

## **Who is Able to Tell the Truth?**

A Review of *Fearless Speech* by Michel Foucault.  
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### **Introduction**

*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... What I wanted to analyze was how the truth-teller's role was variously problematized in Greek philosophy (Foucault, 2001, p. 169)*

The name of Michel Foucault is most commonly associated with words such as power, knowledge, discourse, archaeology, and genealogy. In *Fearless Speech* (Foucault, 2001), Foucault introduces us to another term: *parrhesia*.

*Parrhesia* is a Greek term ordinarily translated into English by “frankness in speaking the truth.” The *parrhesiastes* is the one who uses *parrhesia*, i.e., the one who speaks the truth. *Fearless Speech* describes Foucault’s analysis of the use of the term *parrhesia* in Greek literature and philosophy from the 5<sup>th</sup> Century BC to the 5<sup>th</sup> Century AD. A short book, some 173 pages long, *Fearless Speech* offers the reader a fascinating and, more importantly, an accessible window into Foucault’s later work on sexuality, ethics, and the care of the self.

Foucault is most well known for his earlier works on power/knowledge, especially *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault, 1979) and his introductory volume to *The History of Sexuality* (Foucault, 1980). His archaeological analyses of madness (Foucault, 1988a), medicine (Foucault, 1975) and the human sciences (Foucault, 1972, 1973) are considered groundbreaking. The work of Foucault's last years, in particular his focus on ancient Greek and Roman texts, is cited much less. This is probably because this work is so different in scope and subject matter and was markedly different from the project Foucault claimed to be doing. Foucault's *History of Sexuality: Volume One* promised to be the introductory volume to a series of books addressing "the way in which sex is 'put into discourse'" (Foucault, 1980, p. 11). Volume two of *The History of Sexuality* was supposed to have begun with an analysis of the early Christian confessional practices. Foucault was set to write an introductory chapter addressing the relation of sexuality and self-mastery in ancient culture. But, as Dreyfus and Rabinow (1983) point out, the chapter soon became problematic. Foucault discovered that the Greeks and Romans had nothing to say about sexuality per se, and little to say about specific kinds of sexual acts. However, they *did* talk at length about the relation of sexual activity to health and ethics. Foucault found that Greek thinkers paid elaborate attention to techniques of self-care, and that these concerns endured for six centuries. Foucault was forced to modify his original hypothesis that modern techniques of self-analysis and control were Christian inventions. As a result, Foucault's third volume in his history of sexuality, *The Care of the Self* (Foucault, 1988b), moves away from sexuality to analyze this greater attention the ancient world paid to the care of the self. In an interview conducted in April 1983, one year before his death, Foucault was asked: "Do you still think that understanding sexuality is central to understanding how we are?"

(Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983, p. 229). Foucault replied: “I must confess that I am much more interested in problems about techniques of the self and things like that rather than sex... sex is boring” (p. 229).

*Fearless Speech* is an accessible and clearly written insight into this change of direction that characterized Foucault’s later work. The text was compiled from tape-recordings made of six lectures Foucault delivered as part of a seminar entitled “Discourse and Truth” given at the University of California of Berkeley in the Fall semester of 1983. In these lectures, Foucault focused on how *parrhesia*, frankness in speaking the truth, was *used* in Greek literary and philosophical texts from the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC to the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD. He writes: “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” (Foucault, 2001, p. 169) and to “analyze how the truth-teller’s role was variously problematized in Greek philosophy” (p. 169). He raises questions such as the following:

Who is able to tell the truth?

What are the moral, the ethical, and spiritual conditions which entitle someone to present himself as, and to be considered to be, a truth-teller?

About what topics is it important to tell the truth? (About the world? About nature?

About the city? About behavior? About man?)

What are the consequences of telling the truth?

What is the relationship between the activity of truth-telling and the exercise of power?

Is truth-telling and power separable, or do they require one another?

In *Fearless Speech*, Foucault attempts to show and emphasize some aspects of what he terms the “parrhesastic game” in ancient Greece. He isolates and focuses on three such games:

the relationship of *parrhesia* to rhetoric, to politics, and to philosophy. These form the three main sections of the book:

Section 2: *Parrhesia* in Euripides

Section 3: *Parrhesia* in the Crisis of Democratic Institutions

Section 4: *Parrhesia* in the Care of the Self

Section 1 is entitled “The Word *Parrhesia*” and lays out the parameters of the concept under study.

