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Must We Do What We Say? Truth, Responsibility and the Ordinary in Ancient and Modern Perfectionism

Abstract. The central argument of this paper is that moral perfectionism cannot be understood in its radical philosophical, ethical and political dimensions unless we trace its tradition back to the ancient Greek conception of philosophy as a way of life. Indeed, in ancient Greece, to be a philosopher meant to give importance to everyday life and to pay attention to the details of common language and behaviour, in order to actively transform oneself and one's relationship to others and to the world. Truth itself was conceived as an event emerging from the agreement among the logoi of different people, or from the harmony established by an individual between his words and his deeds (e.g. Socrates, the Cynics). But this way of conceiving truth and practicing philosophy has been somehow put aside in modern times, and it has been renewed only during the last two centuries, primarily thanks to the transcendental American philosophy of Emerson and Thoreau. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to show how modern perfectionism re-invented ancient perfectionism, through the re-activation of the imperative to pay attention to our ordinary words and everyday life (and to their harmonic relation), linked to a truth always meant as a practice. My conclusion will be that moral perfectionism can be conceived and still practiced, today, as an ethics and politics of responsibility, i.e. of attention to and care for the ordinary.

“What I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think. This rule, equally arduous in actual and in intellectual life, may serve for the whole distinction between greatness and meanness.”

R.W. Emerson, Self-Reliance

I. Ancient Perfectionism

“All that concerns me” is my everyday life

My central argument in this paper will be that moral perfectionism cannot be understood in its radical philosophical, ethical and political dimensions unless we trace its tradition back to the ancient Greek conception of philosophy as a way of life. Hence, to begin, I will argue that the Emersonian maxim quoted above, “what I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think”¹, far from being simply a Romantic, self-centered claim of the uniqueness and value of the individual, constitutes on the contrary the reactivation of a more ancient principle, which resides at the very basis of the Western philosophical tradition. Ancient philosophy is in fact entirely traversed by the imperative of separating carefully what does concern us, because it is in our power, from what does not, precisely because it is not in our power. It is the well-known ancient struggle of man against the unpredictability of Fate (Tyche), which takes the form of a series of typical couples of opposites –

¹ Emerson 1841: 143.
soul versus body, inward goods versus outward goods, knowledge versus opinion, wise man versus common man, etc. The purpose of these pairs of opposites is clear: defining, within the framework of human life, a space that is separate from the dominance of Fate, in which man can consequently find his ‘truth’ (what is essential to him), his autonomy and his freedom – in a word, the place of human happiness. Ancient philosophy, then, is a matter of what matters, a matter of knowing what matters for me and being able to construct my conduct and life on this basis.

This fundamental feature of ancient philosophy is particularly evident in Stoic philosophy, founded – as it is well known – on a preliminary distinction between what is in our power and what is not. A theoretical distinction that the Stoics translate immediately into a practical rule: what matters for us, because it is in our power, is only moral good or evil – that is, doing the (moral) good and avoiding to do the (moral) evil. Everything else, strictly speaking, does not matter for us (because it is not in our power), and so it must be considered indifferent. The opening chapter of the Manual of Epictetus is very explicit on this:

Of things, some are in our power, and others are not. In our power are: discernment, impulsion to act, desire, aversion and, in a word, whatever are our own acts. Not in our power are the body, property, reputation, public offices and, in a word, whatever are not our own acts. And the things in our power are by nature free, not subject to restraint, nor hindrance; but the things not in our power are weak, slavish, subject to restraint, in the control of others. Remember then that if you think the things which are by nature slavish to be free, and the things which are in the power of others to be your own, you will be hindered in your action, you will lament, you will be disturbed, you will blame both gods and men. On the contrary, if you think that only which is your own to be your own, and if you think that what is another’s, as it really is, belongs to another, no man will ever compel you, no man will hinder you, you will never blame anyone, you will accuse no one, you will do nothing against your will, no one will harm you, you will have no enemy – for you will not suffer any harm.2

Manifely, it is not just a matter of theoretical knowledge. On the contrary, Stoic philosophy incites men to learn and memorize a set of essential principles, which aim to govern in detail the practice of their everyday life. Therefore, these rational principles of behaviour do not have to remain at the level of logos, of pure discourse, but rather (to use Michel Foucault’s words) they have to be “subjectivated” through a series of specific “ascetic techniques”3, in order to make them coincide with the ethos of the subject – that is, in order to orient his practical conduct. Hence, following Pierre Hadot, we shall conceive ancient philosophy essentially as a choice and a way of life, rather than a theoretical discourse. Or better, in ancient philosophy, theoretical discourse is never considered an end in itself, but it is always clearly and decidedly put in the service of practice, i.e. of a certain way of living and being. Ancient philosophy is “an exercise of the thought, will, and the totality of one’s being”, it is “a method of spiritual progress”, which demands “a radical conversion and transformation of the individual’s way of being”. Its goal is the achievement of a definite

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2 Epictetus 1991: 11 (translation partially revised).
3 Foucault uses this expression to point at the “more or less coordinated set of exercises that are available, recommended and even obligatory, and anyway utilisable by individuals in a moral, philosophical and religious system in order to achieve a definitive spiritual objective”; i.e. “a certain transformation, a certain transfiguration of themselves as subjects”; Foucault 1981-82: 398 (416-417).
4 Cf. Ibid.: 318 (334). See also Foucault 1984b: 1532.
existential state: wisdom. Following these suggestions, in the first lecture of L’herméneutique du sujet, Foucault defines ‘spirituality’ (as opposed to ‘philosophy’) as “the search, practice and experience through which the subject carries out the necessary transformations on himself in order to have access to the truth” or, as he says in an later interview, to have access to a certain mode of being. Hence, Foucault speaks of ‘spirituality’ when it is the life of man – not in its biological sense (zoe), but rather in its ethical, political and social sense (bios) – that becomes the main object of his care (epimeleia), as well as the real stake (enjeu) of his work of transformation and transfiguration practiced on himself.

