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Abstract: This article is a critical examination of the approach to truth in Foucault's late writing on the topic of '*parrhesia*'. I argue that his 1983 Berkeley seminar on 'Discourse and Truth' approaches the topic of truth as a positive value and that this approach presents, at least *prima facie*, a problem of continuity with his earlier critique of the presumption of an exclusionary relation between truth and power in works such as *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*. Does the ethical notion of '*parrhesia*' imply a different relation between truth and power than the one developed in the earlier works? And if so, what are we to make of the difference? In particular, 1) what does it mean to say that speaking the truth is dangerous? And 2) Are the two positions on truth compatible? What does it take to reconcile the two perspectives?

Why is 'speaking the truth' fearless?

'Danger' and 'truth' in Foucault's discussion of *parrhesia*

'If there is a kind of "proof" of the sincerity of the *parrhesiastes*, it is his *courage*. The fact that a speaker says something dangerous – different from what the majority believes – is a strong indication that he is a *parrhesiastes*'

Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, his emphasis.

To read the text of Michel Foucault's late seminars on the topic of *parrhesia* from the perspective of the work of nearly a decade earlier on the topics of disciplinary power and biopower, one is struck by the seemingly irreconcilable positions he adopts in these two periods on the topic of 'truth' [*la vérité*]. His 1983 Berkeley seminar places considerable emphasis on the courage of the *parrhesiastes*. Here Foucault distinguishes the moderns' tests of verification in context-independent rules (science) or procedures of dubitability (Cartesian philosophy) from the 'proof' furnished by the sincerity of the *parrhesiastes*. This sincerity can be measured by the fact that the speaker 'says something dangerous – different from what the majority believes'.¹ As the epigraph to the published seminar notes indicate, Foucault is interested in exploring the way that it is the *status* of the one who speaks, regardless of the dangerous implications of what they say, that determines whether they are speaking the truth.² These two lines of investigation - the status of the truth-teller as the one with an existential stake in what they say and the question of the consequences and risks of their telling of truth directs attention not toward

¹ Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, ed. Joseph Pearson (2001: Semiotext(e), Los Angeles, CA), 15.

² This approach has some important points of similarity with Foucault's discussion of the author-function in his 1969 lecture to the Société française de philosophie 'What is an Author?', Michel Foucault, *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, ed. James D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley and others, *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, Volume Two* (1998: The New Press, New York) 205-223. In this lecture, Foucault is interested in the different ways the author-function operates in the modern sciences and humanities to limit, or impose a principle of 'thrift' on, a semantic content. Against the narrative of an alienation between truth and the arts in modernity, he stresses the value of truth that the author-function has in literary production and contrasts this with the looser role of verification played by proper names to designate theorems in the history of the modern sciences. See too his commentary on this topic in the 'Discourse on Language', Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and The Discourse on Language*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (1972: Pantheon Books, New York), 221-2.

a study of ‘truth’ per se, but instead to the analysis of relations between the subject and truth as these provide a privileged locus for a genealogy of the ‘ “critical” tradition in the West’:

‘My intention was not to deal with the problem of truth, but with the problem of the truth-teller, or of truth-telling as an activity:...who is able to tell the truth, about what, with what consequences, and with what relations to power...[W]ith the question of the importance of telling the truth, knowing who is able to tell the truth, and knowing why we should tell the truth, we have the roots of what we could call the ‘critical’ tradition in the West’³

In some of his last works and interviews Foucault adopts the continuity he suggests here between truth-telling practices in archaic Greece and the Enlightenment understanding of criticism as a principle of interpretation for his own work. He goes so far as to suggest that the interrogation of the relation between the ‘subject and truth’ within a genealogical inquiry into the West provides a retrospective principle of unity for his works.⁴

³ Michel Foucault, Epigraph, *Fearless Speech*. The text of this book is compiled from the tape-recordings and notes of one of the auditors in Foucault’s Fall, 1983 seminar held at Berkeley on ‘Discourse and Truth’.

⁴ See for instance Michel Foucault, ‘On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress’, Herbert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Between Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, Second Edition, (1983: University of Chicago Press, Chicago) 229-253, 237. See also the following comment from *The Use of Pleasure: The History of Sexuality*, Volume 2, trans. Robert Hurley (1990: Vintage Books, New York), 6-7: ‘What I have held to, what I have tried to maintain for many years, is the effort to isolate some of the elements that might be useful for a history of truth. Not a history that would be concerned with what might be true in the fields of learning, but an analysis of the “games of truth”, the games of truth and error through which being is historically constituted as experience; that is, as something that can and must be thought.’ It would be the topic of a different paper to pursue the implications of this type of exercise of retrospective self-characterisation and the contradictions it represents with the thrust of statements in texts like ‘What is an Author?’ and ‘The Discourse on Language’ in which the ‘author’ is treated as a discursive function that operates to separate and fuse the products of an ‘I’ with different empirical selves; or the more personal style of reflection in ‘The Masked Philosopher’ in which Foucault is critical of the presumption and effects of the retrospective imposition of a unifying intention on diverse works, in Michel Foucault, *Ethics: The Essential Works*, Volume 1, ed. Paul Rabinow (1997: The New Press, New York), 321-9. Finally, it is worth noting his concessions regarding the retrospective nature of such schematisation (see, for instance, his comments in the Preface to *The Use of Pleasure*, in *Ethics: The Essential Works*, Volume 1, 202).

