

# Discourse and Truth: the Problematization of Parrhesia

Six lectures given by Michel Foucault at the University of  
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*" My intention was not to deal with the problem of truth, but with the problem of truth-teller or truth-telling as an activity. By this I mean that, for me, it was not a question of analyzing the internal or external criteria that would enable the Greeks and Romans, or anyone else, to recognize whether a statement or proposition is true or not. At issue for me was rather the attempt to consider truth-telling as a specific activity, or as a role. "* *Discourse & Truth*, concluding remarks by Foucault.

source: <http://foucault.info/documents/parrhesia/>

# Lecture 1: The Meaning and Evolution of the Word Parrhesia

## The Meaning of the Word "Parrhesia"

The word "parrhesia" appears for the first time in Greek literature in Euripides [c.484-407 BC], and occurs throughout the ancient Greek world of letters from the end of the Fifth Century BC. But it can also still be found in the patristic texts written at the end of the Fourth and during the Fifth Century AD, dozens of times, for instance, in Jean Chrisostome [AD 345-407].

There are three forms of the word: the nominal form "parrhesia"; the verb form "parrhesiazomai"; and there is also the word "parrhesiastes" – which is not very frequent and cannot be found in the Classical texts. Rather, you find it only in the Greco-Roman period – in Plutarch and Lucian, for example. In a dialogue of Lucian, "The Dead Come to Life, or The Fisherman", one of the characters also has the name "Parrhesiades".

"Parrhesia" is ordinarily translated into English by "free speech" (in French by "franc-parler", and in German by "Freimüthigkeit"). "Parrhesiazomai" is to use parrhesia, and the parrhesiastes is the one who uses parrhesia, i.e., is the one who speaks the truth.

In the first part of today's seminar, I would like to give a general aperçu about the meaning of the word "parrhesia", and the evolution of this meaning through Greek and Roman culture.

## Parrhesia and Frankness

To begin with, what is the general meaning of the word "parrhesia"? Etymologically, "parrhesiazesthai" means "to say everything – from "pan" (everything) and "rhema" (that which is said). The one who uses parrhesia, the parrhesiastes, is someone who says everything he has in mind: he does not hide anything, but opens his heart and mind completely to other people through his discourse. In parrhesia, the speaker is supposed to give a complete and exact account of what he has in mind so that the audience is able to comprehend exactly what the speaker thinks. The word "parrhesia" then, refers to a type of relationship between the speaker and what he says. For in parrhesia, 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 which would veil what he thinks. Instead, the parrhesiastes uses the most direct words and forms of expression he can find. Whereas rhetoric provides the speaker with technical devices to help him prevail upon the minds of his audience (regardless of the rhetorician's own opinion concerning what he says), in parrhesia, the parrhesiastes acts on other people's minds by showing them as directly as possible what he actually believes.

If we distinguish between the speaking subject (the subject of the enunciation) and the grammatical subject of the enounced, we could say that there is also the subject of the enunciandum – which refers to the held belief or opinion of the speaker. In parrhesia the speaker emphasizes the fact that he is both the subject of the enunciation and the subject of the enunciandum – that he himself is the subject of the opinion to which he refers. The specific "speech activity" of the parrhesiastic enunciation thus takes the form: "I am the one who thinks this and that".

I use the phrase "speech activity" rather than John Searle's "speech act"(or Austin's "performative utterance") in order to distinguish the parrhesiastic utterance and its commitments from the usual sorts of commitment which obtain between someone and what he or she says. For, as we shall see, 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.

## Parrhesia and Truth

There are two types of parrhesia which we must distinguish. First, there is a pejorative sense of the word not very far from "chattering" and which consists in saying any or everything one has in mind without qualification. This pejorative sense occurs in Plato, for example, as a characterization of the bad democratic constitution where everyone has the right to address himself to his fellow citizens and to tell them anything – even the most stupid or dangerous things for the city. This pejorative meaning is also found more frequently in Christian literature where such "bad" parrhesia is opposed to silence as a discipline or as the requisite condition for the contemplation of God. As a verbal activity which reflects every movement of the heart and mind, parrhesia in this negative sense is obviously an obstacle to the contemplation of God.

