

Michel Foucault on Problematization, Parrhesia and Critique

Giovanni Maria Mascaretti

Introduction

Michel Foucault's later works manifest two remarkable innovations, represented respectively by the introduction of the concept of problematization to describe his critical project and by his reflections on the notion of *parrhesia* as means through which one can relate oneself truthfully to the social reality and to others. While recent years have witnessed a profusion of writings dedicated to both these ideas taken separately, the aim of the present article is to provide a clarifying account of how Foucault conceives of the relationship between them. In order to accomplish such a task the article will be divided into four sections. In section 1 I shall argue that the notion of problematization names the two sides of Foucault's critical project, indicating at the same time the regimes of veridiction examined in his archaeo-genealogical investigations and the problematizing activity of critical thought itself. Section 2 will show that Foucault's notion of *parrhesia* is the condition of possibility for articulating the passage from one side of critique to the other. Indeed, I shall argue that the ethical differentiation involved in *parrhesia* as the courage of truth enables the problematization of one's mode of subjec(tiva)tion, thus providing a transformative force of resistance against the existing power/knowledge apparatuses. In section 3, then, I shall claim that this act of ethical and political resistance finds its seminal formulation in Socrates' *parrhesiastic* imperative of taking care of oneself. Finally section 4 will conclude by showing Foucault's attempt to realize such an imperative in his own philosophical practice as critical ethos.

Double-sided Critique: Foucault's Notion of Problematization

In the final years of his life, Foucault employs the term "problematization" to designate the kind of critical inquiry he developed in his pre-

vious works under the analytic and diagnostic procedures of archaeology and genealogy:

The notion common to all the work I have done since *Historie de la folie* is that of problematization, though it must be said that I never isolated this notion sufficiently. But one always finds what is essential after the event; the most general things are those that appear last. [...] In *Historie de la folie* the question was how and why, at a given moment, madness was problematized through a certain institutional practice and a certain apparatus of knowledge. Similarly, in *Surveiller et Punir*, I was trying to analyse the changes in the problematization of the relations between crime and punishment through penal practices and penitentiary institutions in the late eighteen and early nineteenth centuries¹.

This is not the only retrospective reconstruction of his whole theoretical itinerary Foucault offers in his later writings: there are plenty of them and they are not always compatible with one another. Nevertheless, I shall maintain that taking this passage seriously is essential in order to correctly understand the nature and the aim of Foucault's critical project. As a matter of fact, it immediately clarifies that his critical history of thought is not a history of ideas, behaviours or representations, but rather a history of the modes and reasons according to which – at a specific time and under particular conditions – «human beings “problematize” what they are, what they do, and the world in which they live»: «I am trying to analyse the way institutions, practices, habits and behaviour become a problem [...] The history of thought is the analysis of the way an unproblematic field of experience, or a set of practices, which were accepted without question [...] becomes a problem [...]»³. For Foucault, then, problematization defines the very critical activity of thought itself: «thought [...] is what allows one to step back from this way of acting and reacting, to present it to oneself as an object of thought and to question it as to its meaning, its conditions and its goals. Thought is freedom in relation to what one does, the motion by which

¹ M. Foucault, *The Concern for Truth*, in *Politics, Philosophy, and Culture. Interviews and Other Writings 1977-1984*, trans. A. Sheridan et alii, Routledge, London and New York 1988, pp. 255-267, p. 257.

² M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 2. The Use of Pleasure*, trans. R. Hurley, Vintage Books, New York 1985, p. 10.

³ M. Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, ed. J. Pearson, Semiotext(e), Los Angeles 2001, p. 74.

one detaches oneself from it, establishes it as an object and reflects on it as a problem»⁴.

In this sense, contrary to what several commentators have suggested⁵, my claim is that problematization does not represent a third methodological tool alongside those of archaeology and genealogy, but rather that it should be regarded as a methodological strategy informing both of them, which finds its fully-fledged elaboration only in Foucault's later works. What I tried to do from the beginning was to analyze the process of "problematization" – which means: «how and why certain things (behaviour, phenomena, processes) became a *problem*»⁶.

As Koopman has recently clarified⁷, this means that archaeology and genealogy come to be inserted into a wider critical framework of inquiry hinged on the notion of problematization, whereby – unlike what various commentators have misleadingly claimed⁸ – these two «axes of analysis are complementary rather than contradictory»⁹. On the one hand, within such a framework archaeology reconfigures itself as the static side of problematizations that makes «it possible to examine the forms [of problematizations] themselves», i.e. the historical-a priori set of rules according to which «the totality of discursive or non-discursive practices [...] introduce something into the game of the true and the false and constitute it as an object for thought (whether in the form of moral reflection, scientific knowledge, political analysis, etc.)»¹⁰. Its descriptive aim, therefore, is to interrogate the conditions of possibility of problematic historical formations, though without any concern for how they actually came into existence. On the other hand, genealogy

⁴ M. Foucault, *Problematics*, in *Foucault Live. Collected Interviews, 1961-1984*, ed. S. Lotringer, Semiotext(e), New York 1996, pp. 416-422, p. 421.

⁵ See for instance B. Han[-Pile], *Foucault's Critical Project*, trans. E. Pile, Stanford University Press, Stanford (CA) 2002, p. 1 and T. May, *The Philosophy of Foucault*, Acumen, Chesham 2006, p. 107.

