Foucault Studies

ARTICLE

The Truths We Tell Ourselves: Foucault on *Parrhesia*[1]

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ABSTRACT: Michel Foucault's later concept of *parrhesia* presents a number of potential interpretive problems with respect to his work as a whole and his conception of truth. This article presents an alternative reading of *parrhesia,* which develops its concept through Foucault's earlier pronouncements on truth and fiction. Seen this way, *parrhesia* becomes a means whereby one enacts useful fictions within the context of one's life. As a practice, which demands self-mastery, orientation towards truth, and a command of one's life, *parrhesia* becomes crucial to an aesthetics of existence.

Keywords: Parrhesia, truth, fiction, aesthetics of existence.

Introduction

A number of recent publications have sought to analyze Michel Foucault's late "turn" to Greek and Hellenistic concepts of *parrhesia* and its function within his overall body of work. This concerns especially his development of the concept of an "aesthetics of existence" in the books, lectures, and interviews following the publication of his *History of Sexuality: The Will to Knowledge*.[2] The reignited interest no doubt stems from the English language translation and publication of his lectures at the Collège de France, including *The Government of the Self and Others* as well as *The Courage of the Truth.* This profusion of work is also, on a deeper level, related to the potential (in)congruities between Foucault's parrhesiastic writings and his genealogical, ethical, and social-critical works from his middle and later periods.

At issue in many writings is the relationship between Foucault's pronouncement of *parrhesia* as a critical, ethical discipline for philosophical elites in the Greek and Hellenistic periods and the means by which it helps frame, or is a participant within, an aesthetics of existence. For many, including Nancy Luxon and Judith Butler, parrhesiastic discourse—literally

"speaking truthfully"—functions as a means of relating oneself truthfully to the present situation and to others. Ostensibly, it conditions one's free access to the truth, liberating both the *parrhesiast* and the student from the constraints of false-speech (most notably sophistry), thereby opening up the possibility of concrete political engagement. If "truth" has a productive role in Foucault's middle and later writings, then *parrhesia* becomes a potential mode of deploying and acknowledging truth, while also remaining in relationship to others.

While I do not wish to reject these interpretations of Foucault's use of *parrhesia*—they are more than honest to its ethical, political, and critical implications—I would like to offer an alternative reading of *parrhesia*, one that emphasizes its self-reflexive aspects and reads its deployment *through* Foucault's well-known arguments on truth and fiction in interviews and occasional writings from the mid-1970s onward. This reading seeks to exploit an apparent contradiction: Foucault appears to advocate a practice of truthful speech, while also being committed, as many commentators have shown, to the project of showing truth to be produced, intermeshed with power relations, and situated. Foucault constructively works through this latter problem by admitting that truth is ultimately fictional, though not merely so: "fictions" are productive of bodies, pleasures, selves, and power relations which themselves produce other truths. In this framework, *parrhesia* would not only be truthful engagement with others, but the constructive telling of fictions to both oneself and others that would produce the effects of truth. In this way, *parrhesia* would function proleptically within an aesthetics of existence to modify existing relations of power and to imaginatively construct novel selves and social configurations.

In sum, this paper explores an alternative reading of *parrhesia* that emphasizes its self-reflexive and aesthetic aspects, both of which exist alongside the more social and political dimensions of *parrhesia* explored by other commentators. In doing so, *parrhesia* can be seen as a critical axis of epistemological reflection within the arts of the self. This allows for new truths and struggles to be defined and carried out.

In order to give an alternate reading of Foucault's use of *parrhesia* and its place within his aesthetics of existence, the concept itself must first be illustrated. I then turn to an elucidation of Foucault's relevant material on truth, followed by a return to *parrhesia* and its relationship to both fiction-as-truth and its place within the larger ethical project of aesthetic self-construction.

Parrhesia Introduced

In the series of 1983-lectures delivered in California—later published as *Fearless Speech*—Foucault introduces *parrhesia* as a disposition to speak honestly to both oneself and others: "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."[3] Additionally, as he notes in the 1982 Collège de France lectures, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, *parrhesia* appears almost as a compulsion to "say what has to be said, what we want to say, what we think ought to be said because it is necessary, useful, and

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[3] Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, edited by Joseph Pearson (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2001), 12.

true."[4] *Parrhesia*, given this reading, is not merely being honest. It is, rather, an *act* of truth-telling. *Parrhesia* functions to enact truth: its proper functioning is the performance and externalization of the speaker's truth claim.[5]

Foucault perhaps regularly stresses the function of *parrhesia* within discourse because of this more processual interpretation. In this way, *parrhesia* is a concrete act of disclosure which allows others and oneself to see the truth in bare form.[6] This more active, functional reading of *parrhesia*, places it in direct contrast with sophistry, which is regularly opposed to "conversation" and true speech in Plato's dialogues—especially the *Gorgias* and *Phaedrus*.[7] Moreover, because one not only possesses *parrhesia*, but also enacts it regularly as part of the relationship one has to both truth and others, it bears with it both a high degree of responsibility and risk. Hence, Foucault frequently speaks of the *parrhesiast* as one who possesses tremendous courage: in enacting *parrhesia*, one speaks a truth which is often contradictory to the present state of affairs and therefore potentially undesirable. "The fact that a speaker says something dangerous—different than from what the majority believes—is a strong indication that he is a *parrhesiastes*."[8] Foucault is careful not to define the "truth" of parrhesiastic speech in his writings concerning *parrhesia*. Rather, what is essential is the active engagement with truth and its faithful—and perhaps risky—relay to others. As Edward McGushin notes, parrhesiastic engagement is therefore often "painful"[9] for both the *parrhesiast* and the listener: the latter because such truths often threaten a comfortable position in life and demand a new responsibility, the former because the telling of such truths requires a relationship with truth that holds the potential for being rejected, or, in Socrates' case, death.

