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**Care of Self  
and Meaning of Life:  
Asian and Christian  
Reflections**

Edited by  
*William Sweet*  
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The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy

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**Introduction**  
**Philosophy, Religion, and Care of Self**

WILLIAM SWEET

**Introduction**

Humanity has long been concerned with questions such as ‘What is the meaning of life?’ and ‘How should we act towards one another – and towards ourselves?’ For answers, people have often turned to religion but also to philosophy.

Yet not only the answers, but these questions themselves are far from straightforward. What is meant by ‘meaning’? Does the question of the meaning of life not simply assume that there is meaning to be had – a dubious assumption, at best? When so many human beings accept a naturalistic, materialist view of reality, does it make sense to look for meaning? Even if there is meaning, how can people come to find that meaning? What methods are available to us? Further, what is the relation between acting rightly and our concern for others – and for ourselves? Does acting rightly require the truth of religions, such as Christianity, or of some kind of humanism? If there is no meaning to life, or if meaning is unclear, is there any way in which people can discern or discover what they ought to do?

The issues involved here, then, are considerable. Nevertheless, the papers in the present volume undertake to address a number of them. Some papers focus on questions of meaning, and the quest for meaning. Others focus on method, and are concerned with how one can come to acquire some insight on these matters. Finally, some focus on the approaches or techniques that, it has been claimed, help people to determine how they should act towards others and themselves.

To appreciate the approach taken to these issues, however, some context is necessary.

### From Meaning to Care of Self

At the beginning of his *Metaphysics*, Aristotle writes that all human beings seek to know. This is not just a matter of knowing what is – i.e., a cognitive issue – but of knowing why, of the purpose of things, and also of one’s own purpose, if any – i.e., an existential issue. Throughout the history of philosophy and throughout the variety of cultures and cultural traditions, seeking to know has almost always carried an existential element. Thus, some twenty-three hundred years after Aristotle, in *Fides et ratio*, John Paul II writes:

In both East and West, we may trace a journey which has led humanity down the centuries to meet and engage truth more and more deeply. It is a journey which has unfolded – as it must – within the horizon of personal self-consciousness: the more human beings know reality and the world, the more they know themselves in their uniqueness, with the question of the meaning of things and of their very existence becoming ever more pressing. This is why all that is the object of our knowledge becomes a part of our life. The admonition *Know yourself* was carved on the temple portal at Delphi, as testimony to a basic truth to be adopted as a minimal norm by those who seek to set themselves apart from the rest of creation as “human beings”, that is as those who “know themselves.”<sup>1</sup>

This knowing oneself is not, as noted above, just a matter of cognition – knowing things about oneself. It also has an existential dimension; it involves knowing what our values and principles are, how we see our place in the

world, whether there is a purpose, whether there is anything that gives us direction or meaning, and so on.

Yet if we press the matter and ask, why it is that human beings seek to know about themselves, it is not clear what response could be given beyond it just being a fact about human beings. John Paul II continues: "It is the nature of the human being to seek the truth. ... Their search looks towards an ulterior truth which would explain the meaning of life."<sup>2</sup>

More, however, can be said. Human beings search for meaning and seek to know themselves because they do, or should, care about themselves. Recall the remark of Socrates in Plato's *Apology*: "For I do nothing but go about persuading you all, old and young alike, not to take thought for your persons and your properties, but first and chiefly to care about the greatest improvement of the soul."<sup>3</sup> The search for the meaning of life is related, then, to the prior demand to care for oneself.

This theme of care of self is found in Asian traditions as well as the 'Western' traditions. In Asia, we find it, for example, in the *Da Xue – The Great Learning*, attributed to Confucius (Kongzi):

The ancients who wished to illustrate illustrious virtue throughout the kingdom, first ordered well their own states. Wishing to order well their states, they first regulated their families. Wishing to regulate their families, they first cultivated their persons. Wishing to cultivate their persons, they first rectified their hearts.<sup>4</sup>

In the Western traditions we find this call to care of self not only in Plato, but in the Stoics<sup>5</sup>, in the early Christian Church fathers such as St Augustine<sup>6</sup>, in Thomas Aquinas,

and through a number of thinkers such as Petrarch<sup>7</sup>, Spinoza<sup>8</sup>, and Kierkegaard<sup>9</sup>, up to Martin Heidegger, Simone Weil, and – perhaps today most famously – Michel Foucault.

