concerned with the care of the self. Lucilius is such a friend for Seneca. Not only does Seneca help the younger Lucilius, but Lucilius helps Seneca. The epistolary writing practiced by Seneca is performed partially for the sake of principle (1), which is made possible by Lucilius' fulfilling the necessary condition for the activation of principle (2). In a manner of speaking, Lucilius keeps Seneca honest, because no blemish in his conduct will escape the gaze of his friend, part of whose station is to provide moral support for his older companion.

At this point, a number of questions naturally arise. What kind of self were Marcus and Seneca attempting to cultivate—one based on metaphysical or ethical truths, or one based on personal preference? Why did they seek to develop this particular self—what was their purpose? Why did they think this specific type of self is better than other types—was it a matter of philosophical argument, or one of individual choice? Foucault does not provide clear answers to these questions in "Self Writing," and so they must be sought elsewhere in his late work. I will broach these questions below, suggesting that Foucault treated the care of the self as an aesthetic phenomenon that did not rely on metaphysical or ethical beliefs supposedly grounded in philosophical truth. I will close by considering the appropriateness of this interpretation as applied to the texts of Marcus Aurelius and Seneca that Foucault treats in "Self Writing."

2. An Aesthetics of Existence

In an April 1983 interview with Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow,¹⁴ Foucault reviews his current work on the second and third volumes of *The History of Sexuality*. Referring to Stoic ethical practices during the imperial period, he says the following:

¹⁴ For an explanatory note concerning the date and context of this interview, see Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics," in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 340.

[T]he principal target of this kind of ethics was an aesthetic one. First, this kind of ethics was only a problem of personal choice. Second, it was reserved for a few people in the population; it was not a question of giving a pattern of behavior for everybody. It was a personal choice for a small elite. The reason for making this choice was the will to live a beautiful life, and to leave to others memories of a beautiful existence.¹⁵

In this characterization, Stoic ethics in the first two centuries had three main components. First, it was non-normalizing. The Stoics were not interested in moralizing their contemporaries, of persuading them to adopt Stoic ways. On the contrary, such adoption was an affair of the individual, a matter of "personal choice." Second, its goal was of an aesthetic nature. There is no attempt to obey universal rules of morality, nor is this ethics grounded in metaphysical principles. The individual is free to pursue that life she deems most beautiful. Third, this ethics appeals only to a small number of people. This component is related to the first: lacking normalization, there is no reason why the population at large should esteem Stoic ethics. Only those cultivated enough to want to beautify their own lives will be interested in pursuing the Stoic *tekhne tou biou*. Later in the same interview, Foucault reinforces this characterization, focusing on a specific Stoic practice:

Sexual austerity in Greek society was a trend or movement coming from very cultivated people in order to give to their life much more intensity, much more beauty. In a way, it's the same in the twentieth century when people, in order to get a more beautiful life, tried to get rid of all the sexual repression of their society, of their childhood. Gide in Greece would have been an austere philosopher.¹⁶

Again, the Greco-Roman art of living was an aesthetic project that privileged the individual self. One practiced it for the sake of achieving a life of "intensity"

¹⁵ Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics," in *Ethics*, 254.

¹⁶ Foucault, *Ethics*, 261. Foucault says "Greek society," but it is fair to extend his comments to the Roman Stoics of the imperial period, both because Foucault directly references Epictetus in this regard and because he has already stated on page 254 that the Roman Stoics were practicing this type of ethics.

and "more beauty," not for the sake of honoring moral or metaphysical dictates. The comparison to twentieth century attempts to overcome sexual repression is interesting, because it highlights Foucault's central claim that Stoic ethics was concerned much more with style than with content. On this reading, Epictetus recommended abstinence from sexual activity not because such activity is somehow wrong, but rather because such abstinence is his preferred way of achieving beauty and intensity. Gide recommended the opposite activity for the same reason: engaging in sexual activity was a means of cultivating for oneself a life of increased beauty and intensity. The difference between Epictetus and Gide is a matter of context and preference. Given their unique preferences and cultural contexts, their apparently opposed ethical recommendations are both in accord with the same principle, namely the desire to beautify the self.

