Michel Foucault and the Concept of Parrhesia

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The aim of this article is to examine different interpretations of the philosophical concept of *parrhesia*, developed in Michel Foucault’s writings. One the one hand, *parrhesia* will be expressed as a traditional discourse about truth, through which the consciousness directs the human being to a better self-constitution. It is opposed to rhetoric and flattery, *parrhesia* being a direct, simple and responsible discourse. On the other hand, the origins of *parrhesia* are not represented by the forms of consciousness, nor by ethical contents, but by the democratic political dimensions. An authentic democracy, beyond its formal principles and structures, such as freedom of expression, equality before the law or the constitution requires *parrhesia* as courage, involving the risk that any citizen has to assume in terms of power. Last but not least, *parrhesia* is expressed in connection with cynical philosophers, with their forms of ‘militant’ life performed as the scandal of the truth.

*Keywords:* *parrhesia*, subject, truth, power, the aesthetics of existence, freedom, cynicism.

In this article I will examine the relation between the subject, power and truth as it was theorized by Michel Foucault at the end of his writings, when he dealt mainly with the concept of *parrhesia*. The problematic critique of personal identity is a central Foucauldian theme, which underlies his entire work.

Before I examine the concept of *parrhesia*, exploring its ramifications, I would like to shortly present some introductory ideas which I believe are important in order to understand his general project.

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Foucault tries to bracket all the supposedly universal, definitive and essential truths. Truth, as seen by Foucault, is never outside power relations and the way people conceive truth is determined precisely by power relations, so that the individual becomes the subject-object for knowledge as a result of specific power relations:

The important thing here, I believe, is that truth isn’t outside power or lacking in power: contrary to a myth whose history and functions would repay further study, truth isn’t the reward of free spirits, the child of protracted solitude, nor the privilege of those who have succeeded in liberating themselves. Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its “general politics” of truth – that is, the types of discourse it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances that enable one to distinguish true and false statements; the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (Foucault 1980, 131)

We can contrast the idea of an authentic personal identity, which presupposes the search for the true self beyond power relations (just as in the case of existentialist and Freudian-Marxist philosophies) to the idea of practices of freedom inside the power relations, strongly connected to the idea of self-autocracy. We believe that in Foucauldian thought there are two distinctive moments concerning subjectivity. On the one side there is the objectivation of the individuals as subjects in certain truth-systems and on the other side there is the subjectivation of individuals starting with the acts of truth of the subjects themselves. If in the first phase the passive forms of submission – assujettissment – are central, in the second phase the active forms of subjectivation are essential. In other words, the individual as subject ceases to be considered solely as an effect of power-knowledge mechanisms which have the creation of passive and submissive subjects as purpose. Instead, he will be considered as subjectification, as a process through which the subject transforms itself and is constituted in an active relationship with the truth.

Foucault reveals the genealogy of desire and the establishment of the subject’s relation to truth against the backdrop of submission. This is why, instead of searching for the true self, in which we may find the truth of desire, we should begin creating new ways to relate to ourselves
and the others, as the only forms of resistance to domination. If we think of the subject as interiority, as division, as scission, the only thing we do is to submit it. This relates to the idea of creation of new forms of subjectivity inspired by the Nietzschean model of the esthetical ideal according to which the discovery of an authentic self is not what is at stake, but the practical ideal of a different form of life, freed from the idea of an inner truth. In other words, it is about the creation of new relationships regarding the self, not according to universals laws, but to voluntary rules, to lifestyles, just as Deleuze points out with precision when he interprets Foucault. So we do not have relations of identity, but of differentiation, of creation, of innovation. In Foucault's case, the same as with Nietzsche's, the relationship to the self must be considered as analogous to artistic activity. Through the concept of “the aesthetics of existence” Foucault tries to eliminate everything that is Christian in the relationship of the subject to the self. This means the renouncing of the self and the hermeneutics of the self. For example, in the case of the Greek and Roman philosophers, the purpose of self-care is not the discovery of the self, but the mastery, the autonomy and the freedom of the self.