Given the foregoing, many commentators have focused on the epistemic and political dimensions of *parrhesia*. On this reading, *parrhesia* is a relationship to truth that is concretized through one's truthful—and often perilous—interactions with others. Read against Foucault's later writings on the "aesthetics of existence," this interpretation of the function of *parrhesia* ostensibly positions it is a means of engaging others in the interest of countering forces of nor-

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[4] Michel Foucault, *Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981-82*, edited by Frédéric Gros, translated by Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2005), 366; also see 372 and 382 in the same volume.

[5] Also see Edward McGushin, *Foucault's Askesis: An Introduction to the Philosophical Life* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 11, where he states: "The subject appears for itself and for the other in the act of *parrhesia* not as an object of true discourse but as a concrete way of producing the truth, as a concrete way of experiencing the truth."

[6] See Foucault, *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 382: "There can only be truth in *parrhesia*. Where there is no truth, there can be no speaking freely. *Parrhesia* is the naked transmission, as it were, of truth itself."

[7] See, for example, Plato, *Gorgias*, translated by Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 448d and following, 453b, and the contrast between conversation and artifice in 465a. This contrast is also made evident in Foucault's 1983 lectures, recently published as *The Government of Self and Others*, edited by Frédéric Gros, translated by Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2010), in the final chapter, as well as Nancy Luxon, in her "Truthfulness, Risk and Trust," 465.

[8] Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, 15. Also see Luxon, "Truthfulness, Risk, and Trust," 473, where she emphasizes the relational dimension of this risk: "For *parrhesia* to be effective, both parties must risk being hurt."

[9] McGushin, 7.

malization or political oppression.[10] It also has the notable consequence of enacting truth within discourse and tying such truth to the ethics and existence of the *parrhesiastes* herself.

Insomuch as this reading focuses on Foucault's analysis of Hellenistic practices of self-care (and is a remedy to its potential solipsism) and its relationship with his other writings on power/truth, it is clearly a sensible interpretation of the place of *parrhesia* within Foucault's thought. However, this interpretation leaves the nature of "truth" unproblematized within the *parrhesiastic* game. As C.G. Prado and others have noted,[11] Foucault's conception of truth is neither simple nor clear. Foucault does not hold a correspondence theory of truth (which would make *parrhesia* a rather banal practice), nor is he committed to a universal ontology (which would make *parrhesia* the relaying of what is real, in the mode of Socrates). If *parrhesia* is an active relationship to "truth" through its enactment in discourse, it is unclear what the content or character of such truths might be, if emptied of traditional or folk understandings of truth. It is against this critical lacuna that I propose a parallel reading of *parrhesia* which sees the content of its discourse as critical to its exposition and place within Foucault's thought.

Truth and Fiction

There seems to be an incongruity between Foucault's later work on *parrhesia* and his general work on truth. On the one hand, *parrhesia* announces an ethic of truthful speech, which helps modify both the *parrhesiastes*'s and the listener's relationship to truth. On the other hand, Foucault consistently problematizes the notion of truth on both epistemic and ethical grounds: one does not have complete access to truth (as a correspondence theory may indicate), and, furthermore, one has good reason to be skeptical of that which parades itself as truth. If unresolved, this apparent contradiction on Foucault's part may undercut the potential importance of *parrhesia* within his aesthetics of existence.

Foucault's problematization of truth stems from realizing that truth is ultimately produced and sustained within power relations.[12] As C.G. Prado explains, this indicates a dual commitment on Foucault's part to the notions of truth-as-created and perspectivism.[13] If truth is constructed, then there is also no neutral epistemic reference point from which truth claims may be adjudicated. As with Friedrich Nietzsche, this contention has been seen as grounding a kind of perspectivism and, at worst, irrealism. At any rate, it is clear that Foucault's con-

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[10] Luxon, "Truthfulness, Risk, and Trust," 481 and Luxon, "Ethics and Subjectivity," 397; Butler's position is similar in her *Giving an Account of Oneself*; see chapters 2 and 3. Also see Foucault, *Government of the Self and Others*, where the task of "speaking truth to power" is given explicit philosophical import.

[11] See C.G. Prado, *Searle and Foucault on Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), especially the section, "Truth in Five Parts," 81–103.

[12] See Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, edited by Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 131, where he states: "Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power." Also see ibid., 133, where Foucault states: "'Truth' is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it. A 'regime' of truth."

[13] See Prado, 84–94, where these separate dimensions are termed the "constructivist" and "perspectival" approaches to truth.

ception of truth-as-constructed may create difficulties for a straightforward rendering of *parrhesia*.

Yet Foucault is unconcerned with the epistemological status of his conception of truth. This is probably because such questions miss the practical and political dimensions of truth's entwinement with power relations. Truth produces discourse about bodies, selves, and societies. In this way, it constitutes the basis for, at minimum, the modification and creation of particular power relations and, as Foucault shows in his later lectures, normalization and governmentality within contemporary societies. This also means, however, that knowledge and power are contingent and reversible[14] and, given the relational nature of power, there are always fractures and disjunctions within relationships that give rise to resistance(s), tensions, and instabilities. For Foucault, this means that power is not only intertwined with the production and continuance of truth, but also resistance.[15] Power produces truths as well as resistance; truth thus stands as a critical apparatus and relay within the production and perpetuation of power, as well as its inevitable resistance. In this way, "truth" can be used to modify power relations.