This interpretation of Greco-Roman ethics is not unique to this particular interview.¹⁷ In an even later interview, published in May 1984,¹⁸ Foucault states that he wanted to think the ancient *tekhne tou biou* "in the same form in which its contemporaries had reflected upon it, to wit, in the form of an art of existence [...]. It was a matter of knowing how to govern one's life in order to give it the most beautiful form possible [...]."¹⁹ This aesthetic interpretation agrees with the one given a year earlier in the Dreyfus-Rabinow interview. Both interviews are retrospective, with Foucault commenting on his recent work on the care of the self. This being the case, it seems fair to assume that "Self Writing" was composed under the same aesthetic interpretation, since it was originally published in February 1983,²⁰ just two months before the Dreyfus-Rabinow interview. Since Foucault claims in April 1983 and May 1984 that his recent work approached Greco-Roman ethics as an affair of personal choice in which one tried to live a beautiful life, I will treat the February 1983 "L'écriture de soi" article as being susceptible to this same approach. This will

¹⁷ See, for example, Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, trans. Graham Burchell (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

¹⁸ See Foucault, *Foucault Live*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer (New York: Semiotext(e), 1996), 478.

¹⁹ Foucault, "The Concern for Truth," in *Foucault Live*, trans. John Johnston, 458.

²⁰ See Foucault, "L'écriture de soi," *Corps écrit* 5 (1983): 3–23.

facilitate a more robust understanding of "Self Writing," because it will bear out some of the nascent elements that inform the overt parts of Foucault's interpretation of the correspondence of Marcus Aurelius and Seneca.

It may be helpful to note two readers of Foucault who seem to agree that he interpreted Greco-Roman ethics on an aesthetic model. In a chapter of *Philosophy as a Way of Life*, Pierre Hadot offers the following critique of Foucault's approach to ancient ethics:

What I am afraid of is that, by focusing his interpretation too exclusively on the culture of the self, the care of the self, and conversion toward the self—more generally, by defining his ethical model as an aesthetics of existence—M. Foucault is propounding a culture of the self that is *too* aesthetic. In other words, this may be a new form of Dandyism, late twentieth-century style.²¹

Arnold Davidson largely agrees with Hadot, although he is more sympathetic to Foucault's project. He claims that Foucault fails to appreciate the normalizing and prohibitive moral elements in the Epicurean and Stoic schools. Although this is a mistake, it

is a defect of interpretation, not of conceptualization. Foucault's conceptualization of ethics as the self's relationship to itself provides us with a framework of enormous depth and subtlety, and it is this framework [...] that allows us to grasp aspects of ancient thought that would otherwise remain occluded.²²

On Davidson's understanding, Foucault mischaracterizes philosophers like Epictetus, because he fails to see that the latter was operating within an ethico-metaphysical framework that neither encouraged nor permitted individual aes-

²¹ Hadot, *Way of Life*, 211.

²² Arnold Davidson, "Ethics as Ascetics: Foucault, the History of Ethics, and Ancient Thought," in *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*, ed. Gary Gutting (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 122.

thetism. On the contrary, as Hadot points out, "the goal of Stoic exercises is to go beyond the self, and think and act in unison with universal reason."²³ Both Hadot and Davidson might protest that Gide, for example, had little in common with Epictetus, the latter of whom was attempting not primarily to intensify and beautify his life but rather to live in accordance with universal reason, a goal towards which everyone ought to strive. Although Davidson thinks Foucault provides an extremely interesting "framework" that might highlight neglected aspects of ancient thought, he over-emphasizes the role of individual choice and aestheticism in Greco-Roman ethics. Although Hadot and Davidson provide interesting commentary about this problem they see in Foucault, I am not at present concerned to evaluate whether an aesthetic interpretation of ancient ethics is appropriate. I only want to borrow from Davidson and Hadot to support my contention that "Self Writing" was composed under the belief that Marcus Aurelius and Seneca were pursuing the aesthetic project of beautifying and cultivating their selves. Both Hadot and Davidson understand the whole of Foucault's interpretation of Greco-Roman ethics to be an aesthetic one. The former even levels this charge against the construal of *hupomnemata* in "Self Writing," although Hadot does not consider the section of that article that deals with correspondence. Interestingly, Hadot does not reference any of Foucault's interviews, where the aesthetic interpretation is most explicitly advanced. Confining himself to *The Care of the Self* and the first half of "Self Writing," Hadot still detects Foucault treating Seneca and those like him as aestheticians. I turn now to a consideration of "Self Writing," showing that Foucault does indeed treat correspondence as part of a larger aesthetic project. To be fair, one might question Hadot's critique of Foucault, but I will argue that Foucault fails to appreciate the nature of the project pursued by Seneca and Marcus Aurelius, which he misdiagnoses as an aesthetic self-beautification.²⁴

²³ Hadot, *Way of Life*, 207.

