

## Foucault: On Parrhēsia and Rhetoric \*\*

**Abstract:** This paper draws attention to the studies of Michel Foucault on parrhēsia as a critical practice of truth-telling situated in the Greek antiquity. Moreover, this paper tries to consider some connections between the revolution (as a dramatic event), as it is understood from Foucault's reading of Kant's 'Was ist Aufklärung?' and parrhēsia as a critical attitude towards truth and truth-telling and in opposition to rhetoric discourse. The underlying presupposing of this paper consists in the fact that in the Greek antiquity, the relationship between parrhēsia, as a critical attitude, and rhetoric discourse reached a very tense moment.

**Keywords:** Foucault, parrhēsia, rhetoric, critical attitude, truth.

### I. *Aufklärung* and *parrhēsia*

If we are to take a look on the lectures, entitled *The Government of the self and others*, held by Foucault between 1982 and 1983, at the Collège de France, we will find something peculiar. Of all the lectures, the first stands out for the reason that it is the only one where the historical setting is not situated in the Greek antiquity. In this lecture Foucault brings in attention the Kantian text *Was ist Aufklärung?* It seems that, for Foucault, the critical attitude expressed in the Kantian text is one that presents a recursive aspect throughout history. For that, the foucauldian genealogy of critical attitude starts at the historical point of birth of the western culture, where a candidate is identified – *parrhēsia*. In this historical frame, the practice of parrhēsia is generally defined as the practice truth-telling. On closer inspection, however, Foucault manages to spot a variety of subtle features in analyzing the concept of parrhēsia. Firstly, parrhēsia is both a quality and a technique:

“...with parrhēsia we have a notion which is situated at the meeting point of the obligation to speak the truth, procedures and techniques of governmentality and the constitution of the relationship with the self.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault, *The courage of truth: Lectures at the Collège de France II. 1983-1984*. Translated by G. Burchell, Palgrave, Basingstoke, 2011, p. 45.

Throughout his investigations of the practice of parrhēsia, Foucault is interested not in the conceptual analysis of the word, but more likely to identify the techniques adopted by members of the antiquity, in order to establish a connection with the critical attitude developed in the enlightenment era. This critical attitude, for Foucault is represented by a series of techniques of the self for the understanding of the present reality. And only through these forms the processes and techniques the possibility to exit, to get out of, understood as *ausgang* can be accessible. But also, there is the dramatic event or *revolution* in a historical period, that form of shift which changes the way we perceive, we give meaning and think of the world. Such a *revolution* was that of the constitution and refining of the practice of parrhēsia as a way of understanding the present reality of their time:

“The present may be represented as belonging to a certain era in the world, distinct from others through some inherent characteristics, or separated from others by some dramatic event. Thus, in Plato's *The Statesmen* the interlocutors recognize that they belong to one of those revolutions of the world, in which the world is turning backwards, with all the negative consequences that may ensue.”<sup>2</sup>

## II. *Parrhēsia* as a limit-attitude and the rhetoric discourse in Greek antiquity

In his first, out of six lectures delivered at the University of Berkeley, entitled *Discourse and Truth*, Foucault makes a concise and sharp distinction between the parrhēsia and rhetoric:

“The word parrhesia, then, refers to a type of relationship between the speaker and what he says. For in parrhēsia, the speaker makes it manifestly clear and obvious that what he says is his own opinion. And he does this by avoiding any kind of rhetorical form from which would veil what he thinks.”<sup>3</sup>

The opposition between parrhēsia and rhetoric can be traced in the five characteristics that constitute the foucauldian interpretation of the meaning of parrhēsia. The first is that of frankness or sincerity, which is etymologically linked with parrhēsia, because parrhēsiastes (the person who is manifesting parrhēsia) translates as one who says everything he thinks<sup>4</sup>. The

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<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault, *What is Enlightenment?* in *The Foucault reader*, Edited by Paul Rabinow, Pantheon Books, New York, 1984, p. 33.

<sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault, *Fearless speech*, Edited by Joseph Pearson, Semiotext(e), Los Angeles, 2001, p. 12.

