

Phänomenologische Erziehungswissenschaft

Luigina Mortari

The Philosophy of Care



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Phänomenologische Erziehungswissenschaft

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Ontological Reasons for Care

1

The Primacy of Care: Some Points for Reflection

In the field of human experience some things are essential and indispensable. Sometimes, however, this very essentiality, though clear in daily life, may elude the work of the thinking. It is often the case that the essential—the fundamental and inevitable part of experience—is what is proximal to us, but just because it is ontically so close may paradoxically be hidden from us and its ontological meaning remains constantly overlooked (Heidegger 1962, p. 69).

This is particularly evident in the phenomenon of care. An indisputable and evident fact is that care is something essential and pivotal, because life cannot flourish without it. For this reason “all people want to be cared for” and “the world would be a better place if we all cared more for one another” (Noddings 2002, p. 11). There is need for goodness as well as for protecting oneself from suffering; care is the necessary response to these needs.

Knowledge about the ontological necessity of care has ancient roots. In the *Phaedrus*, care is considered an essential trait not only of mortals, but also of gods. Indeed, Zeus is said to exercise his divine power when he disposes and cares for all things for the best (Plato, *Phaedrus*, 246e). In Book VII of the *Republic*, Socrates explains to Glaucon that it is fair to ask and compel philosophers to “care for and guard” other citizens, because they have acquired a proper vision of beautiful, right and good things through the uplifting path of knowledge and therefore are able to govern the city (520a).

When we think about birth, about our coming into the world, we envision light that opens on to being. For this reason, we can affirm that coming into being is like coming into light as an enlightened entity. According to Heidegger (1962, p. 401),

care enlightens the essence of the human being, since care is the essential ontological trait of being-there, or in other words “Dasein’s being is care” (1962, p. 329). The essence of human being “lies in its ‘to be’ (Heidegger 1962, p. 68) and in order to realize existence it is necessary to care for life. To be in the life means being called to care (Heidegger 1962, p. 332). Indeed, from beginning to end of life, human being has to care for her/himself and for others, and to take care of some things. Since the human being is brought to life with care, we can say that “each one of us is what he pursue and cares for” (Heidegger 1988, p. 159).

Stating that we become what we care for and that the ways of caring shape our being means that if we care about certain relationships, our being will be formed upon the various components of these relationships, whether beneficial or harmful. If we care about certain ideas, the structure of our thought will be shaped by this care. In other words, our mental experience will rely on the ideas that we have cultivated and will suffer the lack of those we have neglected. If we take care of some things, experiencing them and relating to them will structure our existence. If we take care of certain people, whatever happens in the relational exchange with these others will become part of ourselves. Care, in fact, could be defined as a *fabric of being*.

Care is imposed by the ontological quality of our being-there, which once it enters our lifetime “is already encumbered with the excess of itself” (Lévinas 2001, p. 15). Solidity is a quality which is opposed to lightness and a human being cannot live like a puff of wind. From the beginning, when, at birth, her/his body is touched by light, s/he has to take up a heavy burden: the duty of caring for her/his life, to care “for its endurance and conservation” (Lévinas 2001, p. 10).

When Hannah Arendt (1958) distinguishes between different forms of human activities, she talks of “work” as being constituted by those continuous, never-ceasing actions geared to satisfy primary needs. Care can be defined as the work of living and existing, because the lack of being that makes care necessary never finds a solution. We shall never attain a position of sovereignty over being, nor do we ever fully possess our condition. The intimate fragility of being-there, caused by lacking of sovereignty on life, makes care necessary along all the life. This work takes one’s breath away, allows for no pause. It is a work that occupies every single moment.

Even in the most perfect of worlds, with no horror of war or starvation and where everybody has enough to sustain their life, there will always be a need for care. In some phases of life, a state of fragility and vulnerability makes us especially dependent on others—in childhood for instance or in illness. In other phases, like adulthood, even if we have some degree of autonomy and self-sufficiency, without the caring help of others we cannot cultivate and express our possibilities

of being, nor can we find comfort for our pain. Care is ontologically essential: it protects life and helps make existence possible. Good care keeps one's being steeped in goodness, and it is this goodness that gives shape to the generative basis of our living and that structures that layer of being that keeps us firmly among things and among others. Practicing care is therefore putting ourselves in touch with the heart of life.