²⁴ For a somewhat more sympathetic interpretation of Foucault than that offered by Hadot or Davidson, see Alexander Nehamas, *The Art of Living* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), chapter six.

3. Two Poles of Correspondence

Foucault claims that correspondence in the spirit of the care of the self represents a major advance in the "cultivation of the self" not to be found in the composition of *hupomnemata*. While the latter attempt to unify various bits of discourse gleaned from others, the exchange of "soul service" in the former is concerned to provide an "account of one's relation to oneself." While the letters written by Cicero and his like had the aim of "accounting for oneself as a subject of action [...] in connection with friends and enemies, fortunate and unfortunate events," the letters of Seneca and Marcus Aurelius seem to concentrate on the self for its own sake, seeking to produce a particular kind of self-relation. One already detects some aestheticism here. As Hadot notes, Foucault places special emphasis on the self in his analysis of Greco-Roman ethics, and this for Hadot is already to miss the point. In addition, Foucault sees two "poles" in this practice, the "interference of soul and body" and leisure activity.²⁵ The first pole distinguishes Marcus and Seneca from Cicero by focusing on "impressions" rather than "actions." According to Foucault, Cicero's primary purpose in his correspondence was to constitute himself as a suitable subject for action, while the primary purpose of the later writers was to control, form, and cultivate their passions for the sake of manufacturing a desired type of self. The former privileges action, the latter privileges what might be called the interior life of the self. As for the second pole, leisure is required for the cultivation of the self, because one needs peace, time, and serenity to examine one's "impressions" or passions, to judge them as good or bad, and to pursue "techniques of the self" meant to organize those passions into the self that is desired. While leisure is not absent from Cicero, it is at best an assistant to action, the aim of rest always being to rehabilitate one for future activity.

The first pole is instanced in Seneca's letter 78 to Lucilius, in which Seneca extols the uses of sickness and relates a serious illness that plagued him in youth. According to Foucault, Seneca was cured from this sickness by the "remedies of the

²⁵ Foucault, *Ethics*, 217.

soul." An "interference of soul and body," illness provides an opportunity to practice self-control, to cultivate one's "impressions" in the face of suffering. The soul or self is what matters, but it must be able to deal effectively with the difficulties produced by the body. In Seneca's case, he was assisted in this by his friends, who helped him through the illness with encouragement and edification. This is another example of the importance of principle (2), i.e. that progress in the care of the self requires the help of others. With their help, Seneca was able to overcome the "moral crisis" occasioned by his illness. On Foucault's interpretation, the real problem was this crisis itself, not the physical malady that facilitated it. On this reading, Seneca's main concern was not to overcome his bodily sickness but rather to develop a self-relation that could maintain desirable "impressions" in the face of suffering, both present and future. He cites this example from his youth to encourage Lucilius in the same manner that Seneca was encouraged by his friends. Suffering always provides one the opportunity to test and improve oneself, to try the limits of the self developed so far and to strengthen one's defenses against possible "interference" of the soul produced by the body.

There is no mention here of what Hadot calls "universal reason," the principle with which the Stoics strove to be in accord. As a member of that school, one would expect Seneca to have been deeply concerned with this principle. In fact, one sees this in his epistles to Lucilius: "What Good, then, lies within you? Perfect reason."²⁶ Hadot renders this "*perfecta ratio*" as "divine reason," claiming that it is the same cosmic *ratio* that figures like Marcus Aurelius and Epictetus held in such high regard.²⁷ Although Seneca speaks of this *ratio* being "within you" (*in te*), and this might seem to suggest the interiorization and relation of the self with itself that Foucault emphasizes, Seneca is very far from endorsing or even permitting an aesthetics of existence that stresses beauty. On the contrary, Seneca asks, "Why cultivate your beauty? After all your efforts, dumb animals surpass you in comeliness. [...] Are you not willing to abandon all these details [...] and come back to the

²⁶ Seneca, *Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales, Volume 3*, trans. Richard Gummere (Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library, 1917), 448f.