This is why the ancient philosopher is someone who, despite what other people think and do (and ergo, despite the risk of being considered odd), does not miss the importance of his everyday life. On the contrary, he cares for his life – for every single, low and apparently meaningless detail of it – because his life is precisely what concerns him, what matters for him, what deserves all his attention and ethical work. As Emerson says, the (arduous) application of this distinction between what concerns me and what the people think allows us to discriminate “between greatness and meanness”, that is, between philosophers – who take seriously the fundamental question of ancient ethics, “How ought I to live?” – and other people, who fail to notice the importance and practical consequences of such a question. This rule, according to Emerson, is so arduous to apply because “it is easy in the world to live after the world’s opinion”, as it is easy “in solitude to live after our own”; but “the great man” is only “he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude” – a solitude that, consequently, “must not be mechanical, but spiritual, that is, must be elevation”. In other words, and to bring this rule to its utmost consequences: since the social virtue most requested is conformity, “whoso would be a man, must be a nonconformist”. Which is also the coherent conclusion of ancient philosophy understood as ‘spirituality’ (i.e. a way of life), as Foucault clearly shows in his 1984 lectures at the Collège de France, dedicated to the figure of Socrates and, later, to ancient Cynicism.

On the (perfectionist) relation between words and deeds

Plato’s Laches is the fundamental text to consider if we want to understand how Socrates’ philosophical discourse, his practice of truth-telling (parrhesia), can be combined with his effort to care for the meanest details of his everyday life. In fact, the “style of life”, the “form that we give to life”, constitute the essential object of Socratic parrhesia: as Nicias explains, in the Laches, Socrates’ interlocutor is always “led by the Socratic logos into ‘giving an account’ (didonai logon) of ‘himself, of the manner in which he now spends his days, and of the kind of life he has lived hitherto’”.

6 “La philosophie apparaissait ainsi comme un exercice de la pensée, de la volonté, de tout l’être, pour essayer de parvenir à un état, la sagesse, qui était d’ailleurs presque inaccessible à l’homme. La philosophie était une méthode de progrès spirituel qui exigeait une conversion radicale, une transformation radicale de la manière d’être”; Ibid.: 290 (265).
7 Foucault 1981-82: 16 (15).
10 Emerson 1841: 143 (emphasis added).
11 Ibid.: 154.
12 Ibid.: 141.
14 Foucault 1983a: 96.
means, then, ‘giving an account’ of the way we live and, in order to do it, “submitting” our life “to a touchstone, to a test (épreuve) which enables us to distinguish the good we have done from the evil we have done, in the course of our existence” 15. In this way, it is possible to examine and determine the true nature of the relation between words (logoi) and life (bios), since Socrates asks his interlocutor to demonstrate precisely whether he is able to show the harmony between the rational discourse he uses and the way in which he lives. Here, the touchstone (basanos) to test such a harmony, i.e. “the degree of accord between a person’s life and its principle of intelligibility” 16, is not constituted by the homologia understood as agreement between the discourses (logoi) of two or more interlocutors – as in the Gorgias 17. The basanos is rather represented by Socrates himself, who manifests through his way of living a perfectly harmonic relation, a perfect homologia, between his words and his deeds:

Socrates is able to use rational, ethically valuable, fine, and beautiful discourse; but unlike the sophist, he can use parrhesia and speak freely because what he says accords exactly with what he thinks, and what he thinks accords exactly with what he does. 18

We are confronted, here, with a twofold principle of harmony: Socrates is fully responsible for his words and his deeds, because both accord perfectly with what he thinks. Hence, the way of life emerges in Socratic parrhesia as something we have to take care of, but which we have to submit, during the entire course of our existence, to a test, to a touchstone that enables us to discriminate between good and evil. Indeed, the principle of homologia exposed in the Laches is based on the “harmony”, on the “symphony” 19 – established within the (practical) framework of a style of life – between logos and ethos, logos and bios. This harmony constitutes also the sign, the mark that makes Socrates’ parrhesia possible, allowing him to speak frankly and to call into question the existence, the way of life of his fellow citizens – that is to say: this harmony between logos and ethos has a value which is, at the same time, ethical and political. It is not by chance that, during an interview at Berkeley, Foucault claims that what interests him, what matters for him, is “politics as an ethics” – as an ethos, a way of life.

I do not conclude from this that one may say just anything within the order of theory, but, on the contrary, that a demanding, prudent, ‘experimental’ attitude is necessary; at every moment, step by step, one must confront what one is thinking and saying with what one is doing, with what one is. […] The key to the personal political attitude of a philosopher is not to be sought in his ideas, as if it could be deduced from them, but rather in his philosophy-as-life, his ethos. 20

To sum up, the ancient paradigm of (ethical and political) responsibility consists in the endless work of oneself on oneself, in the endless task of forging a harmonic relation be-

15 Foucault 1984a: 134 (my translation).
16 Foucault 1983a: 97.
17 Cf. Plato, Gorgias, 487E.
20 “Je n’en conclus pas qu’on peut dire n’importe quoi dans l’ordre de la théorie ; mais, au contraire, qu’il faut avoir une attitude exigeante, prudente, ‘expérimentale’ ; il faut à chaque instant, pas à pas, confronter ce qu’on pense et ce qu’on dit à ce qu’on fait et ce qu’on est. […] La clef de l’attitude politique personnelle d’un philosophe, ce n’est pas à ses idées qu’il faut la demander, comme si elle pouvait s’en déduire, c’est à sa philosophie, comme vie, c’est à sa vie philosophique, c’est à son ethos”; Foucault 1983b: 1404-1405 (374-375).
between the words we ordinarily use and our everyday life – and Socrates is the key figure that embodies this paradigm. In particular, according to Foucault, the *Laches* is to be considered the starting point of “a whole philosophical practice and activity, and Cynicism is obviously the main example of it”21. However, as I have already shown elsewhere22, the Cynic philosopher radicalizes the Socratic relation between *logos* and *bios*, and builds up his life in the form of a paradoxical transfiguration of the traditional philosophical life – that is, in the form of a “life other” (*vie autre*), which continuously *calls into question* the lives of others, using the weapon of a scandalous *ethos*, instead of a *parrhesiastic* discourse23. Thus, with Cynicism the ‘nonconformist side’ of the Socratic principle of harmony breaks out, and the philosophical life fully becomes a “manifestation of the truth”24. This manifestation of the truth is not abstract, it does not take place in the realm of pure theory, but rather within the everyday life of the Cynic philosopher, through his ordinary choices and the way he dresses and speaks:

To live philosophically is to show the truth through the *ethos* (the way one lives), the way one reacts (to a situation, a scene, when confronted with a particular situation), and obviously the doctrine one teaches; it is to show the truth in all these aspects and through these vehicles (*ethos* of the scene, *kairos* of the situation, and doctrine).25

However, in order to transfigure his life into such a manifestation of the truth (*alèthurgie*), in order to denounce and attack the common life of conformity and transform it into a “true life” (*vraie vie*), the Cynic philosopher has to undertake an endless ethical practice on himself, on his words and deeds, on every single detail of his way of life. Hence, the Cynic manifestation of the truth is nothing more – but nothing less! – than a courageous, scandalous and public manifestation of his (extra)ordinary way of life. Through this ethical work, the Cynic philosopher learns how to assume his ordinary gestures and words, even the smallest and apparently meaningless ones, as the real object of his attention and care. In this way, he builds up his everyday life as a touchstone for the lives of others, who claim the same theoretical principles (*logoi*), but do not allow them to forge (and be embodied in) their very *ethos*.

Thus, with Cynicism, we really come across the paradigm of a radical form of *resistance*. The Cynic philosopher, in fact, does not limit himself to the valorisation of his ever-

24 Foucault 1982-83: 315 (343).
25 “Vivre philosophiquement, c’est faire en sorte – par l’*ethos* (la manière dont on vit), la manière dont on réagit (à telle situation, dans telle ou telle scène, quand on est confronté à telle ou telle situation) et évidemment la doctrine que l’on enseigne – [de] montrer, sous tous ces aspects et par ces trois véhicules (l’*ethos* de la scène, le *kairos* de la situation et puis la doctrine), ce qu’est la vérité”; Ibid.: 316 (344).
26 “[Le cynisme] fait de la forme de l’existence une condition essentielle pour le dire-vrai. Il fait de la forme de l’existence la pratique réductrice qui va laisser place au dire-vrai. Il fait enfin de la forme de l’existence une façon de rendre visible, dans les gestes, dans le corps, dans la manière de s’habiller, dans la manière de se conduire et de vivre, la vérité elle-même”; Foucault 1984a: 159 (my translation).
ryday life and the (consequent) reversal of common values; on the contrary, he builds up his everyday life as a “militant” practice of opposition to the existing established power. He transfigures the everyday of his life, he makes it the site of perpetual risk (the risk of truthful-telling, or truth-living) and the core of his radical criticism of every form of social conformity. As Foucault says baldly, Cynic (true) life is a form of “explicit, voluntary and constant aggression towards humanity in general”, aiming “to change it”, to change its “moral attitude (its ethos)” but, at the same time, to change also “its habits, its customs, its ways of living”

It is an aggression towards society (and world) as they are, in order to give rise to a society (and a world) “other”. Cynicism is then the matrix of a form of life that does not aim merely “to show what the world is in its truth”, but rather “to show that the world will not reach its truth, will not transfigure and become other to attain what it is in its truth, unless through a change, a complete alteration – that is, the change and complete alteration in the relation of oneself with oneself”.

Indeed, as Foucault claims in La vie des hommes infâmes, if we must consider our everyday life important, it is precisely because it constitutes the main field of struggle – always uncertain and unsteady – between “power relations” and “practices of resistance”. In other words, ancient perfectionism shows us something still relevant: our everyday life matters not only in an ethical, but also in a political sense, and the work of oneself on oneself, applied even to the meanest details of the ordinary dimension of our words and deeds, really forms the fundamental core of every social and political practice of resistance that aims to be effective.

‘Truth’ as an event and a practice

Before considering modern perfectionism, however, we might ask what kind of truth we are facing, when we consider ancient philosophy in its perfectionist task of ethical self-transformation and radical struggle against conformity. According to Foucault, in fact, it is possible to identify a significant rupture that took place between ancient and modern conceptions of truth:

It would be interesting to compare Greek parrhesia with the modern (Cartesian) conception of evidence. For since Descartes, the coincidence between belief and truth is obtained in a certain (mental) evidential experience. For the Greeks, however, the coincidence between belief and truth does not take place in a (mental) experience, but in a verbal activity, namely, parrhesia.

27 “Le combat cynique est un combat, une agression explicite, volontaire et constante qui s’adresse à l’humanité en général, à l’humanité dans sa vie réelle avec comme horizon ou objectif de la changer, la changer dans son attitude morale (son ethos) mais, en même temps et par là-même, la changer dans ses habitudes, ses conventions, ses manières de vivre”; Ibid.: 258 (my translation).

28 “[C]ette pratique de la vérité caractérisant la vie cynique n’a pas pour but simple de dire et de montrer ce qu’est le monde en sa vérité. Mais elle a pour but, et pour but final, de montrer que le monde ne pourra rejoindre sa vérité, ne pourra se transfigurer et devenir autre pour rejoindre ce qu’il est dans sa vérité, qu’au prix d’un changement, d’une altération complète, le changement et l’altération complète dans le rapport qu’on a à soi”; Ibid.: 288-289 (my translation). Stanley Cavell claims that Emerson and Nietzsche’s moral perfectionism is characterized by “an expression of disgust with or a disdain for the present state of things so complete as to require not merely reform, but a call for a transformation of things, and before all a transformation of the self”; Cavell 1990: 46 (emphasis added).