When the preceding analysis of resistance is taken alongside Foucault's constructivist conception of truth, it clearly leads to the notion, pursued by Foucault in the late 1970s, that the production of truth, and therefore the instantiation of resistance, can be a creative and *intentional* process.[16] While Foucault consistently describes the presence of such resistances-through-truth, he also normatively advocates the production of truths to modify power relations. This more imaginative and creative dimension is often revealed in Foucault's reflections on the role of the author, which is:

> …to see how far the liberation of thought can make… transformations urgent enough for people to want to carry them out and difficult enough to carry out for them to be profoundly rooted in reality. It is a question of making conflicts more visible… Out of these conflicts, these confrontations, a new power relation must emerge, whose first, temporary expression will be a reform.[17]

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[14] See, for example, Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, translated by Robert Hurley and others, in *Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*, vol. 1, edited by Paul Rabinow (New York: The New Press, 1997), 292.

[15] Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 142.

[16] See, for example, an interview featured in Foucault, *Ethics*, 168, where the interviewer asks: "to resist is not simply a negation but a creative process; to create and recreate, to change the situation, actually to be an active member of that process." To which Foucault replies: "Yes, that is the way I would put it."

[17] Michel Foucault, *Michel Foucault: Politics, Philosophy, Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 155–56. See also Michel Foucault, *Foucault Live (Interviews, 1961-1984)* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1996), 225: "I dream of the intellectual destroyer of evidence and universalities, the one who, in the inertias and constraints of the present, locates and marks the weak points, the openings, the lines of power, who incessantly displaces himself, doesn't know exactly where he is heading nor what he'll think tomorrow because he is too attentive to the present; who, in passing, contributes the raising of the question of knowing whether the revolution is worth it, and what kind… , it being understood that they alone who are willing to risk their lives to bring it about can never ask the question."

However, the project of "making conflicts more visible" is one which need not be based on present conditions or their limited range of options. Instead, one must constructively problematize the epistemic relations which give rise to the present and question the truths which undergird existing power relations and creatively imagine strategic alternatives. Foucault indicates both this diagnostic and strategic procedure in another interview:

> Why the truth rather than myth? Why the truth rather than illusion? And I think that, instead of trying to find out what truth, as opposed to error, is, it might be more interesting to take up the problem posed by Nietzsche: how is it that, in our societies, "the truth" has been given this value, thus placing us absolutely under its thrall?[18]

It is the opening questions in this quote that I wish to grant interpretive preference when understanding *parrhesia*. Foucault's problematization of truth and myth identifies a critical feature in his conception of truth. While he consistently describes truth as produced and enmeshed with relations of power, he also advocates a more fictive or imaginative, normative role for the production of truths. This is done through his role as an author or in the service of collective struggles. In a frequently cited passage, Foucault acknowledges and endorses this more constructive dimension of discourse:

> In spite of that, the people who read me... often tell me with a laugh, "You know very well that what you say is really just fiction." I always reply, "Of course, there's no question of it being anything else but fiction." …[M]y problem is not to satisfy professional historians; my problem is to construct myself, and to invite others to share an experience of what we are, not only our past but also our present, an experience of our modernity in such a way that we might come out of it transformed.[19]

Many commentators have alighted on Foucault's notion of theory-as-fiction; equally important, however, is his contention that such fictions can be intentionally deployed to create an experience of "what we are" and to be a part in the construction of new individual and collective realities. "Fictions" are "experiments [experience]" in truth.[20]

Foucault's conception of fiction as an intentionally constructed "experiment/experience" should not be read as authorizing irrealism, however. Rather, Foucault clearly conceives of fictions as having a fidelity to the present, while also attempting to illicit transformation in the future. As Timothy O'Leary makes clear, for Foucault, "fiction (in the broadest possible sense) relates to reality by opening up virtual spaces which allow us to engage in a potentially transformative relation with the world; to bring about that which does

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[18] Foucault, *Politics, Philosophy, Culture*, 107.

[19] Michel Foucault, *Power*, translated by Robert Hurley and others, in *Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984*, vol. 3, edited by James Faubion (New York: The New Press, 1997), 242.

[20] Foucault, *Power*, 240. As Jeffrey Bussolini advises, Foucault's use of "expérience" here has the dual signification of "experience" and "experiment." This more multivalent use of "experiment" is resonant with Foucault's conceptualization of the role of fiction as well as Nietzsche's persistent advocacy of experimentalism, especially in the work surrounding *The Gay Science*.

not exist and to transform that which does exist."[21]   Fiction thus has both a diagnostic func-
tion—it must be loyal to the present state of affairs—while also carrying a hermeneutic
function—it is an alternative narrative interpretation of the present that has potential effects in
the future.   Thus, Foucault's "fictions" intend to maintain a fit with reality itself while also
prompting a change in that very reality.   It is for this reason that the line between fiction and
truth is easily blurred for Foucault: fiction produces the same effects as true discourse[22] and
stands on the same epistemological plane as that which is held to be true.   Yet it also seeks to
alter the conditions for truth through an intentional process of re-interpretation and recon-
figuration.   As Foucault states, "Now, the fact is, this experience [through a book] is neither
true nor false.   An experience is always a fiction: it's something that one fabricates oneself, that
doesn't exist before and will exist afterward."[23]

For Foucault, fiction effectively holds the same epistemic weight as truth.   Both are
produced and productive; both can actively frame discourse with respect to bodies and
societies.   Yet fiction holds a decisive advantage over "truth," in that it constructively imagines
an alternative interpretation of the present that exploits unexplored potentialities.   In this way,
fiction has a *proleptic* function, calling forth and enacting a new reality through its pro-
nouncement.   For Foucault, this means that his "fictional" work renders "an interpretation, a
reading of a certain reality, which might be such that... this interpretation could produce some
of the effects of truth; and on the other hand, these effects of truth could become implements
within possible struggles."   This amounts to telling "the truth so that it might be acceptable."[24]
As O'Leary recognizes, this means that, for Foucault, fiction is a "production, a creation,"[25]
and as such, "one that produces something previously unseen and unheard."[26]   Like *parrhesia*,
fiction is an enactment of a truth within a present reality.   "Fictioning" is an active process of
bringing about the same effects as truth, though they may not currently exist.   Seen this way,
"truth" is that which has effects in the present, while "fiction" is that which accurately reflects
the present while having effects in the future.