Most of the time, however, parrhesia does not have this pejorative meaning in the classical texts, but rather a positive one. "Parrhesiazesthai" means "to tell the truth." But does the parrhesiastes say what he thinks is true, or does he say what is really true? To my mind, the parrhesiastes says what is true because he knows that it is true; and he knows that it is true because it is really true. The parrhesiastes is not only sincere and says what is his opinion, but his opinion is also the truth. He says what he knows to be true. The second characteristic of parrhesia, then, is that there is always an exact coincidence between belief and truth.

It would be interesting to compare Greek parrhesia with the modern (Cartesian) conception of evidence. For since Descartes, the coincidence between belief and truth is obtained in a certain (mental) evidential experience. For the Greeks, however, the coincidence between belief and truth does not take place in a (mental) experience, but in a verbal activity, namely, parrhesia. It appears that parrhesia, in this Greek sense, can no longer occur in our modern epistemological framework.

I should note that I never found any texts in ancient Greek culture where the parrhesiastes seems to have any doubts about his own possession of the truth. And indeed, that is the difference between the Cartesian problem and the Parrhesiastic attitude. For before Descartes obtains indubitable clear and distinct evidence, he is not certain that what he believes is, in fact, true. In the Greek conception of parrhesia, however, there does not seem to be a problem about the acquisition of the truth since such truth-having is guaranteed by the possession of certain moral qualities: when someone has certain moral qualities, then that is the proof that he has access to truth – and vice-versa. The "parrhesiastic game" presupposes that the parrhesiastes is someone who has the moral qualities which are required, first, to know the truth, and secondly, to convey such truth to others.

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. If we raise the question of how we can know whether someone is a truth-teller, we raise two questions. First, how is it that we can know whether some particular individual is a truth-teller; and secondly, how is it that the alleged parrhesiastes can be certain that what he believes is, in fact, truth. The first question – recognizing someone as a parrhesiastes – was a very important one in Greco-Roman society,

and, as we shall see, was explicitly raised and discussed by Plutarch, Galen, and others. The second skeptical question, however, is a particularly modern one which, I believe, is foreign to the Greeks.

## **Parrhesia and Danger**

Someone is said to use parrhesia and merits consideration as a parrhesiastes only if there is a risk or danger for him or her in telling the truth. For instance, from the ancient Greek perspective, a grammar teacher may tell the truth to the children that he teaches, and indeed may have no doubt that what he teaches is true. But in spite of this coincidence between belief and truth, he is not a parrhesiastes. However, 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). And that was exactly Plato's situation with Dionysius in Syracuse – concerning which there are very interesting references in Plato's *Seventh Letter*, and also in *The Life of Dion* by Plutarch. I hope we shall study these texts later.

So you see, the parrhesiastes is someone who takes a risk. Of course, this risk is not always a risk of life. When, for example, you see a friend doing something wrong and you risk incurring his anger by telling him he is wrong, you are acting as a parrhesiastes. In such a case, you do not risk your life, but you may hurt him by your remarks, and your friendship may consequently suffer for it. If, in a political debate, an orator risks losing his popularity because his opinions are contrary to the majority's opinion, or his opinions may usher in a political scandal, he uses parrhesia. Parrhesia, then, 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.

It is because the parrhesiastes must take a risk in speaking the truth that the king or tyrant generally cannot use parrhesia; for he risks nothing.

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 himself: he prefers himself as a truth-teller rather than as a living being who is false to himself.

## **Parrhesia and Criticism**

If, during a trial, you say something which can be used against you, you may not be using parrhesia in spite of the fact that you are sincere, that you believe what you say is true, and you are endangering yourself in so speaking. For in parrhesia the danger always comes from the fact that the said truth is capable of hurting or angering the interlocutor. Parrhesia is thus always a "game" between the one who speaks the truth and the interlocutor. The parrhesia involved, for example, may be the 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, and so on. Or the parrhesia may be a confession to someone who exercises power over him, and is able to censure or punish him for what he has done.

So you see, the function of parrhesia is not to demonstrate the truth to someone else, but has the function of criticism: criticism of the interlocutor or of the speaker himself. "This is what you do and this is what you think; but this is what you should not do and should not think."

