

## REVIEW

**Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech*. Edited by Joseph Pearson (Los Angeles, Ca.: Semiotext(e)/MIT Press, 2001). ISBN 1584350113**

Both new and practiced readers of Michel Foucault are subject to the habitual cataloguing of his works in terms of trajectories, and might intuit *Fearless Speech* as a homogenously ethical piece because of the trajectory of thought credited to Foucault in the 1980s. This ordering must be qualified. Perhaps it is scholastically pragmatic to organize propensities in Foucault's thinking by decade, as there are qualitative changes in theoretical content by time period, but this generates a risk for losing the potentialities of a work, in terms of *how* it can be utilized in various spheres. Pigeonholing a project as stringently historical, scientific or ethical defeats Michel Foucault as a *strategic* philosopher and hijacks the indefatigable elasticity and present-day pertinence that result from his continual adjustment of intellectual focus. It also restricts the ways in which his philosophical endeavors can be encountered, both conceptually and discursively. That his books greet us as philosophy, psychology, history, criminology, etc., speaks to his weight as a thinker. *Fearless Speech* represents this intellectual juxtaposition as it bridges multiple Foucauldian phases thematically, at once historical and ethical.

*Fearless Speech* is the transliteration produced from tape recordings of a series of six lectures that Michel Foucault gave at the University of California at Berkeley in the Fall of 1983 as part of his seminar, "Discourse and Truth." Edited into a readable and concise document by Joseph Pearson, *Fearless Speech* captures *critical*, in several senses of the word, aspects of Foucault's late thought, and emphasizes the intellectual legacies that materialize in and via the corpus of his work. The textual topography of *Fearless Speech* is that of a colloquium, as it is a mostly verbatim copy of the talks, taken from the notes of a Foucault auditor, and mirrors the candid style of a Foucault interview. One remarkable feature of the book is the inclusion of actual responses to questions. The aesthetic element of the prose does not address the piece's philosophical consequence as much as it implies it, considering this a text

whose conceptual axis is *parrhesia*, translated customarily as “free speech,”<sup>1</sup> the central meaning of which is “frankness in speaking the truth.”<sup>2</sup>

The book is divided into four main sections, unfortunately without an index for reference purposes, each section with subdirectories that treat a comprehensive thesis regarding *parrhesia* in philosophic-literary contexts, with excerpts in particular from the tragedies of Euripides that underscore the rendezvous of Foucault’s thinking with classical philosophy toward the end of his life. In the introductory portion, Foucault systematically addresses dimensions of the definition of *parrhesia*, with the objective “to analyze how the truth-teller’s role was variously problematized in Greek philosophy” and how “this same Greek philosophy has also raised the question of truth from the point of view of truth-telling as an activity.”<sup>3</sup> Such problematization is the unifying thread of the work. The concern with problematization, in general, alerts the reader as to which period in his life this work is an addendum to, the final two decades of his prolific career. Foucault navigates the concept of *parrhesia* by means of this problematic, detailing how it is recognized by its characteristics in the relationship one has both to oneself and to others. The qualities of *parrhesia* are filtered through the notions of *frankness*, *truth*, *danger*, *criticism*, and *duty* as means of analyzing how the word “evolved” and influenced different dimensions of Greek society and culture. First, Foucault relates *parrhesia* to the *parrhesiastes*, the “truth-teller,” directly to *what* he/she says, that he/she is “both the subject of the enunciation and the subject of the enunciandum,” that he/she is “the subject of the opinion to which he refers.”<sup>4</sup> In addition to *parrhesia* as such, this is a crucial element to contemplate for those concerned with topics akin to critical discourse analysis, in regards to the bearing of what is said in given contexts. Second, Foucault draws a comparison between “positive” and “pejorative” *parrhesia*, the pejorative echoing a type of logorrhea, e.g. flattery and coercion, and, as Foucault cites, the sort poisonous to democracy in Plato, whereas the positive entails a “coincidence between belief and truth,”<sup>5</sup> a concord of sincere opinion, and the knowledge that this opinion is *true*. Drawing distinctions in this mode somewhat recalls the parallel of the positive/negative asceticism with respect to Foucault/Weber, mentioned in the interview *The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom*, and the positive/negative formulation of the *ethos* in *What Is Enlightenment?* It is not improbable to envisage *positive parrhesia*, a concordance of *logos* and *bios*, as an exercise of the self enacted on the self. Third, *parrhesia* is identified as a risk, since “it demands the courage to speak

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1 Michel Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, ed. Joseph Pearson (Los Angeles, CA.: Semiotext(e)/MIT Press, 2001), 11.