With regards to the “repressive hypothesis”, according to which sexuality was repressed, Foucault evaluates it not in terms of submission and domination, but especially in terms of stimulation and verbalization. Ever since ancient Christianity and up to the contemporary era, we have been witnessing an entire process of proliferation of techniques which encourage us to verbalize sexuality. Moreover, even within the contemporary biological, medical, psychiatric and psychoanalytical discourses, we can observe the continuity of the catholic pastoral tradition of the confession of the flesh, where everything regarding sexuality had to be verbalized. We refer in this context to the surge of the concept of *sciencia sexualis* different from *ars erotica*, in the way it was conceptualized and practiced in the Ancient Greco-Roman world, as well as in western cultures. Western modernity transforms sexuality into an instance for performing truth through which individuals recognize themselves and are constituted by a device of truth. The notion of *subjection as assujettissment* must not and can not be understood just as a simple submissive behavior, but in correlation to power:
This form of power that applies itself to immediate everyday life categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own identity, imposes a law of truth on him that he must recognize and others have to recognize in him. It is a form of power that makes individuals subjects. There are two meanings of the word “subject”: subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both meanings suggest a form of power that subjugates and makes subject to. (Foucault 1980, 331)

The quintessential approach to the problem of the subject-power-truth relationship is the fundamental identity question “Who am I? What is the secret of my desire?” The question “Who am I? Who am I truly?” has, in Foucault’s opinion, a Christian origin more than a Greco-Roman one. This formulation is brought to light by the invention of techniques and technologies of confession in ancient Christianity. Foucault tried to detach himself from the problem of identity thought as authenticity, not in the sense of setting the desire “free”, because that would only replicate the old ways of submission, but in terms of practices of subjectivation. This problematization allows him to replace the question “Who am I?” with the question “How should I live?”.

There is a major split between the authentic self and the modern subject. Foucault distinguishes between Greco-Roman ethics and Christian morality. For Foucault, ethics is the ensemble of approaches through which individuals elaborate their own conducts in relation to an intermediary and problematic space by way of which the subject obeys the moral laws, but not entirely. From this point of view there are two irreducible forms of relationship to the self: on the one side we have, in modernity, a form of objectivation of the subject, where the self becomes an object of knowledge. On the other side, in Ancient times we had an ethical subjectivation where the subject was considered through a permanent care of the self and the relationship to the self is structured within the distance of an accomplished piece of work. If in the modern era of subjectivation the constitution of the self as moral subject occurs in the form of an indefinite self-knowledge, in the Greco-Roman philosophy the subjectivation occurs in the form of the constitution of a just ethical self:

But the will to be a moral subject, the search of an ethics of existence meant in Antiquity an effort to claim your own freedom and to give a certain form to your
own life in which you can recognize yourself, others can recognize you and in which future generations might find an example. (Foucault 2001, 1550)

Greek ethics was not connected to the idea of duty as a form of law or as a form of practical reason, but it was understood more as a virtue and virtue was defined as a form of life. The lifestyle of a subject wasn’t something given, but it was the object of an improvement, of an elaboration of the subject on itself. It was not conceived as a theoretical object, as an object for scientific knowledge, but more as the object of styling as “work of art”. They weren’t searching for abstract principles, but for solutions to concrete and immediate problems. In Antiquity the access to truth was conditioned by a teckne tou biou, meaning a technique of life, a technique to create existence. Only the transformation through exercises (askesis) and a continuous effort make the access to the truth possible. Nowadays, on the contrary, truth seems accessible to anyone. The methodology through which sciences operate and the use of logical methods allow the access to the truth, without having subjectivity as an essential factor in this process. In other words, unlike the contemporary era where the method and content of a sentence are what truly matters, in Antiquity the criterion of truth was to be found in the ethos of the subject. So, in Ancient times, acknowledgement of truth in a sentence was given by adequacy between the acts and the words:

I came to it from the old, traditional question, which is at the very heart of Western philosophy, of the relations between subject and truth, a question which I posed, which I took up first of all in classical, usual, and traditional terms, that is to say: on the basis of what practices and through what types of discourse have we tried to tell the truth about the subject? Thus: on the basis of what practices, through what types of discourse have we tried to tell the truth about the mad subject or the delinquent subject? On the basis of what discursive practices was the speaking, laboring, and living subject constituted as a possible object of knowledge (savoir)? This was the field of study that I tried to cover for a period. And then I tried to envisage this same question of subject/truth relations in another form: not that of the discourse of truth in which the truth about the subject can be told, but that of the discourse of truth which the subject is likely and able to speak about himself, which may be, for example, avowal, confession, or examination of conscience. This was the analysis of the subject’s true discourse about himself, and it was easy to see the importance of this discourse for penal practices or in the domain of the experience of sexuality. This theme, this problem
led me, in previous years’ lectures, to [attempt] the historical analysis of practices of telling the truth about oneself. (Foucault 2011, 3)

Etymologically, *parrhesia* means to verbalize everything. In the beginning, Foucault analyses *parrhesia* within the direction of Greek and Roman consciousness. It designates the quality of the observer of consciousness which can verbalize freely and bravely the entire truth with the purpose of transforming the ethos of the observed one. In this sense, it is different from the obligation of telling the truth about oneself as it is for the system of Christian confession. In Christianity, the one who’s talking, the one who’s subjecting himself is the observed one and not the one observing. Foucault will proceed in analyzing the history of *parrhesia* starting with Socrates’ ironical discourse until the provocative ironies of the Cynics. As I have previously said, the main characteristic of *parrhesia* is courage. This is a form of producing truth through which everything is bravely, honestly and bluntly verbalized. *Parrhesia* means a risk for both the person who is giving the discourse but also for the person who is listening to it and who necessarily connects the words to the person saying them. Truth in *parrhesia* does not need to be searched within the speech, in its content, but in the effects that truth has for the receiver, as well as for the speaker. Speech is neither limited to its rational structure nor to the correspondence between phenomena and communication. How could we understand the idea that truth structures freedom through the obligation of saying everything?

How and to what extent is the obligation of truth – the “binding oneself to the truth,” “binding oneself by the truth and by truth-telling” – at the same time the exercise of freedom, and the dangerous exercise of freedom? How is [the fact of] binding oneself to the truth (binding oneself to tell the truth, binding oneself by the truth, by the content of what one says and by the fact that one says it) actually the exercise, the highest exercise, of freedom? (Foucault 2010, 67)

This risk is opposed to performative discourse in the sense that the performative is confined by the institutional structures. *Parrhesia* has more to do with theater than with the performative. As long as we are playing a role, this can be a role only if we assume it until the end, completely, even running the risk of dying. Simultaneously, this
dramaturgy of truth is never played in solitude, because in parrhesia one always finds the other, so that the existence of both the receiver and the speaker are bound to modify.

Precisely this will of telling the truth at all costs is capable of really transforming the identity of the subject, his way of being and it opens him up to a constitution of the self which is never complete. In the course Hermeneutics of subject from 1982 at Collège de France, Foucault relativizes the Socratic imperative of self-knowledge in favor of the care of the self. The notion of parrhesia will be studied in a strong connection with the care of the self, so that within the pressure of “having to tell the truth about oneself” the figure of parrhesia profiles itself as an obligation of telling the truth about oneself. The indispensability of parrhesia appears not only in Christianity, but also in the ancient school of thought. It is the essential characteristic of the master of existence in the act of guidance. Foucault distinguishes between two distinct forms of spiritual direction. Firstly, we find the Christian governance of the souls. Secondly, he talks about the Hellenistic practice of the self. Within the Christian governance of the souls the relation of the subject with the truth takes place under the form of confession. Within the confession techniques, the individual becomes the subject-object of truth as an indefinite search of oneself and the subject is compelled to verbalize an exhaustive truth. The confession also presupposes an unconditional submission (obeissance) towards the Other. This is also the matrix of the relationship to the self, the basis on which the Western subject, the modern subject is formed. Unlike the direction of the Christian consciousness, the Hellenistic direction of existence has the autonomy of the disciple as its purpose, the freedom of the subject, more than his closure in a perpetual hermeneutics of a hidden self. In the Hellenistic and Roman practices of existence, the sentence of truth is not important for its theoretical content. The objective is not self-knowledge or knowledge of the world, but the assimilation of discourses of truth which have as am objective the confrontation of the facts of life and the importance of acting in the right way. Moreover, in the direction of the Hellenistic and Roman existence, the objective is not that of verbalizing the truth about oneself but, with the help of the master of existence, there has to be a proof of “knowing oneself”, with the precise purpose of
verifying the correspondence between words and facts. The practices of
the self should form our existence, to put it in action and not break the
subject. In Antiquity, unlike Christianity and the modern times, there is
a different relation with the Other.