### **The Word *Parrhesia***

*Parrhesia* is linked to courage in the face of danger: it demands the courage to speak the truth in spite of some danger. And in its extreme form, telling the truth takes place in the “game” of life or death (Foucault, 2001, p. 16).

The word *parrhesia* refers to a type of relationship between the speaker and what he says. The one who uses *parrhesia* is someone who says everything he has in mind. The *parrhesiastes* does not hide anything, but opens his heart and mind completely to other people through his discourse. The speaker is supposed to give a complete and exact account of what he has in mind so that audience to comprehend exactly what the speaker thinks. The *parrhesiastes* makes it manifestly clear and obvious that what he says is his *own* opinion. He must do this by avoiding any kind of rhetorical form which would veil what he thinks and the most direct words and forms of expression he can find. Instead of using technical devices to help him prevail upon the minds of his audience, in *parrhesia* the speaker acts on other people’s minds by showing them as directly as possible what he actually believes.

Foucault distinguishes between two types of *parrhesia*. The first is pejorative and is akin to chattering, saying any or everything one has in mind without qualification. However, most instances of *parrhesia* are positive - it means to tell the truth. But does the *parrhesiastes* say what he *thinks* is true, or does he say what *is* really true? For Foucault, the *parrhesiastes* says what is true because he *knows* that it *is* true; and he *knows* that it is true because it really *is* true. The *parrhesiastes* is not only sincere and states his opinion, but his opinion is also the truth. In *parrhesia*, there is always an exact coincidence between belief and truth.

In modern thought since Descartes, the coincidence between belief and truth is obtained in a certain mental experience. For the Greeks, however, the coincidence between belief and truth takes place in a *verbal activity*, the *parrhesia*. Foucault (2001) claims that he could find no cases where the *parrhesiastes* seemed to have any doubts about his own possession of the truth and that “*parrhesia*, in this Greek sense, can no longer occur in our modern epistemological framework” (p. 14). The parrhesiastic game presupposes that the *parrhesiastes* is someone who has the *moral qualities* which are required, first, to know the truth, and second, to convey such truth to others.

What are these moral qualities required to know and convey truth? The first proof of the sincerity of the *parrhesiastes* is his courage. The fact that a speaker says something dangerous, different from the majority, is a strong indicator that he is a *parrhesiastes*. From the Greek perspective, a grammar teacher may tell the truth to the children he teaches and have no doubt that what he teaches is true. However, he is not a *parrhesiastes*. When a philosopher addresses himself to a sovereign or a tyrant, and tells him that his tyranny is disturbing because tyranny is incompatible with justice, then the philosopher is speaking 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 even kill him.

The *parrhesiastes* is someone who takes a risk. In *parrhesia* the danger always comes from the fact that the said truth is capable of hurting or angering the interlocutor. The *parrhesia* may involve may be advice that the interlocutor should behave in a certain way, or that he is wrong in what he thinks or in the way he acts. Or the *parrhesia* may be a confession of the speaker himself to someone who has power over him and is able to censure or punish him for what he has done. Foucault (2001) remarks that “*Parrhesia* is linked to courage in the face of danger: it demands the courage to speak the truth in spite of some danger. And in its extreme form, telling the truth takes place in the “game” of life or death” (p. 16). 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. 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 someone who is false to himself.

The function of *parrhesia*, therefore, is not simply to demonstrate the truth to someone else, like a teacher, or to state what it is on your mind. *Parrhesia* has the function of criticism. It critiques current behaviors and prescribes new ones. However, *parrhesia* is criticism in a situation where the *parrhesiastes* is in a position of inferiority with respect to the interlocutor. He is always less powerful than the one to which he speaks. The *parrhesia* comes from below, not above. For the Greeks, a teacher or a father does not use *parrhesia*. But when a philosopher

criticizes a tyrant, when a citizen criticizes the majority, or when a pupil criticizes the teacher, then such speakers may be using *parrhesia*.