It is often the case that a theoretical bias makes us lose our way among irrelevant issues. As Hölderlin reminds us in his poem *Remembrance*, it is not beneficial for the mind to wander far from thoughts inherent to life, while thoughts from the heart should be expressed; if truth be told, we should cultivate thinking which is rooted in the things essential to life. If we accept the presupposition that when we examine issues related to our being-there the discourse that starts with what we can define as experiential evidence is meaningful, then it is obvious that we should consider care a pivotal issue because its value for life is unquestionable.

Although care is an essential life experience and despite the widespread usage of the term, we lack an adequately rigorous and precise knowledge on this subject. It is indeed true that fundamental ontological experiences, those that mix the texture of daily life, are the most obvious, and it is probably because of this that we are far from having developed an interpretative theory able to define its original meaning. That is why we need to elaborate a phenomenological *analysis of care*.

The demonstration of a subject's relevance is the necessary condition towards the legitimation of engaging the work of thinking in examining it; in this specific field, it means supplying arguments in favour of the thesis of the necessity of care in life. To provide this thesis with a solid foundation, we must *design a phenomenology of fundamental qualities of the human condition and then supply the evidence that care is an essential element in the maintenance of those qualities*.

At this point, we have an eidetic problem: to deal with the epistemic passage mentioned above we must understand what we are discussing. This requires knowing what is meant by care. However, the identification of the essence of care constitutes the objective of an analysis of care. We may extricate ourselves from this discursive loop by adopting the strategy Socrates applies in the maieutic dialogue: for instance, we may consider the *Charmides*, in which Socrates asks his interlocutor to define the concept of temperance, and then proceeds to dedicate the action of the dialogue to discovering its essence. Taking the Socratic method as our point of reference, we will start with a temporary and introductory definition of care, and then allow the unfolding of the theoretical argument to find a rigorous and precise conceptualization of this term.

A simple and essential definition of care, which emerges from a phenomenology that methodically researches the simple and the essential in daily experience,

is the following: *to care is to take to heart, to worry, to have consideration for, to dedicate ourselves to something.*

Once we have formulated this simple and at the same time essential concept, we need to verify if the human condition presents qualities which render necessary a way of being that involves taking existence to heart. Therefore, the questions that we ask are these: *what is the essential structure of the human condition? And what is the relationship of care to this essence?*

Being-There While Lacking Being

When the human being is born he/she has not a complete and well defined shape. When the mind thinks of the divine as the opposite of the human, this is perceived as fully completed and perfect form, since nothing divine needs further development. Any finite entity, on the other hand, is an imperfect and limited presence. It is substance without form, it takes shape with time, and its development is stimulated by the tension toward the search for shape. It is not for us to exist in reality in a pure and simple way. We cannot be at one with the world, as migrating birds are at one with the skyways they have always followed and who seem to have always inhabited the horizon. We carry within us a rupture with the world's order and because we are lacking this order, we are called upon to search for a meaningful balance to maintain us in a good relationship with reality.

We are incomplete beings, in a continuous state of need. We are not rounded off, autonomous and self-sufficient beings in our existence. This ontological state is proved by the fact that we are always desiring a full life that is never achieved. Since we are made of material and spiritual substance, we constantly need to nurture and preserve our body and our soul.

We are lacking in the sense that each of us is an entity without the power to switch from nothingness to being and in our essence we are something that can be, and within this "can" there is all the risk of not coming into being. Our ontological essence is "having the possibility of being" (Stein 2002, p. 34), in the sense that we have a disposition towards being. Having the quality of being possible does not mean not being, but rather the ability to become, and that transition is the passage from "being possible" to "being real".

Our own being, insofar as we know it is an inconsistent entity; we do not exist by ourselves and by ourselves we are nothing. At every moment we are facing the void and we must receive being as a gift, moment after moment. Even though this inconsistency we exist and at every moment we are in touch with the fullness of being (Stein 2002, I vol, p. 55).