Aquinas, for example, wrote that “a man ought to love himself, out of charity, more than any other person”<sup>10</sup> – understanding this love as a care for one’s soul and as a necessary preliminary to the acquisition of virtue.<sup>11</sup> Heidegger focuses on the human being (*Dasein*) who is concerned about itself, arguing that *Dasein*’s being is care (*Sorge*). For Heidegger, then, to be is to care; ‘care’ is the basic way of being of human beings in the world, and human beings are related to the world through their conscious concerns in the world.<sup>12</sup>

It is in Foucault, however, where we find, today, the best known discussion of ‘care of self.’ In the third volume of his *Histoire de la sexualité*, entitled “Le souci de soi,”<sup>13</sup> Foucault argues that the care of the self was foundational in the ancients, and that it involved not only one’s own self, but that of others. Thus, according to one commentator, for Foucault,

Socrates and ancient ethicists understood that caring for oneself was to exhibit an attitude not only toward oneself but also toward others and the world, attend to one’s own thoughts and attitudes in self-reflection and meditation, and engage in ascetic practices aimed at realizing an ideal state of being.<sup>14</sup>

Foucault argues that, in the ancients, there was a normative, indeed a spiritual dimension to the care of self, but that it was not inward looking, but outward looking – it was a call to improve oneself and one’s reason in order to be a member of the *polis* and, thereby, achieve a measure of

self-fashioning or self-realization. According to Foucault, “the general Greek problem was not the *techne* of the self, it was the *techne* of life, the *techne tou biou*, how to live.”<sup>15</sup> Foucault claims, however, that this dimension was lost with Christianity as it became more ‘self-reflexive.’

While Foucault’s analysis of the effects of Christianity and modernity have been debated, there is little doubt that the broader point – that the injunction to know oneself – to know the meaning of one’s life – is connected with, and based on, care of self – is one that is found from antiquity. It also carries with it a normative injunction.

The opening chapters of this volume focus on the question of the meaning of life. In Chapter I, “Christian Philosophy and the Meaning of Life,” William Sweet discusses some responses and answers to the question ‘What is the meaning of life?’ He begins by briefly reviewing the assertions of psychoanalysts such as Sigmund Freud and analytic philosophers such as A.J. Ayer, who challenge the cognitive meaningfulness of the question. Sweet then looks at answers provided by existentialists (e.g., J.-P. Sartre and A. Camus) and by ‘naturalists’ such as William James, and argues that neither approach reflects an adequate account of human nature. Finally, he looks at three Christian philosophers – Thomas Aquinas, Søren Kierkegaard, and Jacques Maritain – and finds, in each, elements of a philosophical answer to the question. By drawing on these elements, Sweet concludes, Christian philosophy can provide a useful answer to the questions of whether and how human life is meaningful.

In Chapter II, “Love and Freedom as Essentials in the Process of Creative Evolution,” Wen-Hsiang Chen takes up this theme of the meaning of life. He investigates in particular the meaning and place of love and freedom in a world that is increasingly viewed through the lens of the

natural sciences. Chen notes that, while there are tendencies towards scientism in our cultures, these tendencies are as much grounded on faith as the views that scientism itself challenges. Chen also notes that the recognition of love and freedom in the world is evidence for a natural capacity for self-transcendence that implies, in particular, love for God.

An answer to the question of the meaning of life, then, is closely related to the answer to the questions of what human life is, what it is for, and how we should act. The example of authors from Socrates and Kongzi, to Heidegger and Foucault, as well as of that of the first two essays in this volume, have suggested that the quest for the meaning of life and for the meaning of own one's life, is the *product* of the injunction to care of oneself, but that this quest also *leads to* this care of self. This care of self, moreover, is not purely self directed. Rather, it is seen as a necessary part of one's relations to others.

