

ARTICLE

Foucault's Concept of Confession

PHILIPPE BÜTTGEN

Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne

ABSTRACT. Setting out from the difficulty of translating the Foucauldian notion of *aveu*, this paper proposes an account of Foucault's concept of confession in the years 1979-1983 surrounding the writing of *Confessions of the Flesh*. I focus on Foucault's relative failure to bring together the complementary dimensions of confession as confession of sins and confession of faith in early Christianity. Foucault's attempts to tackle this challenge nonetheless reveal a number of crucial aspects of his thought throughout the 1970s, e.g., the critique of the notion of ideology and the role that critique played in the setting of Foucault's "critical philosophy of veridictions". A comparison with the lectures given at Louvain and the Collège de France suggests that Foucault took an original and rather solitary path in *Confessions of the Flesh*, which may explain the surprises awaiting the reader. Finally, I propose an explanation of Foucault's final shift away from Christian confession towards Greek *parrhesia*, pointing to the key role of the idea of a "duty of truth". This idea led Foucault to an original approach to confession and the illocutionary force of statements.

Keywords: Foucault, confession of sins, confession of faith, creed, veridiction, ideology.

The translator of *Les Aveux de la chair* is confronted with a number of challenges, the most puzzling of which lies in the very notion of 'aveu'. Modern French draws a fairly sharp distinction between 'aveu' and 'confession', reserving the latter for religious contexts, while 'aveu' encompasses both the private and judicial spheres. The distinction between the notions of 'avowal', 'admission' and 'confession' in English is not exactly parallel to the French, the English 'confession' being much more widely used than 'avowal'. Rendering *Les Aveux de la chair* by *Confessions of the Flesh* is in a sense correct (at least as far as the title of the book is concerned), for 'confession' is indeed a more general notion, just as 'aveu' is in French. On the other hand, this translation necessarily overlooks the way Foucault played with ordinary significations as he avoided the religious connotations usually associated in French with the word 'confession'.

The paradox of Foucault's book lies in the fact that, while obviously concentrating on early Christianity and dealing with the religious practice of confession, it apparently refers through 'aveux' to a broader range of signification. Yet it is not easy to determine

what kind of additional meanings those ‘aveux’ should bear, for the context of Foucault’s study is clearly (and, in a sense, solely) a religious one. Foucault may have aimed to remind his readers of his earlier discussions relating to judicial admission in *Discipline and Punish* (1975) and to the “confessing animal” (“bête d’aveu”) in *The Will to Knowledge* (1976).¹ The same holds for his lectures given at the Collège de France on the *Abnormal* that inaugurated Foucault’s reflection on confession in the years 1974-1975.²

This is certainly more than a conjecture. It would be misleading, however, to assume that the issue of subjectivity, for example, could by itself provide the missing link between the notion of confession in the study of modern and contemporary disciplinary techniques and its use in Foucault’s study of early Christianity. On the contrary, an interesting feature of Foucault’s early analysis of judicial avowal in *Discipline and Punish* is that it explicitly proceeded without referring to the notion of a confessing self, as if the self would *not* be needed at all.³ Foucault’s later critical interventions in the field of legal psychiatry may have contributed to a first unified approach to both issues in his work. This has led to the following statement of 1978, which may be just another translator’s crux: “au-delà de l’aveu, il faut une confession”, “beyond the avowal [of one’s crime], a confession [of the criminal] is needed”.⁴

In fact, it was only later that all strands really came together in Foucault’s thought. The Berkeley and Dartmouth lectures on “Subjectivity and Truth” and “Christianity and Confession” (1980) have filled the conceptual gap between confession and the self through the idea of a “genealogy of the self” in which the confession of one’s sins was to play a major part.⁵ This “genealogy” might be only too well known by now. Indeed, it has provided the basis for the first studies on Foucault on confession.⁶

A more interesting point is that the Foucauldian self actually *ceased to confess* shortly after Foucault had officially engaged (or simply announced) the “genealogy of the self” in the early 1980s. In the lectures *The Government of Self and Others* of 1982-1983, the self achieved some new kind of accomplishment through another sort of speech: no longer the self-pitying discourse of the Christian flesh confessing its sins but the glorious wager of the *parrhesia*, the truth-telling of the ancient Greeks, whose “politics of truth” quickly replaced the “genealogy of the self” amongst Foucault’s main interests.⁷

¹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* [1975] (1995), 35–47; *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1: *An Introduction [=The Will to Knowledge]* [1976] (1979), 59.

² Michel Foucault, *Abnormal* [1999] (2003). See also Michel Foucault, *Théories et institutions pénales. Cours au Collège de France (1971-1972)*, ed. Bernard E. Harcourt *et alii* (2015), 204–208, sp. 207: “toute une éthique et une théologie de l’aveu de vérité”, a seminal phrase for Foucault’s later evolution.