The entity we are does not possess its own being, but is given it from elsewhere. The lack of self is caught in our enigmatic origin and in our end, in the emptiness of our past, in the impossibility to call into being anything that strives to become. We are dependent beings, depending on where we come from, on the world we are living in and where we are measuring our being. The weakness of the human condition consists in not possessing its being, but in needing time to become a being. Our being is transient, meaning it becomes from moment to moment and thus it is irrevocably exposed to the possibility of nothingness (Stein 2002, I vol, p. 58).

Our incompleteness is manifest when we are born without a shape to our being and we have the duty to forge it as time goes by without clearly being told what we are supposed to do to give good shape to our development and its unpredictable possibilities. In this sense we are essentially a problem for ourselves.

Just because we are lacking being and exposed to the possibility of not fulfilling our potential being, an empty abyss can yawn any moment under our feet. From the moment we come to life, we start losing life, because while living we consume the substance of life which is time. If only what is current is real, then our being caught between not-being-anymore and not-being-yet suffers a radical inconsistency. If we stop thinking about our being-there, we cannot but feeling its powerlessness. An impotence that, although it can rely on the power of reason, makes us very similar to other living beings. Semonides reminds us that: "As leaves on the trees is the lot of men" (fragm. 29). It is this ontological weakness that makes us beings who are destined to constantly question our presence.

We feel this exposure to nothingness very deeply. We start to feel it at the moment we become aware of the finiteness of our being-there, of the fact that death annihilates life. Death looms over the being-there simply because the being-there is constantly developing within a limited time and without any power over the scheme of its existence. When we reflect on our experience, we discover ourselves to be inconsistent, and this inconsistency is manifested by the fact that, even if we don't plan it, even if it is undesired, at any moment life can disappear. The possibility of no longer existing, that sets an end to the being-there, is a constant aspect that follows the entire span of existence in the world. From this feeling of losing existence instant by instant derives anguish, the anguish of an unpredictable and inevitable disappearance into nothingness.

It is, however, not only the void that nullifies life, that death which takes life away forever, but also the void that eliminates valuable things, such as the ties of friendship and love, but still leaves us alive. And it is that very feeling of the possibility of losing what we value, without the power of keeping these things within being, that generates a sense of our ineffectuality together with a feeling of lacerating despair. Death looms on the horizon and when it comes, we will no longer

exist. Instead, the disappearance of good things—which occurs when we are deprived of them—erases the value of our being but without liberating us from the work of living, forcing us to endure the void we are dragged into.

Precisely because we experience good things with our entire being, with our mind and with our heart, and in the case of love even with our body, the pain of a friendship that ends or of a love that finishes makes us feel as if our soul has been flayed, excoriated, devoured bit by bit, and we are unable to weaken our sensitivity to the suffering. We must, perforce, deal with our powerlessness before reality, perforce be subjected to it, since “all can be borne” (Sappho, frag. 3). And here is the problem: the heart can stand anything, it cannot break, it does not disappear, therefore we feel the full force of pain and are spared nothing.

If, on the one hand, we face the undeniable reality of a fragile ontological substance since it is prolonged from moment to moment and because of that it is acutely exposed to the possibility of disappearing, on the other, we experience that despite our fragility instant after instant we are preserved into being. This is the paradox of our existence: experiencing the fragility of our being, that is kept together moment after moment, without exercising any sovereignty on its development, and at the same time discovering ourselves bonded to the responsibility of answering the call of our being. As far as the fragility of our being is concerned, we cannot rely on our habits or on any other peaceful and reassuring routine. The poet Bacchylides (fifth Century BC): “Being a mortal, you must cultivate twin thoughts/that tomorrow will be the last day you see/the sun’s light/and that you will complete another fifty years/of truly prosperous life” (*Epinicians*, p. 80). To be destined to act as architects of our own existence is a difficult assignment, because the scheme of our being-there requires us to think long term, and this intellectual action implies that we isolate the condition that makes us feel postponed from one second to the next while knowing and feeling our profound fragility.

