FOUCAULT AND PARRHESIA: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PHILOSOPHY AND POLITICS[1]

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Abstract: In the final stage of his life, Foucault devoted himself to a project of a genealogy of critique. This genealogy of critique made him focus on the Greek notion of parrhēsia as a form speaking the truth. This paper aims at analyzing the notion of parrhesia as well as the various aspects of the parrhesiastic attitudes and functions. Tracing the tensions and connections in the act of parrhesia I try to emphasize the relationship between the will of truth that constitutes philosophy and the will of power that mainly represents politics by following the last courses held by Michel Foucault at the Collége de France.

Keywords: Foucault; parrhesia; philosophy; truth; politics.

Introduction

In the final years of his life, Michel Foucault dedicated two sets of lectures on the unwrapping of various meanings on the notion of parrhesia. The first lectures, named The Government of the self and others were held in 1982-1983. The second lectures, entitled The Courage of the Truth took place in 1983-1984. At the start of the first lectures Michel Foucault announces his *modus operandi* by admitting that his aim is to historically analyze the veridiction forms, the governmentality procedures, the pragmatics of the self and its forms[2]. By this, he focuses on a genealogy of the political discourse, that settles on two important aspects, that of the government of the Prince, and that of the government of the Prince's soul.[3] The first section of this paper is dedicated on identifying different forms of parrhesia, following the last two courses kept by Michel Foucault at the Collége de France in 1982-1983 and 1983-1984. The second section examines various aspects in which parrhesia intersects and even intertwines with the foucauldian term of power/knowledge. The last section consists in some final considerations about the forms of parrhesia and how they relate to philosophy and politics.

The three forms of parrhesia

Parrhesia is a Greek word which made Foucault focus on finding its roots, to establish its full etymology and to locate its surface of emergence in the Greek classical works.

Michel Foucault starts his inquiry on the notion of parrhesia by identifying the general and rather louse meaning, that can be define as free and truthful speech. One of the important

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[2] Michel Foucault, *The Government of the self: Lectures at the Collége de France 1982-1983*, Trans. by G. Burchell, Palgrave, Basingstoke, 2010, p. 5.
[3] Id., p. 6.

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texts that Foucault takes in consideration is Euripides' tragedy *Ion*. In this classical text of the ancient Greek culture, Foucault follows and discusses the term parrhesia by underlining the political requirements of the individual. According to the French philosopher, although there are many characters in the tragedy, only two are parrhesiastic figures. These are Ion, the son of the god Apollo and Kreusa, the Athenian princess. Ion, the main character, is a servant at the temple of Delphi, without any knowledge of who his parents are. This entire Greek tragic play is centered on the call for the truth to be revealed. The Delphic temple serves here as the focal point of Greece, where truth is asked and usually showed by Apollo, trough the oracle. Kreusa goes at the Delphic temple and asks Apollo about the fate of their son, but she does not receive an answer. As a result of the silence of Apollo, Kreusa, later, performs a parrhesiastic act. The parrhesiastic act of Kreusa is a two folded one: firstly as an imprecation, secondly more as a confession and self-accusation. Foucault identifies this two folded act of parrhesia played by Kreusa as the root of two discourses that will separate from each other in history:

"Discourse of imprecation and discourse of confession: these two forms of *parrhēsia* will split apart in future history, and, we see, as it were, their matrices here."[4]

Foucault classifies these two early forms of parrhesia as the judicial parrhesia, in the case of the discourse of imprecation and moral parrhesia in the case of the confessional discourse:

"This is not [designated as] parrhēsia in the text, but will be later, is what could be called judicial *parrhēsia*. And finally, we see a third practice in the text, a third way practice in the text, a third way of telling the truth, which is not [designated as] *parrhēsia* in the text, but will be later. We can call this moral *parrhēsia*, which consists in confessing the offence the offence which weights on one's conscience, and confessing it to someone who can guide us and help us out of our despair or out of feeling at fault. This is moral *parrhēsia*."[5]

The situation of Ion, in regards with performing the parrhesiastic act, is much more complicated. He wants to manifest a different type of parrhesia. The type of parrhesia Ion wants to express is the political parrhesia. But he is unable to practice parrhesia because he does not know who his mother is. By tradition, only those born in the city they live can have the right to participate in the political sphere. And because he does not know his mother, he also does not know if he was born in the city-state of Athens, where he is supposed to participate politically. Parrhesia, in the case of Ion, becomes a right that he needs to have; it is a birth right of every Athenian citizen, that gives the freedom of truthful speech in the political matters of the city-state. Thus, someone does not know his origins of birth, as it is the case with Ion, is deprived by the right of using parrhesia:

"One is called *parrhēsia* by Euripides in this text. We may call this, let's say, political *parrhēsia*, or statutory-political *parrhēsia*: it is the well-known statutory privilege, connected to birth, which is a way of exercising power by what is said and by truth-telling. This is political *parrhēsia*."[6]

[4] Id., p. 139.
[5] Id., p.154.
[6] Ibidem.