I would argue that this conceptualization of fiction serves a critical function in Fou-
cault's later thought and can be formidably linked to his work with Hellenistic practices of
parrhesia.   Fictions serve the function of opening up an interference and dissonance within the
present in order to instantiate an altered future.   These fictions serve as "invitations" to change
something about the world and are to bring about a "transformation of contemporary man
with respect to the idea he has of himself."[27]   As Timothy O'Leary notes in his work on Fou-
cault's concept of fiction, alternative truths for Foucault "allow us to engage in a potentially
transformative relation with the world; to bring about that which does not exist and to
transform that which does exist."[28]

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[21] Timothy O'Leary, *Foucault and Fiction: The Experience Book* (London: Continuum, 2009), 87.

[22] Foucault poses this possibility in *Foucault Live*, 213, where the truths one announces "do not yet exist."

[23] Foucault, *Power*, 243.

[24] Foucault, *Foucault Live*, 261.

[25] O'Leary, *Foucault and Fiction*, 101.

[26] Timothy O'Leary, *Foucault: The Art of Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2002), 5.

[27] Foucault, *Power*, 245-6.

[28] O'Leary, *Foucault: The Art of Ethics*, 87.

For Prado, this form may constitute the fifth aspect of truth delineated in Foucault's work: the "experiential use of truth."[29] Experiential truth is that which is not concerned with the "production of power"—indeed, it opposes it—but is rather gained through the result of "intellectual trial."[30] This can only occur through a process of forecasting and experience, where truths are fictioned and then constructively deployed within either individual experience or collective struggle. Experiential truth, designated as that which defies power relations and institutes a new experience of reality, is the outcome of a process of fictioning and resistance. This interpretation helps substantiate Foucault's claims that truth/fiction is a part of the "toolkit" for those involved in interventions that alter the present. Truth "permits a change, a transformation of the relationship we have with ourselves and with the world where, up to then, we had seen ourselves as being without problems—in short, a transformation of the relationship we have with our knowledge."[31] It is within this "interference"[32] and collective dissonance that new alternatives can be not only imagined, but seen as *already present*, yet latent, within power relations. The "truth" of Foucault's fictions is therefore both in the present—as an unrealized potential—and in the future, as the effects of truth are made evident and used to shape power relations.[33]

This more temporalizing and experimental/experiential dimension of fiction receives particular emphasis in Foucault's analysis of Plato's visits to the Sicilian tyrant Dionysius and his advisor Dion, in his 1983 Collège de France lectures. Observing Plato's advice to the followers of Dion after his death, Foucault gives the following comment: "[Plato] accepts and even demands that reality demonstrate whether his discourse and advice are true or false. If you [the followers of Dion] put my present assertions to the test, you will really experience the effect of the truth of my advice to you."[34] Thus, Plato's truth has both a diagnostic and proleptic function: his discourse must comply with reality, but when subject to testing, the followers of Dion will experience that truth in the future as well. Foucault summarizes this dimension of *parrhesia* well: "All of this gives a discourse whose truth must hold to and be proven by the fact that *it will become reality*."[35] *Parrhesia*, as a truth-telling, announces those truths which have significant traction with the present, but are also to be brought about in the future. As opposed to the banal truths of correspondence or present consciousness, parrhesiastic truth-telling mirrors the present, while inviting change in the future. In clear alliance with parrhesiastic discourse, Foucault observes the following about his own work:

> What I am trying to do is provoke an interference between our reality and the knowledge of our past history. If I succeed, this will have real effects in our present history. My hope is

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[29] Prado, 95.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Foucault, *Power*, 244.

[32] Foucault, *Foucault Live*, 301.

[33] Ibid.: "What I am trying to do is provoke an interference between our reality and the knowledge of our past history. If I succeed, this will have real effects in our present history. My hope is my books become true *after* they have been written—not before... I hope that the truth of my books is in the future." (italics added)

[34] Foucault, *Government of the Self and Others*, 278.

[35] Ibid., 279 (emphasis added).

> my books become true *after* they have been written–not before… I hope that the truth of my books is in the future.[36]

The parallels between Foucault's conception of his own historical-critical method—"fictioning"—and the temporalizing aspects of *parrhesia,* are brought into critical relief in the opening sections on *parrhesia* in his 1983 Collège de France lectures. There, he draws a contrast between a performative utterance, which is "such that when the utterance is made, the effect which follows is known and ordered in advance," and *parrhesia*, in which "the irruption of the true discourse determines an open situation, or rather opens the situation and makes possible effects which are, precisely, not known. Parrhesia does not produce a codified effect; it opens up an unspecified risk."[37] Anticipating the later work of Alain Badiou, who identifies being with that which is in the realm of the known and knowable—therefore in the realm of the "performative" for Foucault—and the event as that which is unpredictable, Foucault clearly identifies *parrhesia* as an "irruptive event" which "creates a fracture and opens up a risk."[38] *Parrhesia*, in this way, announces those truths which radically alter the present state of affairs by transforming the way in which being itself is interpreted.[39] For those involved in the parrhesiastic game, *parrhesia* represents a way of rupturing conventional logic and opening up a new field of relations in which both parrhesiast and listener may begin to operate. Like fiction, *parrhesia* allows an interference with the present that discloses unthought-of possibilities in the future.