30 Foucault 1983a: 14.
Since the epistemological model of evidence plays a fundamental (and founding) role within the framework of modern philosophical inquiry, these words mean also that, according to Foucault, there is a discontinuity between ancient and modern conceptions of philosophy itself. Stanley Cavell expresses almost the same idea when he writes that “after a millennium or so in which philosophy, as established in Greece, carried on the idea of philosophy as a way of life, constituted in view of the (perfectionist) task of caring for the self”, there has been “another millennium or so in which philosophy has seemed prepared to discard this piece of its mission”31. We can find a very similar historical description also in the works of Hadot, in particular where he marks the difference between “philosophical discourse” and “philosophy”. According to him, the essential turning point of this history is represented by Medieval Scholasticism and by the inclusion of philosophy in the cursus studiorum of the (recently born) universities: as a result of such an inclusion, in fact, philosophy becomes an institutional discipline to be taught, locked-up in the realm of theoretical abstraction, without any connection with what it has been in the ancient world – namely, a concrete attitude, an actual choice of existence, an ascetic work of self-transformation, a way of seeing the world and acting in it32. To use (again) a Foucauldian vocabulary, after Scholasticism and the “Cartesian moment”, philosophy – which, in the ancient world, had always been linked with the task of ‘spirituality’ – accepted and adopted the epistemological structure of science, claiming that the subject can have access to truth through a simple act of knowledge, which no longer has to do with his mode of being33. Thus, the epistemological truth became the model for philosophical truth-telling, which in turn became a truth-telling on science – “telling the truth of truth” (dire-vrai du vrai) – more and more detached from ordinary language and everyday life, and from the ethical techniques that ancient philosophers used to shape (and transfigure) them34.

Indeed, in ancient world, truth was closer to a model that Foucault calls “truth-event”, as opposed precisely to “truth-demonstration” – that is, to the modern epistemological conception of truth. Whereas the latter is “ubiquitous” (the question of truth is a question it is always possible to pose, and in relation to everything) and “universally accessible” (because, in principle, “no one is exclusively qualified” and no one is a priori disqualified “to state the truth”)35, the former is a “dispersed, discontinuous, interrupted truth which will only speak or appear from time to time, where it wishes to, in certain places” – a truth which has “its favorable moments, its propitious places, its privileged agents and bearers”. In other words, it is a truth that emerges as an “event”36.

We have, then, two series in the Western history of truth. The series of constant, constituted, demonstrated, discovered truth, and then a different series of the truth which does not belong to the order of what is, but to the order of what happens, a truth, therefore, which is not given in the form of discovery, but in the form of the event.37

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34 Cf. Foucault 1982-83: 211 (228-229).
37 “L’on a donc deux séries dans l’histoire occidentale de la vérité. La série de la vérité découverte, constante, constituée, démontrée, et puis une autre série, qui est la série de la vérité qui n’est pas de l’ordre de ce qui est, mais qui est de l’ordre de ce qui arrive, une vérité, donc, non pas donnée dans la forme de la découverte mais dans la forme de l’événement”; Ibid.: 237 (237).
As we have seen, according to Foucault, the ancient conception of truth cannot be associated with any particular mental state of the subject – and, therefore, it is not a truth-demonstration. It is rather conceived as an event, emerging from the agreement among the *logoi* of different interlocutors (Plato’s *Gorgias*), or from the harmony established and concretely showed, by an individual, between his *logos* and his *ethos* (Socratic *parrhesia*), or – directly and paradoxically – from the way of life itself (Cynicism). Anyhow, if we consider ancient philosophy in the light of our perfectionist work on ourselves and our ordinary words and life, it becomes manifest that, in such a framework, truth is not an epistemological concept based on the modern criterion of evidence, but an ethical *practice* which takes place in the course of human experience. Indeed, in ancient Greece, to be a philosopher means to give *importance* to everyday life and to pay *attention* to the details of common language and behaviour, in order to actively transform oneself and one’s relationship to others and to the world. Moreover, such an ethico-political transformation of the self marks a sharp distinction between philosophical life and the lives of other people, since it can be achieved only through a series of specific techniques that we may call ‘techniques of the ordinary’ – in order to emphasize that they take *ordinary* language and life of man as the essential object of their philosophical gaze and work of transfiguration.

As we have already observed, this way of conceiving truth and practicing philosophy has been somehow put aside in modern times. Nevertheless, in what follows I will argue that the attention to the ordinary and to truth as a practice has *survived* in the form of a hidden tradition, and it has been *renewed* during the last two centuries, primarily but not exclusively thanks to the transcendental American philosophy of Emerson and Thoreau.

**II. Modern perfectionism**

*The struggle against conformity*

The fundamental question of ancient ethics significantly re-emerges at the beginning of Emerson’s essay *Fate*, and thus it attests a (renewed) perfectionist will *not to miss* the importance of the practical question of our way of life:

To me […] the question of the times resolved itself into a practical question of the conduct of life. How shall I live?

Indeed, for modern (as for ancient) perfectionism, each moral choice concerns the *kind of life* we are willing to live and the meaning and value we are ready to attribute to it. Besides, this is not the sole element of continuity: the theme of criticism, of the struggle against social customs and conformity, which is at the core of ancient (Socratic and Cynic) perfectionism, also plays a central role within the framework of modern perfectionism. In fact, as Emerson shows in *Self-Reliance*, conformity is still perceived as one of the main obstacles along the path of perfectionism, precisely since it prevents the individual to be self-reliant and to undertake the quest for his better or higher self. According to Emerson,

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38 Cf. Lorenzini 2010b: 486-487.
39 Emerson 1860: 346.
society is a joint-stock company, in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater. The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion.40

This is why, as already quoted, whoso would be a man, must be a nonconformist – that is, he must believe his own thought and, above all, he must believe that what is true for him in his private heart is true for all men41. Here, in this demanding claim that our own private ‘voice’, if it is expressed on the basis of self-reliance, should become a public (and even a universal) voice, it is possible to find the eminently political dimension of Emersonian perfectionism42.