Yet more needs to be said about *how* this quest for meaning and this practice of care are to be carried out.

### Meaning and Method

Questions of *how* one is to come to know oneself, *how* one discovers, uncovers, or gives meaning to one's life, and *how* this leads to a care of self, introduce the issue of method. What is the relation of these lines of inquiry to the methods offered by philosophy, by humanisms, and by religions, such as the Christian faith?

While humanisms, philosophies, and religions offer answers to these questions, what they tell us rests on what they see as the nature of human being and on what human beings can become. In the first instance, then, we need to understand the structures, institutions, and discourses that give us insight into what human being is. Three of the

authors in this volume undertake to provide this by carrying out a hermeneutical investigation.

In Chapter III, "The Hermeneutical Perspective and Christian Humanity," Cristal Huang focuses on how we can discern meaning – meaning in a cognitive sense and in an existential sense. She sees, that for many – particularly for the non-religious and the non-Christian – there is a gap between Christian faith and the care of humanity. She argues, however, that hermeneutics is a method to establish the dialogue between them. Hermeneutics can serve, she says, as a way of understanding the truths of Christianity and of Christ in relation to the meaning of life. Huang calls, then, for an engagement in a Christian hermeneutics in order to interpret and make sense of oneself and the world, and in order to see Christ in the world.

Jing-Jong Luh also turns to hermeneutics – in order to understand human being, but also to show the foundational role of philosophy in developmental psychology. In Chapter IV, "A Systemic-Hermeneutical Ground-Conception of Genetic and Developmental Psychology," Luh emphasises the importance of the human being as a being that understands – an understanding being. A systemic-hermeneutical approach is proposed as a way of understanding human psychology; this involves seeing people in context, and it is the context in which one lives that determines the meaning of one's existence. But there is also a possibility of transcendence, of a connexion with absolute spirit. Thus, a systemic-hermeneutic psychology may enable us to conceptualize a framework that shows us the different spheres in which human beings play a role, but also leads us to the issue of care of self. It is here that what has been called 'philosophical counselling' may be able to contribute.

Of course, all methods rest on or make assumptions. In Chapter V, "The Philosophical Method of Maurice Merleau-

Ponty: Styles and Negations,” Michel Dalissier considers the example of one method – that of Merleau-Ponty – in an attempt to discern Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical humanism. Beginning with Merleau-Ponty’s style of writing, Dalissier finds in his work a *methodus negativa*, rather than a specifically positive method. Dalissier reminds us, then, that, in adopting any method, hermeneutical or other, the practitioner must be cautious and be aware of what might be presupposed by it.

In short, Huang, Luh, and Dalissier propose that a hermeneutical method will help people to understand the discourses, structures, institutions, and conceptions of the human being that underlie the answers offered by humanisms, philosophies, and religions, and, thus, may point to how the search for meaning connects with the ethical care of oneself and of others.

That connexion, however, must still be spelled out.

### **From Care of Self to Caring for Self**

While it is essential to recognise the connexion between the search for meaning and the care of self, key issues remain: What is meant by ‘care’? What is care of self? How is ‘care of self’ carried out?

Care is an ambiguous term. It can refer to a feeling of worry and anxiety; one’s cares are one’s troubles and concerns. It can also refer to one’s attentiveness or meticulous consideration in correctly carrying out a task. Yet care can also refer to “the provision of what is necessary to the health, welfare, maintenance, and protection of someone”<sup>16</sup> – as showing one’s attentiveness or solicitude for what matters; its opposite is apathy.<sup>17</sup> It is this latter sense of care with which ‘care of self’ is concerned.

Care of self, therefore, means care of the person as a whole. It is care of the person as an embodied being, and so

involves the physical. But it also involves a care for one's psyche, for the intellectual, ethical, and the spiritual.