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Euripides' tragedy manages to capture the main theme of parrhesia, where the notion rarely appears mentioned, but it constantly brought to the surface. It illustrates a sort of game of parrhesia, sometimes being searched, as it is the case of the character of Ion, sometimes bargained - the case of Kreusa and other times it is denied - the case of Apollo. Here, the sun god does not answer truthful, or, in most cases, it does not speak at all. The way he sheds light to Ion about his lineage is trough the goddess Athens. Above that she also tells him about his destiny in reshaping the city-state of Athens' political structure into a true democracy. Here, there are two interesting observations that Foucault makes. The first one is in correlation with the behavior of the gods. Foucault insists that parrhesia can be is a something to which only humans have access to. So even if the Greek deity, as it is the case with Euripides' tragedy, performs truthful speech acts, they are not situated within parrhesia:

"On the one hand, none of the gods is the bearer of *parrhēsia*. Neither the reticent oracle of Apollo, nor Athena's proclamatory declaration at the end of the play fall within the domain of *parrhēsia*, and in Greek literature the gods are never endowed with *parrhēsia*. *Parrhēsia* is a human practice, a human right, and a human risk."[7]

The second observation made by Foucault is on risk assumed when performing parrhesia constitutes a crucial condition for the state of freedom, in the case of individual and for the constitution of democracy in the case of political structuring. For Foucault, parrhesia is emerges whenever four criteria are in play. The first one is the act of speaking the truth. The second is constituted by courage of speaking the truth by assuming a risk that can even jeopardize his life. The third involves a type of criticism which is directed one's self, or towards someone that is placed higher in a power relationship. The last criterion implies responsibility in the act of exercising parrhesia, in connection with freedom:

"[...] *parrhēsia* is a kind of verbal activity where the speaker has a specific relation to truth, trough frankness, a certain relationship to his own life trough danger, a certain type of relation to himself or other people trough criticism (self criticism or criticism of other people), and a specific relation to moral law trough freedom and duty. More precisely, *parrhēsia* is a verbal activity in which a speaker expresses his personal relation to the truth, and risks his life because he recognizes truth-telling as a duty to improve other people (as well as himself). In *parrhēsia*, 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 apathy."[8]

But how does parrhesia function under the precepts of criticism and risk? How could the parrhesiast (truth-teller) manifest criticism under the greatest risk of all? Foucault suggests that parrhesia, as a discursive practice, was accepted in the ancient Greek space, under a pact between the truth-teller and the person of power that was criticized.

"Thus the true game of *parrhēsia* will be established on this kind of pact, which means that if the parrhesiast demonstrates his courage by telling the truth despite and regardless of everything, the person to whom this *parrhēsia* is addressed will have to demonstrate his greatness of soul by accepting being told the truth. This kind of pact between the person who

[7] Ibidem.
[8] Michel Foucault, *Fearless speech*, edited by Joseph Pearson, Semiotext(e), Los Angeles, 2001, pp.19-20.

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takes the risk of telling the truth and the person who agrees to listen to it, is at the heart of what we could be called the parrhesiastic game."[9]

The relationship between philosophy and politics

An important aspect regarding political parrhesia is that of how does it manages in the game of power relations, either subtle, as in the political regimes of democracy, or less subtle, as it is the case in monarchy-type of regimes. Foucault dedicates a great deal in discussing this issue. Surprisingly, he suggests that political parrhesia can have two values - positive and negative, according to the political regime in which is performed. The French philosopher identifies four conditions that are mandatory for the existence of positive political parrhesia.[10] The first is the formal condition that represents the constitution or *politea*. For a positive political parrhesia to be possible, the constitution needs to rely on two basic democratic principles: equality under the law (*isonomia*) and the equal right to speak in public (*isêgoria*). The second is the condition de facto. This condition is described by Foucault as the game of ascendance or superiority (*dunasteia*) of a political individual in a democratic regime. He is not superior over others in terms of privileges or status in regards to the law. He is recognized by others as superior in terms of personal virtues and not by rights. One such historical example in ancient Greek is Pericles. The third condition is that of truth (*logos*). This entails that all actions and speech acts must be rational and true. The forth is the moral condition, in which the courage to perform parrhesia (andreios) is active. For Foucault, it was the synergy between the political parrhesia and democracy with the support of the above mentioned principles that made the period of Pericles to be called the 'golden age' of the city-state of Athens.