To one in the state Emerson names self-reliance, every word urged from one in the state of conformity causes chagrin, violates the expression of our nature by pressing upon us an empty voice, hence would deprive us of participation in the conversation of justice.43

Likewise, Emerson claims that our “genuine” action – the action undertaken on the basis of self-reliance – will explain itself and our other genuine actions, but that, on the contrary, our conformity “explains nothing”44. Hence, our genuine action is supposed to operate a transition from the realm of private intelligibility to a universal dimension. We are not so far from Socratic parrhesia, which courageously claims its truth by relying on the harmony established between Socrates’ thoughts and his words and deeds. In Socrates too the main question is the question of expression, of finding our voice in the public, political conversation – not the conversation of Athens’ democratic assembly of citizens, but the ordinary, everyday conversation of justice, which represents the true political dimension of the polis45. Socratic parrhesia, as we have seen, aims to criticize conformity and to awaken the interlocutor to the necessity of finding his personal (non-mimetic) voice within democratic conversation, of caring for himself and of practicing virtue – as a result of an actual exercise of attention towards ordinary language and everyday life. According to Cavell, the aim of Self-Reliance is the same: Emerson’s writing constitutes an analogon of Socrates’ truth-telling, since it aspires to fight against “society’s demand for conformity”, through the expression of a person’s thought as “the imperative to an incessant conversion or refuguration of society’s incessant demands for his consent – his conforming himself – to its doings”. This is why Emerson’s writing too has to be “the object of aversion to society’s consciousness”46. Or better, on the one hand, it must be the outset of an ethical conversion and transformation, courageously operated on ourselves and our life, since “we must become

40 Emerson 1841: 141.
41 Ibid.: 138.
42 Cf. Laugier 2010: 77-93.
43 Cavell 1990: XXXVII.
44 Emerson 1841: 146.
45 Cf. Plato, The Apology of Socrates, 36B-E.
46 Cavell 1990: 37.
47 In modern perfectionism too, like in ancient perfectionism, we can find a sharp attention towards the kairos (the ‘opportune moment’), linked to the practice of courageously taking a risk. In Self-Reliance, Emerson suggests that, in order to answer adequately to our “genius” when it calls us, we must be prepared to accept the risk of breaking with our conformist and familiar everyday – even to the point of risking to lose it forever. Hence, we must be prepared to risk everything, without any certainty for the future, without any certainty that what we are doing is something different from a mere whim: “I shun father and mother and wife and brother when my genius calls me. I would write on the lintels of the door-post, Whim. I hope it is somewhat better than whim at last, but we cannot spend the day in explanation”; Emerson 1841: 142. The same sharp attention to the (perfectionist) kairos and to the risk rooted in it, can be found in Cavell’s analysis of the comedies of remarriage and melodramas. I am deeply indebted to Arnold I. Davidson for pointing out this line of reflection.
averse to this conformity, which means convert away from it, which means transform our
conformity, as if we are to be born (again)48. On the other, it must function as the propel-
lar for a real revolution, for a transfiguration of others, of society and the entire world,
which is very close to Cynic revolution (as Foucault describes it):

It is easy to see that a greater self-reliance must work a revolution in all the offices and
relations of men; in their religion; in their education; in their pursuits; their modes of living;
their association; in their property; in their speculative views. 49

Emerson’s self-reliance is an attitude all at once ethical and political, which does not
consist in the (unlikely) discovery of ‘the self’ as the ultimate place for us to rest and feel
safe, but rather in the creation of a new relation of ourselves to ourselves, the others and the
entire world. This attitude is exercised through the attention to the words of our ordinary
life50, through the importance we must recognize in them and, consequently, through a
“self-transformation” that aims to attain “the further or higher self of each” (an infinite,
never concluded task)51. At the same time, this attitude is traversed by the contrast between
imitation (conformity) and the exercise of individuality. “Insist on yourself; never imitate”52
is, indeed, the essential corollary of Emersonian self-reliance. This is why it is perhaps pos-
sible to consider the work of John Stuart Mill as a part of the modern perfectionist tradition –
and I am thinking especially of On Liberty’s third chapter, centered, as it is well known,
on individuality, originality and even eccentricity as fundamental ingredients of human
happiness. In fact, according to Mill, “unity of opinion, unless resulting from the fullest and
freest comparison of opposite opinion, is not desirable, and diversity not an evil, but a
good”. This diversity must function not only at the level of opinions, but also and above all
in relation to our everyday life:

As it is useful that while mankind are imperfect there should be different opinions, so it
is that there should be different experiments of living; that free scope should be given to va-
riet eies of character, short of injur y to others; and that the worth of different modes of life
should be proved practically, when anyone thinks fit to try them.53

For, where the rule of conduct is not the person’s own character, but social traditions or
customs, “there is wanting one of the principal ingredients of human happiness, and quite
the chief ingredient of individual and social progress”. Thus, against the “yoke” of confo-
rmity, we must always encourage the free development of individuality, and a wider exer-
cise of spontaneity and originality: in a society where a very limited (and fixed) set of ac-
cepted models of life exists, indeed, people “should do absolutely nothing but copy one an-
other” – and, according to Mill (and to Emerson), “he who lets the world, or his own por-
tion of it, choose his plan of life for him has no need of any other faculty than the ape-like
one of imitation”. On the contrary, “he who chooses his plan for himself employs all his
faculties”: he beautifies and perfects himself, since human nature “is not a machine to be
built after a model, and set to do exactly the work prescribed to it, but a tree, which requires
to grow and develop itself on all sides, according to the tendency of the inward forces
which make it a living thing”54. Consequently, there is no reason that “all human existence

48 Cavell 1990: 47. “Emerson’s authorship enacts […] a relationship with his reader of moral perfectionism in
which the friend permits one to advance toward oneself, which may present itself, using another formulation of
Emerson, as attaining our unattained self”; Cavell 1995: 202.
49 Emerson 1841: 157 (emphasis added).
51 Cavell 1990: 53.
52 Emerson 1841: 160.
53 Mill 1859: 120 (emphasis added).
54 Ibid.: 120-123. Here, Mill explicitly refers to the ancient “Greek ideal of self-development”; Ibid.: 127.
should be constructed on some one or some small number of patterns”, but rather – Mill argues – “different people should be allowed to lead different lives”, since a person’s own mode of laying out his existence is the best, “not because it is the best in itself, but because it is his own mode”55. Therefore, in a sense, “the mere example of non-conformity, the mere refusal to bend the knee to custom, is itself a service”, also if it does not propose a better way of living, but merely a different one.