There are, it is true, readily identifiable connections between the discussion of *parrhesia* in his Berkeley lectures and the approach he takes to the topics of criticism in ‘What is Enlightenment’ and of truth in his course on ‘The Hermeneutics of the Subject’, all of which share the same framework of an investigation of relations between the subject and truth for the project of a genealogy of criticism in the West. From this perspective the discussion of ‘problematization’ in his late interviews and the 1983 Berkeley seminar share the rationale of a ‘history of the present’ that governs the stakes of the analysis of *Discipline and Punish* and also guides the critical interrogation of the repressive hypothesis in the *History of Sexuality: An Introduction*. Similarly it is possible to recast the pertinent features of earlier works, such as *The Order of Things*, so that it may be integrated into a broader, more systematic investigation of how different epistemes determine what counts as ‘true’. There are, however, obvious constraints limiting the scope and plausibility of such an interpretative approach. His comments, for instance, that *The Order of Things* fails to meet the exacting requirements of a genealogy in its focus on discursive formations at the expense of practices may be cited to support an alternative interpretation of his intellectual itinerary in which we might question the relevance of the texts from the so-called archaeological period for the task of giving systematic account of his ‘genealogical project’ of practices. In the same vein, and perhaps more importantly, one might raise the question of the sense and status of the subject implied in the epistemological perspective of archaeology on the one hand, and in the ethics of truth-telling on the other.⁵

Neither is the problem of finding a consistent approach to the topic of truth solved by restricting the sample of Foucault’s texts to the ‘period’ of genealogy. The distinction between ‘archaeology’ and ‘genealogy’, it is true, gives heightened visibility to

⁵ In *The Order of Things* ‘what was lacking... was this problem of the discursive régime’, of the effects of power peculiar to the play of statements. I confused this too much with systematicity, theoretical form, or something like a paradigm’. Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-77*, ed. Colin Gordon (1980: Harvester Wheatsheaf: Hertfordshire, UK), 113. See too his comments in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* in which he describes as ‘imperfect’ his works prior to 1970 and the mention he makes of feeling ‘mortified’ at the generalised theory *The Order of Things* was taken to be, Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and The Discourse on Language*, trans. A M Sheridan Smith (1972: Pantheon Books, New York) 15-6.

significant changes in Foucault's approach and selection of topics. Further, Foucault himself has emphasised the interpretative importance of such a distinction.⁶ It should be noted, however, that one of the effects of this distinction is that it gathers together as a coherent body the suite of works, lectures and interviews that belong to the so-called genealogical period, which is itself in question for us. This is not to say, of course, that the alterations in perspective or modification of key ideas that occurred in this period (i.e., from 1970 onward) necessarily explode the postulated coherence of the genealogical project in its methods and results. Rather, what is being urged here is caution: one should not assume that no significant changes took place in Foucault's thinking with regard to the sense and status of 'truth' in this period just because one calls it by one and the same name: genealogy.

The terms Foucault uses to conceptualise the speaker's existential stake in truth in his writing on the practice of *Parrhesia* do not seem to be present in his critique of the ideals of emancipatory politics in his important works of the early and mid 1970's. On the contrary, these works formulate the idea that truth is entangled in the operation of power relations and Foucault articulates a lucid account of the political implications of this entanglement. In *Discipline and Punish* Foucault develops a counter-thesis to the view that there is an exclusionary relation between truth and power, and its corollary that knowledge unsullied by power is able to identify and unmask the operations of power. In Foucault's account, the institutions that produce knowledge are the main tool for the extension and consolidation of power relations in the modern period and cannot be positively invested as external to these relations. He identifies the 'knowledge' activity of the human sciences as the agents of the deeper, more penetrating form of disciplinary power, which over-lays and colonises the earlier form of sovereign power relations. Disciplinary power conceives of the human body as a composite of forces. The disciplines aim to train these forces to optimise the productive capacities of bodies, whilst fostering their political docility. According to Foucault, the disciplines do not succeed in constructing a fully disciplined society and this failure intensifies the relation between

⁶ His lecture of 1976 on the topic of subjugated knowledges tries to combine the resources of archaeology and genealogy, 'Two Lectures', *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-77*, 85.

power and knowledge. Knowledge is placed in a relation of mutual incitement with power as the failure of the aims of the disciplines calls for more precise knowledge to construct better mechanisms of discipline, and so on. Finally, 'knowledge' in this work concerns the modes in which the human being is known as an object. On this axis of objectification knowledge is intimately related to disciplinary power because it is the instrument for the crafting of disciplinary techniques and the condition therefore for the extension of power that disciplinary mechanisms represent, as these are measured against the discontinuous and negative operations of sovereign power.

In *La volonté de savoir* the critique of the idea that there is an exclusionary relation between truth and power is carried out in terms of how the subject itself makes itself the site of knowledge and inquiry. Along this axis of subjectification, Foucault calls into question the supposed emancipatory benefit that accrues to the speaker by being able to speak the truth about one's sexuality. Instead, he argues that the speaking that is positively coded as overcoming repression through self-exposure and self-knowledge in fact forms part of the constellation of 'biopower', which joins up the interest of the disciplines in managing individuals to the interest of the modern state in the management of its population. In this work the human sciences involved in the incitement to speak the truth of sexuality are described as belonging to the 'apparatus of sexuality' that also includes the knowledge instruments of the modern state, such as demography. The term 'apparatus' allows Foucault to join his analysis of the micro-disciplines that operate in specific institutional settings to ends that are tied to the management of life as such or more specifically of populations, and thus to a biopolitical map that structures the entire social field. Within this biopolitical mapping of the social field truth is viewed as an instrument of biopolitics and not a value external to or able to oppose its logic.

The salient implications of these works for the topic of truth are given their most acute formulations in Foucault's comments on the political dimension of his research. In a 1976 lecture, where he reflects on the methodological significance of these works, Foucault contrasts his identification and analysis of the triangular relation between truth, right and power to 'the traditional question of political philosophy', which asked how philosophy as the discourse of 'truth' can 'fix limits to the rights of power'. Against this

traditional faith in the 'truth' as a limiting operator on 'the rights of power', Foucault argues that the

'manifold relations of power which permeate, characterise and constitute the social body...cannot themselves be established, consolidated nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse. There can be no possible exercise of power without a certain economy of discourses of truth which operates through and on the basis of this association. We are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth.'⁷

He goes on to single out the compulsion that structures the value of speaking the 'truth' in modern Western societies:

'This is the case for every society, but I believe that in ours the relationship between power, right and truth is organised in a highly specific fashion. If I were to characterise, not its mechanism itself, but its intensity and constancy, I would say that we are forced to produce the truth of power that our society demands, of which it has need, in order to function: we *must* speak the truth; we are constrained or condemned to confess or discover the truth. Power never ceases its interrogation, its inquisition, its registration of truth: it institutionalises, professionalises and rewards its pursuit'.⁸

It is in this key that his critical interrogation of attempts to claim scientific status for 'knowledges' like psychoanalysis, Marxism and semiology is undertaken.⁹ The context of this commentary on truth as a 'compulsion', however, is to qualify the value and functions attached to the historical figure of the 'intellectual' as a 'truth-sayer'. Against this figure, closely identified with the value of the 'writer' whose works aim to articulate 'universal' truths, Foucault praises the local interrogation of truth effects of those involved in the practices they criticise.¹⁰ It is significant for our topic that his critical remarks on the figure of the intellectual suggest that in this case too speaking the truth is part of how power relations function. In the way he contrasts the intellectual as a

⁷ Michel Foucault, Two Lectures, *Power/Knowledge*, 93.