⁶ M. Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, p. 171.

⁷ C. Koopman, *Genealogy as Critique*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 2013, especially p. 45.

⁸ See most notoriously J. Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. F. Lawrence, MIT Press, Cambridge (MA) 1987 and more recently E. Paras, *Foucault 2.0. Beyond Power and Knowledge*, Other Press, New York 2006.

⁹ A.I. Davidson, *Archaeology, Genealogy, Ethics*, in D. Hoy (ed.), *Foucault. A Critical Reader*, Blackwell, Malden 1991, pp. 221-233, p. 227.

¹⁰ M. Foucault, *The Concern for Truth*, p. 257.

compensates for this lack by investigating the historical development of problematizations «out of the practices and modifications undergone by the latter»¹¹, namely in the context of a structural enmeshing of relations of power and systems of truth. Indeed, genealogy tracks the contingent *Entstehung* (provenance) and *Herkunft* (emergence) of problematizations within what Foucault himself calls “regime of truth”, i.e. within the general political-economic matrix regulating the circular relation of mutual reinforcement between modalities of power and types of knowledge¹². Hence, in Davidson’s brief formulation, for Foucault «genealogy does not so much displace archaeology as widen the kind of analysis to be pursued»¹³. By making visible complex networks of coproduced problems and solutions, then, archaeology and genealogy converge in the attempt to show their contingent, fragmented and heterogeneous development, thus disclosing the different modes in which subjectivity has been socially and culturally constituted in the course of history up to the modern concept of the self.

As a result, from the archaeo-genealogical perspective problematizations must be firstly understood as the proper objects of the history of thought. Foucault’s critical interrogation engages certain historical practices, rules of action or styles of self-government only insofar as they have posed an issue or raised a question, while trying to provide potential answers to the problems generated by the ineffectiveness of previous practices. In this respect, far from being «the creation by discourse of an object that doesn’t exist»¹⁴, problematization indicates simultaneously the conditions of possibility of a specific historical configuration, the intricate set of discursive and extra-discursive practices at the basis of its production (what Foucault calls the “apparatus”), and the manner in which human beings’ subjectivity is objectively, discursively and governmentally engaged with such a process and its products (technologies of power/“techniques of the self”): «This development of a given into a question, this transformation of a group of obstacles and difficulties

¹¹ M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 2*, p. 12.

¹² See M. Foucault, *History of Sexuality, Volume 1. An Introduction (The Will to Know)*, trans. R. Hurley, Pantheon Books, New York 1978, p. 98 and M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison*, trans. A. Sheridan, Vintage Books, New York 1997, p. 29.

¹³ A.I. Davidson, *Archaeology, Genealogy, Ethics*, p. 227.

¹⁴ M. Foucault, *The Concern for Truth*, p. 257.

into problems to which the diverse solutions will attempt to produce a response, this is what constitutes the point of problematization and the specific work of thought»¹⁵.

However, this dimension of problematization as object of inquiry names just one side of Foucault's critical project: indeed, while it is concerned with the analysis of «the problematizations through which being offers itself to be, necessarily, thought»¹⁶, it further problematizes the seemingly necessary character of the practices that have been produced on their basis, whereby problematization itself assumes the verbal meaning of an act of critical interrogation: «The role of an intellectual [...] is, through the analyses that he carries out, in his own field, to question [...] what is postulated as self-evident, to disturb people's mental habits, [...] to dissipate what is familiar and accepted, to reexamine rules and institutions and on the basis of this *reproblematization* [...] to participate in the formation of a political will [...]»¹⁷.

As an activity of inquiry, problematization brings to light the problems that have triggered the development of particular practices, while simultaneously interrogating the way such problematics persistently condition our way of constituting and representing ourselves. This means that the objective of Foucault's archaeo-genealogical investigations is not only to describe historical problematizations, but also to unmask and challenge them by questioning the inevitability and rational necessity of the practices, institutions, techniques and functions that have been construed as their responses. To put it differently, by unfreezing the problematizations frozen in sedimented, ossified practices and technologies Foucault strips the latter of their familiarity and naturalness, thus opening the theoretical and effective space for experimentally imagining new possibilities of relating to ourselves and to others.

In sum, problematization denotes the two sides in which Foucault's critical project is articulated: on the one hand, posing itself at the intersection of different practical vectors, it represents a contingent and anonymous regime of veridiction that determines the subject's forms of experience (problematization as object of critical inquiry). On the

¹⁵ M. Foucault, *Polemics, Politics, Problemizations. An Interview*, in M. Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*, ed. P. Rabinow, Pantheon Books, New York 1984, pp. 381-390, p. 389, text amended.

¹⁶ M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 2, p. 10.

¹⁷ M. Foucault, *The Concern for Truth*, p. 265, emphasis added.

other hand, it configures itself as a kind of reflexivity implying a certain relation to oneself, whereby the subject is prompted to question his adherence to this very same subject(iviz)ing apparatus through the test [*mise à l'épreuve*] of the alternative possibilities of self-constitution freed by the critical activity of thought itself (problematization as a verbal act of inquiry).