³ See Philippe Büttgen, “Aveu et confession,” in *Foucault, les Pères, le sexe: Autour des Aveux de la chair*, ed. Philippe Büttgen, Philippe Chevallier, Agustín Colombo and Arianna Sforzini (2021), 85–107.

⁴ Michel Foucault, “L’évolution de la notion d’‘individu dangereux’ dans la psychiatrie légale du XIX^e siècle” [1978], in *Dits et écrits* Vol. 3, ed. Daniel Defert and François Ewald (1994), 444.

⁵ Michel Foucault, “Subjectivity and Confession,” “Christianity and Confession” [1980], in *The Politics of Truth*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer and Lysa Hochroth (1997), 171–198, 199–236.

⁶ See, e.g., Chloë Taylor, *The Culture of Confession. A Genealogy of the ‘Confessing Animal’* (2009); James Bernauer, “Confessions of the Soul,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 31 (2005), 557–572.

⁷ See Torsten Bech Dyrberg, *Foucault and the Politics of Parrhesia* (2014); Petra Gehring and Andreas Gelhard (ed.), *Parrhesia: Foucault und der Mut zur Wahrheit* (2012); Daniele Lorenzini, “Performative, Passionate, and

It is important to take a close look at this shift in the late Foucault. The correct interpretation of *Confessions of the Flesh* depends on it. A striking feature of the book is that the confession itself apparently vanishes from the middle of *Confessions of the Flesh*. At some point, Foucault's perspective suddenly changes. After part 1, he abruptly interrupts his study of the doctrines and rituals of Christian penance. He then turns to the Patristic theologies of virginity (part 2) and of the goods of marriage (part 3). The Christian flesh is obviously involved in those middle and last parts of the study. But is it still really *confessing* anything?

This sudden shift of interest in *Confessions of the Flesh* gives an important insight into the intellectual evolution of the last Foucault. According to Frédéric Gros, Foucault must have written the final manuscript of *Confessions of the Flesh* in the years 1981-1982,⁸ i.e., at some point between the lectures on the "genealogy of the self" in the United States and the last lectures on *parrhesia* at the Collège de France. More importantly perhaps, I think that this shift in Foucault's last years is a shift *in the confession itself*. By this I mean a kind of internal fluctuation inside the notion of confession itself, from one meaning to another, namely from the "deciphering of oneself as a subject of desire" through religious penance⁹ to the proclamation of truth through political *parrhesia*.

At this point, it seems that we have moved far beyond the challenges of translation. The challenge relating to the correct translation of the Foucauldian "aveux" has turned into a more fundamental one. In the following, I will focus on Foucault's relative failure to bring together the various dimensions of confession as confession of sins *and* confession of faith in early Christianity. Foucault's attempts to tackle this challenge reveal, nonetheless, a number of crucial issues of his thought throughout the 1970s. A comparison with the lectures given at Louvain and the Collège de France suggests that Foucault took an original and rather solitary path in *Confessions of the Flesh*, which may reflect the reader's first impression that his discussion of confession suddenly breaks down. Finally, I propose an explanation of Foucault's final shift away from Christian confession towards Greek *parrhesia*, pointing to the key role of the idea of a "duty of truth". This idea led Foucault to an original approach to confession and the illocutionary force of statements.

SILENT WORDS OF THE SPEAKING FLESH

Foucault's paradox in *Confessions of the Flesh* can now be reformulated. On the one hand, Foucault suggests that he operates with a broader notion of confession ('aveu') that might echo his former inquiries into judicial and psychiatric disciplines. Yet, on the other hand, his concept of Christian confession is strangely narrow. Foucault is exclusively interested in the confession of sins (*confessio peccatorum*), systematically underplaying the role of the confession (or profession) of faith (*confessio fidei*) in early Christianity. The model set up

Parrhesiastic Utterance: On Cavell, Foucault, and Truth as an Ethical Force," *Critical Inquiry* 41:2 (2015), 254–268.

⁸ Michel Foucault, *Confessions of the Flesh* (*The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 4) [2018] (2021), x.

⁹ Michel Foucault, "The Concern for Truth" [1984], in *Michel Foucault: Politics, Philosophy, Culture*, ed. Lawrence D. Kritzman (1990), 260.

by Augustine for the concept of confession was even threefold, as one knows, adding the confession of praise (*confessio laudis*). By the time of Foucault's first lectures on early and mediaeval Christianity (*Abnormal*, 1974-1975; *On the Government of the Living*, 1979-1980), patristic scholarship had long provided all information relating to the complex semantics of *confessio*.¹⁰ The study of early Christianity corroborates that the formal admission of one's sins is but one aspect of the overall problem of confession; obviously the most important one when it comes to one's sexuality, but not when it comes to the confession itself. Foucault's somewhat mysterious statement of 1978: "au-delà de l'aveu, il faut une confession" therefore makes sense, at least if one adds that "beyond the confession" (of the sins) there still must be a confession or even two (of faith, of praise).