"This is the way you behave, but that is the way you ought to behave." "This is what I have done, and was wrong in so doing." Parrhesia is a form of criticism, either towards another or towards oneself, but always in a situation where the speaker or confessor is in a position of inferiority with respect to the interlocutor. The parrhesiastes is always less powerful than the one with whom he or she speaks. The parrhesia comes from "below", as it were, and is directed towards "above". This is why an ancient Greek would not say that a teacher or father who criticizes a child uses parrhesia. But when a philosopher criticizes a tyrant, when a citizen criticizes the majority, when a pupil criticizes his or her teacher, then such speakers may be using parrhesia.

This is not to imply, however, that anyone can use parrhesia. For although there is a text in Euripides where a servant uses parrhesia, most of the time the use of parrhesia requires that the parrhesiastes know his own genealogy, his own status; i.e., usually one must first be a male citizen to speak the truth as a parrhesiastes. Indeed, someone who is deprived of parrhesia is in the same situation as a slave to the extent that he or she cannot take part in the political life of the city, nor play the "parrhesiastic game". In "democratic parrhesia" – where one speaks to the assembly, the *ekklesia* – one must be a citizen; in fact, one must be one of the best among the citizens, possessing those specific personal, moral, and social qualities which grant one the privilege to speak.

However, the parrhesiastes risks his privilege to speak freely when he discloses a truth which threatens the majority. For it was a well-known juridical situation when Athenian leaders were exiled only because they proposed something which was opposed by the majority, or even because the assembly thought that the strong influence of certain leaders limited its own freedom. And so the assembly was, in this manner, "protected" against the truth. That, then, is the institutional background of "democratic parrhesia" which must be distinguished from that "monarchic parrhesia" where an advisor gives the sovereign honest and helpful advice.

## **Parrhesia and Duty**

The last characteristic of parrhesia is this: in parrhesia, telling the truth is regarded as a duty. The orator who speaks the truth to those who cannot accept his truth, for instance, 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. When, on the other hand, someone is compelled to tell the truth (as, for example, under duress of torture), then his discourse is not a parrhesiastic utterance. A criminal who is forced by his judges to confess his crime does not use parrhesia. But if he voluntarily confesses his crime to someone else out of a sense of moral obligation, then he performs a parrhesiastic act to criticize a friend who does not recognize his wrongdoing, or insofar as it is a duty towards the city to help the king to better himself as a sovereign. Parrhesia is thus related to freedom and to duty.

To summarize the foregoing, parrhesia 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 type of relation to himself or other people through criticism (self-criticism or criticism of other people), and a specific relation to moral law through freedom and duty. More precisely, 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). 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 and moral apathy.

That, then, quite generally, is the positive meaning of the word "parrhesia" in most of the Greek texts where it occurs from the Fifth Century BC to the Fifth Century AD.

# The Evolution of the Word "parrhesia"

Now what I would like to do in this seminar is not to study and analyze all the dimensions and features of parrhesia, but rather to show and to emphasize some aspects of the evolution of the parrhesiastic game in ancient culture (from the Fifth Century BC) to the beginnings of Christianity. And I think that we can analyze this evolution from three points of view.

## Parrhesia and Rhetoric

The first concerns the relationship of parrhesia to rhetoric – a relationship which is problematic even in Euripides. In the Socratic-Platonic tradition, parrhesia and rhetoric stand in a strong opposition; and this opposition appears very clearly in the *Gorgias*, for example, where the word "parrhesia" occurs. The continuous long speech is a rhetorical or sophistic device, whereas the dialogue through questions and answers is typical for parrhesia; i.e., dialogue is a major technique for playing the parrhesiastic game.

The opposition of parrhesia and rhetoric also runs through the *Phaedrus* – where, as you know, the main problem is not about the nature of the opposition between speech and writing, but concerns the difference between the logos which speaks the truth and the logos which is not capable of such truth-telling. This opposition between parrhesia and rhetoric, which is so clear-cut in the Fourth Century BC throughout Plato's writings, will last for centuries in the philosophical tradition. In Seneca, for example, one finds the idea that personal conversations are the best vehicle for frank speaking and truth-telling insofar as one can dispense, in such conversations, with the need for rhetorical devices and ornamentation. And even during the Second Century AD the cultural opposition between rhetoric and philosophy is still very clear and important.