⁸ Michel Foucault, 'Two Lectures', *Power/Knowledge*, 93. His emphasis.

⁹ See for instance, 'Two Lectures' *Power/Knowledge*, 84.

¹⁰ The examples he gives tend to emphasise the scientific contexts of power constellations, he cites in this regard the criticisms of scientists or those involved in the medical professions, especially psychiatry. See 'Truth and Power', *Power/Knowledge*, 109.

‘truth sayer’ with the local interrogation of truth effects Foucault attributes a value to criticism as historically inflected practice. On the one hand, this value is distinguished from a general interrogation of the notion of ‘truth’, not least because the targets of such criticism are the effects of local truth-bearing practices and the ‘subjugated knowledges’ that contest them do not pretend to the neutral posture of an intellectual speaking the truth. But, on the other, it is also in this respect that something like a more ‘general’ register is invoked because of the general typology of truth that characterises ‘the specificity of the politics of truth in our societies’.¹¹ It is because there are specific effects of power attached to the true that contesting these truth-effects belongs to a political register.

‘There is a battle “for truth”, or at least “around truth” – it being understood once again that by truth I do not mean “the ensemble of truths which are to be discovered and accepted”, but rather “the ensemble of rules according to which the true and the false are separated and specific effects of power attached to the true”, it being understood also that it’s not a matter of a battle “on behalf” of the truth, but of a battle about the status of truth and the economic and political role it plays’.¹²

These general remarks seem to be placing certain exigencies on politics, understood as the practice of ‘detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic and cultural, within which it operates at the present time.’ It is because Foucault has conceded in these remarks that ‘truth is already power’ that he is also able to criticise as a ‘chimera’ those attempts to emancipate truth from power. ‘The political question’, he concludes, ‘is not error, illusion, alienated consciousness or ideology; it is truth itself. Hence the importance of Nietzsche.’¹³

What is striking about Foucault’s phrasing of the political question as ‘truth itself’¹⁴ is that it draws together an approach to politics with the key methodological

¹¹ Michel Foucault, ‘Truth and Power’, *Power/Knowledge*, 132.

¹² ‘Truth and Power’, *Power/Knowledge*, 132.

¹³ ‘Truth and Power’, *Power/Knowledge*, 133.

¹⁴ I leave out of consideration how, as his essay on the Enlightenment makes clear, Nietzsche’s importance is his radicalisation of the Kantian critique. The latter also makes criticism an activity related to present institutions and practices. In this respect the Kant of the Enlightenment essay is distinguished from the understanding of critique as the understanding of necessary limitations to become a practical release of possibilities. See

moves of his work on the disciplines and biopolitics. Just as knowledge and truth are not outside of power relations but the mechanisms of their intensification and modalities of their operation, Foucault's call for the questioning of the status of truth disabuses the assumptions of emancipatory politics in which truth unmasks repressive practices. The reference to Nietzsche is decisive in this context. After all, it is under the auspices of a Nietzschean genealogy of truth as a value that Foucault will later recast the central works of his *oeuvre* as contributing to the same interrogation of practices, which are not just specific to modernity but constitute something like a framework in which defining features of the West may be identified. Further, the generality of the project of a genealogy of criticism in the West allows Foucault to gather together quite different truth practices and place aside the problem of defining truth distinct from defining the stakes and effects of these practices. However, if this suite of works is joined under the theme of the genealogical critique of the status and value of truth claiming practices, on this same theme they also present a point of discontinuity with the way Foucault presents the truths of the *parrhesiastes* in ethical terms. This ethical value is marked most clearly by the fact that the speaker of the truth risks danger and thus needs courage to speak the truth.

We should like to examine the question of how Foucault understands 'truth' in his late work in relation to two points of reference. The first is the hermeneutic problem of clarifying how truth is understood in his discussion of *parrhesia* to the extent that this differs from his critique of the exclusionary relation between truth and power. I will argue that his seminars on *parrhesia* seem to understand truth in an ethical sense. This understanding is given its most acute sign in Foucault's discussion of the danger the *parrhesiastes* courts. How does this danger, I will ask, inflect and alter the conception of truth, in the sense he understands it in his earlier work on the disciplines and sexuality? The significance of this question can be gauged by the Nietzschean inflection he gives to genealogy, which inquires into truth as value.

Second, I would like to consider the points of continuity between this ethical conception of the speaker of truth and the genealogical weight he gives to terms like 'critique' and 'problematization' in his late work in order to ask about the possible points

of compatibility between the earlier and later references to truth. In this connection we should particularly consider the relations between his discussion of *parrhesia* and the specific inflection he gives in his genealogy of ethics to ‘courage’ and ‘danger’ to characterise the field of material forces in social relations, and the possibilities and modes his genealogy identifies for the modification of these forces.¹⁵ Although the prospects of such compatibility are encouraged by Foucault’s retrospective comments regarding the continuities of his intellectual itinerary, it needs to be asked whether such comments do not in fact propose a substantial revision in his perspective and thus need to be examined from the viewpoint of an altered conception of the stakes of the ‘will to truth’ in the West. Alternatively, we may ask whether truth carries two different valences in Foucault’s thinking, related on one side to courage in the determination of the will, and on the other to an unreflective will to truth?