2 Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, 7.

3 Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, 169.

4 Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, 13.

5 Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, 14.

the truth in spite of some danger,"<sup>6</sup> which positions the philosopher as the unambiguous dispenser of truth to power. The degree to which Foucault imagined himself, and his philosophical tasks, as reflective of this facet of *parrhesia* can be gleaned from his self-characterizations that appear in a number of localities. Fourth, *parrhesia* is cited as a "form of criticism, either towards another or towards oneself, but always in a situation where the speaker or confessor is in a position of inferiority with respect to the interlocutor,"<sup>7</sup> conjuring up Foucault's studies on confessions, their shifting roles, and their adoption in religious and legal institutions, but returns here to the trajectory of the *techne tou biou*, the *art of life*, where one negotiates their being-in-the-world with *parrhesia* in regards to how they sanction and ethically form themselves in the shadow of their milieu. And fifth, Foucault binds *parrhesia* to duty, where "to criticize a friend or a sovereign is an act of *parrhesia* insofar as it is a duty to help a friend who does not recognize his own wrongdoing, or insofar as it is his duty towards the city to help the king to better himself as a sovereign."<sup>8</sup> The notion of duty as it disclosed here is intimate with the aspects of governance in interpersonal relationships – with *taking care* – with respect to others and oneself that Foucault emphasized in the majority of writings in his "golden years."

Four questions that illuminate the problematizing of *parrhesia* and allow a more distinct characterization than the aforementioned brief illustrations, are, in Foucault's words, "who is able to tell the truth, about what, with what consequences, and with what relation to power."<sup>9</sup> Aspects of these four questions were earlier articulated in *Power/Knowledge*.<sup>10</sup> However, the *truth* of *Fearless Speech*, that is, the prime rationale of the Berkeley seminar, was to establish "a genealogy of the critical attitude in Western philosophy."<sup>11</sup> This divergence from the perceived ethical route of Foucault's thought indicates a genealogist (perhaps elaborating the genealogy of truth that had its roots in *Madness and Civilization*<sup>12</sup>) operating in 1983 in tandem with an ethicist, evidence of the second designation emerging in the evaluation of *parrhesia* as it developed in *the care of the self*, "from the standpoint of its practices,"<sup>13</sup> which concludes the transcript. Since this is the case, *Fearless Speech* can be situated, that is, read through – *against* – later essays such as

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6 Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, 16.

7 Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, 17-18.

8 Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, 19.

9 Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, 170.

10 Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980).

11 Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, 170-171.

12 Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1988).

13 Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, 107.

*What Is Enlightenment?* and *Technologies of the Self*, as well as in such interviews as *On The Genealogy of Ethics*, all in *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*<sup>14</sup>, volume 1, and perhaps also *The History of Sexuality*, volumes 2 and 3, *The Use of Pleasure*<sup>15</sup> and *The Care of The Self*<sup>16</sup>, respectively, volume 2 being where the telos of Foucault's ethics, *freedom*, is central, and the *free speaker* is seen as the *fearless speaker*, speaking from moral obligation and not from fear of ridicule, torture, or death, where the chance for silence is present. Volume three is his final work, treating the ways in which sexuality is encountered in the West, substituting the concept of truth for sex.

What is unmistakable about *Fearless Speech* is the searching description Foucault provides his audience of problematization and its relation to his philosophical enterprise. Foucault states that his desire is to demarcate "the history of ideas" and "the history of thought." In this manuscript, Foucault, the tenacious historian of ideas, probes and clarifies how "practices, habits, and behavior become a problem," while Foucault, the historian of thought, the problematizer, the philosopher under the profound influence of Nietzsche and Heidegger, asks how people "become anxious about this or that—for example, about madness, about crime, about sex, about themselves, or about truth."<sup>17</sup> This is inadequate as a blanket summarization of his entire project, and to try to tender such a synopsis in a brief review would be futile. It is rather a reminder that his interdisciplinary impact and his inimitable role in philosophy challenge us to ask provocative questions about topics taken for granted, questions that drive our anxieties.

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14 Michel Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth, Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954-1984, Volume I*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: The New Press, 1997).

15 Michel Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure: The History of Sexuality Volume 2* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990).

16 Michel Foucault, *The Care of the Self: The History of Sexuality Volume 3* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988).

17 Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, 74.