At this point, one may ask: is it because Foucault did not consider the whole essence of confession that his theory of confession ('aveu') eventually fell short in *Confessions of the Flesh*? And is the striking absence of any reference to Augustine's *Confessions* in Foucault's manuscript to be explained by the fact that this work carefully calibrates the three dimensions of confession in a way that is not compatible with Foucault's construction?¹¹

The first part of *Confessions of the Flesh* deals with a "different type of experience", a difference that, according to Foucault, transcended the continuity of pagan and Christian sexual "codes" through a "certain mode of relation of oneself with oneself, and a certain relation between the wrongful and the true": Foucault, after the Church Fathers, names it "flesh".¹² How is flesh, taken as a "form of experience" and a "form of subjectivity", identified as a *sinner's* flesh? Foucault's answer is twofold. The first answer points to "penitential discipline", a set of procedures that came along with the baptism of converts and the formal forgiveness of sins committed after baptism, the so-called "second penance". A second answer lies in "monastic asceticism" as a way for the flesh to experience itself. In both "practices" of penance and asceticism, Foucault says, "nullification of evil", "manifestation of truth" and the "knowledge and transformation of oneself by oneself" flowed together.¹³

The confession of sins first regarded penitential discipline as *exomologesis* and *confessio*¹⁴; it was then additionally incorporated into the practices of monastic asceticism under the form of the so-called *exagoreusis*, i.e., the close examination of one's thoughts (*cogitationes*) under the guidance of a director of conscience. These are the two main steps in Foucault's account of confession.¹⁵ How are they related with what *we* now call confession of sins?

¹⁰ See, e.g., Pierre Courcelle, *Recherches sur les Confessions de saint Augustin* (1950); Joseph Ratzinger, "Originalität und Überlieferung in Augustins Begriff der 'Confessio'," *Revue des études augustiniennes* 3/4 (1957), 376–392.

¹¹ See Taylor, *The Culture of Confession*, 42–46 for an alternative, though less plausible explanation: Augustine's *Confessions* are first and foremost a confession of faith, associated with the "climatic moment" of conversion.

¹² Foucault, *Confessions of the Flesh*, 35.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 35–36.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 66.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 66–78, 101–110.

Foucault here gives a nuanced answer. Among the “truth procedures” pertaining to penitential discipline (*exomologesis*) according to Tertullian, Cyprian and Jerome, he draws an “axis of the verbal and the non-verbal”.¹⁶ Along this line, Foucault goes on to emphasize within confession what first went beyond (or stood below) the “verbalization of sins committed”,¹⁷ such as tears, self-inflicted wounding, prostrations, etc., which were not meant to “tell the truth” but to “do the truth”.¹⁸ An example for this was the Roman matron Fabiola (fourth century CE), whose public penance (“ritual of *exomologesis*”) at the Lateran basilica after the death of her second consort had to be viewed primarily as a “penitential drama” rather than an articulated discourse of self-disclosure.¹⁹

According to Foucault, the extensive “verbalization” of one’s sins appeared at a relatively late stage in the history of Christian penance, although the Church has always been careful to maintain the dramatic, objective and thereby shareable aspect of public confession. The problem, if one were to formulate it in the language of the sources, is that of the *expositio casus*, i.e., the spoken part of penance. Starting from a merely preliminary step of the ceremonial, the *expositio casus* has developed throughout the Middle Ages into a key-element of the “penitential rite”.²⁰ A decisive transition in this regard was provided by the “examination-confession” (“examen-aveu”), which put the emphasis on the *virtus confessionis*.²¹

Let us summarize: the flesh of *Confessions of the Flesh* does not only speak. Its “experience” and “exercise” are not only made of words.²² Foucault’s originality in *Confessions of the Flesh* lies without doubt in the focus put on the silent part of penance, which the notion of confession had to take on; a speechless confession. The flesh always confesses, even if it does not speak. Foucault insists that for early Christian writers the involuntary motions of the flesh were confessions as well; the male erection, for example, so much feared by Augustine, was a confession of the sinning flesh, a kind of ‘aveu de la chair’ that is *not* a ‘confession’.²³

It is interesting to note here that Foucault, while writing *Confessions of the Flesh*, was simultaneously developing a pragmatics of confession as a “speech act”. A trace of those reflections is to be found in the Louvain lectures *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling: The Function of Avowal in Justice* of 1981. They are significantly absent from *Confessions of the Flesh*. The book takes an alternative path (also, at that time, a rather solitary one): Foucault underplays the “critical philosophy of veridictions” developed in the Louvain lectures²⁴ and focuses instead on what the Dartmouth lecture on “Christianity and Confession” had called the “ontological temptation” of early Christianity, as opposed to a “constant

¹⁶ Ibid., 71.