However, one can also find some signs of the incorporation of parrhesia within the field of rhetoric in the work of rhetoricians at the beginning of the Empire. In Quintilian's *Institutio Oratoria*, for example (Book IX, Chapter II), Quintilian explains that some rhetorical figures are specifically adapted for intensifying the emotions of the audience; and such technical figures he calls by the name "exclamatio". Related to these exclamations is a kind of natural exclamation which, Quintilian notes, is not "simulated or artfully designed." This type of natural exclamation he calls "free speech" (*libera oratione*) which, he tells us, was called "license" (*licentia*) by Cornificius, and "parrhesia" by the Greeks. 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.

## Parrhesia and Politics

The second important aspect of the evolution of parrhesia is related to the political field. As it appears in Euripides plays and also in the texts of the Fourth Century BC, parrhesia is an essential characteristic of Athenian democracy. Of course, we still have to investigate the role of parrhesia in the Athenian constitution. But we can say quite generally that parrhesia was a guideline for democracy as well as an ethical and personal attitude characteristic of the good citizen. Athenian democracy was defined very explicitly as a constitution (*politeia*) in which people enjoyed *demokratia*, *isegoria* (the equal right of speech), *isonomia* (the equal participation of all citizens in the exercise of power), and parrhesia. Parrhesia, which is a requisite for public speech, takes place between citizens as individuals, and also between citizens construed as an assembly. Moreover, the agora is the place where parrhesia appears.

During the Hellenistic period this political meaning changes with the rise of the Hellenic monarchies. Parrhesia now becomes centered in the relationship between the sovereign and his advisors or court men. In the monarchic constitution of the state, it is the advisor's duty to use parrhesia to help the king with his decisions, and to prevent him from abusing his power. Parrhesia is necessary and useful both for the king and for the people under his rule. The sovereign himself is not a parrhesiastes, but a touchstone of the good ruler is his ability to play the parrhesiastic game. Thus, a good king accepts everything that a genuine parrhesiastes tells him, even if it turns out to be unpleasant for him to hear criticism of his decisions. A sovereign shows himself to be a tyrant if he disregards his honest advisors, or punishes them for what they have said. The portrayal of a sovereign by most Greek historians takes into account the way he behaves towards his advisors – as if such behavior were an index of his ability to hear the parrhesiastes.

There is also a third category of players in the monarchic parrhesiastic game, viz., the silent majority: the people in general who are not present at the exchanges between the king and his advisors, but to whom, and on behalf of whom, the advisors refer when offering advice to the king.

The place where parrhesia appears in the context of monarchic rule is the king's court, and no longer the agora.

## Parrhesia and Philosophy

Finally, parrhesia's evolution can be traced through its relation to the field of philosophy – regarded as an art of life (*techne tou biou*).

In the writings of Plato, Socrates appears in the role of the parrhesiastes. Although the word "parrhesia" appears several times in Plato, he never uses the word "parrhesiastes" – a word which only appears later as part of the Greek vocabulary. And yet the role of Socrates is typically a parrhesiastic one, for he constantly confronts Athenians in the street and, as noted in the *Apology*, points out the truth to them, bidding them to care for wisdom, truth, and the perfection of their souls. And in the *Alcibiades Majoras* well, Socrates assumes a parrhesiastic role in the dialogue. For whereas Alcibiades' friends and lovers all flatter him in their attempt to obtain his favors, Socrates risks provoking Alcibiades' anger when he leads him to this idea: that before Alcibiades will be able to accomplish what he is so set on achieving, viz. to become the first among the Athenians to rule Athens and become more powerful than the King of Persia, before he will be able to take care of Athens he must first learn to take care of himself. Philosophical parrhesia is thus associated with the theme of the care of oneself (*epimeleia heautou*).

By the time of the Epicureans, parrhesia's affinity with the care of oneself developed to the point where parrhesia itself was primarily regarded as a *techne* of spiritual guidance for the "education of the soul". Philodemus [110-140 BC], for example (who, with Lucretius [99-55 BC], was one of the most significant Epicurian writers during the First Century BC), wrote a book about parrhesia which concerns technical practices useful for teaching and helping one another in the Epicurean community. We shall examine some of these parrhesiastic technique as they developed in, for example, the Stoic philosophies of Epictetus, Seneca, and others.