Parrhesia as Ethical Distance

Now, I shall contend that what is at stake for Foucault is not so much the elaboration of a coherent account of these two sides as the explanation of the passage from one to the other. While the existing secondary literature leaves this issue largely unexplored, here I shall show that such an exposition is provided by Foucault's later reflections on the notion of *parrhesia*¹⁸, which «apparaît, rétrospectivement, comme la formule même des problématisations foucaaldiennes»¹⁹. More specifically, I shall argue that, as an act of critical inquiry, problematisation finds its condition of possibility in what Foucault himself identifies as the *parrhesiastic* relationship between subject and truth. Indeed, as a form of *askesis* demanding self-governance, orientation to truth and stylization of one's existence, I shall maintain that for Foucault *parrhesia* is a practice of care for oneself as an ethopoietic work of self-transformation, which can be effectively deployed in resistance to the dangerous intensification of power/knowledge relations.

¹⁸ This is illustrated by the fact that the most-up-to date analysis of Foucault's methodology of problematization, namely Koopman's *Genealogy as Critique*, fails to offer almost any reference to the notion of *parrhesia*. A noteworthy exception to this trend is represented by E. McGushin, *Foucault's Askesis. An Introduction to Philosophical Life*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 2007. However, the latter's unitarian reconstruction of Foucault's earlier works in light of his later ones tends to underestimate the theoretical shift determined by Foucault's reflections on the notion of *parrhesia*, while his analysis of Foucault's notion of problematization often misses the tension between the two aforementioned sides of Foucault's critical project (see e.g. pp. 15-18 and p. 287).

¹⁹ F. Rambeau, *La critique, un dire-vrai*, in «Cahiers Philosophiques», n° 130 (2012), pp. 29-38, p. 30. Although he correctly points out the centrality of *parrhesia* for the articulation of the passage from the first side of Foucault's critical project to the second one, Rambeau surprisingly fails to accurately clarify how this very same passage actually takes shape.

At the beginning of *The Courage of Truth*, Foucault offers a diverse retrospective description of his whole itinerary that might help to elucidate how the aforementioned passage is articulated. Indeed, he holds that the relationship between subject and truth at the centre of his inquiries can be explored along two distinct but complementary axes, namely those of epistemological structures [*structures épistémologiques*] and of alethurgic forms [*formes aléthurgiques*]. The former refers to «the specific structures of those discourses which claim to be and are accepted as true discourse»²⁰, whose anonymous network of functions and rules delineates the regime the individual has to abide by if he is to acquire a subject position. But since discursive formations are always intermeshed with power relations, it seems legitimate to widen Foucault's characterization of these structures. As a result, they end up representing so many apparatuses of power/knowledge in which truth distributes the various functions that constitute the subject as such²¹. However, contrary to what his critics have suggested, for Foucault such deployments are less inalterable and stable than it might appear at first glance. Indeed, as it is already clear in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* and in his works of the 1970s, every form of subjec(tiva)tion entails the creation of a series of tensions, resistances and instabilities which might eventually question the cohesion of these very same apparatuses. However, it is only with Foucault's investigations of the ethical problematization of the subject in the ancient Greek-Roman world that this resistive dimension is re-defined in terms of a new relationship between subject and truth²². As Foucault already explains during the first lectures of his 1982 course

²⁰ M. Foucault, *The Courage of Truth (The Government of Self and Others II)*. *Lectures at the Collège de France. 1983-1984*, eds. A.I. Davidson, F. Gros, F. Ewald and A. Fontana, trans. G. Burchell, Palgrave Mcmillan, Basingstoke 2011, p. 2.

²¹ For an analogous remark see P. Cesaroni, *Verità e vita. La filosofia in Il coraggio della verità*, in P. Cesaroni and S. Chignola (eds.), *La forza del vero. Un seminario sui Corsi di Michel Foucault al Collège de France (1981-1984)*, Ombre Corte, Verona 2013, pp. 132-160, p. 139.

²² Although their analysis exceeds the scope of this article, precedents suggesting developments in this direction can be traced in Foucault's discussion of the figures of the hysteric and of the possessed in his lectures courses of 1973-1974 (M. Foucault, *Psychiatric Power. Lectures at the Collège de France. 1973-1974*, eds. A.I. Davidson, J. Lagrange, F. Ewald and A. Fontana, trans. G. Burchell, Palgrave Mcmillan, Basingstoke 2006) and 1974-1975 (M. Foucault, *Abnormal. Lectures at the Collège de France. 1974-1975*, eds. A.I. Davidson, V. Marchetti, A. Salomoni, F. Ewald and A. Fontana, trans. G. Burchell, Verso, London and New York 2003).

entitled *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, only the study of the alethurgic forms circulating in antiquity can bring to light a different conception of truth, one that – far from being the mere outcome of the ruling power – enables the subject to detach himself from the prevailing regimes of veridiction, presenting «himself to himself and to others as someone who tells the truth»²³. As a matter of fact, for Foucault what the analysis of alethurgic forms reveals are «the conditions and forms of the type of act by which the subject manifests himself when speaking the truth», that is to say «thinks of himself and is recognized by others as speaking the truth»²⁴. Now, in order to clarify what Foucault means by this manifestation, I shall turn to his account of the notion of *parrhesia*, the alethurgic figure in which such a manifestation of the subject to himself comes more evidently to the fore²⁵.

