

The Role of Authority in Foucault's Concept of Parrhesia

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Abstract

This essay critically discusses Foucault's concept of Parrhesia – the Greek concept of fearless speech. In the book *Fearless Speech* (2001), Foucault argues that figures of authority cannot be parrhesiastes, since they are the ones who create the truth, and therefore cannot challenge it. This essay argues that this view is incorrect, and that truths expressed by authority should be viewed as equally as important as those truths presented by other members of society. This discussion of Foucault's concept of parrhesia is relevant to political theory debates, specifically discussions around political morality, as it raises questions of what truth is in the modern political climate; who creates the truth and whose speech truly matters?

Introduction

In his book *Fearless Speech* (2001), Foucault outlines the concept of parrhesia as being a form of frank and fearless expression of truth, often involving risk to oneself. This expression of truth centres around a commitment/moral duty to speak the truth openly, as this facilitates both accountability and transparency, which are fundamental democratic ideals in modern society. Foucault excludes the figure of the King from having the ability to use parrhesia due to the centrality of risk in his formulation of the parrhesiastes, as he believes that the King cannot risk anything. In this essay, I will examine the role of risk and imbalance of power in the character of Foucault's parrhesiastes, arguing that they serve as modes of verification. I will use Socrates' view of parrhesia to propose that authenticity and alignment between logos and bios

can also verify parrhesia and argue that, by invalidating the necessity of risk in parrhesia, there is no significant barrier to the King's ability to use parrhesia. I will demonstrate the importance of the King's ability to use parrhesia, and conclude that Foucault is wrong to argue that the King cannot use parrhesia on the basis of risk.

The Importance of Risk

In Foucault's formulation of parrhesia, the King cannot be a parrhesiastes due to the characteristic of risk. Foucault argues that the courage displayed in telling the truth creates a sense of sincerity that verifies the parrhesiastes; the fact that the parrhesiastes tells the truth despite the risk being posed to them demonstrates their commitment to and belief in that truth (Foucault, 2001, p. 15). Thus, to demonstrate the sincerity and courage that verifies the truth, Foucault views parrhesia as fundamentally linked to risk. Foucault interprets this risk as being manifested in imbalanced power dynamics between the parrhesiastes and the interlocutor. When critical truths expressed through parrhesia are posed to powerful figures, the parrhesiastes risk the wrath of the interlocutor should they decide not to participate in the parrhesiastic game. It is due to this assumed necessity of risk, and the view that risk can only be manifested through an imbalance of power, that Foucault (2001, p. 16) concludes "It is because the parrhesiastes must take a risk in speaking the truth that the king or tyrant generally cannot use parrhesia; for he risks nothing". Foucault's view that risk is essential to parrhesia is plausible - it is logical that an act of parrhesia involving risk would be more sincere than one that risks nothing. Moreover, it is self-evident why it is necessary to verify the parrhesiastes' credibility. However, risk itself is only necessary as an avenue to this verification. It is possible that other methods of verifying parrhesia could exist alongside the characteristic of risk. Yet, Foucault does not include other modes of verification in his formulation of the parrhesiastes, and so unnecessarily excludes the King from being able to use parrhesia.

The Importance of Frankness and Authenticity

An alternative method of verification could take form in the alignment between logos and bios, as seen in Socratic parrhesia. Alignment between logos and bios means a consistency between someone's beliefs (logos), and the principles by which they live their life (bios). Socrates proposes that the truth of someone's words is demonstrated by their mode of living, which ought to align clearly with what they preach. By committing to the truth through their bios, the parrhesiastes "can use parrhesia and speak freely because what he says accords exactly with what he thinks, and what he thinks accords exactly with what he does" (Foucault, 2001, p. 101). Thus, alignment between bios and logos can be seen as another mode of verification. This method of verification does seem plausible; it logically follows that a parrhesiastes would implement what they preach into their bios if it did truly align with their beliefs, and so it is possible to verify whether they speak truthfully by observing their life. Furthermore, it is supported by Socrates' criticism of rhetoric. Rhetoric involves persuasion and influence as opposed to parrhesia which highlights frankness. Schlosser (2014) analyses the use of rhetoric in Plato's *Gorgias*, and Socrates' explicit criticism of rhetoric, to argue that rhetoric conflicts with parrhesia by being disingenuous. Embellishment of speech in the form of rhetoric breaks the alignment between logos and bios by fracturing the sense of frankness and authenticity in the logos. Thus, the prohibition of the use of rhetoric can be seen as an extension of verification through alignment between logos and bios. Given that frankness is already a key characteristic of Foucault's parrhesiastes, the concept of verification through frankness and authenticity is clearly compatible with the ideas of Foucault. Therefore, it does seem possible for a person to verify their truth not through risk taking, but in living in consistency with the truth they preach.

This method of verification is arguably more convincing than that of risk taking. When the parrhesiastes risks themselves, they express a temporary commitment to the truth, with

potentially dreadful consequences. However, the commitment is singular. Moreover, the parrhesiastes has the potential to be protected by either public pressure, or the participation of the interlocutor in the parrhesiastic game. Contrastingly, in living their bios in alignment with the truth in order to verify their speech, the parrhesiastes dedicate their mode of existence to the truth, and so completely commits to it. Schlosser argues that this commitment to truth in the form of life entails an element of risk itself, “since these were now open to competitive scrutiny and legal accountability” (Schlosser, 2014, p. 96). Verification of truth through alignment between logos and bios can thus be seen as more convincing, as it entails complete commitment to the truth, and forces one to expose their life to public scrutiny in the name of the truth. Therefore, the characteristic of risk is not essential to the figure of the parrhesiastes as they can instead verify their commitment to the truth by aligning their logos and bios. Consequently, the King does not have to be excluded from use of parrhesia on the basis that he cannot take risk in telling the truth, when the role of risk can be fulfilled by alternative modes of verification.