²⁷ Hadot, *Way of Life*, 207.

Good that is really yours?"²⁸ To be fair, the beauty or "*forma*" Seneca dismisses is one of physical appearance only, and the beauty Foucault says was sought by Seneca includes much more than this. Nonetheless, Seneca encourages Lucilius to pursue the good (*bonus*), not the beautiful, and although he says that "joy" (*gaudium*) will result from this, it is a joy "born of reason" alone. Whether or not Hadot is correct in identifying Seneca's *ratio* with that of Epictetus, it seems clear that this is not an aesthetic affair. There is no mention of wanting to cultivate a beautiful life, nor of wanting to leave beautiful memories to posterity. Still, Foucault is right that Seneca was concerned with the "interference" of soul and body, striving to control and organize his passions in such a way that the life of the soul should be unencumbered by the distractions of the body. Even in great bodily pain, says Seneca in letter 23, "a high-minded and sensible man divorces soul from body, and dwells much with the better or divine part, and only as far as he must with this complaining and frail portion."²⁹ Attending to one's body only so far as is necessary, one focuses primarily on the soul (*animus*). But what is Seneca's purpose in regimenting his passions? Relying on the interviews he gave shortly after publishing "Self Writing," Foucault would seem to suggest that Seneca sought to cultivate his soul for the sake of attaining some sort of aesthetic edification. But Seneca himself would have it otherwise. As he writes to his younger friend, the aim in divorcing body from soul is to put one's stock in *ratio*, to take all joy in the goods of *ratio* alone. As Hadot argues, this is the universal *ratio* with which the Stoics thought one ought to be in accord, and this is quite different from an aesthetics of existence.

The second pole of correspondence as a technique of the self, the importance of leisure, is instanced by the meticulous, often banal accounts of daily that are given throughout the correspondence of Seneca and Marcus. The point of this practice, Foucault says, is to testify "not to the importance of an activity but to the quality of a mode of being."³⁰ It matters little whether one has performed any noteworthy action on a given day, so long as one has maintained his cultivated self

²⁸ Seneca, *Epistulae* 3, 448f.

²⁹ Seneca, *Epistulae* 2, 186f.

³⁰ Foucault, *Ethics*, 218.

securely against the caprices and dangers of the world that threaten the it. Lucilius requests that Seneca send him reports of his daily life, and the latter obliges with an accounts of walking, eating meager meals, reflecting on philosophical texts, bathing, etc. The commonplace day in which nothing out of the ordinary occurs is valuable because, as Foucault notes, "nothing has happened which might have diverted him from the only thing that is important for him: to attend to himself."³¹ This, of course, recalls Foucault's earlier point that the correspondence of Seneca, unlike that of Cicero, was not concerned with readying oneself for action—on the contrary, it was focused on the self and its passions. Hence, leisure is of paramount value. Free from the responsibilities, temptations, and disappointments of the world of action, one is able to focus chiefly on maintaining and improving oneself. Further, the practice of recounting one's day to a correspondent allows one to practice an examination of conscience in written, semi-public form. This review of one's day has a precedent in the Pythagorean, Stoic, and Epicurean traditions, but it did not usually take a written form. Its purpose was "constituting oneself as an 'inspector of oneself,' and hence of gauging the common faults, and of reactivating the rules of behavior that one must always bear in mind." In written form, it benefits both the writer and the reader—not only does the "self-inspector" improve herself through evaluation, but the reader is provided with an exemplar in the art of living. This self-examination offers a chronicle of "correct or incorrect actions, of the regimen observed, of the physical or mental exercises in which one engaged."³² The reader can learn both from the successes and failures of the writer, once again activating principles (1) and (2). Foucault gives a long citation from a letter of Marcus Aurelius to his master, Fronto, in which the former recounts the events of the previous day: rising from bed, gargling, reading, writing, attending a sacrifice, eating, working at grape-gathering, conversing with his mother, mentally reviewing the events of the day, and finally going to bed. The minute details are important for Foucault, because they indicate a privileging of one's "mode

³¹ Foucault, *Ethics*, 219.