Generally speaking, for a discursive act to be regarded as *parrhesiastic* Foucault thinks it has to satisfy four conditions²⁶: 1) it has to tell the truth without any concealment or reserve. Indeed, *parrhesia* indicates not only the attitude of speaking honestly and frankly both to oneself and others, but also the coincidence of what one says with the truth. *Parrhesia*, he writes, might be regarded as the demand «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 true»²⁷. 2) The discursive act must show the commitment of speaker to the truth spoken, which therefore represents her own conviction. In *parrhesia* the speaker manifests himself or reveals his self, as well as his stance towards the world with respect to a determined problematic. 3) Distinguishing itself both from the rational, demonstrative structure of discourse and from the captivating devices of sophistry, it must represent that peculiar form of truth-telling in which one engages at his own risk. As a matter of fact,

²³ M. Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, p. 3.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, pp. 2-3.

²⁵ Alongside *parrhesia*, Foucault identifies three other alethurgic forms, i.e. prophecy, wisdom and know-how expertise [*tekhnē*]. The space at my disposal here does not allow me to delve into their respective characteristics and mutual relations, for which see *ibidem*, especially pp. 15-26.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 10-13.

²⁷ M. Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Self. Lectures at the Collège de France. 1981-1982*, eds. A.I. Davidson, F. Gros, F. Ewald and A. Fontana, trans. G. Burchell, Palgrave Mcmillan, Basingstoke 2005, p. 366.

parrhesia configures itself as a perilous act, whereby the listener's way of living is put into question by the *parrhesiastes'* truth claim, while the latter courageously faces the possibility of being punished for what he has said. Hence for Foucault courage is a constitutive feature of *parrhesia*, its classical example being that of the confrontation between Plato and Dionysius, namely that of «a man [who] stands up to a tyrant and tells him the truth»²⁸ of his injustice. 4) the risk involved in *parrhesia* must be reduced by what Foucault calls the «*parrhesiastic games*», i.e. a tacit pact between the speaker and listener according to which the latter shows his willingness to listen to the likely unwelcome words of the *parrhesiastes*. In this sense, for Foucault a *parrhesiastic* act is a public, courageous act of veridiction, which demands a binding commitment of the speaker to the utterance of his personal conviction and, at the same time, entails the danger of a violent, negative reaction of the addressee up against such a potentially undesirable and offensive enunciation: «So, in two words, *parrhesia* is the courage of the truth in the person who speaks and who, regardless of everything, takes the risk of telling the whole truth that he thinks, but it is also the interlocutor's courage in agreeing to accept the hurtful truth that he hears»²⁹.

Contrary to the regulated and predetermined effect of a performative utterance, then, in *parrhesia* «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»³⁰. Far from being confined within the discursive constraints of the existing power/knowledge regime, for Foucault *parrhesia* is «an irruptive event»³¹ endowed with a highly subversive force, whose original political function «is precisely to be able to limit the power of the masters»³². As a result, among the

²⁸ M. Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others. Lectures at the Collège de France. 1982-1983*, eds. A.I. Davidson, F. Gros, F. Ewald and A. Fontana, trans. G. Burchell, Palgrave Mcmillan, Basingstoke 2010, p. 50.

²⁹ M. Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, p. 13. Although he strangely fails to provide any examination of the last abovementioned requirement, on *parrhesia's* conditions see F. Gros, *La parrhêsia chez Foucault (1982-1984)*, in F. Gros (ed.), *Foucault. Le courage de la vérité*, PUF, Paris 2002, pp. 155-166.

³⁰ M. Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others*, p. 62.

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 63.

³² *Ibidem*, p. 161.

alethurgic forms circulating in ancient societies, Foucault conceives of *parrhesia* as a risky, eventual practice that introduces alternative forms of truth within the present regime of political power, thus disrupting the consensual and domineering logic of its *dispositif* of veridiction. As in the case of Foucault's own historico-critical method of fictioning³³, then, the *parrhesiastes*' oppositional and partisan discourse confronts the authority of the all-powerful subject with a truth that – by unsettling the present reality – might bring about transformative effects in the future. In other terms, by countering the hegemonic, objectifying regimes of power-produced truth, the *parrhesiastes* calls on a sagittal³⁴ reading of truth, according to which the latter «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»³⁵.

This means that, beyond being oriented towards others, for Foucault *parrhesia* is first and foremost a reflexive practice, one in which the concern for truth entails a radical modification of the relationship the self has to itself:

When you accept the *parrhesiastic* game in which your own life is exposed, you are taking up a specific relationship to yourself: you risk death to tell the truth instead of reposing in the security of a life where the truth goes unspoken. Of course, the threat of death comes from the Other, and thereby requires a relationship to the Other. But the *parrhesiastes* primarily chooses a specific relationship to himself: he prefers himself as a truth-teller rather than as a living being who is false to himself³⁶.

³³ See Z. Simpson, *The Truths We Tell Ourselves. Foucault on Parrhesia*, in «Foucault Studies», no. 13 (2012), pp. 99-115. For an excellent reconstruction of the Weberian origins of Foucault's *histoire fiction* see S. Chignola, «Phantasiebildern"/ «histoire fiction». Weber, Foucault, in P. Cesaroni and S. Chignola (eds.), *La forza del vero*, pp. 30-70.

³⁴ See S. Chignola, *L'impossibile del sovrano. Governamentalità e liberalismo in Michel Foucault*, in S. Chignola (ed.), *Governare la vita. Un seminario sui Corsi di Michel Foucault al Collège de France (1977-1979)*, Ombre Corte, Verona 2006, pp. 37-70 and P. Cesaroni, *Verità e vita*, p. 142.