The Imposing of the Truth

Foucault furthers his argument that the King cannot be a parrhesiastes by referring to the fact that, due to his position of power, the King imposes the truth on others. The imposing of truth upon others conflicts with Foucault’s view of parrhesia as it means the parrhesiastes cannot criticise the established order (since they impose it), and so they do not risk themselves. The fact that the imposing of power is contradictory to the role of the parrhesiastes is redundant, since risk is not necessary to the role of the parrhesiastes, as demonstrated above. However, the argument that the King cannot be a parrhesiastes because he imposes the truth can further be invalidated by arguing that Foucault’s formulation of the parrhesiastes requires them to impose the truth. This becomes evident when examining the similarities between Foucault’s and Plato’s parrhesiastes. In Plato’s formulation, the parrhesiastes’ role as a moral guide is a foil to

the role of the powerful who create legal rules; “Plato says that even in the city ruled by good laws there is still a need for someone who will use parrhesia to tell the citizens what moral conduct they must observe” (Foucault, 2001, p. 104). Though Plato’s parrhesiastes does challenge imposed laws, they also impose a truth upon the demos in the form of moral guidance. Similarly, though Foucault’s parrhesiastes does criticize the truth imposed by the powerful, they also attempt to shape the truth into something more akin to their conception of the truth through political activism. Thus, they impose the truth on the public through parrhesia, as their criticism aims to shape and change the demos. Therefore, it is unreasonable for Foucault to reject the King as a parrhesiastes on the basis that he imposes the truth, as it is evident that his formulation of the parrhesiastes requires the imposing of truth in order to be an effective catalyst for change.

Defenders of Foucault’s view that imposing truth prevents one from becoming a parrhesiastes could appeal to the Cynic view of parrhesia by arguing that the Cynic’s emphasis on self-authentication removes them from the community and prevents them from imposing the truth upon others. However, Cynic parrhesiastes do impose their truth upon others through visibility. The Cynic aversion to societal norms extends beyond their own independence, to a duty to compel others to reject the norms they perceive as perverse. Foucault (2001, p. 119) identifies the three modes of Cynic parrhesiastic practice as critical parrhesia, scandalous behaviour, and provocative dialogue. These practices all directly grapple with the demos and provoke them, rather than focusing on personal truth. Hull (2018, p. 259) argues that this provocative behaviour inherently serves to challenge, and shape, the demos - “the Cynic authenticates himself - and implicitly criticizes others for not authenticating themselves in this way - not just by denying any need for privacy, but also by living entirely in public view”. The centrality of the Cynic scandal, as emphasized by the three forms of practice Foucault identifies, inherently links Cynic parrhesia to the community. Imposing their criticism of societal norms

on the community by “presenting them with the image of what they accept and value in thought, and at the same time reject and despise in their life” is essential to Cynic parrhesia (Hull, 2018, p. 258). So, it seems that even Cynic parrhesia fundamentally imposes the truth on others. Therefore, it is evident that these variations of parrhesia all necessarily include some element of imposing the truth. So, it is illogical to exclude the King from using parrhesia on the basis that he also imposes the truth.

Why It Matters that the King Can Use Parrhesia

The King’s ability to use parrhesia is important as to ignore a truth told by the King in favour of falsehoods proposed by those in lower positions of power could expose society to anarchy. In Foucault’s formulation of parrhesia, one can be in possession of the truth without being a parrhesiastes (Foucault, 2001, pg. 15). This distinction between possession of the truth and the ability to successfully communicate the truth makes it possible that the King could possess the truth and govern justly, yet would still be ignored in favour of ignorant or dangerous truths proposed by those in lower positions of power. Indeed, the Cynic view of parrhesia argues that “the masses understand that this man’s ignorance, vulgarity, and sympathy are more useful to them than all the morals, wisdom, and antipathy of the distinguished man. With such a social order, it is true, a state will not be able to develop into perfection itself, but democracy will be best maintained in this manner” (Foucault, 2001, p. 80). As this quote illustrates, to fail to listen to the truths of the King because of his position prevents society from reaching a perfect state, yet is somehow considered favourable due to the threat to democracy. Though totalitarianism is dangerous, to disregard just truths in favour of useless or unjust truths based on position of power could be equally dangerous by resulting in anarchy or the failure of society. Furthermore, the King’s ability to use parrhesia does not necessarily result in totalitarianism, as the King can simply be one of many parrhesiastes within a society. Thus, it seems illogical that, should the King be correct or truthful, it necessarily follows that we should

not listen to him because of his position in society. Therefore, the King's ability to use parrhesia is important for guiding society towards the truth.

Conclusion

I have argued against Foucault's view that a King can never be a parrhesiastes. I have demonstrated why the qualifications that have traditionally formed a barrier preventing the King from using parrhesia are not essential to the character of the parrhesiastes by identifying their function, and provided alternative methods that equally fulfil this function. I have also demonstrated why it is important to accept the King as being able to use parrhesia, as this prevents society from ignoring valid or useful truths due to their source. Thus, I believe the King should be accepted into the role of the parrhesiastes should his truth be beneficial and just, and should he live in accordance with this truth.

Bibliography

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