Not only we are born with a lacking being, and remain like this forever, but we are also trapped by the onus of becoming our own potentiality-for-being. This is the root of all the difficulty of living: we cannot exist in the lightness of a pre-established scheme of life free from the responsibility of finding the right direction in our own path in time, but we find ourselves immediately burdened by the encumbrance of an existence which must be devised instant by instant, having to make decisions without any definite orientation, in obscurity.

The first fact apparent to the mind is its own being, we can talk about the certitude of our existence, but this certitude is not reassuring, because from its beginning

it becomes a certitude of the burden of our own becoming and of the impossibility of eluding it. The exertion of our soul in sustaining the art of life derives from finding ourselves involved in actions that seem useless or in some cases completely futile; and even trusting that all the effort of “struggling out of children’s shoes” (Rilke 2000) is not a fruitless effort, we cannot evade the responsibility of giving shape and meaning to our own development. Lacking being does not mean lightness, but weight, a weight which this responsibility makes more and more evident. We are born with the obligation to become our own being-there. The human condition does not permit us to evade the imperative of being there. If thoroughly reflected upon, the “impossibility of nothingness”, of abstaining ourselves even for a moment from being there, makes it evident why freedom is so sought after.

The Directionality of Care

Preserving Vital Strength

Our ontological weakness makes us needy. Life constantly needs something and if it has to go without it, it ends. The problem consists in the fact that this something needs to be found. The continuous urgency to find things for ourselves represents an ineluctable necessity. Being thrown into the world means dealing with the permanent task of coping with life. This leads to the ontological burden of caring for life. In the first place, the care for life manifests itself as a search for things that nourish and preserve the life cycle. Care is essentially care about the being-there and the being-there which may be identified as care as care is “being toward something” in order to actualize the “uttermost possibilities of its own can-be” (Heidegger, 1992, pp. 312 and 313).

In Ancient Greek, the word *mérimna* [μέριμνα] defines care as the action of providing everything necessary to preserve life.¹ Care as *mérimna* is the way of being that represents the answer to *hormé* [ὁρμή] as referred to by Stoicism, or in other words the tendency to persist in being, an inevitable inclination since we are all called to live the life. The being-there is constantly expected to face the threats of a world that tests our capacity of staying in the here and now and deals with this through the way of being of provision which is in itself care.

The term *mérimna* recurs frequently in the Gospel and describes the concern of dealing with life, safeguarding the possibility of the continuation of being-there, having always continuously to find things in order to keep on existing. Even if our

¹ Please note that Greek translations are mainly made by the author herself directly from the originals.

culture considers the life of the mind, and then the spiritual activity, “the highest and perhaps purest activity” of which human beings are capable (Arendt 1958, p. 5), however the action of procuring material things to preserve life is not a kind of less valuable action. Taking care of things, so that we satisfy the needs that we have in the world, is not a degraded level of life in comparison to another spiritual level of existence, but it is the way of being that belongs to us, that coincides with us, because we are embodied entities that live in the world. The care for things is our care for life.

Although the care to save life from its weakness is inevitable, it can assume enormous proportions because of the anxiety that affects our soul when faced with our ontological fragility. Our lack of sovereignty over life engenders apprehension and anguish, which can lead us to a frantic seeking of things with the illusion that acquisition allows us to find a shelter for our fragility. It is this very craving, however, that ends up consuming our life itself.

In the parable of the birds, Jesus invites us not to worry [μή μεριμνᾶτε] too much about life and to consider the birds in the sky (Matt. 6,25), since the excessive concern for things and the attachment to material riches suffocate the search for the authentic sense of the life (Matt. 13,22). In inviting us not to care too much about material things, he uses the verb *merimnao* [μεριμνάω]. Concern for life, which is necessary in order to protect the continuation of being, can be transformed into excess, into a form of relentless perseverance in collecting what might be useful, and this excess that leads to anxiety can be interpreted as a consequence of the anguished realization of our condition of lacking, needy, beings.