The Other is called upon not to listen to the secrets of individuals,
to their deepest hidden desires, but to help the individual come out of
the *stultitia*. *Parrhesia* is ultimately on the master’s side, having as only
purpose the production of effects of truths on the way of being of the
subject and the transformation of the subject’s ethos. The observer of
existence needs to help the integration of the discourse of the disciple in
order to allow him an adequate relation from the self to the self.

Foucault analyses *parrhesia* starting from two series of antinomies: on the
one hand, *parrhesia* opposes confession and allows Foucault to estab-
lish a point of rupture between the antique and the Christian self. On the
other hand, *parrhesia* opposes rhetoric and flattery. *Parrhesia* is a quality
of the master in order to teach the other to properly take care of himself.

There is a difference in the relation with Christian consciousness: in the
psychologic relation, the master plays the essential role, not the disciple.
He must have a direct, simple and engaged speech which contains a
personal conviction. He also presupposes total devotion towards what’s
being said and guaranteed by the perfect harmony between acts and
speech. In this case, truth authenticates behavior. The major difference
regarding the relation of the subject with truth between Christianity and
Greco-Roman practices of the self is that while in the first case we have
subjective division, in the second we have the consolidation of a strong
self. The Christian practices presuppose self-interpretation, while truth
is thought as being hidden. In addition to this, the search for truth is
done out of obligation. These practices of subjectivation rather involve
the renouncing of the self, they include a perpetual hermeneutics of the
self, of desire. On the contrary, in the Greco-Roman practices it is about
giving an account of the constitutive force of the way of being of the
subject under the form of a principle of action. The constitution of the
self is done without supposing a hidden identity, an immutable truth or
any profoundness. It is not about hermeneutics, but about playing the
game, it is not about giving up, but about exposing, putting yourself in
danger. Without compulsion towards the civil law, without religious
constraint, but personal choice, it is a choice regarding the form we want to give to our existence. We can say that the subject is transformed by and through truth, in other words truth becomes practical ethos. Foucault opposes parrhesia to flattery and rhetoric. In contrast to parrhesia, the flatterer uses the language not to obtain effects of truth in order to act, but in order to get some advantages. The flatterer, unlike the parrhesiast uses deceitful speech as to put the receiver in a state of addiction, making him believe something else about himself, creating a false image of himself. This is why flattery hinders self-knowledge, the authentic self-constitution. The flatterer has a discourse that is different from the person to which he addresses, a speech that tries above all to adulate the speaker. But parrhesia, in contrast to flattery, can indicate a more important political form. It is about counseling of the prince, a very important problem in the political domain of training the princes. The prince’s counselor must never be a flatterer; on the contrary, he is to prove himself worthy of a sincere and brave speech. On the other side, the art of rhetoric or the art of persuasion is also different from parrhesia. If in the parrhesiast speech the truth we know and in which we believe is told and assured, in rhetoric we will try to gain some profit by directing our speech according to someone’s desires. The difference between parrhesia and rhetoric is that rhetoric makes things believable, it builds false concepts, it performs under false precepts, unlike parrhesia. It’s more about searching the other’s agreement, the other’s sympathy. The rhetorician’s purpose is not the other’s autonomy, but the other’s addiction.