Truth as relation of power and truth as ethical value:

The differences between the ‘truths’ of the disciplines and ‘fearless truth’

The novel aspects of Foucault’s discussion of ‘truth’ in the context of *parrhesia* can be seen if we briefly remark the pragmatic contexts that guide references to ‘truth’ [*la vérité*] in his writing. It seems to me that his approach to *parrhesia* is governed by different imperatives than those that govern the other three main contexts in which ‘truth’ is discussed in his work. The most infrequent contexts of reference are those in which he mentions the physical and life sciences. Here, although there is a concession to a regulative conception of truth (especially in the context of references to the natural sciences), it is qualified and structured by a historicist approach to knowledge [*connaissance*].¹⁶ There is the important distinction to be made here between Foucault’s

¹⁵ I am thinking of his comment that ‘everything is dangerous’, meaning that there is no political strategy that is able to secure in advance a ‘progressive’ outcome. Michel Foucault, ‘On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress’, *Michel Foucault: Between Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, 231.

¹⁶ See, for instance, the discussion in ‘On the Archaeology of the Sciences: Response to the Epistemology Circle’, *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, ed. James D. Faubion, 297-335, as well as Foucault’s ‘Introduction’ to Canguilhem’s *The Normal and the Pathological*, trans. Carolyn Fawcett in collaboration with Robert S. Cohen (1991: Zone

examination of the procedures of acceptance under which knowledge counts as ‘true’ (where knowledge is considered in relation to the rule-set ‘true/false’) and the normative conception of a scientific truth. For our purposes, the importance of this distinction is that Foucault’s interest in the conditions of truth-acceptation shapes his consideration of truth claims as specific contents. More than this, these truth contents are ‘truths’ of a specific type, namely, they exert authority for the definition of scientific fields on account of their claim to truth.¹⁷

The next two important contexts may be considered together. They are formulated in his work of the mid-1970’s on the disciplines and bio-power. As we have seen, in *Discipline and Punish* and *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* (the English version of *La volonté de savoir*) he explicitly rejects an exclusionary relation between truth and power. Foucault identifies in his approach to the role of the body as a field invested with relations of power a materialism with a double character: it opens the prospect for a new

Books, New York), 7-25, and his commentary on Mendel in ‘The Discourse on Language’, 224. There is a detailed discussion of the difference between the question of normative truth claims and the methodological suspension of this question in Foucault’s inquiry into conditions of acceptance in Béatrice Han’s *Foucault’s Critical Project: Between the Transcendental and the Historical*, trans. Edward Pile (2002: Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA). Han’s book also queries whether Foucault can reflect on the topic of truth other than as ‘content’. She compares him unfavourably to Heidegger on this point because Heidegger is able to ask about the ‘essence of truth’ and thus to distinguish truth as *aletheia* from specific, ontic understandings of truth (193-4). Of course, in Heidegger this opening of truth as *aletheia* is understood as an error, but one with transcendental force. For this reading the main difference between Heidegger and Foucault on the question of truth follows from Heidegger’s ontological approach to the topic. I will argue here that Foucault’s treatment of the *parrhesiastic* figure as an exemplar of truth differs in important respects from his treatment of truth as ‘content’. Further, Foucault’s analysis of the exemplar of truth has important connections to Heidegger’s understanding of an attunement (*Stimmung*) of the will to the experience of truth. What Foucault adds to Heidegger’s treatment of *Stimmung* is the significance of this attunement of the will for social criticism. Both thinkers stress the difference between the ‘epistemological’ understanding of truth as correctness and the ‘experience’ of truth. Foucault, however, is critical of the approach that says, ‘at a certain moment, philosophy went astray and forgot something’. See ‘The Ethics of Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom’, *Ethics*, 281-303, 294.

¹⁷ Hence he tends to follow Gaston Bachelard and Georges Canguilhem in the documentation of the productive role of ‘errors’ in the history of the constitution of scientific fields, although he also qualifies their position. See his comments in ‘The Discourse on Language’, 223-4.

analysis of politics that is able to contest calcified utopian and anthropological themes in Marxist and post-Marxist theory, and it does so because it provides an alternative theory of modernity as the institution and perfecting of the disciplines. There are two aspects involved in the conception of truth developed in this period, which may also be addressed from the two different angles he takes on the subject: in *Discipline and Punish* Foucault examines the ways in which human beings are taken as an object of knowledge and calculation; but this angle is supplemented and also altered in *La Volonté de savoir* where Foucault examines how we take ourselves as subjects and hold the speaking of the truth of our experience to be emancipatory. As I suggested above, the settings for this investigation of truth are specifically tied to the genealogist's investigation of the specific practices that take shape in the modern period. Although the scope of the interrogation of the value attached to truth is considerably broader than this what is important is that in these works 1) 'truth' is tied to a register of practice-specific 'contents' 2) these practices are stimulated by their postulate of an interior depth. Although the 'speaker's benefit' discussed in *La volonté de savoir* is drawn from the idea that speaking against sexual repression is an act of defiance, Foucault emphasises that the 'truth' it speaks is chimerical; constant speech is encouraged because the 'secret' to be told is itself constructed as an unfathomable depth product of the apparatus of sexuality. Speaking the truth in this context is to speak a normalising truth.¹⁸ Similarly, the truth of the soul in the discourse of the prison reformers is a construction that stimulates the invention of disciplines able to shape and govern the body through the fictive intermediary of the soul. In both cases these fictions of depth have a productive series of effects that Foucault considers in terms of their generation of particular paths of constraint that limit the fields of possible experience.

Further, whether it is the credibility specific disciplines gain through their relations to the human sciences or the institutional practices that direct or frame our understanding of our identity as speaking the truth of our sexuality, it is because these normalising practices are connected to 'truth' that they are understood to be authority-

¹⁸ See on this topic Foucault's reference to the contemporary need to rent out ears to listen given that there is so much to be said. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, Volume 1, trans. Robert Hurley (1990: Random House, New York), 7.

bearing practices. Foucault's consideration of procedures of truth-acceptation in the physical and life sciences, like his analysis of disciplinary practices, has an explicit political dimension on account of the fact that he queries the effects of power attached to truth as institutional practices.¹⁹

In contrast to these three contexts, the striking feature of Foucault's discussion of the *parrhesiastes* is that here truth is understood as an ethical value. The main indication of this understanding of truth is the presentation of the truth-sayer as an exemplar. This quality of exemplarity derives primarily from the 'danger' the *parrhesiastes* risks in speaking, which distinguishes the activity of *parrhesia* from a specific truth-content that underlines or conjures or projects authority, and aligns it instead to the activity of 'critique' of authority, however broadly this needs to be construed.²⁰ Foucault's focus in this seminar series on truth-telling as an agonistic activity, rather than on truths as normative criteria, is instructive in this respect:

'what I wanted to show you was that if Greek philosophy has raised the problem of truth from the point of view of the criteria for true statements and sound reasoning, this same Greek philosophy has also raised the question of truth from the point of view of truth-telling as an activity'.²¹

¹⁹ His commentary on 'subjugated knowledges' as 'anti-sciences' may be cited here, 'Two Lectures', *Power/Knowledge*, 83.