Foucault's contrast between the performative utterance and *parrhesia* also clarifies what *parrhesia does not do*: represent a present political or social state of affairs as it is. Stated positively, this means that *parrhesia* is not only the constitution of an event within discourse, it is also politically subversive. As Prado notes, what is "most noteworthy about experiential truth is that it *opposes* power-produced truth."[40] In Foucault's middle writings and interviews, this subversive function is given over to critique, genealogical analysis, and the role of the author. As Foucault avers in an interview, "Critique doesn't have to be the premise of a deduction that concludes, 'this, then, is what needs to be done.' It should be an instrument for those who fight, those who resist and refuse what is… It is a challenge directed to what is."[41] This more subversive function of critical and oppositional discourse is transferred in the later writings to *parrhesia* itself, where "the function of parrhesia is precisely to be able to limit the power of the masters."[42] This dimension of *parrhesia* is most evident in Foucault's extended examination of the confrontation between Plato and Dionysius, where Plato—seen as the true parrhesiast—engages the ignorance and tyranny of Dionysius himself. In reflection, Foucault notes that

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[36] Foucault, *Foucault Live*, 301 (emphasis added). Also see McGushin, xxvii, where he observes that Foucault's histories "[attempt] to bring into existence a new reality."

[37] Foucault, *Government of the Self and Others*, 62.

[38] Ibid., 63.

[39] There are interesting parallels here between Foucault's notion of parrhesia and Badiou's concept of art in his *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, trans., Alberto Toscano (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005).

[40] Prado, 95.

[41] Foucault, *Power*, 235-6.

[42] Foucault, *Government of the Self and Others*, 161.

"this is an exemplary scene of parrhesia: a man stands up to a tyrant and tells him the truth."[43] What distinguishes Plato in this instance is not only his role as philosopher and truth-teller, but also his position within the discourse: Plato's speech is all the more remarkable given its subversive nature with respect to power and, hence, its subsequent risk.

The subversive dimension of parrhesia is further examined in the second major analysis from the 1983 lectures concerning the tragedy *Ion,* by Euripedes. Ion was the abandoned son of a god and noblewoman, Creusa. He was denied the political right of *parrhesia* afforded citizens of Athens. Since his patronage had not yet been established, he had few tools of empowerment in finding his parents and establishing his citizenship. The one tool he does have, however, is *parrhesia*, which Foucault grants as the following: "In this discourse of injustice proclaimed by the weak against the powerful there is at once a way of emphasizing one's own right, and also a way of challenging the all-powerful with the truth of his injustice, of jousting with him as it were."[44] In *Ion,* parrhesia is seen not only as a preeminent political right of the Athenian elite, but as a discourse undertaken by somebody in a position of subordination against those in a position of power, that is, those who control the very terms of discourse itself (in this case, the god Apollo). This dual signification is granted by Foucault when he states that *parrhesia* is the "rational discourse enabling one to govern men and the discourse of the weak reproaching the strong for… injustice."[45] In both the example of *Ion* and in Plato's confrontation with Dionysius, parrhesia emerges as the means by which authority is confronted with a truth that unsettles the present reality. Owing to its evental character, *parrhesia* is the way in which new and alternative forms of truth come to be constituted within a particular social or political reality.[46]

Parrhesia is therefore both a proleptic speech event, which instantiates a new reading of truth, and a subversive form of social and political discourse. When read through Foucault's earlier pronouncements on fiction, *parrhesia* should be seen as the evocation of truths which: (1) have traction with reality itself, (2) uncover latent forms of the present, (3) have potential effects in the future, (4) constitute a new form of reality itself, and (5) are potentially subversive (and thus risky). Indeed, this constellation of factors marks parrhesiastic discourse, which allow it to oppose flattery and sophistry as well as presently reified forms of knowledge and discourse. In this interpretation, *parrhesia* and fiction should not be seen as irrealistic speech acts, ideological mystification, or fetishist disavowel (as Žižek states, "I know this very well, but…"), but as truths, which point to and anticipate the present reality, while also attempting to transform that very reality. These truths are in the service of those in a sub-

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[43] Ibid., 50.

[44] Ibid., 133.

[45] Ibid., 135. Foucault will later argue that these two functions of parrhesia are effectively cleaved during the Hellenistic period.

[46] This is also what leads to Foucault's later identification of parrhesia with philosophical practice. See, in particular, *Government of the Self and Others*, 230, 288, and 354, and, in particular, Foucault's analysis of Plutarch on page 194, in which he affirms that, for Plutarch, parrhesia "is a directly political act which is exercised either before the Assembly, or before the leader, governor, sovereign, tyrant, and so on. It is a political act. But, on the other hand… it is also an act, a way of speaking which is addressed to an individual, to his soul, and it concerns the way in which this soul is to be formed."

ordinate position within politics and discourse and are entered into intentionally. While *parrhesia* requires acts of imagination and reconfiguration, it also requires a sincere fidelity to the present and the intention to counter the operations of power and governmentality.

This reading of fiction and *parrhesia* has the ostensible advantage of clarifying the form of "truth" evoked in acts of truth-telling. The truth invoked in fiction and later in parrhesiastic discourse, is neither correspondent nor ontological, but rather a hermeneutical procedure which reads reality in a way which alters the present state of affairs. The truths of fiction and *parrhesia* are not self-deceptions or "wrong" vis-à-vis more clearly held or "plain" truths; the truths of fiction and *parrhesia* hold the same epistemic status as all other supposed truths, except for their intentional status. For Foucault, fictioning and *parrhesia* are processes whereby we intentionally enter into particular truths because of their potential effects in the future and their traction with the present. They are also potentially subversive. The spoken truth seen in this way—be it fiction or *parrhesia*—becomes an act of liberation.