Precisely because the tyranny of opinion is such as to make eccentricity a reproach, it is desirable, in order to break through that tyranny, that people should be eccentric. Eccentricity has always abounded when and where strength of character has abounded; and the amount of eccentricity in a society has generally been proportional to the amount of genius, mental vigour, and moral courage it contained. That so few now dare to be eccentric marks the chief danger of the time.56

Hence, exercising individuality means daring to take our way of life itself as the object of a positive transformation, in order to find our voice and engage ourselves in a (perfectionist) effort of self-improvement. Moreover, as in the case of Cynicism, this effort of self-improvement and transformation is not ‘individualistic’ – if we mean, by this word, ‘selfish’, ‘narcissistic’. On the contrary, it has essentially to do with other people and with the possibility of building up something like a new “shared” world – since it is the weapon we must use to fight against social conformity, and endlessly call into question the others, their empty words and their lives of quiet desperation. This is why the “philosophical mission” of Mill’s writing, as in the case of Emerson’s, is precisely “to awaken us to the question he poses”57, that is to say: it is a critical mission, very close to the older Cynic one. Indeed, according to Emerson, the fundamental task of thinking is the reversal of our way of life and the perpetual struggle with (and within) the present, characterized by the tension between society “as it stands” and society “as it may become”58. Such a twofold ethic-political “pattern of disappointment and desire” is considered by Cavell as one of (or perhaps the) essential feature of moral perfectionism:

The very conception of a divided self and a doubled world, providing a perspective of judgement upon the world as it is, measured against the world as it may be, tends to express disappointment with the world as it is, as the scene of human activity and prospects, and perhaps to lodge the demand or desire for a reform or transfiguration of the world.59

Exemplarity, responsibility and the ordinary

This struggle for the ethical transfiguration of oneself, which acquires at once a social and political dimension and which has ancient Cynicism as its (theoretical and practical) matrix, can also be discovered at work in some of the most important European revolutionary movements, or more precisely – as Foucault claims in Le courage de la vérité – in modern “militancy” (militantisme), understood as a specific form of life60. In particular, the figure of the Spanish anarchist Buenaventura Durruti, among others, can help us to analyse more deeply this close relation between (personal) ethical subjectivation and the emergence of a shared movement of resistance that aims to transform society and the world concretely.

55 Ibid.: 128, 132-133.
56 Ibid.: 132 (emphasis added).
58 Cavell 2004: 97.
59 Ibid.: 141.
60 Ibid.: 2.
As it is known, Durruti was one of the protagonists of the Catalan revolt and the conquest of Barcelona; more generally he is considered the real anarchic “hero” of the Spanish civil war. He was not an intellectual, but a metal-worker who did not write anything, who did not leave (almost) anything material after his death. Therefore, in his (peculiar) biography of Durruti, Hans Magnus Enzensberger states clearly that we are confronted with the task of reconstructing the life of a man “whose patrimony consisted in ‘a change of underwear, two guns, a binoculars and a pair of sunglasses’”62. That is to say, Durruti’s life did not express itself in the accumulation of material things, but rather in his deeds – and, as a direct consequence, for others, it became ‘exemplary’63. Indeed, if so many Spanish workers followed and spontaneously obeyed Durruti, this was precisely because he did construct and present his (ordinary) life in the form of an example – of an exemplary life. As the Italian socialist Carlo Rosselli writes, the revolutionary hero is neither chief nor myth, but rather a man who tries to help the work of social renewal “through the exemplary renewal of himself”64. It is not by chance, then, that we are assured that Durruti “lived a life absolutely consonant with his principles”, that he “lived for what he believed” (in fact, “his ideas were not a hobby for him; on the contrary, he wanted to translate them into action”), and that we must not look for his “heroism” within the pages of newspapers, but rather “in his everyday life”65. For all these reasons, people considered him as the embodiment of that “faith in a new society” which was deeply rooted in their hearts too66 – in short, they recognized in him, in his words and life, their own “rejected thoughts”67.

Therefore, through this notion of exemplarity, we can concretely link the perfectionist transformation of ourselves and our everyday life to the struggle aiming to change and transfigure others, society and the entire world. In the construction of his life as an exemplary life, in fact, Durruti did not suggest that the same construction was useless for others, he did not prevent others from experiencing such a (personal and always unique) ethical transformation. On the contrary, he emphasized its necessity and urgency, its value as a preliminary step for every further perfectionist effort of revolution: the first struggle we have to combat is the struggle within ourselves, because “no one has the reason for this revolution if each of us has not”69. Indeed, the function of the exemplary and (extra)ordinary life of Durruti was to show (rather than ‘to teach’) practically that nothing is necessary as such, nothing is ‘natural’ in human society, and that everything is important – every ordinary word and gesture has an ethical and political value. Durruti assumed the responsibility for his words and deeds precisely through the creation of an (already Socratic) harmony between thoughts, words and life – and in this harmony resides, ultimately, his exemplarity. The construction of a shared world (of struggle, of resistance) and the perfectionist transformation of ourselves are then nothing but the two sides of the same coin:

Huge amounts of money passed by the hands of Durruti, and nevertheless I used to repair his shoe soles with patches, because he did not have enough money to bring them to the

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63 Cf. Ibid.: 257-260.
67 Emerson 1841: 139. Thus it is possible to say, following Nietzsche, that “the rare and most valuable exemplar” is not another person, but one’s own “higher self”; cf. Cavell 2004: 200.
69 Cavell 1990: 55 (emphasis added).
70 A harmony that has obviously nothing to do with the idea of truth as an improbable “correspondence” (mise en correspondance) of our thoughts or words with an external reality; cf. Laugier 2009: 172.
We used to go to his house, and he was often wearing an apron, to peel the potatoes: his wife was working. The next day, he took his gun and came down in the street, to face a world of social repression.71