The negative political-parrhesia can be found in autocratic regimes. It can be found even in democratic regimes, when the relation between parrhesia and democracy is altered, when the principle of *isêgoria* or *isonomia* are no longer active. Foucault mentions several Greek texts where this issue is being discussed. An example being the treatise *Peri tês eirênês* (On the Peace by Isocrates), emphasizes how orators are treated in the unequal way in regards to public speaking:

"So, there is bad *parrhēsia* when measures are taken against orators, or orators are threaten with such measures, like expulsion, but these measures may go as far as exile, or ostracism, and also, in some cases (and Athens had experienced this and will do so again in the future) death."[11]

The censorship and punishment of the public speakers that had until now used parrhesia left room only to the orators that where masters in the art of rhetoric. Rhetoric, for Foucault, is situated in perfect opposition with parrhesia.[12] The process of rupture of the parrhesiastic pact reached its pinnacle moment with Socrates' trial. With Socrates' death, the

[9] Michel Foucault, *The courage of truth: Lectures at the Collége de France II. 1983-1984*. Trans. by G. Burchell, Palgrave, Basingstoke, 2011, pp.12-13.
[10] Michel Foucault, *The Government of the self: Lectures at the Collége de France. 1982-1983*, Trans. by G. Burchell, Palgrave, Basingstoke, 2010, pp.173-180.
[11] Id. p.181.
[12] Id. p.226.

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relationship between philosophy, truth and politics reaches a turning point.[13] This is the encounter between Socrates, as the representative of the will to truth, with the political demos of Athens, representing the will to power. In this context Socrates is judged (and found guilty) for his parrhesiastic criticism. And as a final gesture of parrhesia directed to him, Socrates refuses to escape and accepts the verdict. Not because the verdict was just, but because he believed in the just laws of Athens.

The episode of Socrates' death led Plato to seek another place in which he can perform the act of parrhesia. If Socrates had the many (demos) to uphold the parrhesiastic pact, Plato only had one, the ruler of Syracuse, Dionysus. After Foucault analyzes in great depth the relationship between counselor and the Prince, as it was the case of Plato and Dionysus (both the Old and the Young), he identifies a set of elements that make possible liberty (eleutheria) and, implicitly parrhesia in an autarchic political system. Firstly, parrhesia undergoes a twofold transformation. The philosopher parrhesiast will interact with the sovereign in issues that concern the political, but also at the level of the sovereign's soul trough psycagogic parrhesia. This marks a sudden shift of scenery, from the philosopher who practices parrhesia in the public square (Socrates) to the philosopher who practices parrhesia at the court of the sovereign and even operates at the level of his soul (Plato):

"On the one hand, *parrhēsia* appears as something that is certainly necessary in the political field strictly speaking. *Parrhēsia* is a directly political act which is exercised either before the Assembly, or before the leader, governor, sovereign, tyrant, and so on. It is a political act. But, on the other hand, and this is clear in Plutarch, it is also an act a way of speaking which is addressed to an individual, to his soul, and it concerns the way in which this soul is to be formed."[14]

Foucault identifies some of the elements required in order make possible the relationship between the sovereign and the philosopher-counselor. Firstly there is the need for collaboration (koinôia) between the two which, in the best case scenario can evolve into a friendship (philia). Secondly, there needs to be an opportune moment for the parrhesiastic philosopher to intervene (kairos), both regarding the matters of politics and those of the sovereign's soul. Therefore, the parrhesiastic philosopher as a counselor for the sovereign is able, trough advice (somboulē) to cover both fields of philosophy - the field of abstract thought (logos) and the field of reality (pragma)[15]. The interest of philosophical parrhesia towards the soul of the sovereign can also be traced in Plato's *Republic*, where the idea of the philosopher-king or that of the king-philosopher is depicted:

"Unless, I said, either philosophers become kings in our states or those we whom now call our kings and rulers take to the pursuit of philosophy seriously and adequately, and there is a conjunction of these two things, political power and philosophical intelligence...there can be no cessation of troubles, dear Glaucon, for our states, nor, I fancy, for the human race either."[16]

Final considerations

[13] Maria Toumboukou, Truth telling in Foucault and Arendt: Parrhesia, the pariah and academics in dark times in Journal of Education Policy, 27:6, p.852.
[14] Id.p.194.
[15] Id., pp.201-221.
[16] Plato, *Republic*, Book V, Trans. by B. Jowett and Lewis Campbell, Clardon Press, Oxford, 1894, pp.712-713.

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At the beginning of this paper I have tried to show some aspects regarding Foucault's endeavor in his final years of his life in pinpointing the genealogical roots of the notion of parrhesia. That endeavor led him to Euripides' tragedy *Ion*, the oldest text where term parrhesia is to be found. Although there is only one form of parrhesia named explicitly here (political parrhesia), Foucault believes that he found two more, the judicial and moral parrhesia. The last one will evolve and manifest at a large scale, when it will be used as a Christian the practice of confession.

In the second part I have outlined different conditions and principles in which the act of parrhesia can be exercised, depending on the circumstances that regard the political regimes. Moreover, I have showed how philosophy and politics are inextricably connected trough parrhesia. This relationship makes possible a critique of political power by philosophy, trough parrhesia.

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