A blessed life is perceived as “sine angore curae”, or in other words without the anguish of care (Augustine *Epistulae*, 55, 17), a necessary condition that helps us to find the middle way in caring. The awareness of being needy and unable to find a permanent defence against our want is transformed into a feeling of impotence that, if it is allowed to burgeon in our souls, can cause us to act compulsively so as to quiet our sense of lack, filling our life with an excess of things that make us feel anchored. For this reason, even though the following poetic fragment is referring specifically to her love life, we perceive as universal Sappho’s prayer: “vex not my soul with agonies and anguish” (1, frag. 1) and in this case anguish translates the term *mérimna*. And we can add: *nurture it in the hope of finding the right balance of care.*

Care that Makes Being Flourish

Taking things to heart however, does not only mean providing things to maintain life the way it is. For the very fact that every human being comes to life lacking some form of being-there, her/his duty is to find the shape of her/his own presence, and that the very best possible. We are called to shape our life. Even if the human being-there is fragile and vulnerable, he/she has an important ontological task: being called to transcend and seek further forms of being. Besides having to find things to preserve life, every human being has the obligation to care for existence so that s/he can become her/his own potentiality-for-being. Care, in point of fact, may be understood as making bloom the ontological possibilities of being-there.

Our ontological fragility makes us incapable of being-there in a pure and simple way; it calls us irrevocably to accomplish the duty of becoming our potentiality-for-being, by responding positively to the commitment of existing. If we share the same intimate *logos* that permeates the world with all other entities, our obligation to constantly become other alienates us from this world, rendering us unable to live with an immediate simplicity at the hub of things. The human being is not a fixed point in the becoming of being, it is neither accomplished nor complete. Rather, it is a nucleus of being in continual transformation, driven constantly towards and beyond the way it exists. It is a self in search of its own shape and because of that it is forced to depart from what it is, to overtake itself. The essence of being-there lies within this lack of shape of being that calls for constant transcendence. To take upon ourselves the duty of transcendence means *to care for the span of life*. The *proprium* of the human condition is to submit to its own transcendence (Zambrano 2004, p. 13), because its living nucleus is a potentiality that needs to overcome what already exists and look towards further horizons. To submit to our own transcendence means that our being is always what it has to be, and it is called upon to become everything that it is not yet, but that it could be.

We can therefore say that there is a task for care to provide things which nurture and preserve life, as well as care seen as a search for evidence-based conditions that allow for transcendence and surpass what is already given in order to create new kinds of being-there. This is how I interpret the “double sense” that Heidegger confers on care: as providing things and as dedication to improve the quality of life (1992, p. 303).

Among the studies discussing care, there is a prevalent, not to say almost exclusive, attention for care as an answer to the need to find what is necessary to live, what Bubeck (2002, p. 161) defines as the labor necessary to maintain and reproduce ourselves, disregarding the idea that devoting ourselves to the search for the best quality of life possible, while permitting the realization of

various possibilities proper to being, is just as necessary. There is a need for care that knows how to «awake souls and make them greater» not in order to «make human beings more efficient in action» (Cicero, *De officiis*, I, 12) but to better fulfill that adventure which is the human life.

Good maternal care does not consist only in satisfying the needs that are expressed by the baby, but also in offering those experiences that stimulate its self to grow and to flourish in all its ontological dimensions. A good teacher not only organizes the learning activities as presented in the syllabus, but tries to comprehend the needs of each student in order to offer those experience which nurtures the cognitive, ethical, aesthetic, social and spiritual potential of every one of them. A caring nurse not only provides competent therapy, but takes the time to put the patient in the condition of regaining his or her autonomy as soon as possible.