³² Foucault, *Ethics*, 219.

of being" over the type of actions one performs. Marcus' mental review of the events of the day, in which they are evaluated and considered vis-à-vis the desired "mode of being," are the next morning transcribed in a letter to his philosophical instructor. Foucault claims that this practice, in both its mental and written forms, was a central "technique of the self" for those who pursued the *tekhnē tou biou* through correspondence. As Foucault concludes, the self-writing in correspondence was "a matter of bringing into congruence the gaze of the other and that gaze which one aims at oneself when one measures one's everyday actions according to the rules of a technique of living."³³ Principles (1) and (2), the need to train oneself throughout one's entire life and the requirement of others for the success of this training, occupy places of extreme importance in writing the self.

This again prompts the question of *why* Seneca and Marcus pursued this practice. It is true enough that they sought a "mode of being" rather than a life of action, that they recommended leisure for this purpose, and that principles (1) and (2) were of central importance—but what was their ultimate goal? As I have framed the question so far, did they want to pursue beauty or reason? To answer this question from Foucault's side, one must again read information from his interviews into the text. For Foucault, Marcus examined his conscience, gave detailed reports of his daily thoughts and actions, valued leisure, tried to cultivate himself with the help of others throughout his life, and strove towards a particular "mode of being" all because he wanted to beautify his life and leave beautiful memories to others. To achieve a "mode of being" through strenuous, sophisticated cultivation of the self is principally an aesthetic pursuit, the aim being an increase in the intensity and beauty of one's existence. Is this an appropriate portrayal? As with the first pole, the extant writings of Marcus seem to contradict Foucault's interpretation. In his *Meditations*, Marcus praises Apollonius for teaching him "to look to nothing else, even for a little while, except reason."³⁴ Elsewhere in the same text, he

³³ Foucault, *Ethics*, 221.

³⁴ Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations*, trans. A. S. L. Farquharson (Dutton, New York: Everyman's Library, 1965), 1 (1.8).

writes the following: "The properties of the *rational* soul: it is conscious of itself, it moulds itself, makes of itself whatever it will, the fruit which it bears it gathers itself [...] it achieves its proper end, wherever the close of life comes upon it."³⁵ The soul is rational for Marcus, and although it cultivates itself, it does so for the sake of a "proper end." Since one should "look to nothing else [...] except reason," the "proper end" of the rational soul is accordance with reason, not pursuit of self-beautification. If this is not enough, Marcus also claims, "The matter of the Whole is docile and adaptable, and the Reason that controls it has in its own nature no ground to create evil [...] and all things come into being and are accomplished according to it."³⁶ More than just a property of the human soul, reason is a metaphysical principle that governs the universe, and this makes Marcus' injunction that one should rely on reason and nothing else all the more salient. To live in harmony with reason is therefore of imperative importance, not just an aesthetic project or a non-normalizing dalliance of elites. The text of the *Meditations* thus seems to support Hadot's claim that Marcus, like the rest of the Stoics, tried "to go beyond the self, and think and act in unison with universal reason."³⁷ This being the case, it does not seem appropriate to treat Marcus' correspondence with Fronto as an aesthetic venture, as the subtext of Foucault's article does. It is true that by chronicling his daily thoughts and actions Marcus sought to achieve a "mode of being," but this mode is rational rather than aesthetic, concerned as it is with living according to right reason than with realizing some form of the beautiful. "Self Writing" does not directly claim that it is the latter, but Foucault's commentary on his work makes it clear that this was his intention. This would explain the excessive emphasis Foucault places on the self throughout "Self Writing," whereas Hadot stresses the transcendence of the self for the sake of universal reason. Although, as Davidson suggests, Foucault has conducted an interesting study that throws fresh light on some neglected aspects of ancient thought (the *tekhne tou biou* itself, for

³⁵ Aurelius, *Meditations*, 72 (11.1). Emphasis mine.

³⁶ Aurelius, *Meditations*, 31 (6.1).

³⁷ Hadot, *Way of Life*, 207.

instance), he misses the spirit of Stoic correspondence, which was meant by its practitioners as a method of improving one's relationship with universal reason.