Paying attention to the everyday of our words and lives allows us to return to an ordinary that is not the place of final rest, of absolute peace, but rather that has to be conceived as a propellant for the perfectionist transformation of ourselves, society and the entire world. Such an attention can produce, evidently, different consequences, and encourage different kinds of conduct – but it is essentially the same attention exercised by Thoreau in refusing to pay his poll taxes to a government that still accepted slavery and was waging war on Mexico. Indeed, in his famous essay on *Civil Disobedience*, Thoreau makes it plain that his act of resistance is rooted in his capability to pay attention to the details of ordinary life, and in his will not to miss their ethico-political value. In a democracy (it could be said), we can easily use many other legal methods to express our dissent and try to change things; but this easiness is only an illusion.72 We need to see that every word we speak and every action we accomplish compromises us, and so requires always a choice – since, through it, we daily express our consent or dissent to our democratic government. It is not a matter of seeing something hidden, but rather of being able to see what is under our eyes, what is so difficult to perceive precisely because of its plainness:

We have long known that the role of philosophy is not to discover what is hidden, but to render visible what precisely is visible, which is to say, to make appear what is so close, so immediate, so intimately tied to ourselves that, as a consequence, we do not perceive it.74

This capability to see what is visible, i.e. to pay attention to it, is not natural, but rather a competence to be acquired through a specific education. Therefore, a work of ethical (re)construction of ourselves and reshaping of our lives turns out to be necessary to meet an ordinary which always precedes us, but can never be directly grasped. It is “a task to come to see the world as it is”.75 Such a task, such work on ourselves, leaves room for the emergence of the ordinary as an event (as something important for us, something that matters) and, consequently, for experience itself – for our possibility of having an experience. What is at stake here is the construction of an ‘ethics of the ordinary’, which is only the other face of a “politics of the ordinary”.76 Indeed, for Thoreau, it is a question of (political) responsibility: he cannot accept that his government acts unjustly, he feels compromised,

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72 Cf. Thoreau 1849.
73 “In a democracy the speaking of public thoughts is apt to seem, in its open possibility, the easiest way to speak; for Emerson it is the most necessary and the hardest”; Cavell 1990: 31.
74 “Il y a longtemps qu’on sait que le rôle de la philosophie n’est pas de découvrir ce qui est caché, mais de rendre visible ce qui précisément est visible, c’est-à-dire de faire apparaître ce qui est si proche, ce qui est si immédiat, ce qui est si intime lié à nous-mêmes qu’à cause de cela nous ne le percevons pas”; Foucault 1978: 540-541 (my translation). See also Cavell 2004: 33.
75 Murdoch 1970: 91.
76 On the relation between self-reliance, experience and education, see Laugier 2006.
77 Cf. Laugier 2010: 141-159.
since in a democracy each of us is responsible for each decision of our government – ergo, each of us must always keep the possibility to express dissent open and alive.78

[In an encounter over justice, there are sides, or positions, and while there may in the moment be nothing to do, and nothing further to say, there is still something to show: say consent or dissent. Responsibility remains a task of responsiveness.79

Responsibility (and disobedience) remains a task of responsiveness through which Thoreau tries to find his voice – since “finding my voice consists not in finding an agreement with everybody, but in making a claim (revendication)”80. But responsibility (and disobedience) is also a matter of way of life. Indeed, as it clearly emerges in his essay, it is not (only) his conscience that Thoreau opposes to his government, but rather – and directly – his life itself. He asks: “How does it become a man to behave toward this American government today?” As we can see, such a question concerns essentially the kind of man one wants to be, and the kind of man Thoreau wants to be – he claims – cannot be “associated” to a government which is “the slave’s government also”81. Hence, as a result of this question, which I take to be the perfectionist question of Civil Disobedience, a renewed and higher ideal of democracy emerges: ‘democracy’ does not mean to vote, when we have to, for what we think is right, and then leave the task of managing it to the majority. On the contrary, ‘democracy’ means to take care of the right, to be “vitally concerned that that right should prevail”, since “even voting for the right is doing nothing for it”82. Therefore, “the mission of perfectionism generally, in a world of false (and false calls for) democracy, is the discovery of the possibility of democracy, which to exist has recurrently to be (re)discovered”83. It is through the touchstone of this ‘democratic’ way of life that the actions of our democratic government have to be tested, as Thoreau claims clearly: injustice can be considered a part of “the necessary friction of the machine of government”, but “if it is of such a nature that it requires you to be the agent of injustice to another, then, I say, break the law. Let your life be a counter friction to stop the machine. What I have to do is to see, at any rate, that I do not lend myself to the wrong which I condemn.”84

Here again we can see the legacy of the ancient (perfectionist) idea of the harmony to be established between what we say and what we do, between logos and ethos. In other words, Thoreau is saying that, if it is necessary to find our voice within the democratic discourse and to claim our personal voice publicly, we must always remember that this voice can never be dissociated from the practicing of what we claim within the framework of our everyday life:

The question of democracy is really the question of voice. I must have a voice in my history, and I must recognize myself in what my society says or shows and therefore, somehow, give it my voice, accept that it speaks in my name. Disobedience is the necessary solution when there is dissonance: I do not hear myself any longer, in a discourse that sounds false – an experience that each of us can daily have.85

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79 Cavell 1990: 25.
80 Laugier 2010: 89 (my translation).
81 Thoreau 1849: 238 (emphasis added).
82 Ibid.: 240.
83 Cavell 1990: 16-17.
84 Thoreau 1849: 243 (emphasis added).
85 “La question de la démocratie est bien celle de la voix. Je dois avoir une voix dans mon histoire, et me reconnaître dans ce qui est dit ou montré par ma société, et ainsi, en quelque sorte, lui donner ma voix, accepter
The question of democracy, then, is the question of the (harmonic or dissonant) relation between my voice and political discourse. And the perfectionist touchstone of this relation is represented by my capability of assuming the responsibility for my voice, which is possible only if I am able to establish a homologia between my voice and my everyday life – in order to transfigure the latter, and make it the highest practical example of the correct (true) use of the former. In this way, I will no longer feel the temptation to speak by quoting the words of others, hiding behind imitation: “Man is timid and apologetic; he dares not say ‘I think’, ‘I am’, but quotes some saint or sage”. Conformity will be overcome only as a result of our ethical work on ourselves, which implies the establishment of a critical relation to others and the world (as it is). This is why, according to Cavell, civil disobedience is how Thoreau names the “power to demand the change of the world as a whole”.