¹⁷ Michel Foucault, *On the Government of the Living* [2012] (2014), 102.

¹⁸ *Confessions of the Flesh*, 73.

¹⁹ Ibid., 68–69; see Foucault, *On the Government of the Living*, 202, 207, 212.

²⁰ *Confessions of the Flesh*, 67.

²¹ Ibid., 101–110.

²² See *ibid.*, 35, 39, 46–47, etc.

²³ Ibid., 265–266.

²⁴ Michel Foucault, *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling: The Function of Avowal in Justice* [2012] (2014), 20.

verbalization” viewed as its “epistemological temptation”.²⁵ *Confessions of the Flesh* may be read as Foucault’s great phenomenological book, together with *The Birth of the Clinic* (1963): the ‘flesh’, no doubt, required it, just like the ‘medical gaze’ did twenty years earlier.

Is this the reason why Foucault suddenly stops dealing with confession after the first part of the book? For the flesh, for sure, sets forth its “exercise” in virginity and marriage – albeit silently, or with other words than those of confession. Foucault’s book indeed has a unity – but is it the same for his notion of confession? Even in the few passages of *Confessions of the Flesh* in which Foucault explicitly refers to the semantics of *confessio* in early Christianity, he insists that confession was to be defined as “a general act by which one is recognized being a sinner”.²⁶ He thereby refers to some sort of action which cannot be subsumed into the sole *confessio oris*, the confession of the mouth, “as it will be found later at the heart of the penitential rite”.²⁷ This “general act” however, according to Foucault, did not extend to the confession of faith.

This is all the more striking as the confession of faith has actually been associated with confession of sins throughout the history of confession in Christianity. Foucault briefly mentions a rule in that sense in Hippolytus of Rome’s *Apostolic Tradition* (215 CE), without drawing the necessary conclusions as to the unity of confession in early (and later) Christianity.²⁸ Here it is clear that Foucault draws a rather schematic sketch of the historical development of confession along the “axis of the verbal and the non-verbal” at the expense of the unity of penance and faith that has long been testified in the history of the Christian Churches.

CONFESSION AND IDEOLOGY

By contrast, the lectures contemporary to the writing of *Confessions of the Flesh* developed a complete approach to the semantics of confession that also included the pragmatics of avowal I previously referred to in *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling*. The absence of these semantics and pragmatics from *Confessions of the Flesh* is all the more striking in as much as Foucault borrowed the materials for his book from these lectures. In the next two sections, I will show how this approach to confession reshaped Foucault’s philosophical project in the years 1979-1982, and how it may pertain to today’s philosophical concerns.

In the lectures *On the Government of the Living*, Foucault first justifies his choice to exclude the confession of faith from his discussion of the “historical problem of the formation of a relation between the government of men and truth acts”. A confession of faith immediately relates to a *doctrine*:

It is, of course, a regime of truth constituted by a body of doctrine that, [on the one hand,] depends upon a permanent reference to a text and, on the other hand, refers to an

²⁵ Foucault, “Christianity and Confession,” 228.

²⁶ *Confessions of the Flesh*, 52.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 67.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 71.

institution that is also permanent, and that changes and maintains something as enigmatic as tradition. So, a body of doctrine, but also truth acts required from the faithful, non-reflexive truth acts, but truth acts in the form of beliefs, acts of faith, professions of faith.²⁹

Shortly before, Foucault provides a general definition of what an "act of truth" is, namely the "insertion of the subject (...) in the procedures of manifestation of truth" or "the part that falls on a subject in the procedures of alethurgy", the production of truth.³⁰ Within those procedures the "insertion of the subject" follows three main modes, depending on the role the subject takes as an "operator", a "spectator" or the "object itself of alethurgy".³¹

Foucault's decision not to consider the confession of faith is tacitly justified by the idea of some reflexive virtue or property supposedly inherent to superior forms of alethurgy, as the subject finds a way to identify her- or himself as an "object in the procedures of truth manifestation", e.g., in the confessions of her or his sins.³² The "act of confession", Foucault says, is a matter of (actively) discovering and "exploring" oneself, whereas the "act of faith" is merely a matter of (passively) "accepting" a doctrine and "adhering" to it:

The regimes of faith and confession in Christianity are very different, since what is involved in the case of faith is adherence to an inviolable and revealed truth in which the role of an individual, and therefore the truth act, the point of subjectivation is essentially in accepting this content and in agreeing to demonstrate that one accepts it – this is the meaning of the profession of faith, of the act of profession of faith – whereas in the other case, in confession, it is not at all a matter of adhering, but of exploring individual secrets, and of exploring them endlessly. We can say, more or less, from the point of view that interests us here at any rate, that Christianity has been constantly traversed by this extraordinary tension between the two regimes of truth, the regime of faith and the regime of confession.³³

Foucault's assumption of the superiority of the (active, reflexive) act of avowal over the (quasi-passive, pre-reflexive) act of faith may appear surprisingly traditional through the kind of depreciation of belief it implies. The interesting thing about this reformulation of the age-old faith-knowledge problem, however, is that it takes place in a discussion of *confession*. For confession actually *is* the regime of truth that breaks down into adherence and self-exploration. Foucault may not have drawn all consequences from such a theoretical shift that has put the notion of confession at the center of a theory of truth. After all, the notion of an "act of truth" itself is borrowed by Foucault from the scholastic doctrines of penance as a sacrament, with its three components, *actus contritionis*, *actus satisfactionis*,

²⁹ Foucault, *On the Government of the Living*, 83.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 81, see 6–7 on alethurgy.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*, 82 (translation modified).

³³ *Ibid.*, 83–84.

and *actus veritatis*.³⁴ But this, in turn, may reflect the priority Foucault has always given to the confession of sins over the confession of faith.

Foucault's choices are significant. He assumes that creeds and confessions of faith can only be looked at as "bodies of doctrines". The only kind of analysis that may be relevant here is "ideological", i.e., based on the "ideological nature of the content of the dogma and beliefs".³⁵ This is partly misleading: what is also fascinating about creeds is the illocutionary force of their statements, with all the religious and political implications this "force" carries with itself, and the type of attitude these statements imply towards one's belief. This attitude can be, precisely, reflexive, of this particular kind of reflexivity that characterizes illocutionary statements in many rituals.³⁶ The confession of faith can indeed, as well as the confession of sins, be viewed "in terms of truth acts" that are no less interesting as those of penance.³⁷

Foucault's obsessive concern with the notion of ideology throughout the 1970s, his critique of "ideological analysis" as an inadequate way of interpreting discourse, certainly explains the absence of the notion of confession of faith in *Confessions of the Flesh*. "I have insisted on this rejection of ideological analysis many times. I have returned to it, I think, in practically all the annual courses I have given".³⁸ It is also important to note that this critique of ideological analysis accompanied the introduction of religious issues into Foucault's thought, e.g., in *Security, Territory, Population* in 1977-1978.³⁹ Nevertheless, this may now all sound a bit outdated. Quite obviously, Foucault's discussion of confession also bears the wounds of his life-long fight against Marxist orthodoxy. The question is whether we still can find some use for Foucault's critique in that respect. A lesson that can be drawn is that the critique of ideological analysis, as well as the critique of ideologies itself, prevents one from claiming any method that would be particularly designed for the study of religion. This already had been the scope of the critique of religion in Marx, which does not need to develop particular means to target religion but, on the contrary, uses the notion of ideology as a tool for *not* essentializing religion – *indifferentiating* it, as it were, as a product of ideology among many others. Viewed from their result, both Foucauldian and Marxist critiques do stand in some sort of continuity with each other.

THE RELIGION OF CONFESSION

Indeed, Foucault did not entirely ignore the confession of faith. Having noticed "the extraordinary tension between the two regimes of truth, the regime of faith and the regime of confession", he then adds:

³⁴ Ibid., 80–81.

³⁵ Ibid., 83.

³⁶ See Philippe Büttgen, "Formules de foi et d'attestation," *Philosophie* 145 (2020), 30–46.

³⁷ *On the Government of the Living*, 82.

³⁸ Ibid., 75–76.

³⁹ See Craig Martin, "Ideology and the Study of Religion: Marx, Althusser, and Foucault," *Religion Compass* 7:9 (2013), 402-411; Philippe Büttgen, "Théologie politique et pouvoir pastoral", *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 62:5 (2009), 1129–1154, sp. 1142–1143.

