# *Parrēsia*: The problem of truth

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**review of:** Michel Foucault (2010) *Government of self and others: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1982-83*, trans. G. Burchell. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan. (HB: pp. 402, £19.99, ISBN 1 4039 8666 5).

> The painter is standing a little back from his canvas. He is glancing at his model; perhaps he is considering whether to add some finishing touch, though it is also possible that the first stroke has not yet been made. (Foucault, 1989: 3)

This opening in *The Order of Things* with reference to *Las Meninas* bears some resemblance to the lectures Foucault held at the *Collège de France* in 1983. Here Foucault presents his work-in-progress, and it is not certain when or if the work will be conclusive – or to what degree it has even begun. This unfinished form, nevertheless, makes the lectures worth reading as they give us a good sense of how Foucault works with his material. Through the subject of the lectures, the Greek concept of *parrēsia*,[1] he explores the relation between philosophy and politics as well as the problematization of conditions of truth. As such, the analysis of *parrēsia* ties central aspects of Foucault's authorship together in a clarifying way.

The lectures begin with a programmatic exposition in which Foucault positions his preceding works by explaining what he has been doing, or always intended to do (3). What he has been doing is a history of thought based on an analysis of the central experiences of our culture (e.g. criminality, madness, sexuality), their development and transformation. Such an analysis is carried out through three overlapping analytical approaches. These are 'forms of possible knowledge', 'normative frameworks of behavior', and 'potential modes of existence for possible subjects'. Together, these approaches create the 'focal point of experience' in our culture (*ibid.*). The analysis of *parrēsia* clarifies the relation between these three analytical approaches since they are related to the central question of 'truth-telling in procedures of government and the

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[1] The lexical definition of *parrēsia* (παρρησία), whose meaning Foucault tries to re-shape and re-assemble, is 'outspokenness, frankness, freedom of speech' (Liddell and Scott, 1940: 1344).

constitution of [an] individual as subject for himself and for others' (42; brackets in original).

Foucault finds inspiration for this general frame of analysis in the Kantian question of the *Aufklärung*, stating that a part of Kant's legacy was to raise two questions that founded modern philosophy. First, examined by analytical Anglo-Saxon philosophy, the 'question on the conditions of possibility of a true knowledge'. Second, elaborated by Continental philosophy, the question of the status of our present reality, which Foucault famously calls 'an ontology of the present' (20-1). The latter is the one to which he, unsurprisingly, links himself to, and it is on the basis of an analysis of *parrēsia* that Foucault articulates this ontology of the present. *Parrēsia*, then, reinforces elements of his prior studies but points towards future research as well.

This clear schematic division found in the first and last lecture is in marked contrast to Foucault's actual analysis of *parrēsia*, which produces a myriad of analytical distinctions and subdivisions that are neither schematized nor explicitly joined together. The question thus arises: *how* is he doing what he says he does? A discussion Foucault undertakes when addressing an objection from one auditor outlines the way in which he carries out his analyses. The objection is directed at Foucault's elaboration of the concept of *parrēsia*, arguing that the canonical definition of *parrēsia* is simply 'free speech'. Foucault answers:

> I would correct this everyday definition of the word *parrēsia* by saying that it is not just freedom of speech; it is frankness, the profession of truth. […] When we say "speaking freely", this is of course an everyday, ready made expression which does not have a strong meaning. Nevertheless, it remains the case that free speech is a political problem, […] a technical problem, and also a historical problem. I would say the same is true of *parrēsia:* it has an everyday, current, familiar, and obvious meaning, and then this precise and technical meaning. (188)

In order to find the precise meaning of *parrēsia* Foucault dives into the archive of antique texts, continuously displacing older definitions and identifying nuances in the various meanings of the word. In this way he traces the problem of *parrēsia* through a careful collation, exegesis and juxtaposition of a variety of texts. The tracing is so detailed that reading the lectures is somewhat like reading the texts themselves, with Foucault giving the reader a unique insight into the way he conducts his analyses.

In spite of the different meanings of *parrēsia*, two general moments of *parrēsia* emerge through Foucault's analysis (340). The first moment, based on a reading of classical tragedy and history, is concerned with the political problematization of *parrēsia*. This moment, treated in lectures 3 to 6, is derived from the works on the tragic figure Ion (Euripides) and the political figure Pericles (Thucydides). The other moment, primarily devoted to the work of Plato, is philosophical. It is examined in lectures 6 to 8 and constitutes the Socratic and philosophical problematization of *parrēsia* (353). With this distinction in place, Foucault assembles the various aspects of *parrēsia* in an expositional rather than strictly analytical way.