Parrhesia and an Aesthetics of Existence

If *parrhesia* is an act of truth-telling, then *parrhesia* could be seen as a means by which fictioning ties it to both interpersonal relationships and an aesthetics of existence. Collectively, this would allow for *parrhesia* to become part of "an alternative *manner* of subject-formation,"[47] as Nancy Luxon contends. This is because it allows for the imaginative production of truths, which can then be entered into experience. As Foucault suggests at the outset of his 1983 Collège de France course lectures, *parrhesia* is implicated within a "bundle of important notions," among which are "care of self, knowledge of self, art and exercise of oneself…"[48] This means that *parrhesia* is not only critical to pedagogical and political relations with others, but also to self-reflexive forms of resistance, self-construction, and potentially an "aesthetics of existence." Seen in this way, *parrhesia* would be a critical hinge in an aesthetics of existence, in which truth would enter into reality.

In order to uphold this interpretation, however, two critical dimensions of Foucault's thought must hold. For fictioning to be a viable part of *parrhesia*, it must not only obtain for others, but for the *parrhesiast* herself (fictioning must be part of the actor's project of self-construction); secondly, it must demand the responsibility, subversion, and risk seen by Foucault as the hallmark of parrhesiastic practices. The former aspect of *parrhesia* is seen most clearly in Foucault's pronouncements on *parrhesia* as a self-reflexive practice that makes the greatest demands on the speaker.[49] In *Fearless Speech*, Foucault states, "In *parrhesia* the speaker emphasizes the fact that he is both the subject of the enunciation and the subject of the

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[47] Luxon, "Ethics and Subjectivity," 378.

[48] Foucault, *Government of the Self and Others*, 45.

[49] This reading could be countered by Foucault's recognition, in his *Fearless Speech*, 103, that Socratic *parrhesia* "means to disclose who you are—not your relation to future events, but your present relation to truth." Clearly Foucault maintains *parrhesiastic* practice as one oriented towards a "present relation to truth." However, read against his other pronouncements on truth, one may be able to see traces of a more fictive orientation towards *parrhesia*, as I do below.

enunciandum—that he himself is the subject of the opinion to which he refers."[50] This is echoed in *Government of the Self and Others*, where parrhesia is a "pact of the speaking subject with himself. It is a pact which has two levels: that of the act of enunciation and then [that], explicit or implicit, by which the subject binds himself to the statement he has just made, but also to the act of making it."[51] While much of Foucault's writings on *parrhesia* emphasize its external and pedagogical dimensions, Foucault also consistently points out the fact that parrhesiastic speech places the greatest burden on the *parrhesiast* herself, as she must possess the truth and, to an even greater extent, manifest that truth through speech. As Foucault states, "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."[52] This self-critical function is echoed in Plato's *Gorgias*, where Socrates avers, in contrast to the Sophists, that we "should be the first to denounce ourselves and the people close to us."[53] Such criticism reveals the degree to which *parrhesia* is both a practice oriented toward others and, equally, oneself.

Indeed, as Foucault shows, later parrhesiastic practices push the balance towards self-reflexivity and perhaps away from the more pedagogical bent of earlier writings on *parrhesia*.[54] Such a transition reveals the potential for *parrhesia* to be not only a means of engaging and reforming others through honest speech, but also a means of altering oneself through the deployment of true speech in one's own life. In the last Berkeley lecture on *parrhesia*, this more individual dimension is stressed: "What is at stake is the *relation* of the self to truth or to some rational principles."[55] As Foucault notes earlier, this is a form of "personal *parrhesia*," the ability to confess and pronounce truths about oneself.[56] On this reading, *parrhesia* can be seen not only as an honest engagement with others, but as a self-referring practice of telling truths to oneself. Without this dimension of *parrhesia*, its links to acts of self-transformation are tenuous.

The relationship between the *parrhesiastes* and herself—the ability for the speaker to tell truths to herself, which can be part of the process of self-construction—is therefore of central importance. This indicates that the *parrhesiastes* must be both the "moneychanger" of her own thoughts, acts, and representations,[57] as well as the bearer of true content for her own life and those around her.[58] The first asks for honesty and self-criticism, while the latter demands acts

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[50] Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, 13; also see, in the same volume, 164–65 for this reflexivity in the instance of a student of Epictetus.

[51] Foucault, *Government of the Self and Others*, 64-65. Also see 67, in the same volume, where Foucault states, "starting from the example of Plutarch, we see that parrhesia is therefore a certain way of speaking such that the statement and the act of enunciation will produce some kind of 'retroactive effects' on the subject himself, but not of course in the form of the consequence."

[52] Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, 17.

[53] Plato, *Gorgias* 480d.

[54] Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, 143.

[55] Ibid., 165.

[56] Ibid., 56.

[57] Foucault, *Ethics*, 240.

[58] See Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, 102, where he states: "And the truth of that which the parrhesiastic discourse discloses is the truth of someone's life, i.e., the kind of relation someone has to truth: how he constitutes

of re-interpretation and self-fictioning. The former concept of honesty and self-criticism receives considerable treatment under the umbrella of Foucault's later concept concerning "care of the self," where self-care is directly related to knowing oneself.[59] This also ties care of the self into regimes of truth. This linkage between self-care and truth is, however, more evident in the latter concept of creative re-interpretation, which emerges as a form of *savoir*—"knowledge concerning things, the world, gods, and men," which "must affect the subject."[60] In this reading of *parrhesia*, the truths disclosed to oneself regard the world, which has a direct bearing on one's constitution. This goes beyond simply knowing oneself and is an active engagement with those 'regimes of truth' that have a direct bearing on the *parrhesiastes*.