That there has been profound tension does not mean that there have been two heterogeneous and unrelated regimes. After all, we should not forget that the notion of confession, the meaning of the word "confession" in the Latin Church, is precisely at the fork, as it were, of these two regimes (...) So, Christianity is, at bottom, essentially, the religion of confession, to the extent that the confession is the hinge of the regime of faith and the regime of confession of self (*aveu*), and, seen from this perspective, Christianity is underpinned by two regimes of truth.⁴⁰

In the Dartmouth lecture "Christianity and Confession", given the same year, Foucault added in a somewhat hesitant English: "As everybody knows, Christianity is a confession".⁴¹ How are the confessions of the flesh exactly related to that "religion of confession"? Here is an attempt in that direction in 1981:

It seems to me that an absolutely fundamental aspect of Christianity is that it is a religion bearing two sets, two types, two modes of obligation for truth. On the one hand, there is an obligation to believe in revealed truth or dogma; this is also the truth of the text. And on the other, in Christianity, [either] through the exomologesis (...) or the exagoreusis (...), in all this we see the appearance of an obligation of truth. This obligation does not take the form of believing in dogma, nor does it take the form of an act of faith. Rather, it is an obligation of truth that takes the form of the necessary exploration of oneself, of the necessary discovery of a truth within the self, of the fundamental obligation to tell this truth. Truth of the text, truth of the self. Truth of the text, truth of the soul. Hermeneutics of the text, hermeneutics of the self.⁴²

In a similar way, as we have seen, the *Government of the Living* lectures commented on confession being at the crossroads (the "fork") of two regimes of truth. Here Foucault goes on to insist that between the obligation to believe and the obligation to discover oneself "there is an affiliation", a "fundamental connection".⁴³ In Christianity, the revealed truth of the confession of faith has to connect with the revelation of oneself through the confession of sins.⁴⁴

CONFESSION AND THE DUTY OF TRUTH

Foucault's thoughts on the entanglement of faith and penance in an overall regime of confession found their way to only one limited section in *Confessions of the Flesh*. This text is nonetheless crucial.

Appendix 3 of the edition provided by Frédéric Gros includes a separate set of reflections that Foucault might have intended to insert into his discussion of "second penance" dealing with the "fundamental character of the truth obligation (...) as a precondition for

⁴⁰ *On the Government of the Living*, 84.

⁴¹ "Christianity and Confession," 200.

⁴² Foucault, *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling*, 165–166.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 166.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

possible redemption".⁴⁵ The main text develops reflections on the confessions of Adam and Eve, and of King David acknowledging his sins, and, on the other hand, on Cain's "refusal of truth" after murdering his brother Abel. In Appendix 3, these reflections find a continuation through the reading by Foucault of a chain of exegesis including texts by John Chrysostom, Ambrose and Augustine.⁴⁶ Foucault here comments on the "obedience to the principle of truth-telling", an obvious echo to the "critical philosophy of veridictions" he presented at the same time in his lectures on *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling*.⁴⁷

This shift is significant. As already shown, part 1 of *Confessions of the Flesh* essentially focusses not on 'truth-telling' but on 'truth-doing' in the beginnings of Christian penance, with an accent on the non-spoken part of the penance ritual. Here, on the contrary, non-verbal manifestations of penance (e.g., Adam and Eve's sudden shame of nudity after committing sin) are deciphered through a language code that displays a correlation between the "obligation of truth in relation to transgressions" and the "obligation of truth in relation to Revelation".⁴⁸ The "fundamental connection" between revealed truth and self-revelation mentioned in *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling* comes here to the foreground. At the core of Cain's drama, Augustine saw an inner relation between a "call to recognize the truth of his crime" and the "call to recognize the truth of the Gospel". Augustine thereby reinforced a shift that according to Foucault was already to be identified in Ambrose and Chrysostom, namely "from the avowal (*aveu*) of faults to faith in the Gospel".⁴⁹

At this point, Foucault is in the position to take up again the semantics of Christian confession:

Truth-telling and believing, veridiction in regard to oneself and faith in the Word are or should be inseparable. The duty of truth, as belief and as confession, is at the center of Christianity. The two traditional meanings of the word "confession" include these two aspects. In a general way, "confession" is the recognition of the duty of truth.⁵⁰

In a somewhat indirect way, without referring to *Confessions* and quoting instead from *Contra Faustum* (XII, 10), Foucault's exegetical reflections finally recognize Augustine's major role in the history of the Christian theory and practice of confession. Foucault here reintegrates flesh into a Christian regime of veridiction that seemed relatively under-developed throughout the manuscript. In addition to the parallel sections in the lectures from the years 1979-1981 at Louvain and the Collège de France, *Confessions of the Flesh*, at least in that Appendix, manifest a concern about "faith" that might open new horizons in his thought.

⁴⁵ *Confessions of the Flesh*, 315–320, see 74–75.

⁴⁶ See Sébastien Morlet, "L'exégèse d'une exégèse: Foucault, lecteur de Chrysostome", in *Foucault, les Pères, le sexe: Autour des Aveux de la chair*, ed. Philippe Büttgen, Philippe Chevallier, Agustín Colombo and Arianna Sforzini (2021), 139–158.

⁴⁷ *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling*, 20.