<sup>4</sup> Michel Foucault, *The courage of truth...*, ed. cit., p. 12.

second feature is represented by truth, in a manner which, the parrhēsiastes is the one that speaks the truth, inasmuch what he thinks to be true. Foucault goes so far as to say that, the truth here is not to be considered the subjective truth of the person who performs parrhēsia, but the actual truth in relation to what he is saying<sup>5</sup>. The third parameter is that of danger to whom the parrhēsiastes is exposing to when telling the truth. By this the act of parrhēsia is always followed by an undertaken risk. Foucault does specify stringent depictions of the parrhēsiastes and his proximity with danger and risk taking in addressing to the one who is hierarchically more powerful:

“I think that in a way, this is an exemplary scene of *parrhēsia*: a man stands up to a tyrant and tells him the truth.”<sup>6</sup>

The forth aspect, that of criticism, is somewhat related with the previous one, of danger, although in an inversed way. When the parrhēsiastes tells the truth and criticizes his interlocutor, he exposes not only to the dangers upon himself, but also risks the possibility of harming the one who addresses to. Moreover, Foucault points out that this function of criticism in parrhēsia can also be directed toward the self, as it is in the case of the confessional<sup>7</sup>. The fifth and last characteristic is that of duty. The person who engages in the act of parrhēsia does this on his own volition, without being subjected to any forces, other than his sense of duty. Bringing together all these features we can now comprise an expanded definition of parrhēsia. Therefore, parrhēsia is an act of duty to freely express a truth, to a power-superior interlocutor by the means of critique, while taking the risk of exposing to dangerous situation. This multilayered definition sums up the core of what Foucault will call the positive parrhēsia and will keep bringing in discussion in numerous places thorough he's lectures held at the College de France (1983-1984 and 1984-1985) and to the one's given at the University of California, at Berkeley (1983). Alongside this well-structured form of parrhēsia, denoted as positive, Foucault also identifies a more radical type. That is the parrhēsia seen in the form of radical free speech. To the mentioning of this negative parrhēsia, Foucault points out to a few paragraphs in Plato's *Republic*, where it is criticized as the result of a bad democratic constitution, where everyone has the right to say anything about anyone (*isegoria*). Moreover, Foucault also highlights this bad parrhēsia in correlation with Christian literature, where it was regarded in opposition to the silence discipline that is required for reaching the contemplation of God<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 14.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 50.

<sup>7</sup> Michel Foucault, *Fearless speech*, ed. cit., p. 18.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 13-14.

For Foucault, one of the best indicative examples of the practice of bad parrhēsia and its implications in a democratic is represented in Euripides' play, *Orestes*. The section where the pejorative meaning of parrhēsia is present is pointed by Foucault as the part in which a messenger arrives at the royal palace of Argos to inform Electra of what happened at the trial of her brother Orestes, in the Pelasgian court, where he was judged for matricide. In the following depiction, the events of the trial are made known. Being a trial for murder, all Athenians were present and they all had equal right to speak in public, a precept called *isegoria*. Four characters and their discourses are then described by the messenger to Electra. The first speaker is Talthybius, a former companion of Agamemnon in the Trojan War and his herald. Foucault argues that Talthybius characteristic as a herald has a deeper meaning in Euripides' plays. The most relevant to the present matter – the practice of parrhēsia – is that Talthybius is not able to recognize the truth<sup>9</sup>. He engages in public discourse without this essential trait, that of identifying the truth. Secondly, he is also not completely free, in the sense that he is dependent of other superior individuals. Therefore, he's discourse is cataloged by the messenger to Electra as ambiguous and filled with double meaning. His discourse was not that of expressing a clear opinion, but more of securing a neutral position between two factions. His discourse is that of the opposite extremes. On the one hand he praises Agamemnon, Orestes' father; on the other he proposes harsh punishment for Orestes revengeful act. The second public speaker is Diomedes, a man of many virtues, such as bravery, skillful in battle, strength and eloquence. Through his discourse, Diomedes proposes the moderate solution in the punishment of exile. Doing so, he divides the assembly's opinion in two<sup>10</sup>. The following two public speakers names are not given by the messenger, but even with their anonymity, certain features can be discerned from their public discourses. This third speaker is characterized as symmetrical with Talthybius for being a bad orator. Foucault identifies four major traits. Firstly, his continuous rambling in the absent of *logos*, which Foucault points to the meaning of the Greek word *athuroglosos*:

“This notion of being *athuroglosos*, or of being *athurostomia* (one who has a mouth without a door), refers to someone who is an endless babbler, who cannot keep quiet and is prone to say whatever comes into his mind. Plutarch compares the talkativeness of such people with the Black Sea – which has neither doors nor gates to impede the flow of its waters into the Mediterranean.”<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 61.