²⁰ Amongst the different types of *parrhesia* discussed by Foucault are the cynics' 'permanent negative and critical attitude towards any kind of political institution, and towards any kind of *nomos*' (*Fearless Speech*, 105). The cynics believed that the way a person lived was the touchstone of their relation to truth, but they 'taught by way of [public] examples.' 'In order to proclaim the truths they accepted in a manner that would be accessible to everyone, they thought that their teachings had to consist in a very public, visible, spectacular, provocative, and sometimes scandalous way of life' (*Fearless Speech*, 117). Thus 'the ignorance/knowledge game' so important in the Socratic dialogue 'is a side effect' of the cynics' practice (*Fearless Speech*, 127). Diogenes, for instance, ridicules Alexander because he wishes to hurt his pride (*Fearless Speech*, 125). In general, the cynics oppose social institutions and rules, which they show in different public spectacles to be arbitrary (*Fearless Speech*, 121).

²¹ *Fearless Speech*, 169. Foucault follows here Marcel Detienne's approach to truth in *The Masters of Truth in Archaic Greece*. Like Detienne, he stresses the shift that occurs when truth is not longer disclosed in Delphi, but discussed in Athens. It is this shift that removes truth from something the gods disclose to human beings to what human beings disclose to each other through Athenian *parrhesia*. But it is clear that Foucault's discussion of *parrhesia* has quite different stakes and a considerably broader scope of argumentation than Detienne's book given that the latter is restricted to an account of the three masters of truth (the diviner, the bard and the king) in archaic Greece and a

The schema for the consideration of *parrhesia* is the consideration of the ‘relationship between the speaker and what he says.’ In particular, Foucault contrasts what is at stake in this relationship from the attempts to sway an audience with the technical devices of rhetoric.²² The absence of manipulative tropes of speech underlines the moral claim of the *parrhesiastes*. Two general features are especially important. First, in *parrhesiastic* utterances ‘the speaker makes it manifestly clear and obvious that what he says is his *own* opinion’ and ‘the *parrhesiastes* acts on other people’s minds by showing them as directly as possible what he actually believes’.²³ Second, this direct coincidence between belief and truth indicates the different type of commitment that operates in the *parrhesiastic* utterance ‘from the usual sorts of commitment which obtain between someone and what he or she says.’

‘The commitment involved in *parrhesia* is linked to a certain social situation, to a difference of status between the speaker and his audience, to the fact that the *parrhesiastes* says something which is dangerous to himself and thus involves a risk, and so on’.²⁴

Foucault’s account stresses the difference between the modern question of the certainty of the alleged truths and the Greco-Roman question, in which the problem is

documentation of the historical effects of the Greek city state and the polis on the question of who was a master of truth. See Marcel Detienne, *The Masters of Truth in Archaic Greece*, trans., Janet Lloyd (1999: Zone Books, New York).

²² He cites Quintilian’s discussion of a type of ‘natural exclamation’ [*exclamatio*] which he differentiates from those rhetorical figures designed to intensify the emotions of the audience. This natural exclamation, which Quintilian calls ‘free speech’ [*libera oratione*] and which includes as well the Greek *parrhesia* and Cornificius’ ‘license’ [*licentia*] is described in his *Institutio Oratoria* as neither ‘simulated or artfully designed’. Foucault comments that this makes *parrhesia* ‘a sort of “figure” among rhetorical figures, but with this characteristic: that it is without any figure since it is completely natural. *Parrhesia* is the zero degree of those rhetorical figures which intensify the emotions of the audience’ (*Fearless Speech*, 21). These comments may be compared in the case of cynicism with the treatment of Diogenes’ rhetoric in R. Bracht Branham’s ‘Defacing the Currency: Diogenes’ rhetoric and the invention of cynicism’ *The Cynics: The Cynic Movement in Antiquity and Its Legacy*, ed. R. Bracht Branham and Marie-Odile Goulet-Cazé (1996: University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London) (81-105).

²³ *Fearless Speech*, 12.

²⁴ *Fearless Speech*, 13.

how to recognise a particular individual as a truth-teller. In the latter framework having the truth is ‘guaranteed by the possession of certain *moral* qualities’.²⁵ Such qualities secure the speaker her truth-telling role as well as her capacity for the effective communication of truth to others, but they do so in the context of a ‘game’ in which the act of *parrhesia* ‘is linked to courage in the face of danger’. ‘In its extreme form, telling the truth takes place in the “game” of life or death’.²⁶

‘When a philosopher addresses himself to a sovereign, to a tyrant, and tells him that his tyranny is disturbing and unpleasant because tyranny is incompatible with justice, then the philosopher speaks the truth, believes he is speaking the truth, and, more than that, also takes a *risk* (since the tyrant may become angry, may punish him, may exile him, may kill him)’.²⁷

The figure of the *parrhesiastes* has an exemplary moral status because she eschews a safe life for a life of truth and accepts the risks it may entail. Conversely, it is difficult for the king or the tyrant to use *parrhesia* because he is not in a position to risk anything.

The historical place in which this criticism of power occurs is worth emphasising.²⁸ After all, given the historical context of *parrhesia*, understood as a verbal activity that performs an ‘exact coincidence between belief and truth’, Foucault concedes that this Greek sense of *parrhesia* ‘can no longer occur in our modern epistemological framework’.²⁹ We might add that the examples of Greek *parrhesia* against a tyrant are themselves incompatible with the terms of Foucault’s account of the shift from sovereign to disciplinary power in the modern period. Nonetheless it is the way the *parrhesiastes* chooses ‘a specific relationship to himself’ that interests Foucault and gives this example of ‘truth practice’ a broader scope than a commentary on an archaic Greek practice:

²⁵ *Fearless Speech*, 15.