⁴⁸ *Confessions of the Flesh*, 320.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

CHRISTIAN CONFESSION AND GREEK PARRHESIA

The horizon here is an ethical one, including “faith” and the “duty of truth”. This might be no surprise to readers of Foucault. I think, however, that new light may be shed on Foucault’s so-called “ethical turn” by trying to situate the “duty of truth” within the process that led Foucault away from Christian confession to *parrhesia* in Classical and Hellenistic Greek sources. In Foucault’s late thought, the idea of a duty of truth is a pivotal notion; it brings us back to my first question as to the transitional role of Christian confession for Foucault and its replacement by the notion of *parrhesia*.

In the notion of a “duty of truth,” Foucault’s analytics of the flesh and semantics of confession finally come together. The “duty of truth” connects the confessions of the flesh to the kind of “obligation” that according to Foucault may define every possible regime of truth:

By regime of truth I mean that which constrains individuals to a certain number of truth acts (...). Roughly speaking, a regime of truth is that which determines the obligations of individuals with regard to procedures of manifestation of truth.⁵¹

This is a key text: in *On the Government of the Living*, Foucault achieves a kind of synthesis of the “regimes of production of truth” in *Discipline and Punish* and the “regime of confession (*aveu*)” first mentioned in *The Will to Knowledge*.⁵² This synthesis expands on the lectures of 1982-1983 on *The Government of Self and Others*. In these lectures, truth obligation is formulated for the first time as an issue *for philosophy*, “the philosophical question of the relationship between the obligation of truth and the practice of truth”.⁵³

The discussion here takes place within a new framework that Foucault defines as that of a “general dramatics of true discourse”.⁵⁴ He thereby insists on what distinguishes this new project from a “pragmatics of discourse”.⁵⁵ Strangely enough, his discussion makes *parrhesia* “the opposite of the performative”,⁵⁶ which is quite a nonsense from an Austinian point of view. For what would it mean to say that performative utterances have an *opposite*?

However the complex relationship between “pragmatics of discourse” and “pragmatics of the self” may be looked at in the late Foucault,⁵⁷ one more connection is to be established within the rich network of concepts relating to confession in his work. For the “general dramatics of true discourse” in *The Government of Self and Others* clearly echoes the “drama” or “dramaturgy” Foucault dealt with in the last lectures of *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling*. At that time, “dramatic” was already conceived of as a notion alternative to that

⁵¹ *On the Government of the Living*, 92–93.

⁵² See Büttgen, “Aveu et confession,” 104.

⁵³ Michel Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1982-1983* [2008] (2011), 69.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁵⁷ See Lorenzini, “Performative, Passionate, and Parrhesiastic Utterance”; “Foucault et la force des mots: de l’extralinguistique à la subjectivation,” *Phantasia* 8 (2019).

of the performative. Judicial avowal according to Foucault is neither performative nor “symbolic” but “dramatic”:

If one understands the “dramatic” not as a mere ornamental addition, but as every element in a scene that brings forth the foundation of legitimacy and the meaning of what is taking place, then I would say that avowal is part of the judicial and penal drama.⁵⁸

Let us now turn more closely to the other “dramatics” in Foucault, namely the dramatics relating to *parrhesia*. Foucault’s critique of what he called the “pragmatics of discourse” is a perplexing case. Notwithstanding the somewhat nonsensical mention of an “opposite of the performative” I have just referred to, Foucault certainly remains true to Austin’s inspiration when he insists that performative utterances are not a matter of sincerity but only of “authority”, for “there does not have to be an, as it were, personal relationship between the person making the utterance and the utterance itself for the latter to be performative”.⁵⁹ He does that, however, primarily in order to highlight the contrast with parrhesiastic truth-telling utterances. These, Foucault says, do not allow the subject’s “personal” position towards her or his own saying to be “indifferent”.⁶⁰ What distinguishes parrhesiastic from performative utterances is a kind of commitment of the speaking subject to what he or she is saying. Foucault defines this commitment as follows:

(...) the parrhesiastic enunciation is the affirmation that in fact one genuinely thinks, judges, and considers the truth one is saying to be genuinely true. I tell the truth, and I truly think that this is true that I am telling the truth when I say it.⁶¹

This aspect he calls the “doubling or intensification of the statement of the truth by the statement of the truth of the fact that I think this truth and that, thinking it, I say it”: the “affirmation of the affirmation”.

At this point one can note that this definition exactly applies to the confession of faith, viewed as the reflexive statement of the truth of the statements of faith through liturgy. At that time, however, Foucault had already left the Christians for the Greeks, shifting towards the “eccentric centrality” of *parrhesia* in his work, as Étienne Balibar calls it.⁶² This was his *rendez-vous manqué* with the confession of faith and with an approach to the phenomenon of Christian doctrine that may reach beyond the limits of mere intellectual history.