Thus, it is no surprise that, for most authors, care of self fundamentally involves spiritual and ethical growth. It is a self-fashioning or a self-realization – and, as we have seen above, for many figures it is motivated by, but also motivates, at least in part, the desire to know oneself and to know the meaning of one's life. As a 'care of *self*,' it is an activity that individuals themselves take up. But it is not, as we have also seen, something that is just a matter of individual choice. The care of self is, arguably, a vocation and an ethical obligation.

This leads us to the theme of how 'care of the self' is carried out. Thus, a number of authors in this volume speak to the contributions of Christianity, of non-Christian religions and humanisms, but particularly of meditative and counseling techniques.

In Chapter VI, "Philosophical Counselling and *The Cloud of Unknowing*," Bernard Li introduces the reader to one technique for care of self – that of 'philosophical counselling.' Li begins with a brief summary of some of the classical 'ways' of approaching truth, particularly the spiritual ways. He notes, however, that what some modern 'ways' miss is the place of spirituality. Li calls the reader back, then, to a spirituality that has a central place in an anonymous work of the late fourteenth century, *The Cloud of Unknowing*. To achieve ethical and, more importantly, spiritual growth, Li recommends the counselling process (which he finds to be, in fact, a kind of spiritual exercise) present in *The Cloud*, and argues that this process applies to coming to understand values and spirituality, not simply to changing one's behaviour.

Another way of carrying out care of self can be found in the Daoist tradition. In Chapter VII, "The Reasoned

Structure of the *Guanzi* and Care of Self,” Chen-Yu Chou turns to a proto-Daoist text – the four chapters of the *Guanzi* on heart-mind cultivation. Although the four chapters deal with on “heart-mind,” “dao” is their main focus. According to this text, dao can be retained “when mind is tranquil and qi is regulated.” The aim of following the guidelines of the *Guanzi*, then, is the achievement of emptiness, tranquility, adaptation, and concentration. Chou argues that this practice of stillness and quiescence can apply effectively in modern society, and concludes that these ancient texts provide a philosophical approach to the care of self, compatible with the kind of counselling described by Bernard Li.

In Chapter VIII (Philosophical Therapy and Song-Era Confucianism: An Instance of Medical Application based on Settling-and-Stillness Practice from Zhou Dunyi’s *Explanation of the Taiji Diagram*), Chung-Hsiu Huang offers another method for the care of self. Seeking to discover a psychosomatic discourse of “composing oneself to cure depression,” Huang considers the similarities between the Confucian scholar Zhu Danxi (1281-1358) and his theory of “three kinds of depression caused by emotion,” and the neo-Confucian Zhou Dunyi (1017-1073), who focuses in the *Taichi Tushuo* [“Explanation of the Taiji [the Great Ultimate] Diagram”] on the theory of composing oneself through centredness, correctness, benevolence, and righteousness [zhong-zheng-ren-yi - 中正仁義]. Huang concludes that both approaches ultimately affirm a tripartite form of benevolence, righteousness, and centredness-plus-correctness, and open the way to “nurturing life” as both a medical and a mental praxis.

These different examples, then, offer models of caring for oneself through a range of spiritual and contemplative traditions and the associated techniques.

What is the situation today with regard to ‘caring for self’? In the final two chapters in this volume, the reader will find short reports on activity in mainland China and in Taiwan. In Chapter IX (“Thought Counseling in Mainland China”), Xisheng Wang provides a brief account of how philosophical or ‘thought counseling’ is understood in mainland China, of its distinctive character, and of some of the major scholarship and scholarly work being carried out there. But discussion of care of self and its relation to the meaning of life and to the spiritual would not be complete without a statement of how care in general is carried out in institutions devoted to care, i.e., health care facilities. In Chapter X (“Catholicism and Health Care in Taiwan”), the last chapter in this volume, Sr. Mary Ann Lou gives the reader a short description of care offered in the context of Catholic hospitals in Taiwan.

### **Conclusion**

The essays in this volume address questions with which humanity has long been interested – questions of the meaning of life, about how we are led to such a concern, and about how one might find or discover that meaning. The answers are, in large part, intertwined with the matter of ‘care for self’ – specifically, the injunction to do ‘what is necessary to the health, well-being, and protection’ of oneself as an embodied being whose needs are not only physical, but intellectual, ethical, and spiritual. One might say even that part of the call to care of self is the call to discover meaning.