It might be objected that it is inappropriate to read material from Foucault's interviews back into a particular article, because the article itself does not directly claim that Marcus and Seneca were engaged in self-beautification and should therefore be left to stand on its own merits. In response, I would point out that Foucault does not tell the reader in "Self Writing" why it is that these Stoics of the imperial period pursued the practice of self-writing. He usefully and skillfully elaborates the details of that practice by, e.g., delineating principles (1) and (2), noting the importance of a "mode of being," and emphasizing the two poles of soul-body interference and leisure. This undertaking is quite appropriate, and it helps one understand *what* Marcus and Seneca were doing, but it does not answer *why* they practiced self-writing, and this is an important question. There is an enormous difference between writing epistles for the sake of beautifying one's life and doing so to be in accordance with universal reason. The former is a non-normalizing and personal engagement, whereas the latter has imperative force for everyone. The difference is essentially that between living a particular kind of life because one finds it beautiful and living a particular kind of life because it is enjoined by the very nature of the universe. Since Foucault does not tell us in "Self Writing" which is the case, one must attempt to find the answer elsewhere in his work. I have argued above that the 1983 and 1984 interviews present admissible evidence for evaluating "Self Writing," because they were conducted immediately after the publication of "*L'écriture de soi*" and, by Foucault's own admission, applied directly to the recent work on Greco-Roman ethics that encompassed that article. Since the interviews clearly state that Foucault believed the care of the self of the imperial period to be an aesthetic affair, it is appropriate to read his treatment of Marcus' and Seneca's correspondence as subject to that belief.

I have tried to show that this aesthetic reading of late Stoic correspondence is inappropriate, or at least that it clashes severely with what Seneca and Marcus thought they themselves were doing. If one wishes to understand these figures on their own terms, one is better off not adopting Foucault's aesthetic interpretation.

Nonetheless, it is helpful to remember Davidson's comment that Foucault's misreading "is a defect of interpretation, not of conceptualization."³⁸ Foucault has offered a detailed report of the techniques and nuances of the Greco-Roman art of living. Despite its shortcoming, the meticulous attention he has given to the overlooked *tekhne tou biou* in ancient ethics is an important step towards understanding and appreciating this interesting tradition.

References

- Aurelius, Marcus. *Meditations*. Translated by A. S. L. Farquharson. Dutton, New York: Everyman's Library, 1965.
- Davidson, Arnold. "Ethics as Ascetics: Foucault, the History of Ethics, and Ancient Thought." In *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*. Edited by Gary Gutting. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL9780521403320.007>
- Foucault, Michel. *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*. Translated by Robert Hurley et al. Edited by Paul Rabinow. New York: The New Press, 1997.
- Foucault, Michel. *Fearless Speech*. Translated by Joseph Pearson. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001.
- Foucault, Michel. *Foucault Live*. Edited by Sylvere Lotringer. New York: Semiotext(e), 1996.
- Foucault, Michel. "L'écriture de soi." *Corps écrit* 5 (1983): 3–23.
- Foucault, Michel. *The Courage of Truth*. Translated by Graham Burchell. Edited by Frederic Gros. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.
- Foucault, Michel. *The Foucault Reader*. Edited by Paul Rabinow. New York: Pantheon, 1984.
- Foucault, Michel. *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*. Translated by Graham Burchell. Edited by Frederic Gros. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.
- Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality, Volume 2: The Use of Pleasure*. Translated by Robert Hurley. New York: Random House, 1985.

³⁸ Davidson, "Ethics as Ascetics," 122.

- Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality, Volume 3: The Care of the Self*. Translated by Robert Hurley. New York: Random House, 1986.
- Hadot, Pierre. *Philosophy as a Way of Life*. Translated by Michael Chase. Edited by Arnold Davidson. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1995.
- Nehamas, Alexander. *The Art of Living: Socratic Reflections from Plato to Foucault*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.
- Seneca. *Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales*. Translated by Richard Gummere. Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library, 1917.

How to cite this article: Svoboda, Toby. "Foucault on Correspondence as a Technique of the Self." *Le foucaldien* 6, no. 1 (2020): 1, 1–19. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/lefou.69>

Submitted: 25 September 2019 **Accepted:** 11 January 2020 **Published:** 30 January 2020

Copyright: © 2020 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.



Le foucaldien is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Open Library of Humanities.

OPEN ACCESS The Open Access icon, a stylized 'A' inside a circle.