## *Parrēsiatic* moments: The political and the philosophical problematization

Foucault sketches out how political *parrēsia* is a practice of fundamental importance for the political realm. It revolves around four conditions: it is a part of democracy; it includes a 'game of ascendency'; it involves truth-telling; and it is executed with courage (173-5; cf. also 299). The central question for this moment is how truth and truth-telling play out within this realm (89). Truth is not something already given or simply established through truth-telling itself. On the contrary, truth is an unstable affair. It can, however, momentarily be settled through the 'passions' circulating *in* and *between* political individuals (119). With such a conception Foucault is hinting to how truth is not exclusively *constituted* by *logos*; truth, rather, is *supported* by logos, through a complex mass of social relations, educational apparatuses, and individual desires. Nevertheless, within the domain of politics truth keeps on quivering and does not sediment once and for all.

Consequently, the central problem for politics becomes how truth is to be maintained. A discourse of reason, *logos*, is necessary, but what *kind* of *logos* can establish truth? Who has the ability to conduct this discourse within democracy? And, given that this ability to speak truly may give this person the right to lead others, who should be delegated the responsibility of governing others? Political *parrēsia* cannot solve these problems adequately. There might be ascendancy in democracy, some may actually govern, but the governed always constitutes the reverse side of governing. The governed too may expose a reasonable discourse when speaking up against the powerful – something of interest for the governing:

Those, however, who think differently from what the Assembly in general desires, he [Isocrates] says, really must look for rational and true arguments in order to persuade the Assembly and get it to change its opinion. Consequently, an assembly would do much better listening to those who speak to it against its opinion, than to those who merely repeat what it thinks (191).

Governing and governed are thus intimately related and continually displace the problem of who may speak the truth. Both parties *may* have an answer, and *parrēsia* in its political moment remains therefore a risky affair: something that may not fulfill itself and something that must be guided. This insecure situation opens up a new kind of discourse that enables the rise of a new conception of *parrēsia*: philosophical *parrēsia*. Political *parrēsia* is not replaced with this new conception. On the contrary, they co-exist in a chiastic relationship. Political *parrēsia* constitutes philosophical *parrēsia,* and the latter modifies the first. Thus, *parrēsia* continues to be a problem for politics, but it is characterized by an instability that philosophy responds to.

According to Foucault, philosophical *parrēsia* also revolves around four conditions: it is still executed with courage but without running a risk; it refers at the same time to general principles and particular circumstances; it is addressed to both the governing and the governed in order to 'elicit a certain kind of behavior'; and it must 'confront reality' (276-9). Philosophical *parrēsia* no longer unambiguously refers to an act of speaking up courageously when a political subject suffers from injustice. The

philosopher no longer 'takes the risk of reproaching someone powerful for his injustice' (134). Rather, within the domain of philosophical *parrēsia*, the philosopher *advises* the powerful. This is not done by addressing the powerful directly, but by speaking in general principles to all parties. This generality disrupts the political use of *parrēsia*, which was explicitly directed to the Assembly or the governor. Now *parrēsia* acts, in what Foucault calls a 'psychagogic' manner (cf. 334-6), towards both governor and governed. In this setting, the problem of *how* philosophy should be concerned with and related to politics arises, because in order for philosophy to be a constitutional part of politics it must confront political reality. It must not remain merely discourse (*logos*) but turn into action (*ergon*) by confronting the political field with truth-telling (247-55).

Philosophy can only turn into *ergon* when it is listened to and, as a particular discourse of truth that is different from the one in political *parrēsia*, becomes worth listening to. With its apolitical discourse – although politically influential – philosophy speaks truly and deals with the problem of truth within the political. However, the problem of the political, when subject to philosophy, is not politics as such:

> What concerns philosophy is not politics, it is not even justice and injustice in the city, but justice and injustice inasmuch as they are committed by someone who is an acting subject; acting as a citizen, or as a subject, or possibly as a sovereign. Philosophy's question is not the question of politics; it is the question of the subject in politics. (319)

The subject, and the care for itself, thus becomes the central concern for philosophical *parrēsia*. Caring about oneself Foucault writes, 'consists first and foremost in knowing whether or not one does know what one knows' (326). With this conception of *parrēsia* Foucault is able to weave together politics, philosophy, subject, truth and caring. With the conjunction of these dimensions the title of the lectures, *Government of Self and Others*, is the underlying unifying leitmotif. In the lectures we do not find a direct or careful unraveling of governmental relations. It comes up occasionally, sometimes discretely in relation to caring. At other times more concretely, as when Foucault demonstrates how the governor may turn to philosophy when handling political issues. Through this engagement with philosophy the governor turns towards himself and guides himself towards his political (and philosophical) task. This turning towards oneself implies the need to exercise a variety of different self-practices in order to carry out the creation of a new way of being that improves political governance – philosophy thus becomes a 'practice of self on self' (254).