³⁵ M. Foucault, *Interview with Michel Foucault*, in M. Foucault, *Power. Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, Vol. 3*, ed. P. Rabinow, New Press, New York 2000, pp. 239-297, p. 244.

³⁶ M. Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, p. 17.

As the «meeting point of the obligation to speak the truth, procedures and techniques of governmentality, and the constitution of the relationship to self»³⁷, *parrhesia* reveals the difficult, hazardous process of self-transformation one has to go through in order to tell the truth in the game of power relations. In this sense, *parrhesia* has an immediate bearing on the subject's own ethical and political self-constitution. More precisely, in his constant relation to the other this bold act of veridiction is characterized both by a moment of conversion and a movement of detachment: on the one hand, it brings the subject's mode of living into focus, disclosing the intricate web of power relations in which he is enmeshed. On the other hand, thanks to this process of visualization, it enables the subject to withdraw from himself in order to call his mode of subjec(tiva)tion into question, manifesting the latter's problematic nature and consequently its amenability to change. *Parrhesia's* alethurgic dimension, therefore, allows the subject to split the core of his own self, so that he can resist what has been made of him by the predominant structures of veridiction and by the existing institutions in charge of truth. Indeed, by shattering the unity of the political scene through the introduction of an antagonistic incongruence, *parrhesia* is the light perspective necessary «to render visible what precisely is visible»³⁸, to create the «ethical distance»³⁹ that enables the subject's problematization of his unquestioned modes of subjectivation as well as their subsequent, inventive modification:

For as he is, the subject is not capable of truth. [...] It follows that from this point of view there can be no truth without a conversion or a transformation of the subject ... [and] once access to the truth has really been opened up, it produces [transfigurative] effects ... effects of the truth on the subject [...] In short, I think we can say that in and of itself an act of knowledge could never give access to truth unless it was [...] doubled, and completed by a certain transformation of the subject; not of the individual, but of the subject himself in his being as subject⁴⁰.

³⁷ M. Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others*, p. 45.

³⁸ M. Foucault, *La philosophie analytique de la politique*, in *Dits et Écrits II, 1976-1988*, ed. D. Defert and F. Ewald, Gallimard, Paris 2001, pp. 534-551, p. 540 (my translation).

³⁹ F. Gros, *Course Context*, in M. Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Self*, p. 540.

⁴⁰ M. Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Self*, p. 15.

To put it differently, in his later works of the 1980s Foucault conceives of the lines of rupture that mark the prevailing power/knowledge regimes in terms of a *parrhesiastic* conception of truth, which figures as the condition of possibility for exposing the ethical margin between the social order of identifications and the capacity of the subject to problematize the social and discursive functions he has individually assumed, i.e. to courageously transform the social practices, resources and “styles” of his own culture in new and unexpected ways⁴¹.

Far from remaining at the mere level of words, then, *parrhesia* represents the practice through which the subject can modify himself in virtue of his access to the truth, which means that *parrhesia* is fundamentally a form of life, a mode of behaviour, that discloses «who you are [...] your present relation to the truth»⁴², what Foucault himself calls “*askesis*”. Indeed, the latter defines «a set of [spiritual] practices by which one can acquire, assimilate, and transform truth into a permanent principle of action. *Aletheia* becomes *ethos*»⁴³. For Foucault, the *parrhesiastes* is not merely the one who speaks the truth within a definite discourse, but also the one who embodies that truth in his style of existence. As a way of «binding oneself to oneself in the statement of the truth»⁴⁴, *parrhesia* brings the subject’s ethos into play, such that the *parrhesiastes*’ self-proclaimed truth demands a harmonious connection between his words [*logoi*] and his actions [*erga*]:

⁴¹ Actually, as a verbal act of inquiry, problematization seems to fulfil each of the four conditions defining the *parrhesiastic* utterance: 1) problematization tells the truth about a familiar and silent set of practices disclosing it as the response to a particular historically situated problematic; 2) problematization expresses the conviction of the speaker in such a way that the fact that it is his personal opinion is made clear; 3) problematization entails a certain risk (whose maximal form is the risk of one’s own life) concerning the relationship between the listener and the person who speaks, as the latter says something «different from what the majority believes» (Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, p. 15), thus potentially arousing the negative reaction of his addressee; 4) problematization can occur only where the speaker is effectively allowed to direct his speech to his listener, i.e. where the listener himself shows his willingness to hear the truth told.

⁴² M. Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, p. 103.

⁴³ M. Foucault, *Technologies of the Self*, in *Ethics. Subjectivity and Truth. The Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984, Vol. 1*, ed. P. Rabinow, The New York Press, New York 1997, pp. 223-251, p. 239.

⁴⁴ M. Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others*, p. 66.

Parrhesia is free speech, released from the rules, freed from rhetorical procedures, in that it must, in one respect of course, adapt itself to the situation, to the occasion and to the particularities of the auditor. But above all and fundamentally, on the side of the person who utters it, it is speech that is equivalent to commitment, to a bond, and which establishes a certain pact between the subject of enunciation and the subject of conduct. 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 expresses⁴⁵.