Foucault’s views regarding the “affirmation of the affirmation” were indeed not new in 1983. I think that their source lies in the discussion of the *Government of the Living* lectures of 1979-1980 on regimes and games of truth. It is this discussion that also gave the impulse to the discussion on the “duty of truth” we read in *Confessions of the Flesh*. Against the objection that “the truth is sufficient unto itself to make its own law”, Foucault argues:

⁵⁸ *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling*, 210.

⁵⁹ Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others*, 63.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Étienne Balibar, “Dire, contredire: Sur les formes de la *parrêsia* selon Foucault,” in *Libre Parole* (2018), 85.

It is not true that the truth constrains only by truth. To put things very simply, in an almost or completely infantile way, I shall say the following: in the most rigorously constructed argument imaginable, even in the event of something recognized as self-evident, there is always, and it is always necessary to assume, *a certain assertion* that does not belong to the logical realm of observation or deduction, in other words, an assertion that does not belong exactly to the realm of the true or false, that is rather *a sort of commitment, a sort of profession (une sorte d'engagement, de profession)*. In all reasoning there is always this assertion (*cette affirmation ou profession*) that consists in saying: if it is true, then I will submit; it is true, therefore I submit; it is true, therefore I am bound.⁶³

This crucial text has already been commented on.⁶⁴ I shall insist on the notion of a “profession”. Foucault connects it with the assertion of truth, strikingly echoing the profession or confession of faith. To put it in other words, truth always requires its own profession, namely a profession of truth. It is this profession that is to be viewed as the shared root, in Christianity, of the confession of sins and the confession of faith; Foucault, however, primarily let it apply to the truth-telling *parrhesia*. In another terminology, I should call it the illocutionary force of statements – the statement of one’s sins and the statement of one’s faith. Foucault rediscovered, at is were, that illocutionary force. I do not know whether his knowledge of speech act theory extended up to that particular point.⁶⁵ If so, it is not established whether Foucault referred to it in this lecture of 1980. But one thing is certain: Foucault’s discovery of the illocutionary force of statements (or, to put it in other words, of the power of declarations) stood in a complex relationship with his approach to early Christianity.

This is the point I shall make as a conclusion. Foucault certainly has grasped the unity of confession; but this sense of unity was of no real relevance for his conception of Christianity. He indeed recognized Christianity as the “religion of confession”: an inspiring phrase that should still be meditated upon. Foucault even designed tools and methods for that purpose, the most important one being the “duty of truth” in *Confessions of the Flesh*. However, that “duty” remained isolated in Foucault’s book. *Confessions of the Flesh* is, in some sense, a book on the unity of confession – but of the confession of sins, in its verbal and non-verbal manifestations. This is, certainly, Foucault’s most ‘catholic’ book; but it may be no coincidence that the discussion on confession failed precisely in that book. For the broader unity of confession is to be found elsewhere in a wider trajectory that connects Foucault’s first attempts towards a philosophy of avowal in *Discipline and Punish* to his final philosophy of *parrhesia*. It is that wider trajectory that finally gives sense to *Confessions of the Flesh*, allowing one to read the book in the light of notions absent from it, namely those of the regime, act, and obligation of truth.

⁶³ *On the Government of the Living*, 95–96 (italics mine)

⁶⁴ See Daniele Lorenzini, *La Force du vrai: De Foucault à Austin* (2017).

⁶⁵ See Michel Foucault, “‘Introduction’ à *L’Archéologie du savoir*,” ed. Martin Rueff, *Les Études philosophiques*, 153:3 (2015), 327–351, sp. 349–351; David Simonetta, “L’archive de *L’Archéologie du savoir*. Les sources anglophones (positivisme logique, logique, philosophie analytique),” in Alain de Libera, *L’Archéologie philosophique* (2016), 253–258.

Should we be surprised? Of course not, if it simply comes to contextualizing the book. But in another sense we should indeed be surprised, for Foucault found the truth of confession in *parrhesia* – thus ending where the story began, with the Greeks. From a mere internal point of view, the problem of confession sheds light on a tension between Foucault's "genealogy of the self" on the one side and his "critical philosophy of veridictions" on the other. Once again, is it so surprising that critique and genealogy, the two Kantian and Nietzschean programmes, should eventually come to collide with each other – even in Foucault? The main problem, however, is that of confession, and Foucault actually *made* it a problem for philosophy.

Foucault as the thinker of confession – but not so much of *Christian* confession. This may sound paradoxical: but for whom, actually? We all should know that the study of early Christianity was no task *per se* for Foucault. Conversely, I am quite sure that the whole essence of confession cannot be reached now without Foucault.

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Author info

Philippe Büttgen

philippe.buettgen@univ-paris1.fr

Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne

Institut des sciences juridiques et philosophiques de la Sorbonne

France