A productive engagement with one's own *savoir* therefore comes with the responsibility to produce those truths/fictions which one has announced. As Foucault consistently remarks in his lectures on *parrhesia*, this means that there must be a harmony between one's speech and actions.[61] Indeed, the declaration of a truth or a proleptic fiction opens up the critical space for ethical action; it is a pronouncement of both a potential state of affairs and the actions required to see its completion. As Foucault states, "The subject who speaks commits himself. At the very moment he says 'I speak the truth,' he commits himself to do what he says and to be the subject of conduct who conforms in every respect to the truth he expresses."[62] *Parrhesia* thus functions as a means of externalizing one's intent and positing a potential truth within discourse and action.

Through this movement, Foucault is able to cast *parrhesia* as a critical practice that demands ethical responsibility, but also the self-control and self-mastery requisite to bring about the practical effects of truth. In this vein, Foucault repeatedly notes the "self-sovereignty"[63] required within *parrhesia*. Moreover, *parrhesia* is part of the institution of a "rule of oneself" that connects "the analysis of modes of truth-telling [*veridiction*], the study of the techniques of governmentality, and the localisation [*repérage*] of the forms of practices of the self."[64] *Parrhesia* is directly linked to practices of truth and self-governance: in order to bring about the former, one must possess and apply the latter. In this way, *parrhesia* is a demand for the ancillary arts of self-mastery and its cultivation of the various modalities and controls that allow for one to act honestly and effectively.

The demand for self-mastery within regimes of truth potentially explains the litany of conflict-related metaphors that Foucault uses to describe *parrhesia*. In *Fearless Speech*, for exam-

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himself as someone who has to know the truth through *mathesis*, and how this relation to truth is ontologically and ethically manifest in his own life."

[59] See, for example, Foucault, *Ethics*, 285, and *The Use of Pleasure: Volume 2 of the History of Sexuality*, translated by Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1985), 86, as well as Jakub Franek, "Philosophical parrhesia as Aesthetics of Existence," *Continental Philosophy Review*, vol. 39 (2006): 128.

[60] Foucault, *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 243.

[61] With specific reference to Socrates, see Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, 101. Also see Luxon, "Truthfulness, Risk and Trust," 478.

[62] Foucault, *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 406.

[63] See, for example, Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, 164.

[64] Foucault's 1984 Collège de France lecture, as quoted by Franek, 117. Also see McGushin, 77, where he states: "To take care of oneself is to occupy oneself with the proper government of one's soul–to establish the right and just relationship of oneself to oneself."

ple, parrhesiastic practice allows one to "fight a spiritual war within himself" and opens the space for internalizing one's faults and deficiencies.[65] In the 1983 Collège de France lectures, parrhesia is "connected much less to status than to a dynamic and a combat, a conflict."[66] At other points, *parrhesia* is given as a game between student and teacher or within oneself that moves forward only with the evocation of truths and the conflict they create within a student or the *parrhesiastes*. Such points resonate with Foucault's use of *enkrateia* in his *Use of Pleasure*, which is described as "an active form of self-mastery, which enables one to resist or struggle, and to achieve domination in the area of desire and pleasures,"[67] or as a "domination of oneself by oneself."[68] Arguably, *parrhesia* functions similarly to *enkrateia,* insomuch as it establishes a relationship of domination, combat, or "dueling,"[69] wherein one's self-proclaimed truths are constantly measured against one's own actions. As in fiction, the space between speech and action opens up a critical dissonance that forces the *parrhesiastes* to struggle against herself and others to bring about the very truths she has externalized.

If, as I have suggested, *parrhesia* acts to cast out truths whose reality is seen in the present and whose effects are produced in the future, then *parrhesia* becomes a critical linkage in the acts and knowledge which are required to produce de-normalized and self-governing individualities. *Parrhesia*, to this end, calls forth the cultivation of self-mastery, a theme repeated both explicitly[70] and implicitly in the images of self-combat. The result of such self-cultivation, however, is a relationship to oneself and others in which truth has a formative role in allowing a subject to outline future realities and the responsibility to attain them. Indeed, as Foucault contends, *parrhesia* is a way of "binding oneself to oneself in the statement of the truth,"[71] such that the announcement of truth connects both the speaker's thought and actions to her statements. On one level, this is the ability, as Foucault recommends, to "show that there is a relation between the rational discourse, the *logos*, you are able to use, and the way that you live,"[72] a harmony between discourse and action. More significantly, however, a process of self-cultivation, which depends on truth, requires a strategic orientation to the self in which truths function to clarify both the battlefield and the goal of critical inquiry. Plato reveals this more strategic orientation in his *Phaedrus*:

> But when [the speaker] both has sufficient ability to say what sort of man is persuaded by what sorts of things, and is capable of telling himself when he observes him that *this* is the man, *this* the nature of person that was discussed before, now actually present in front of him, to whom he must now apply *these* kinds of speech in *this* way in order to persuade him

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[65] Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, 133. Also note the more self-reflexive dimension emphasized here with respect to Diogenes the Cynic.

[66] Foucault, *Government of the Self and Others*, 456.

[67] Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 64.

[68] Ibid., 65.

[69] See ibid., 68 and 70, as well as Foucault, *Power*, 14.

[70] See Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure*, 86, and Foucault, *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 94, as well as Plato, *Gorgias*, 491d and 511d, where Socrates makes reference to rhetoric (positively construed) as the art of "helmsmanship."

[71] Foucault, *Government of the Self and Others*, 66.

[72] Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, 97; also see 106 in the same volume.