<sup>10</sup> Michel Foucault, *The courage of truth...*, ed. cit., p. 164.

<sup>11</sup> Michel Foucault, *Fearless speech*, ed. cit., p. 63.

The second trait is that of boldness and arrogance of speech without being truthful. Thirdly, he's not a native from Argos, but an outsider that was integrated in city. The fourth characteristic is that of the emotional power of his speech, in the sense that he was relying on the strength of his voice, and not to his rational articulation of his discourse. For Foucault, all these traits of the third speaker represent a dangerous combination to the democratic system in ancient Greece:

“The characteristics of the third speaker – a certain social type who employs parrhēsia in its pejorative sense – are these: he is violent, passionate, a foreigner to the city, lacking in *mathesis* and therefore dangerous.”<sup>12</sup>

The last speaker is depicted as the symmetrical opposite to the former one, and analogous to Diomedes, as an embodiment of the positive parrhēsia. He too, without a name, is described in the play with three main features. The first one regards his rough, manly appearance, in the sense that he is a courageous man. The second feature refers to his participation in the public space (agora) only in the most important political moments.

The third feature is that he was a manual laborer (*antourgos*), meaning that he was a landowner that took care of his land both personally and through the supervision of his servants. This entails his interest in protecting his land outside the city-state by training in the art of war and being courageous in the face of battle. *Antourgos*, as Foucault indicates, has a second meaning, that of being a person that is capable of providing good advices in the matters of public interest:

“...the *antourgos* [...] is able to use language to propose good advice to the city.”<sup>13</sup>

The landowner's advice in the case of Orestes is not only to be acquitted, but to be honored for the deed. This advice comes in stringent contrast with the previous public speaker, who used the pejorative parrhēsia. The justification of this advice proposed by the *antourgos* consists in the fact that, in order to avenge his father Agamemnon, Orestes murders his mother for the reason of making adultery. By acquitting Orestes and honoring him, the *antourgos* believes that it will set an example to all the wives in the state to think twice before resorting to adultery<sup>14</sup>.

After all four characters finished their discourses and Orestes himself had taken a speech in his defense, the trial assembly calling for the condemnation of Orestes. In Foucault's view, this trial marks a crisis in the

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 67.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 69.

<sup>14</sup> Michel Foucault, *The courage of truth...*, ed. cit., p. 168.

practice of parrhēsia. Along with its splitting into negative and positive practices of parrhēsia, this sentence shows how the former was more appreciated by the audience of the trial:

“In this way, Orestes is condemned to death. Why? Well, because victory went to the bad orator, the one who used an uneducated *parrhēsia*, *parrhēsia* not indexed to the *logos* of reason and truth.”<sup>15</sup>

Using the (positive) definition of parrhēsia, which entailed from the Foucauldian analysis, we can compare it with rhetoric speech in Greek antiquity. In the Socratic-Platonic tradition, the opposition between parrhēsia and rhetoric is at its strongest point. Foucault points out that there are (at least) two places in Plato's texts where this opposition is discussed. The first one is located in *Gorgias* and the second in *Phaedrus*. In the case of *Gorgias*, Foucault argues, the main distinction lies in the fact that rhetoric discourse relies on the continuous long speech as a form of sophistical device. On the other side, parrhēsia is used in the forms of dialog<sup>16</sup>.

*Phaedrus* is composed in four important parts. The first step is the one in which Socrates observes that Phaedrus holds a speech dearly in his pocket, with the intention of learning it by heart. After Socrates convinces Phaedrus to read him the speech, we find out that the theme is that a boy should not grant favors to a man who loves him, but to a man who doesn't love him. The second step is that in which Socrates produces a speech similar to Lycinus', as being an imitation (of an imitation). The third step comprises in Socrates second speech, which comprises in praise to the true love, as in opposition to the first two, where the relationship between lovers was disqualified. Here, Foucault points out, the praise of true love is not a rhetorical speech because it is not intended to persuade or to convince somebody about a thesis. Moreover, Foucault argues, the relation to truth here is double, in the fact that it is a true speech about true love<sup>17</sup>.

The final step in the dialog is on the difference of true discourse and rhetorical discourse. The aspect on which Foucault insists upon is that it does not matter if the discourse is written or spoken. This does not consist as a distinction between a good and a bad discourse. Phaedrus proposes that, for a discourse to be true, the speaker must already have access to it. Foucault notices that in some way, Phaedrus solution, simple and direct, points out the problem of rhetoric, because rhetoric is not concerned about the truthfulness of the discourse. But for Socrates, knowing the truth prior to discourse is not a satisfactory solution. Instead, Socrates believes that

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 167.