Hence, the *parrhesiastic* game ends up designating an experience in which the *parrhesiastes*’ frank words are tightly connected to a public engagement ensuring the coincidence of his faith in the truth with an open, risky life [*bios*] – a mode of living that is *exemplar* in its irreducibility to the social order of identitarian domination⁴⁶. As a matter of fact, the *parrhesiastes* is someone who excels at his modal act of veridiction before «*le corps des citoyens*», thus acquiring a rare exemplarity whose truth can always be verified by submitting his words to the test of his life:

Parrhesia is a kind of verbal activity where the speaker has a specific relation to truth through frankness, a certain relationship to his own life through danger, a certain type of relation to himself or other people through criticism (self-criticism or criticism of other people), and a specific relation to moral law through freedom and duty. More precisely, *parrhesia* is a verbal activity in which a speaker expresses his personal relationship to truth, and risks his life because he recognizes truth-telling as a duty to improve or help other people (as well as himself). In *parrhesia* the speaker uses his freedom and chooses frankness instead of persuasion, truth instead of falsehood or silence, the risk of death instead of life and security, criticism instead of flattery, and moral duty instead of self-interest and moral apathy⁴⁷.

To summarise the foregoing, the notion of *parrhesia* appears to be crucial for Foucault’s understanding of those ancient practices and technologies that he himself summons under the label of “care of the self”. Since taking care of truth is the indispensable precondition for taking care of

⁴⁵ M. Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Self*, p. 406.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 407.

⁴⁷ M. Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, pp. 19-20.

oneself⁴⁸, *parrhesia* as a distinct modality of truth-telling comes to figure as an ethopoietic practice of self-fashioning aimed at the acquisition of the self-knowledge and self-mastery necessary for the proper government of oneself and others. In other terms, bringing to light the structural instability of governmental relations, *parrhesia* delineates a potential practice of ethical differentiation that is not only critical and insurgent but also creative, oriented, as it were, to fashioning new political subjectivities capable of the obligations of truth and freedom.

“Take Care of Yourself”’: Socrates’ Parrhesiastic Imperative

As I shall show in the present section, for Foucault such a conception of *parrhesia* finds its original and fundamental *exemplum* in the figure of Socrates, who in his view represents the founder of *parrhesia* as an ethical (and political) practice of self-care. Indeed, as is clearly witnessed by Plato’s *Apology*, before the crisis of political *parrhesia* in the context of 5th century B.C. Athenian democracy Socrates stands out as the one who initiates a new experience of the self by connecting the truthful discourse of *parrhesia* to the practice of caring for oneself with the purpose of desubjectifying ethical and political subjects, namely of questioning the way they have been constituted by the pressure of the “general opinion” as well as the flattery of rhetors and sophists to which democracy itself has fallen prey.

According to the broad historical reconstruction of Foucault’s 1983 course, *parrhesia* is first of all a political notion, which finds its original condition of possibility in the right of speech [*isegoria*] granted to every free citizen in front of the assembly on the basis of the egalitarian constitution of the Athenian democracy [*politeia*]. However, Foucault remarks that *politeia* and *isegoria* are necessary but not sufficient conditions for *parrhesia* to occur. Indeed, what enables someone to courageously commit his true speech in defence of his point of view on the common interest of the city is *dunasteia*, namely the force of ethical differentiation which allows a subject to act upon himself in order to exercise his ascendancy upon others. Far from undermining the city’s democracy, in Foucault’s view the fragile tension between these two heterogeneous regimes ini-

⁴⁸ M. Foucault, *The Concern for Truth*, p. 264.

tially guarantees its correct exercise, as testified by the emblematic figure of Pericles. Nonetheless, he shows us that the discrepancy between the egalitarian aspect of democracy and the necessity to choose among the citizens those who are able to employ *parrhesia* for the true benefit of the city lets the latter progressively emerge as a problematic issue. Indeed, the submersion of *parrhesia* under *isegoria* contributes to the crisis of political *parrhesia* and the concomitant demagogic relapse of democracy, eventually determining the very same crisis of the Athenian *polis* between the V and IV century B.C. In this context, political *parrhesia*'s ethical differentiation comes to be eroded by the deceitful game of opinions and interests, while democracy itself turns into a structure of non-differentiation that fosters individuals' self-neglect and attachment to the will to power through the pressure of the general opinion and the blandishments of rhetoric. The restoration of the capacity of ethical differentiation, then, presents itself to Foucault's eyes as the indispensable condition in order for truth to play a renewed role in the political sphere. However, since the latter is hopelessly closed off as an arena for truth-telling, *parrhesia*'s goal and target have to change: from a strictly political practice *parrhesia* has to become an ethical one: «a different type of veridiction, [...], which will be defined not in relation to the city (the *polis*) but to individuals' ways of doing things, being, and conducting themselves (*ethos*), and also to their formation as moral subjects»⁴⁹.

Now, for Foucault it is exactly in Socrates' philosophical activity that such a shift takes shape. As a matter of fact, the latter founds a mode of truth-telling which has as its problematizing aim no longer the well-being of the city but rather the care of the self, i.e. the ethical dimension of the subject's self-government. Nonetheless, for Foucault this does not mean that Socratic *parrhesia* is apolitical. Rather, as a form of ethical differentiation, the latter does pose itself in a relationship of exteriority with regards to politics but only to intervene as the mediation which enables truth-telling to deploy its effects within the political field: in short, politics understood as an ethics⁵⁰.