The authors contribute to this continuing discussion not only by analyzing and investigating some of the presuppositions and central issues, but also by suggesting ways in which the care of self might take place. Some of these authors remind us that care of self is not simply a matter of

looking inward, but concerns the whole person – that self-realization is not just a product of introspection, meditative practice, and reflection, but also of how to live in the world. Some point out that there are techniques, practices, and forms of counselling that will be useful in engaging in this care. Some maintain that a resolution of the question of the meaning of life is not simply to be reached by giving an answer to a question, but by being reminded of one's vocation – to respond to others, to do good, to care, and to love – and of the fact that this search can end only in reaching an absolute.

There is, of course, more to these essays than can be summarized here. At this point, however, it is time to turn to these essays themselves, and to see how far the issue of 'care of self and the meaning of life' has been addressed.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> John Paul II, Pope, *Encyclical Letter, Fides et Ratio, of the Supreme Pontiff John Paul II: To the Bishops of the Catholic Church On the Relationship between Faith and Reason* (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1998), section 1.

<sup>2</sup> John Paul II, *Fides et ratio*, section 33.

<sup>3</sup> Plato, *Apology*, tr. Benjamin Jowett, 30b.

<sup>4</sup> *The Great Learning* (Da Xue [大學]), English translation by James Legge at <http://ctext.org/liji/da-xue>

<sup>5</sup> See Gretchen Reydam-Schils, *The Roman Stoics: Self, Responsibility, and Affection* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 25.

See also Richard Sorabji, *Emotion and Peace of Mind: From State Agitation to Christian Temptation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), also at <http://www.giffordlectures.org/books/emotion-and-peace-mind/>

<sup>6</sup> In "Sorge in Heidegger and in Goethe's *Faust*," *Goethe Yearbook* 16 (2009): 207-218, Ellis Dye writes: "In the summer semester of 1921, ... six years before the publication of *Sein und Zeit*, Heidegger lectured on "care" in the writings of St. Augustine, which he does not yet denominate as "Sorge" in German but as "Bekümmierung." It becomes "Sorge" in his winter semester lectures of 1921-22 and is fundamental in *Sein und Zeit*. ... For Heidegger, Sorge is an ontological term, not an

ontic one, and pertains to “the deep structures that underlie and explain the ontic”.”

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Gur Zak, *Petrarch's Humanism and the Care of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>8</sup> Aristides Baltas, *Peeling Potatoes or Grinding Lenses: Spinoza and Young Wittgenstein Converse on Immanence and Its Logic* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012), p. 40.

<sup>9</sup> See Warren T. Reich, “History of the Notion of Care,” in *Encyclopedia of Bioethics*, revised edition. Ed. Warren Thomas Reich. 5 vols. (New York: Simon & Schuster / Macmillan, 1995), pp. 319-331.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* II-II, q. 26, a. 4, resp.

<sup>11</sup> In *Summa theologiae* II-II, q. 25, a. 4, Aquinas continues: “hence we read in [Aristotle's *Nicomachean*] *Ethic.* ix, 4,8, that “the origin of friendly relations with others lies in our relations to ourselves.”

<sup>12</sup> For a discussion of the issue of care in Heidegger, see, for example, Vensus A. George, *Authentic Human Destiny: The Paths of Shankara and Heidegger* (Washington, DC: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 1998), ch 4. See also the entry on “care, concern, solicitude” in *A Heidegger Dictionary*, ed. Michael Inwood (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999).

<sup>13</sup> Paris: Gallimard, 1984.

<sup>14</sup> Bob Robinson, “Michel Foucault: Ethics,” *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/fouc-eth/>

<sup>15</sup> Michel Foucault, “On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress.” In *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), p. 348.

<sup>16</sup> *Concise Oxford English Dictionary: Luxury Edition* / 12<sup>th</sup> edition (2011), p. 214.

<sup>17</sup> See Reich, “History of the Notion of Care.”