²⁶ *Fearless Speech*, 16.

²⁷ *Fearless Speech*, 16.

²⁸ In Foucault’s examples he understands there to be an intimacy between *parrhesia* and criticism that follows from the nature of the commitment to speak truth that *parrhesia* entails: ‘...when a philosopher criticizes a tyrant, when a citizen criticizes the majority, when a pupil criticizes his teacher, then such speakers may be using *parrhesia*’ (*Fearless Speech*, 18).

²⁹ *Fearless Speech*, 14.

‘When you accept the *parrhesiastic* game in which your own life is exposed, you are taking up a specific relationship to yourself: you risk death to tell the truth instead of reposing in the security of a life where the truth goes unspoken. Of course, the threat of death comes from the Other, and thereby requires a relationship to the Other. But the *parrhesiastes* primarily chooses a specific relationship to himself: he prefers himself as a truth-teller rather than as a living being who is false to himself’.³⁰

This choice of a definite relation to the self as a truth-teller, who does not have to ‘demonstrate the truth to someone else’ but in speaking criticises the interlocutor or ‘the speaker himself’³¹, can be considered in relation to the topic of ‘truth’ in Foucault’s writing in two ways. On the one hand, the moral figure of the *parrhesiastes* underscores the extent of the incompatibility in Foucault’s treatment of the topic of truth between his account of the ethical value of the truth-teller and the role truth plays as an element in modern authority generating practices. This point has further significance when we consider that the terms of the incompatibility cannot be confined to an historical contrast between the modern disciplines and archaic Greece. Rather, the determination of a specific relation to the self is the same vocabulary Foucault uses in his late writing on ethics.³² Here too, truth is given a positive value as the term used to shape the will against a lazy, supine relation to authority.

On the other hand, it raises the question of the scope and implications of the difference in approach to the topic of truth. Once again it is important to note the contemporary frame of reference we can give to Foucault’s treatment of *parrhesia*. Foucault’s use of the vocabulary of truth to articulate his own ethics of self-transformation outlines practices engaged in a shaping of the will. It is clear that here, as in the case of his treatment of *parrhesia*, the criteria he uses to outline such practices differ from the terms he uses to characterise the Western will-to-truth and its authority generating practices. More specifically, I think he articulates truth as an ethical practice in the form of an explicit alternative to the practices of the disciplines and the particular role that knowledge and the fiction of interior depth play as stimulant for such practices. This point is especially clear in the different ways truth is conceived in these contexts:

³⁰ *Fearless Speech*, 17.

³¹ *Fearless Speech*, 17.

³² See *The Use of Pleasure: The History of Sexuality*, Volume 2, trans. Robert Hurley (1985: New York, Vintage Books)10-11.

whereas truth in the modern disciplines is understood as a depth to be discovered, whether in the case of the soul or the ‘will to know’ (*la volonté de savoir*) that drives the compulsion to document sexuality, in the context of *parrhesia* the truths told are there, what is needed is someone courageous enough to speak them. This contrast explains the importance of the topic of the will for Foucault’s link between courage and truth: what follows from the quality of truth’s unspoken presence is that for this truth to be spoken it requires someone who is willing to see truth and accept the risks that this choice entails. In Plato’s *Lache* Socrates is presented as a touchstone of truth on account of the evidence of his courage. It is on the basis of this evidence that when he tests the relation between the discourse used by his interlocutors and the life they lead he is able to instil a care for styling the relation to oneself so that what one says accords, as in Socrates example, with what one does or how one lives.³³ The cynics’ staging of public spectacles that aim to show the arbitrariness of social conventions and institutions are acts of self-endangerment that depend on a will which has chosen a life of truth.³⁴ Similarly, the techniques of self examination used by many of the Greek schools, including the cynics and the stoics, aim to strengthen certain dispositions in order to more effectively conduct one’s relations to others.³⁵ In all these cases, however, one chooses a specific relation to oneself. It follows that rather than attempting to persuade others, the *parrhesiastes* relates to others as an exemplar.

To put the elements of Foucault’s writing on *parrhesia* in a general form we might say that although Foucault’s genealogy of truth identifies multiple and contradictory strands of truth, including the unreflective practices of the will-to-truth, he is interested in strengthening those aspects of the Western tradition of truth that involve a disposition to shape the will against unthinking patterns of authority. It is possible to clarify the import of some of the topics treated in his early genealogical work in light of this distinction. For instance, his account of ‘subjugated knowledges’ refers to ‘anti-science’ sentiments that, like *parrhesia*, are distinguishable as voices that speak with a

³³ *Fearless Speech*, 98-100.

³⁴ *Fearless Speech*, 115 ff.

³⁵ *Fearless Speech*, 142-160.

degree zero rhetorical effect; they do not aim to persuade but to tell.³⁶ Although these ‘subjugated knowledges’ require an anti-authoritarian facility it is clear that they do not also entail the shaping of the will for a life of truth that marks out the ethical value of *parrhesia*. Indeed there is a reflective dimension involved in the ethical value of the life of truth that differentiates it from the type of political significance Foucault credits to ‘subjugated knowledges’, which tend to fall into the category of a response to intolerable conditions.³⁷

Given the attention Foucault’s work of the mid 1970’s gives to identifying the power effects of truth we might ask after the consequences of this treatment of the topic of *parrhesia*. What are the motives and effects of the choice of ‘truth’ to positively train the will in his late work? Are these two approaches to truth, which even conceive of the truth in incompatible ways, able to be reconciled? In one respect, the very incompatibility between the two understandings of truth speaks to the prospects and instructs the terms of reconciliation between the perspectives. After all, the stark difference between the status of the truth teller as an exemplar and truth as it is integrated into the Western constellation of the will to truth, suggest the critical relation the former practice allows in respect to the latter. Foucault’s commentary on *parrhesia* describes a truth-telling activity that is related to courage in the face of danger. A truth-telling that involves self-endangerment also plays a role in Foucault’s criticisms of the authority complicit motives of the Western ‘will to truth’. Further, it is possible to see in Foucault’s ethical conception of a lucid relation to oneself (distinguished from self-serving delusion or hypocrisy) as a critically inflected relation an attempt to develop an account of how these constraints or patterns of authority may be reengaged and thought at their limits. Nonetheless, we might still ask why Foucault’s ethical project attempts to reframe truth as a positive value given the exigency he had placed on politics in his earlier work as ‘detaching the power of truth’ from hegemonic social, economic and cultural forms. In other words, what is the relation between the positive ethical conception of truth and the

³⁶ *Power/Knowledge*, 83.