In this sense, the importance of Plato's *Apology* for Foucault's interpretation of the novelty introduced by Socratic *parrhesia* can hardly be

⁴⁹ M. Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, p. 33.

⁵⁰ M. Foucault, *Politics and Ethics. An Interview*, in *The Foucault Reader*, pp. 373-380, p. 375.

overestimated. From the beginning of the text, Socrates identifies in his accusers' rhetorical use of language the very source of the factor that has triggered the crisis of democracy in the city of Athens, i.e. self-forgetting or self-neglect⁵¹. *Ex contrario*, he conceives of *parrhesia* as a form of frank and unembellished speech that recollects who one truly is through the courageous provocation to be concerned about the care of oneself. Indeed, Socrates perceives the political scene of Athens as a structure of non-differentiation, which is to say as an obstacle to take up a deliberate and free relationship of ethical self-government. Hence, following the voice of his daemon, Socrates refuses to engage in the established *parrhesiastic* game and to act as a political *parrhesiastes*⁵². In other terms, the daemon's warning prevents Socrates from engaging in the political field in order to preserve him for the task he has received from the god of Delphi, namely to care for himself and to employ a completely different order of discourse to care for the care of the others. Such a task takes the form of a continuous confrontation and examination directed at establishing whether the words of the oracle – according to which nobody is wiser than Socrates – are actually true. By inquiring into the just way of living, this confrontation eventually leads him to reveal the ignorance and self-forgetfulness of his fellow citizens, which in turn allows him to acquire the truth about himself: paradoxically, he becomes aware of being wiser than any other man because he knows that he knows nothing. Thus, Socrates can finally grasp the meaning of the oracle's apparently unsolvable riddle: the god has assigned him the mission of watching over others and taking care of them, of testing everyone in such a way that each one recognizes his own self-neglect and is encouraged «to take care, not of his wealth, reputation, honours, and offices, but of himself, that is to say, of his reason, of truth, and of his soul (*phronesis, aletheia, psyche*)»⁵³. In this way, as the means through which one can shape himself as a moral subject before taking on public appointments, for Foucault Socrates' philosophical *parrhesia* is the condition of possibility of an effective and just political

⁵¹ M. Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, p. 75.

⁵² Even in the two recollected occasions where he behaves as such, Socrates courageously puts his life at risk only out of care for himself, in the refusal to commit an inauthentic and unjust political act by conforming to the will of the majority. See *ibidem*, pp. 78-80.

⁵³ *Ibidem*, p. 86, translation amended.

life, since it loosens one from the distorted and pernicious self-interpretation constantly backed up by the hegemonic political practice. Indeed, by problematizing the negligent and deficient experience the private individual has of himself as an ethical and political agent, it does not aim to convey a determined set of truthful doctrines meant to be fundamental to conducting one's own life, but rather – at risk and danger of himself – it strives to detach the subject from the self-forgetting forms of control and domination he has incorporated through the levelling pressure of the general opinion and the diverted discourse of rhetoric, thus encouraging a profound transformation of one's own style of existence: «On the god's command, he [Socrates] will reply by exhorting those he meets not to care about honour, wealth, or glory, but to care about themselves. [...] This is philosophical *parrhesia*, and this test of oneself and others is useful to the city, since by being the *parrhesiastes* within the city in this way [Socrates] prevents the city from sleeping»⁵⁴.

Within the horizon defined by the problematization of democratic *parrhesia*, therefore, Socratic *parrhesia* serves as a critical practice of resistance to the domination harboured in the self-neglecting *dispositif* of power and knowledge put into existence as an attempt to give a response to this very same problematization. Against the art of governing constituted by the absorbing and controlling technology of rhetoric, Socrates' philosophical *parrhesia* puts the domineering political practice into question in order to disconnect the problem of political life from the dangerously rigidified solution it has received, thus opening it up to a radically different reply, namely that of a courageous practice of differentiating working upon the self aimed at fashioning ethically and politically responsible subjects. As is even more clearly shown in the Platonic dialogue of *Laches*, this means that the subject is called to take care of himself, to give an account not of the divine being of his soul but rather of his own life [*bios*] in its relationship to the truth [*aletheia*], a constant account which finds its touchstone in the virtuous harmony between words [*logoi*] and actions [*erga*] that distinguishes Socrates as a moral guide to living for anyone willing to listen. This insistence on the centrality of one's aesthetics of existence reaches its acme in the last moments of Socrates' life as they are described in the great «cycle» of the *Apology*, the *Crito* and the *Phaedo*. Here, through his own death, Socrates ends up embodying the authentic scandal of truth,

⁵⁴ M. Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others*, pp. 326-327.

which is not connected to the transcendent purity of the world of Ideas – as the traditional reading of Platonism suggests – but rather to the exemplarity of his bold existence, whose *parrhesiastic* saying is unacceptable for the constituted order of the community⁵⁵.

To put it in a nutshell, by taking care of himself through his care for the care of the others, Socrates is the *parrhesiastes par excellence*, whose courageous assertion of truth breaks the non-differentiating structure of consensus and virtuously reconfigures the political sphere, so affirming his own ethical freedom.

Conclusion. Critique as a Philosophical Ethos

Foucault's interest in Socratic philosophical *parrhesia* is not motivated by purely archaeological reasons. Rather, in this last section, I shall briefly show that Foucault sees in Socrates' *parrhesiastic* imperative of taking care of oneself the seminal formulation of the critical function of his own philosophical enterprise⁵⁶.

