



REVIEW

Paul Allen Miller, *Foucault's Seminars on Antiquity: Learning to Speak the Truth*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021. Pp. 232. ISBN: 978-1474278669 (hardback).

If every form of power has a claim to truth, there must be forms of speaking the truth to power. From 1980 to 1984, Foucault tells his students how mythical figures that represented power, such as Oedipus Tyrannus, Dionysius the Younger, and Socrates' condemners, were told the truth; a form of speaking with a historically particular relation between truth and the speaker as its condition.

In *Foucault's Seminars on Antiquity: Learning to Speak the Truth* (2022), Paul Allen Miller provides us with an exhausting overview of Foucault's last five lecture series at the Collège de France. In the five chapters, Miller discusses the lecture series and traces the critical and conceptual developments in Foucault's work on the subject of Antiquity. Each section is introduced by two blocks of quotations of Foucault's text or the text of one of Foucault's references. Through the citations, Miller shines a new light on what Foucault was writing about, and what Foucault found of great interest, using his own carefully made translations and offering us alternatives to the existing editions.

The book is not limited to the lectures alone. It is a historical inquiry of itself, which is highly relevant for all readers interested in the texts and plays that Foucault discussed. The book is strong in its clear, detailed, and extended explanations of Foucault and his interests in Antique thinking. However, Miller chose to limit himself to Foucault and Foucault's references, leaving quite a gap between Foucault's death almost 38 years ago and the present. The choice limits the conceptual possibilities of the book.

Interestingly, Miller introduces his book with an inquiry of how Foucault became increasingly occupied with Ancient philosophy from the 1970s onwards and challenges the story of the eight-year silence in which Foucault is said to shift his interests towards Antique forms of subjectivation. It is already in 1971, writes Miller, that Foucault held a lecture series that was titled *La volonté de savoir*, with a content quite far from the book from 1976 (p. 4-5). Foucault speaks about Aristotle and Nietzsche as representatives of a specific form of subjectivity in which a subject has the ability to speak the truth through the relation it has with itself. According to Miller, the question of the relation between subject and truth is also already present during the lecturing on disciplinary power and biopolitics. If, according to Miller, Foucault asks 'what is the truth, and what is its relation to power',

there is in his work already a specific relationship between subject and truth that is not fully reducible to relations of power (p. 16).

Miller describes how Foucault sees a new type of subject in *Oedipus Tyrannus*. For Foucault, the play is essentially a murder mystery in which eyewitness accounts and third parties are needed to find the truth about Laius, the murdered king of Thebes. Miller shows us how Foucault problematizes the psychoanalytical reading of the play and how it is exemplary of a form of subjectivity in which truth is not residing in the subject but outside of the subject. In this way, he contextualizes Foucault's argument as an argument against the relationship between subject and truth, as brought forward in psychoanalysis, in an attempt to save the play of *Oedipus Tyrannus* from a psychoanalytical reading. However, the reading seems to oppose the reading of the relation between subject and truth that we find from *The Subject and Truth* and onwards, in which Foucault describes how the Antique subject gained access to the truth through spiritual exercise. It seems as if Foucault found something more promising.

Through the reading of the lecture series of '80 and '81 before going to *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* from '82, Miller is able to present a highly original reading of the latter. If we follow Miller's approach, the newly introduced elements are philosophical care for the self, spirituality, self-knowledge, and *parrhēsia*, and throughout the lecture series the four elements are unrelated to sexual compartments but appear as forms of self-reflexivity needed to become a subject of true knowledge, a *phronimos*, whose actions accord with its theoretical knowledge (p. 85).