> of *this* kind of thing; when he now has all of this, and has also grasped the occasions for speaking and for holding back, and again for speaking concisely and piteously and in an exaggerated fashion... *then* his grasp of the science [of speaking] will be well and completely finished, but not before that...[73]

This more strategic conception of self-care calls forth true speech in both diagnostic and prescriptive terms. As a descriptive operation, *parrhesia* would give situational and strategic awareness; prescriptively, it requires the formulation of truths which are to be inserted into both acts of individual significance and collective struggle, those truths which are to subvert and alter the present.

Arguably then, *parrhesia* is a critical dimension within processes of self-construction aimed at an aesthetics of existence. As has been shown above, it is a self-reflexive and world-oriented practice that demands ethical responsibility and the production of multiple forms of truth. It is not without coincidence that *parrhesia* arises within the context of practices of "spirituality" in the ancient Hellenistic world. It constitutes a practice which holds the capacity to "transfigure" the self as a result of one's access to the truth.[74] As Foucault contends in *Government of the Self and Others*, *parrhesia* can be seen as a "psychagogical"[75] practice, which guides the cultivation and care of the soul. It is central to acts of self-formation and perfection. Furthermore, as a performative process of engagement with the truth, *parrhesia* can be closely linked to Foucault's repeated citation of philosophy as an *askesis*, that is, "a set of practices by which one can acquire, assimilate, and transform truth into a permanent principle of action. *Aletheia* becomes *ethos*."[76] While *askesis* is a more broad term related to the multiple practices which allow for self-formation, Foucault clearly designates *parrhesia* as a part of ascetic practices directed towards the formation of the self.[77] This is owing to the fact that Foucault demarcates *askesis* as "what enables us to become the subject of these true discourses, to become the subject who tells the truth and who is transfigured by this enunciation of the truth, by this enunciation itself, precisely by the fact of telling the truth."[78]

The "transfiguration" and "conversion" spoken of by Foucault as indicative of *askesis* and, by association *parrhesia*, is only possible if the truths given in *parrhesia* are true, evental, risky, and imaginative, as stated above. The truth not only enables one to live in harmony with present reality, but also "enables the subject not only to act as he ought, but also to be as he ought to be and wishes to be."[79] In this way, the truths evoked in *parrhesia* can carry the

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[73] Plato, *Phaedrus*, translated by Christopher Rowe (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 271e3.

[74] See Foucault, *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 15ff. Also see Christopher Yates, "Stations of the Self: Aesthetics and Ascetics in Foucault's Conversion Narrative," *Foucault Studies*, vol. 8 (2010): 78–99, on Foucault's concept of redemption and spirituality in the ancient Hellenistic world.

[75] See the final two lectures of *Government of the Self and Others*, in particular, for an examination of the psychagogical nature of parrhesia.

[76] Foucault, *Ethics*, 239; also see 137 in the same volume.

[77] See Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, 143, as well as Foucault, *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 327, where Foucault states: "The *askesis* is what enables truth-telling—truth-telling addressed to the subject and also truth-telling that the subject addresses to himself—to be constituted as the subject's way of being."

[78] Foucault, *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 332; also see 317 in the same volume.

[79] Ibid., 318–9.

governmental functions accorded to them by Foucault and others: one is governed by both reality as it is given and as it can be in the future.[80] *Parrhesia* seemingly demands a continuous conversion of the self in which "one's style of life, one's relation to others, and one's relation to oneself"[81] are altered in order to align with the truths and fictions one announces. As both a speech act and a relationship to truth/fiction, *parrhesia* foments the creative and strategic space in which one can develop the practices necessary to bring about the effects of truth.

Coupled with the self-referring nature of *parrhesia* discussed earlier, the preceding indicates the ethical import of parrhesiastic speech. As an act of self-criticism and analysis, *parrhesia* discloses those truths to which one does and should relate and, as an *askesis*, *parrhesia* recommends those acts and practices which allow one to achieve the effects of truth. Taken together, *parrhesia* is articulated as a manifold performance in which the realities, fractures, and potentialities of the present are spoken in order to create new truths and selves in the future.

Conclusion

Due to its self-reflexive and courageous nature, *parrhesia* should be seen as a principle element within Foucault's aesthetics of existence which demands new forms of ethical self-constitution. Moreover, as I have attempted to show in reading Foucault back upon himself, *parrhesia* externalizes both acts of truth-telling and proleptic fictioning, the active attempt to outline subversive and alternative possibilities within the present whose effects can be seen in the future. This reading differentiates parrhesiastic practice from ideology, manipulation, or dissimulation. This is because *parrhesia* must conform with reality, render an alternative reading of that reality, and, as an intentional process of truth-formation, demand a fit between the *parrhesiastes* and truth. If *parrhesia* is viewed as part of a greater effort in Foucault's later work, it would make an aesthetics of existence an active process of diagnosis, pronouncement, and action, and would make central acts of truth- and self-creation. Most importantly, it would place a process of experimentalism and playfulness at the heart of Foucault's aesthetics of existence.[82]

While many have read *parrhesia* as a primarily pedagogical and external practice relating to the present, when read against Foucault's complicated conceptions of truth and fiction, *parrhesia* becomes a way of creating practices which destabilize the present and reveal potentialities for future action. In upholding both notions of *parrhesia*, Foucault's concept is seen to be a complex operation in which an honest acknowledgement of the present is blended with acts of fictioning, self-mastery, and concrete action.

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[80] See Foucault's paraphrase of Seneca, ibid., 405, where Seneca is "attached to" and "governed by" that which he knows to be true.

[81] Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, 106.

[82] See O'Leary, *Foucault and Fiction*, 19, for commentary on the linkage between fiction and experimentalism.

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