Despite philosophical *parrhesia*'s long period of decline due to the colonization of the *parrhesiastic* engagement by the mechanisms of pastoral and disciplinary power, the Socratic practice of *parrhesiastic* philosophy re-emerges in the modern era in Kant's reflections on *Aufklärung* as a critical ethos aimed at demystifying the dangerous connections between power and truth⁵⁷. In this sense, Socratic *parrhesia* as an ethical differentiation endowed with a critical and transformative force seems to provide the seminal inspiration for that line of thought to which Foucault expli-

⁵⁵ See J. Revel, *Passeggiate, piccoli excursus e regimi di storicità*, in P. Cesaroni and S. Chignola (eds.), *La forza del vero*, pp. 161-179, p. 165.

⁵⁶ On this point, albeit for different reasons, see J. Franěk, *Philosophical Parrhesia as Aesthetics of Existence*, in «Continental Philosophy Review», vol. 39 (2006), pp. 113-134. Rambeau's bold claim about the cynic practice of *parrhesia* being the closest to Foucault's own philosophy (*La critique, un dire-vrai*, p. 36) seems to me unfounded. Indeed, while the cynic courage of truth belongs to the punctual and intense class of provocation, Foucault's courage of truth seems to be more akin to the Socratic idea of a stylistic harmony implying a laborious work of ethical differentiation. I shall leave the accurate analysis of this issue for another occasion.

⁵⁷ M. Foucault, *What is Critique?*, in *The Politics of Truth*, ed. S. Lotringer, Semiotext(e), Los Angeles 2007, pp. 41-81, p. 67 and p. 74.

citly aligns his own work⁵⁸, i.e. “a critical ontology of ourselves”. Indeed, in his late essay *What is Enlightenment?* Foucault defines the latter in the following way:

I shall thus characterize the philosophical ethos appropriate to the critical ontology of ourselves as a historico-practical test of the limits we may go beyond, and thus as work carried out by ourselves upon ourselves as free beings. [...] Yet if we are not to settle for the affirmation of the empty dream of freedom, it seems to me that this historico-critical attitude must also be an experimental one. I mean that this work done at the limits of ourselves must, on the one hand, open up a realm of historical inquiry and, on the other, put itself to the test of reality, of contemporary reality, both to grasp the points where change is possible and desirable, and to determine the precise form this change should take⁵⁹.

Accordingly, Foucault’s own critical history of thought should be best understood as a historical problematization of our present that is diagnostic and ethopoietic at the same time. The complementarity of these two dimensions of Foucault’s critique is confirmed by the double role of his later notion of problematization, which describes both the regimes of veridiction at the centre of his archaeo-genealogical inquiries and the critical activity of thought itself, where the latter indicates the capacity of the subject to relaunch the problem at the basis of certain practices in the attempt to experiment alternative solutions through the creation of new practices, relational modalities, types of values, and styles of existence. Progressively, Foucault comes to recognize that what is stake in the derivation of one side of critique from the other is an inversion of the very meaning of the concept of truth, whereby the latter is no longer the mere outgrowth of power relations but rather the courageous saying of the one who does not hesitate to subordinate his own survival to the risky, ethical challenge of subverting the closed cycle of subjection and subjectivation. For Foucault, this is what defines *parrhesia* as the public, free practice of truth-telling that enables the subject to resist the games of truth according to which he has been constituted, thus allowing him to engage in a problematizing practice of audacious self-transformation that reshapes the political sphere. Such a practice finds its original expres-

⁵⁸ Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others*, p. 21.

⁵⁹ M. Foucault, *What is Enlightenment?*, in *Ethics. Subjectivity and Truth*, pp. 303-319, p. 316, text amended.

sion in the figure of Socrates as *parrhesiastes*. Endorsing the task of taking care of himself through the constant care for the care of the others, Socrates enacts a laborious act of ethical differentiation upon himself that enables him to reconnect the courage of truth-telling to the political life of the city, resisting in this way the degeneration of the rhetorical competition and the power of the general opinion that mark the crisis of the Athenian democracy.

In conclusion, I think it is this Socratic task that Foucault wants to revive: the task of resisting the forms of individuation imposed on us by power-produced truths. The endeavour of courageously problematizing what we have become in order to invent ourselves otherwise. In sum, the task is to reintroduce the ethical force of truth at the heart of the present.

Giovanni Maria Mascaretti

University of Essex

gmmasc@essex.ac.uk



Michel Foucault on Problematization, Parrhesia and Critique

Focusing on his last courses at the Collège de France, the present paper aims at exploring the strategic role the notion of *parrhesia* plays in the elaboration of Foucault's critical project, according to which *parrhesia* is what enables the passage from the concept of problematization as an archaeo-genealogical target of inquiry to the idea of problematization as a verbal act of investigation. To this end, the article argues that *parrhesia* is the condition of possibility for the problematization of one's mode of subjectivation, whereby it comes to describe a transformative practice of resistance against the existing power regimes in charge of truth. After tracing the seminal formulation of such a form of resistance in the Socratic imperative of taking care of oneself, the paper then concludes by briefly pointing to the importance of Socrates' parrhesiastic philosophy for the development of Foucault's own critical ethos.

Keywords: *Parrhesia*, Problematization, Critique, Socrates, Resistance, Ethos, Care.