³⁷ Michel Foucault, ‘Lecture One: 7 January 1976’, *Power/Knowledge*. Subjugated knowledges are described as ‘incapable of unanimity...[it] owes its force only to the harshness with which it is opposed by everything surrounding it’, p. 82.

role truth plays as an authority enforcing value in politics? What considerations does the former impose on the latter?

Courage and truth in Foucault's critique of the will- to- truth.

There are good reasons to use the political stakes that Foucault attaches to genealogy as the parameters for this discussion of his positive conception of 'truth'. First of all, it is clear that his thesis regarding the non-exclusionary relation between truth and power in the modern disciplines imposes certain exigencies on politics. For this reason his critique of the political value invested in truth as an unmasking practice also raises the question of how the positive ethical value he attaches to truth may have a modifying effect on the authority bearing practices of the disciplines. Maybe one could connect this question to Foucault's attempt to accommodate the limitations on the strategic field of politics: It seems Foucault in the end moves away from the modern idea of philosophical activity (ie, ideology critique, social and political conscience, guide of praxis – eg. society transforming activity) to the ancient one of aesthetic self-forming. What the exemplar chooses is primarily a relation to themselves, rather than the aspiration to shape practices. As an ethical project the stylisation of the self in relation to truth may well chart an alternative path for forms of existence to the paths of practices elaborated and reinforced by the normalising tendencies of the disciplines but neither do such projects of self-stylisation pretend or aspire to legislative force.³⁸ Rather, such an aspiration may itself be understood as the critical target of 'positive truth' given that the primary unit if not the scope of this ethics is the individual.

Second, it is possible to reach greater clarity regarding the motives for and implications of Foucault's criticisms of the 'will-to-truth' and 'knowledge' in his work on

³⁸ 'The historical ontology of ourselves must turn away from all projects that claim to be global or radical. ...I prefer the very specific transformations that have proved to be possible in the last twenty years in a certain number of areas which concern our ways of being and thinking, relations to authority, relations between the sexes, the way in which we perceive insanity or illness; *I prefer even these partial transformations*, which have been made in the correlation of historical analysis and the practical attitude, to the programs for a new man that the worst political systems have repeated throughout the twentieth century.' 'What is Enlightenment?', *Ethics: The Essential Works*, Volume 1, 316, my emphasis.

the disciplines when we consider how political considerations inflect and shape the form of his late references to courage and the positive, ethical value he ascribes to truth. Foucault's cautions against the ambitious aspirations of grand theories of politics follow from his insights regarding the will. His treatment of the topic of the will can be consulted to define more precisely the sense in which he judges the value placed on knowledge in political calculations to be a ruse. Finally, it is from attention to the topic of the will that the features entailed in a possible reconciliation between 'truth' as a supine appeal to authority and a 'courageous truth' that courts self-endangerment can be given further definition, as can the political significance of their clash in Foucault's writing.

It is uncontroversial to point out that Foucault understands 'politics' against global projects as the partial work of modification of practices. Moreover, he expresses the view that 'everything is dangerous' in the sense that modifications of this type are unpredictable in their final consequences and immediate effects. This view is ranged against the chimeras of radical politics because 1) it takes its settings from current practices rather than ideals; and 2) it tries to accommodate the need for caution given the experience of the devastating consequences that radical projects to design a 'new man' bring in their wake. Finally, the caution of 'danger' may be seen against the alibis of those who act with a 'good conscience'. When Foucault characterises the disposition that partners this conception of politics he terms it 'hyperactive pessimism'. In this way he wishes to answer the criticism that his attempt to train the task of thought on the real difficulties of our current situation leads to resignation.³⁹ It is true that Foucault encourages his audience to be alert to the possibilities of our contemporary situation and that to this end he gives knowledge a role as a tool for identifying the contingency of practices. The genealogical weight given to terms like 'critique' and 'problematization' in his late work are, for instance, tools that mark different possibilities for practices. He calls for altering the Kantian practice of criticism as 'knowing [*savoir*] what limits knowledge [*connaissance*] must renounce exceeding' into the following positive question: 'In what is given to us as universal, necessary, obligatory, what place is

³⁹ 'On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress', *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, 231-2.

occupied by whatever is singular, contingent, and the product of arbitrary constraints?’⁴⁰ Similarly, the study of modes of problematization in Western societies, such as the problem of the role of sexual relations or the importance given to truth, aims to identify the ‘determined historical figures’ of these general modes.⁴¹

It seems to me that Foucault’s conception of ‘courageous truth’ is the crucial setting for this politics. It is possible, for instance, to see the genealogical weight he gives to terms like ‘critique’ and ‘problematization’ in his late work as ways of reflecting on the modification of practices as they involve a shaping of the will. It is certainly true that the vocabulary of ‘critique’ and ‘problematization’ give a ready schema for the account of Foucault’s work as the identification and delimitation of the practices that make us what we are and what we think.⁴² However, Foucault’s positive conception of truth indicates a sharper position than that of offering a general account of the sacralization of practices and the airing of the proposition that things may be different once these practices are grasped in their historical contingency. His positive conception of truth sharpens this general position because it brings with it an insight into the limitations imposed on projects for the modification of practices. Foucault’s pessimism needs to be carefully weighed. If we consider his comments on the will in relation to his criticisms of the over-investment in knowledge we have the key to the position that wishes to

⁴⁰ ‘What is Enlightenment?’, 315.