## Politics and philosophy

> But philosophy has to tell the truth […] not about power, but in relation to power, in contact with, in a sort of vis-a-vis or intersection with power. It is not for philosophy to tell power what to do, but it has to exist as truth-telling in a certain relation to political action; nothing more, nothing less. (286)

Philosophy is related to power. It indirectly guides politics by constituting a new mode of being within the political in order for politics to guide power and itself. This is done by questioning rather than lecturing, leaving the political to reflect upon its own actions. Telling the truth, however, can have socio-political consequences for oneself and others, and has the possibility to transform the field of politics. Philosophy as a practice of

truth-telling that addresses the political field, therefore, is a practice that must also reflect upon its own circumstantial *when* and *how*.

From this point of view, the analysis of *parrēsia* and the conditions of truth-telling lay bare not only the historical conditions of Foucault's own practice as an intellectual, but also the conditions and possibility of intellectual truth-concerned activity in general. This in the sense that the lectures show how modern philosophy has come to deal with questions about the conditions of truth and the practical implications of telling the truth in a certain way, at a certain time, and knowing that this truth-telling can have consequences for its own present.

In the final two lectures, Foucault points out more directly that his analysis could be understood as such an uncovering: 'Maybe we could envisage the history of modern European philosophy as a history of practices of veridiction, as a history of practices of *parrēsia*' (349). Elsewhere he calls for historical analyses of 'ontologies of the discourse of truth' (309). Such historical research, Foucault suggests, would ask three questions: (1) What is the mode of being peculiar to this or that discourse, when it introduces a certain specific game of truth into realities? (2) What is the mode of being that this discourse of veridiction confers on the reality it talks about? (3) And what is the mode of being that this discourse of veridiction imposes on the subject who employs it? (309-10).

Foucault presents these as questions *to be posed* by research. Yet it seems quite clear that they are also the research questions he actually indirectly employed in his previous analyses. Following this, Foucault states that all truth should be understood and analyzed as a game of veridiction and every ontology of this as a fiction (310). Hence, what emerges in the lectures is a sense that truth as an object for analysis is essentially conditioned. Understanding ontology as fiction and truth as conditioned, however, does not seem to discredit the idea of truth as such. In Foucault's account, truth becomes highly interesting in another sense, and seeking truth emerges as a question of asking: Why does this obvious experience (madness, sexuality, etc.), which in principle is contingent, insistently present itself as obvious and with particular claims to truth? As a discourse on truth, the role of modern philosophy is to question its own conditions and conditioning effects. The concrete ontology of truth undertaken in the lectures is then not only an ontology of the discourse of truth in antique Greece but also of present philosophy (and politics). The lectures are thus an archeological and genealogical attempt to uncover the provenance of critical thought and the relation to truth that characterizes modernity. Through a genealogy that goes further back than the Kantian question of enlightenment, Foucault therefore emphasizes that 'philosophy through the critique of the *Aufklärung*, became aware of problems which were traditionally problems of *parrēsia* in antiquity' (350).

This first tentative exposition of *parrēsia*, in retrospect, represented the first move towards a more complete elaboration of the concept, which Foucault would present more systematically in a lecture series held at Berkeley in 1983 (Foucault, 2001), and in his final lectures given at the *Collège de France* shortly before his death in 1984 (Foucault, 2011). Following the displacements of the notion of *parrēsia* through his analysis, the *Government of Self and Others* provides an interesting glimpse into the

analytical machinery of Foucault's work. Reading with Foucault is important and valuable, allowing us to gain a concrete idea of how he actually dealt with his material: continuously analyzing, developing and displacing concepts – a way of working in which concepts can hardly be *applied* in other contexts. Thus the central lesson to be learned from the lectures, if we are inspired by his work in our own analytical endeavors, is to ask ourselves: Should we *use* what Foucault says, or *do* what he does?

Conclusively, these interesting aspects of how Foucault undertakes his work are of great relevance to academic disciplines interested in how significant concepts are *analytically developed* rather than *analytically applied*, whether they are Foucauldian or derived from any other source. For organization studies, and for the topic of the management of self-management in particular, important general questions to be posed by research inspired by Foucault could be: Why and how does the experience of self-management insistently present itself as obvious and with particular claims to truth? How does self-management present itself as a managerial, economical and political problem, and how is truth conditioned in these different problematizations? In so far as this research considers itself as a discourse on truth in line with modern philosophy, it will have to question its own conditions and conditioning effects in relation to the experience of the management of self management, and in that sense address its own truth problems.

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