III. Conclusion

I hope to have shown in this paper how modern perfectionism re-invented ancient perfectionism, through the re-activation of the imperative to pay attention to our ordinary words and everyday life (and to their harmonic relation), linked to a truth always meant as a practice. Indeed, in modern perfectionism too, truth does not represent the final and absolute goal of human destiny, nor it is placed within the (mental) framework of Cartesian evidence. On the contrary, like in ancient perfectionism, truth emerges from the practical relation we are able to establish between our words and our deeds: it is an ethical, rather than an epistemological truth – a truth-event that, to be grasped (if ever such a thing is possible), requires the endless task of the work of oneself on oneself. Hence, ancient and modern perfectionisms advocate the practice of a series of specific ethical techniques, in order not to miss the importance of our ordinary words and life.

Only within such a framework, I think, is the following claim by Emerson intelligible:

This conformity makes [most men] not false in a few particulars, authors of a few lies, but false in all particulars. Their every truth is not quite true. Their two is not the real two, their four not the real four; so that every word they say chagrins us and we know not where to begin to set them right.

Both Iris Murdoch and Cora Diamond stress the fundamental role played by the work of attention in our moral life, which is not “something that is switched off in between the occurrence of explicit moral choices”, but rather “something that goes on continually”. What is crucial is precisely “what happens in between such choices”, and it is here, at this very level, that we can fully understand the importance of moral attention (and the risk of moral inattention), since “I can only choose within the world I can see, in the moral sense of ‘see’ which implies that clear vision is a result of moral imagination and moral effort”. When it is a matter of our moral life, to give importance to attention, and to improvisation, means to

66 Cf. Laugier 2010: 90 (my translation, emphasis added).
67 Emerson 1841: 151.
69 Emerson 1841: 144 (emphasis added).
70 Murdoch 1970: 37.
give importance to our capability of seeing the details, the particulars, and “to struggle to make sense” of them. Indeed, moral thought does not take place “in a situation with fixed, given possibilities”: on the contrary, through the work of attention and improvisation, through “the exercise of creative imagination”, a moral agent discovers himself capable of transforming the situation he thought to be necessary in an adventure of personality.

This is precisely what is at stake in (ancient and modern) moral perfectionism. The necessity of acquiring a specific competence, which enables us to see an ordinary always under our eyes, on the one hand, entails the transformation of our perception of things as a result of the exercise of our creative imagination; on the other, it indicates our need for someone who, thanks to his creative imagination, is able to show us things in a different light – like Socrates in the Crito (Diamond), but also like the Cynics, like Thoreau and Durruti, through their practical examples of ordinary resistance. In fact, though philosophy tries always to break with the ordinary understood as the (illusory) natural attitude of common sense, as the place of habits, prejudices and conformity, such a rupture is never a mere refusal. It rather takes the (paradoxical) form of a militant acceptance, since the ordinary is the ‘real’ of philosophy only when and if it is transformed, transfigured by it, by its gaze and its practices. The (perfectionist) philosopher always tries not to miss what matters, i.e. the ordinary dimension of his language and life; he tries to become responsible for it, assuming it as the real object of his reflection and action – a hard task, as we have seen, always traversed by the ambiguity and the uncanniness of the ordinary and, as a consequence, by the (necessary) menace of skepticism.

Thus, the perfectionist philosopher establishes his relation to ordinary language and life as a relation of restlessness and alterity; and through the transformation of himself, of his way of seeing and saying the world, and of his conduct, he constantly aims to use the valorisation of the ordinary as the essential propellant for a positive transfiguration of the ordinary itself. This transfiguration takes the form of the creation of a higher self, of a new personal and social intelligibility, and of a world that is new and radically other. It is what Cavell calls “the practice of the ordinary”:

Sharing the intuition that human existence stands in need not of reform but of reformation, of a change that has the structure of a transfiguration, Wittgenstein’s insight is that the ordinary has, and alone has, the power to move the ordinary, to leave the human habitat habitable, the same transfigured.

This is why moral perfectionism can be conceived and still practiced, today, as an ethics and politics of responsibility, of attention to and care for the ordinary, engaged in an “endless” but fully human struggle against skepticism – that is, against the temptation of

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95 “[I]t seem[s] to me […] work for an ambitious philosophy to attempt to keep philosophy open to the threat or temptation to skepticism”; Cavell 1990: 35.
96 “Is the idea of a new world intelligible to mere philosophy? Philosophy can accept the existence of other worlds, of various similarities to our own, I mean to this one. But new? That at once seems to speak of something like a break with this one, or a transformation or conversion of it”; Cavell 1989: 94. “Perfectionism, as I think of it, is not a competing theory of the moral life, but something like a dimension or tradition of the moral life that spans the course of Western thought and concerns what used to be called the state of one’s soul, a dimension that places tremendous burdens on personal relationships and on the possibility or necessity of the transforming of oneself and of one’s society”; Cavell 1990: 2.
97 Cavell 1989: 46-47.
“empty[ing] out my contribution to words, so that language itself, as if beyond me, exclusively takes over the responsibility for meaning”98. Perfectionism, understood as an ethico-political exercise of transfiguration of oneself, others and the entire world, aims to bring together and harmonize words and life; thus, it incites us to courageously and openly assume the responsibility for our words, in the double sense of meaning and doing what we say. It is this twofold challenge – difficult, experimental and always to be renewed – that characterizes “perfectionism’s moral urgency” in both its ancient and its modern form:

In Emerson’s way of speaking, “one day” (“Each philosopher… has only done, as by a delegate, what one day I can do for myself”) always also means today; the life he urgently speaks for is one he forever says is not to be postponed. It is today that you are to take the self on; today that you are to awaken and to consecrate yourself to culture, specifically, to domesticate it gradually, which means bring it home, as part, now, of your everyday life.99

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98 Ibid.: 57.
99 Cavell 1990: 54-55.