⁴¹ ‘What is Enlightenment?’, 318. Modes of problematization have ‘general import’ and in this respect give the critical project theoretical coherence, but they are not evidence of an ‘anthropological constant’ nor a series of ‘chronological variations’; they need to be treated in ‘their historically unique form’ (318).

⁴² ‘Maybe the target nowadays is not to discover what we are, but to refuse what we are.’ Foucault, ‘The Subject and Power’, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, 208-229, 216. ‘The critical ontology of ourselves must be considered not, certainly, as a theory, a doctrine, nor even as a permanent body of knowledge that is accumulating; it must be conceived as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits imposed on us and an experiment of the possibility of going beyond them [*de leur franchissement possible*].’ Foucault, ‘What is Enlightenment?’, *Ethics: The Essential Works*, Vol.1, 319. This distinction between ‘doctrine’ and ‘a philosophical life’ explicitly adapts the distinction between the epistemological and existential types of truth and takes the latter up as a positive schema of orientation for Foucault’s thinking. It is outside the scope of this paper to comment further but I think Heidegger and Wittgenstein both share this positive evaluation of truth as having an existential hold.

understand the difficulties of our contemporary settings, and which practices a considered refusal of the tendency to overestimate possible counter-paths.

In his ‘What is Enlightenment?’ essay Foucault says that he prefers to think of the Enlightenment as an attitude, rather than a historical epoch. Further, what distinguishes this attitude is that it is ‘philosophical life’ not a ‘body of theory’. Kant had specified that the Enlightenment signalled ‘man’s’ emergence from ‘self-imposed immaturity’. As its motto, Kant had taken Horace’s dictum: ‘*Sapere Aude!*’ In Foucault’s essay on Enlightenment he comments on this motto that both instructs ‘oneself’ and ‘proposes’ an instruction ‘to others’:

‘Significantly, Kant says that this Enlightenment has a *Wahlspruch*: now, a *Wahlspruch* is a heraldic device, that is, a distinctive feature by which one can be recognized, and it is also a motto, an instruction that one gives oneself and proposes to others. What, then, is this instruction? *Aude sapere*: “dare to know,” “have the courage, the audacity, to know”’.⁴³

In Kant what is at issue is not a deficiency of knowledge, a defect of the intellect, but a weakness of the will. The immaturity is self-imposed; its roots, Kant says, are to be sought in ‘laziness and cowardice’. This is why of all the dimensions of ‘immaturity’ Kant singles out religion for explicit treatment, ‘the most pernicious and disgraceful of all’.⁴⁴ Just as Kant understands the Enlightenment to entail courage in the face of self-imposed immaturity so too in Foucault’s discussion of *parrhesia* it is a question of moral character rather than intelligence that defines the courage of the *parrhesiastes*. It is not that what the *parrhesiastes* sees is invisible to others, it is not the case that ‘truth’ is recalcitrant, but that others choose not to see it.⁴⁵

⁴³ Foucault, ‘What is Enlightenment?’, *Ethics: The Essential Works*, Vol.1, 306.

⁴⁴ Immanuel Kant, ‘An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?’ *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays on Politics, History and Morals*, trans. Ted Humphrey (1983: Hackett Publishing: Indianapolis and Cambridge), 41-9, 45.

⁴⁵ The idea that infantilizing self-delusions are a matter of the will rather than of the intellect can also be found in Ludwig Wittgenstein. In Wittgenstein’s case he highlights the way that what one wants to see can blind us to ‘the very things which are most obvious’: ‘What makes a subject hard to understand – if it’s something significant and important – is not that before you can understand it you need to be specially trained in abstruse matters, but the contrast between understanding the subject and what most people *want* to see. Because of this the very things which are most obvious may become

To conclude I would like to point out that this approach to truth is more than a topic in Foucault's writing. It is also a resource for locating some of the distinctive traits of Foucault's intellectual disposition. In a 1982 interview he states:

'For me, intellectual work is related to what you could call "aestheticism", meaning transforming yourself. I believe my problem is this strange relationship between knowledge, scholarship, theory, and real history. I know very well, and I think I knew it from the moment when I was a child, that knowledge can do nothing for transforming the world. Maybe I am wrong. And I am sure I am wrong from a theoretical point of view, for I know very well that knowledge has transformed the world.

'But if I refer to my own personal experience, I have the feeling knowledge can't do anything for us, and that political power may destroy us. All the knowledge in the world can't do anything against that. All this is related not to what I think theoretically (I know that's wrong), but I speak from my personal experience. I know that knowledge can transform us, that truth is not only a way of deciphering the world (and maybe what we call truth doesn't decipher anything), but that if I know the truth I will be changed'.⁴⁶

These comments locate a personal disposition. This disposition shapes the path of Foucault's own research into the practices of the Greek philosophical schools in which how one lives one's life are the crucial settings for 'philosophical life'. However, considered in relation to Foucault's reflection on truth as an ethical value that modulates the will and shapes the self, these comments regarding the failings of 'knowledge' also draw attention to the limits that are placed on the reach and efficacy of self-transforming 'truth'. For instance, it is possible to conduct a genealogical inquiry into the effects of 'truth', but the core problem of the motivation needed to shape one's will, which determines the context for exemplary-truths, is impervious to any such inquiry. Is it possible that Foucault's insight into these limits determines the context of truth-telling as a positive value today? To put this differently: we might say that to be critically aware of or to reflect on the elements that compose ourselves, to adopt them as the object of a knowledge-project (a 'body of theory') is not sufficient. Indeed this type of positive evaluation of knowledge as a sufficient counter to unthinking behaviour has all the features of a sacralized category; the very type that Foucault's positive conception of 'truth' arrays as an unthinking practice. His genealogy of the role of courage in the

the hardest of all to understand. What has to be overcome is a difficulty having to do with the will, rather than with the intellect'. Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, ed. G.H. Von Wright, trans. Peter Winch (1980: University of Chicago Press, Chicago), 17e.

⁴⁶ 'An Interview by Stephen Riggins', in *Ethics*, 121-135, 130-131.

determination of the will shows that critical reflection on such practices is not enough; equally, if it is the case that only a strong will or audacity is able to contest the hold of such practices then this fact gives good reason for Foucault's pessimism.