In *parrhesia*, telling the truth is a duty. The orator who speaks the truth to those who cannot accept his truth and who may be exiled or punished in some way is free to keep silent. No one forces him to speak, but he feels that it is his duty to do so. A criminal who is forced to confess his crime does not use *parrhesia*. A criminal who voluntarily confesses his crime out of a sense of moral obligation does perform a *parrhesiastic* act. Foucault singles out Socrates as the ultimate example of *parrhesia*: “Socrates is able to use rational, ethically valuable, fine, and beautiful discourse; but unlike the sophist, he can use *parrhesia* and speak freely because what he says accords exactly with what he thinks, and what he thinks accords exactly with what he does. And so Socrates - who is truly free and courageous - can therefore function as a *parrhesiastic* figure” (p. 101). He discloses the truth in speaking, is courageous in his life and in his speech, and confronts his listener’s opinion in a critical manner.

*Parrhesia*, then, is a kind of verbal activity where the speaker has a specific relation to truth through frankness, a certain relationship to his own life through danger, a certain relation to himself or other people through criticism, and a specific relation to moral law through freedom and duty. As Foucault (2001) explains: “*Parrhesia* is a verbal activity in which a speaker expresses his personal relationship to truth, and risks his life because he recognizes truth-telling as a duty to improve or help other people (as well as himself)” (p. 19). In *parrhesia* the speaker uses his freedom and chooses frankness instead of persuasion, truth instead of falsehood or silence, the risk of death instead of life and security, criticism instead of flattery, and moral duty

instead of self-interest. This is the meaning of *parrhesia* in most of the Greek texts where it occurs from the Fifth Century B.C. to the Fifth Century A. D.

Why does Foucault conduct this painstaking analysis of *parrhesia* in ancient Greek texts? *Fearless Speech* is a continuation and extension of Foucault's analysis of problematizations: "how and why certain things (behavior, phenomena, processes) became a *problem*" (Foucault, 2001, p. 171):

We have to understand very clearly, I think, that a given problematization is not an effect or consequence of a historical context or situation, but is an answer given by definite individuals... For example, with regard to the way that *parrhesia* was problematized at a given moment, we can see that there are specific Socratic-Platonic answers to the questions: How can we recognize someone as a *parrhesiastes*? What is the importance of having a *parrhesiastes* for the city? What is the training of a good *parrhesiastes*? (p. 172).

Foucault's analysis of Greek texts brings into sharp relief similar issues of interest to media ecologists. With respect to modern media-dominated environments, we can ask: Who speaks the truth today? We look to our leaders, politicians, news anchors, spiritual advisors, and teachers as authorities for truth-telling. What entitles these people to be recognized as truth-tellers? What are the consequences of telling the truth? Is there an equivalent to *parrhesia* in modern conceptions of truth telling?

*Parrhesia* was an answer that appeared as a reply to some concrete and specific aspect of the world. Foucault (2001) writes that "I think it is possible to give an analysis of a specific problematization as the history of an answer - the original, specific, and singular answer of



thought - to a certain situation. And it is this kind of specific relation between truth and reality which I have tried to analyze in the various problematizations of *parrhesia*” (p. 173). *Fearless Speech* offers a way to step outside of modern discourses of truth, reality, and power. The Greeks developed a very different relation between truth and reality and it this relation that Foucault has tried to excavate in the various problematizations and language games of *parrhesia*. Foucault (1986) writes that “there are times in life when the question of knowing if one can think differently than one thinks, and perceive differently than one sees, is absolutely necessary if one is to go on looking and reflecting at all” (p. 8). The language games of *parrhesia* offer us a new and useful vantage point of viewing truth-telling in the modern world and brings to light the question of the problematizations that generate and organize contemporary practice.

In conducting this analysis, is Foucault seeking an escape from modern systems of discourse and a retreat to another, and perhaps better, world? His answer is emphatic:

No! I am not looking for an alternative; you can't find the solution of a problem in the solution of another problem raised at another moment by other people. You see, what I want to do is not the history of solutions, and that's the reason why I don't accept the word *alternative*. I would like to do the genealogy of problems, of *problematiques*. My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad. If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983, pp. 231-232).

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