Propitiating the potential to transcend what we are in order to open ourselves to greater things is proper to the essence of the soul, which Heraclitus said is a *logos* that makes it grow (frag. 14 [A11] in Colli 1993, p. 29), a fruitful and seminal *logos* that nurtures the being with seeds of possibilities and with the necessary energy to make it bloom. The soul that follows its *logos* is always in search of its best shape. This potential towards expansion can give rise to fear and a propensity to retreat, without the realization that useless struggle is a waste of time. On the other hand, when the soul listens to its desire for transcendence and persists in the search for that source of knowledge that helps in finding the right way of living, then “it is the wisest and the best” (Heraclitus, frag. 14 [A52] in Colli 1993, p. 61). For the very reason that the human being lacks shape, our self is in continuous potential becoming and during the process of transcending it takes on a shape of sorts, even if this shape is always provisional and ahead-of-itself. If care is essentially care of the being-there and the being-there implies the possibility of being, then care as in the care of the being-there has the potential to realize the possible within its best form, that in which we can feel the positive sense of existing.

To be bound to the care that responds to the necessity of transcendence means the inability linger in the mode of existence most proper to us, because we have not been granted the possibility of existing in calmness. Care is an action that is ontologically necessary because human life is uncertain and incomplete. This way of being of mine, that I find prolonged moment by moment, never comes in a complete shape nor is it ever possessed, but needs the effort of caring that is necessary to give it shape. The work of living is incessant since we must perform our lives from moment to moment. In this continuous flowing we never attain true sovereignty of our existence (Stein 1950, p. 91). It is alive, gifted with vital strength, with potentialities that are expected to be actualized, but at the same time, it is

vulnerable and fragile: it has to continuously work on preserving its life and on nurturing its existence.

In order to care for oneself it is not sufficient to accept the burden of transcendence, of the search for forms that overcome the existing situation, but it is also necessary to care for what is happening within our own being quite apart from any intentional investigation. The condition of the human subject is characterized by the fact that any action towards its own being intended to give it a shape, even if it is unsuccessful in what it set out to do, ends up by being effective in giving it some shape all the same. This pliability of being makes constant vigilance necessary regarding the modes of our own development. In this sense, the work of existing does not know the quality of lightness, and always imposes a presence that is extremely attentive and intensely responsible.

Being born without shape and with the onus to find one, the human being is therefore called upon to care for itself. To care for ourselves in order to look for the better kind of potential self means to search for a horizon that radiates significance. Caring for ourselves is a tiring job. It interweaves the threads of being-there, but without ever completely accomplishing the realization of its pattern, because the human being finds it impossible to realize all that s/he considers essential to the planning of a good life. From the beginning of her/his life s/he is bound to the task of giving a shape to her/his own individual way of existing without having any control over the steps of her/his own development. We care for ourselves in order to cope with the fragility and vulnerability of the human condition, without being able to reduce our intimate fragility and vulnerability, either in our flesh or in our soul.

From the analysis of the lived experience care manifests itself as being out for something that still is not (Heidegger 1992, p. 308). In this action, our being-there tends towards something that does not yet exist and for this reason we can say that care is the answer to the condition of being underway towards something that is possible towards the actualization of some of our potentialities. Caring for the self does not only mean finding what is necessary to live, guarantee our own lifespan and preserve it, but also how to build a living space in which we can fully realize our own potential for existence.

The lacking of a full and entire being that characterizes human life is at the same time openness towards the becoming of being-there, towards further and not pre-established possibilities of existence. Our state of existence is actually that of finding ourselves always open to possible ways of being regarding the how and why of our current being. Existing means answering the appeal to realize concretely the possibilities of being. This takes some care. To care for life therefore means committing to the duty of actualizing the possible in such a way that we can fulfil the

life that makes the best part of the human being flourish so that it may be worth living.

We are always running the risk of a fragmented life, in other words one that it is divided into periods without a centre, periods without connection between themselves. The soul feels the necessity of finding a centre, a living heart, from which it can draw the necessary energy to walk with joy in time. Caring for existence is about making life a living whole.