<sup>16</sup> Michel Foucault, *Fearless speech*, ed. cit., p. 20.

<sup>17</sup> Michel Foucault, *The courage of truth...*, ed. cit., p. 328.

truth must be a constant and permanent companion of discourse. To be able to continue this process invokes a Spartan, Laconian Apothegm which says that a genuine art (*etumos tekhnē*) cannot exist if it is not attached to the truth. Therefore, discourse, as art, can be genuine (*etumos*) only in the condition that truth is a constant a permanent function<sup>18</sup>.

In *Phaedrus*, parrhēsia and rhetoric become analogous to the two forms of logos that are identified in the dialog. The first *logos* is that in which parrhēsia (truth) is accessible. From this point, Socrates needs to explain the condition of possibilities of such a perpetual relationship between art and truth. As Foucault notices, Socrates begins by developing the conception of the relationship between discourse and truth, indicating that truth does not constitute the psychological prior condition of the art of oratory, but of to what discourse refers to in each and every moment. Then he finds out that rhetoric is a method of guiding souls through the medium of discourse (*psukhagōgia dia tōn logōn*). Psychagogy becomes here a bigger framework in which rhetoric becomes subordinated. Replacing rhetoric with psychagogy, Socrates goes back to the initial definition of rhetoric. Here he states that, in order for a true rhetoric to present the ugly as the beautiful, the unjust as the just, it must make it by advancing with small differences. But, in order that the orator to best persuade, he must be know all the differences, which also means he needs to have a vision about the whole. And by that, Foucault observes, what it is needed for the orator is not a *tekhnē retorikē*, but a *dialektikē*<sup>19</sup>. But dialectic and prior truth would still not suffice for the rhetoric to function, because it needs to also adopt a methodology. After the inventory of known rhetorical elements is done, he proceeds on the condition of applying them. And he does that, through analogy with medicine. A true medic is not the one that knows the list of every cure but the one that knows the body and also knows how, where, in what dosage (*dunamis*) will apply it. Reciprocally, an orator must precede the same. The problem arises here when the orator must know the soul itself. Foucault insists on the fact that psychagogy and dialectic requirements are to be understood as inseparable, interlinked in the mode of being with the specific to philosophical, parrhēsiastic discourse. Rhetoric, on the other hand, is regarded as *atekhnia*, as void of *tekhnē*, when it comes to its discourse:

“The *tekhnē* peculiar to true discourse is characterized by knowledge to the truth and the practice of the soul, the fundamental, essential, inseparable connection of dialectic and psychagogy, and it is being both a dialectician and a psychagogue, that the philosopher will really be a parrhesiast, which, the rhetorician, the man of rhetoric cannot be or function as. Rhetoric is an *atekhnia*

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 331.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 334.

(an absence of *tekhnē*) with regards to discourse. Philosophy is the *etumos tekhnē* (the genuine technique), of true discourse.”<sup>20</sup>

Interestingly enough, in the historical findings of parrhēsia cataloged by Quintilian as a rhetorical technique, Foucault notices the borderline-paradoxical situation of this classification:

“From Quintilian's point of view, *parrhēsia* is a figure of thought, but it is the most basic form of rhetoric, where the figure of thought consists in not using any figures.”<sup>21</sup>.

Also,

“Parrhesia is thus, 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.”<sup>22</sup>

## Conclusions

In the first part of this paper I have tried to indicate a connection from Foucault's reading of Kant's *Was ist Aufklärung?* and that of the practice of parrhēsia in the Greek antiquity. This connection presupposes the way the present is perceived in a critical manner, through a series of practices. As it is the case between Fifth and Fourth Century B.C., the debate circled around the practice of parrhēsia, in regards to the political and gnoseological. More precisely, the double form of parrhēsia and its repercussions in a democratic regime, as was showed in Euripides's play *Orestes* and that of the difference between parrhēsiastic discourse and rhetoric. As concluded, following the Foucault's reading of Plato's dialog *Phaedrus*, the philosophical discourse (*logos*) is the one which can hold its ground as a parrhēsiastic discourse (*logos*) as well. On the other hand, the rhetoric discourse (*logos*) does not have access to truth.

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 336.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 53.

<sup>22</sup> Michel Foucault, *Fearless speech*, ed. cit., p. 21.