Miller is very specific in his introduction of *parrhēsia* in the 1982 course, in which it does not yet occupy central space. Surprisingly, Miller chose to present it in connection to the Alcibiades dialogue, in which the 'risk' for the philosopher is almost absent because Alcibiades is in love with Socrates. The philosophical activity in the activity of frank speech is a problematization of what was thought to be certain, and Plato's works sometimes end with a resolution of the problem (e.g., in *Republic*) but mostly remain at the problematization. There is not yet much of a courage of truth, although the 'vocation of philosophy', the commitment to the combatting of false opinion, has the execution of Socrates as its ultimate consequence (p. 96 and 175). Here, Miller does not so much emphasize the well-known motive of subjectivity as resistance and vigilance but predominantly develops the argument that Foucault is telling the truth to us. He chooses to conclude his chapter with an explanation of practices of hermeneutics of the self in identity formations. Just as the 'New Soviet Man' or 'Japanese Company Man' transformed itself in response to institutional and governmental structures, we academics transform ourselves according to unstated assumptions of university life (p. 120). Miller notes that Foucault himself worked through the archives to describe 'a decisive moment on which the modern subject's mode of being is still engaged' and shows that modern identity-formation and Antique forms of subjectivation progress along of similar lines (p. 83). According to Miller, a contemporary example of such practices is the checking of privilege within progressive groups (p. 121).

In chapter four, on *The Government of the Self and Others*, Miller reminds us of Foucault's interest in Kant in the creation of a genealogy of truth in which, in order to come to the truth, the Other is excluded. Since Kant, spiritual guidance no longer belongs to the realm of philosophy, and thinking can be done in private. Contrary to *The Hermeneutics of the Subject* in which Foucault speaks of a loss in modernity of the subject's work on the self to gain access to the truth, Enlightenment is presented as 'maturation' of the subject. The subject has access to the truth because of what it is and not because of the care for the self. It is in the fourth chapter that the book offers its strongest conceptual possibilities, since Miller presents *parrhēsia* not as form of telling the truth that is lost in Antiquity but as an ever present historical possibility: 'Thus the emancipated thinker of modernity is one who must stand before the present and speak frankly' (p. 130). Miller's fourth chapter brings the possibility of speaking the truth to the 20th century, serving as a theoretical introduction to the final chapter. After his disappointment in the GIP, Foucault thought that the one who speaks the truth to power should be on its own. However, it is here that Miller's focus on the individual in his last years shows the limitations of the project. The exclusive focus on Foucault and his interests in a form of speaking the truth to power makes it look like as if we are waiting for Foucault's successor.

'The Courage of Truth: Philosophical Life in the Face of Death' is the title of the final chapter of the book. Miller interweaves the story of Foucault's last phase in his life with the latter's comparison between himself and Socrates: since the unexamined life is not worth living, we must think and act according to our thoughts until death takes us. We cannot stop saying the truth even when it has a cost for ourselves; either when we are executed for it or when we become too ill to work and lecture. As Miller reminds us, although the lecture rooms were still full, Foucault did not die as a star, and a great many thinkers deplored his turn away from the analyses of power. In his reading of Foucault's last years, Miller insists on Foucault's emphasis on self-examination: Foucault does not tell us what we want to hear, but he is telling the truth to all of us, and we cannot get away with the genealogy of this or that. Miller's description of the history of the reception of *The Use of Pleasure* and *The Care for the Self* in the U.S. in the introduction anticipates a sad introduction to the last chapter: Miller feels the need to defend Foucault against the accusation that Foucault deliberately infected others with HIV, an accusation that can too easily be made with contemporary knowledge of the virus and that goes together with the resentment and disappointment in Foucault in the American progressive left and the aversion against him in the conservative right.

Parrhēsia is only the case when you say, with an undetermined risk, not what others want to hear but what needs to be said. Foucault took the risk of being 'called out' by his contemporaries by leaving out references to women like Sappho and by making historically debatable choices in the description of sexual and ethical conducts in Antiquity (Miller 2021, 12). But, as he emphasizes in *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, the historical inquiries of his last years were not only motivated by historical curiosity. He wanted to trace the historical relation between subject and truth, which is where he found how the Antique subject of true knowledge became the subject of hermeneutics. However, in this same

history he saw the actual existence of forms of speaking the truth to power, that is, to problematize the omnipresent relations of power both inside and outside the university buildings. As Miller says: To be a professor of philosophy is a career choice, to be a philosopher is a vocation (p. 96).

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Toon Meijaard is interested in the philosophy of disease and finds his inspiration in French philosophy, Nietzsche, and the anti-ableism studies. He recently finishing his thesis, which is titled 'Medicalization and Hermeneutics: the Care of the Self in Michel Foucault's *L'Herméneutique du sujet*'.