As a non-finite entity, the human being is called to transcendence, and this call to realize our own possible being by transforming possibility into reality never ceases. If transcendence towards what still is not is something that the human being has to be subjected to (Zambrano 2004, p. 8), undertaking the care for our own existence is accepting the call to transcendence, to work on the possibility of the possible and to transform it into reality. Seizing the possibility of existing and projecting our own way of being-there to facilitate the actualization of the existential possibilities means to stay in the world with a project. Being in the world with a project of our own is a way of existing. This way of existing, which consists in taking upon oneself the burden of giving a good shape to our own becoming, is not meant to be explained technically as a managerial approach to the possibilities of existing, because the project is typical of a being thrown into life, and therefore immediately aware of not controlling what happens for his development. This type of awareness manifests itself in emotional phenomena (anguish, fear, apprehension...) that constantly reveal to our conscience the weakness of every existential project.

Having care for existence as a project for the actualization of our own possible being, and therefore as an opening to transcendence, finds its most significant enunciation in the dialogues of Plato, where we find Socrates engaged in theorizing the priority of care for ourselves as care of the soul.

In *Laches*, Lysimachus begins the dialogue by affirming that adults have the duty to care for young people and this care means that the adults have to take upon themselves the responsibility of the education of the young so that they may excel in the art of living (179a-d). In the *First Alcibiades*, Socrates explains that in order to learn the art of existing, that constitutes the meaning of life itself, we have to learn how to care for ourselves. We find the same concept in the *Apology*, where Socrates, while setting forth the original meaning of educational practice, affirms that it is the duty of every educator to cultivate the other to care for himself in order “to be as good and as wise as possible ἐπιμελεῖσθαι τῆς ψυχῆς (*Apology*, 36c), and he explains that the essence of care for oneself consists in caring for our own soul [ἐπιμελεῖσθαι τῆς ψυχῆς] so it acquires the best shape possible (*Apology*, 30b). Education is therefore a practice of care and the person-who-cares promotes at the same time in the other who is cared for the ability of caring for himself; since the

self corresponds to the soul (*First Alcibiades*, 130e) so caring for ourselves means caring for our soul (*First Alcibiades*, 132c). Starting from the assumption that the soul is the most valuable of things, in the dialogues where he discusses the sense of education, Socrates talks about care and precisely of caring for the soul [ψυχῆς ἐπιμελητέον] (*First Alcibiades*, 132c), and while talking about this type of care he uses the term *epimeleia* [TM**piméleia**]. *Epimeleia* means care that nurtures the being in order to make it flourish. It is not an answer to the urgent demand for survival, to feeling bound to the necessity of persisting, but responds to the desire of transcendence, to the need of horizons of meaning in which to actualize our own being as a possibility of being.² Caring for oneself to plan our own time meaningfully signifies allowing our being to be born into existence. Since everyone's existence always takes place within a political sphere, Plato uses the word *epimeleia* for the art of successful government, and he actually talks about "caring for the city" (*The Republic*, VI, 499b).

In the Gospel of John (3,5) the possibility of a birth from water and from breath is announced. Only those who are capable of this birth may attain the knowledge of the truth. If we put aside the religious interpretation of this passage from the New Testament, we could interpret that birth from water and from air might indicate the possibility of being born to a different way of thinking, one capable of helping us find a way to be-there with fluidity and lightness and that does not let the burden of conscience or the difficulties of existence prevail. Water washes away, it flows, and air allows us to breathe. We are all born from flesh (John 3,6) and our being remains flesh throughout our lifetime, but precisely because we are able to think, and through our thoughts we experience something else, we can be born to the other, to another sort of breath of life, unburdened by the feeling of emptiness caused by the work of life. But as we are relational beings, this possibility can only be disclosed to us by others, by those who know how to have care for.

We all would love to live a good life; the Gospel is also called the text of joy, because our soul thirsts for joy. Life, however, rarely spares us from difficulties, moments of more or less intense pain and anxiety. The burden of anguish can be sustainable or it can break down all resistance, and destroy every positive energy for life. If in our life we have experienced a type of care that has given our soul vital energy, we are then able to face anxiety and anguish without being overcome.

²The term transcendence is generally used to indicate something beyond the self, that is actually both the outside and the inside world that reveal themselves to the conscience, which is the sphere of immanence since it is inseparable from the self; here, instead, I use the term in the sense indicated by Zambrano, as the ability of going further than what is given, a leaning out towards the ulterior.