If in the Hermeneutics of the Subject, the French philosopher analyses mainly the parrhesia of the master during the process of the directing of consciousness, during his class of 1983 (on the courage of truth) it is the concept of political parrhesia which will be analyzed in particular. Political parrhesia is essentially understood as a public and risky form, which is conducted either by the orator in front of the citizens or the philosopher in front of the prince. One of Foucault’s most original ideas is the question regarding the origins of parrhesia, which in the beginning is neither a spiritual technique, nor an ethical discourse, but first and foremost a political discourse. At its origins, parrhesia is a practice, a duty towards the city, strongly connected to the status of the citizen. This form of political parrhesia has four conditions of possibility:
first of all, in order to talk truthfully in a political context you need a political right, namely the right to speak. Secondly, we need to take into consideration the contradictory nature of the political game: besides the right to speak, the one who’s talking needs to obtain a certain authority towards the others. The third condition refers to the fact that the speaker needs to tell the truth in his own name, the enunciation should be connected to the speaker, which means that he needs to be responsible and to identify himself. The fourth and last condition, without which political parrhesia is not possible is courage; parrhesia institutes the thing Foucault called the “parrhesiast pact”: the speaker needs to have the courage to tell the truth in front of an auditorium, and the auditorium needs to have the courage to listen to this truth, a truth that is different from public opinion. This pact constitutes a moral condition of political parrhesia. Parrhesia is the courage of the truth manifested by the one who speaks, who enunciates the entire truth in his mind. In doing that he takes an indeterminate risk. But parrhesia is also the bravery of the receiver. He accepts as true the scandalous truth that is being told. In the political parrhesia Foucault initiates the analysis starting from the status of democracy. There is a fundamental relation between ethics and politics. For the Greco-Romans politics meant exposure, taking a risk and even exposure in front of the others. Foucault begins not only with the analysis of the formal conditions of democracy, like the balance of powers, the separation of powers, constitutional problems, but also with the practical analysis of the citizen’s active engagements. According to Foucault, there is a paradox of democracy. The paradox of democracy is that in this form of government politics can only function if the citizens as subjects expose themselves to risk and are personally engaged in public affairs. Otherwise we only have a system of seducers. For Foucault, democracy is not just a form of government structured by formal principles, but first of all by practices. The originality of Foucault concerning the analysis of democracy is that it places the source of parrhesia not just in its ethical forms, not even in the forms of the direction of consciousness, but mainly in the public space. Parrhesia gives ground to the ethical domain in the moments of a crisis of democracy. It presupposes the free and public exercise of speech in the Agora, confronted with other opinions. It also involves a brave discourse
in front of the leader, in front of the prince. This is where we have the biggest problem of political counseling, in other words the problem of “governing” the prince’s soul. He must know how to lead himself right, in order to lead the others better.

Democracy also involves some essential characteristics: firstly there is *eleutheria* (freedom) – this can be national or *exterior* freedom (more precisely it is about the independence of each and every state in relation to the others); *inner* freedom (freedom vis-à-vis the tyrant, as unique governor of power) and the freedom of the citizen. Secondly, there is the *nomos* which defines the law and also the tradition, the constitution or the fundamental principle. Then there are the concepts of *Isonomy* understood as the equality before the law and *Isegoria* – equality of all in freedom of speech. Last but not least, authentic democracy involves *parrhesia*, meaning courage, the risk to tell the truth that every citizen takes on the battlefield. But this one presupposes a *polis* without tyranny, which means that the power is not imposed but on the contrary, this needs to be earned in the space of an agonistic confrontation within the city. *Parrhesia* in democracy presupposes that every citizen can have authority over the other, it

is this political risk of a discourse which leaves room free for other discourse and assumes the task, not of bending others to one’s will, but of persuading them. What is making use of this *parrhesia* within the framework of the city if not, precisely, and in accordance with what has just been said, handling, dealing with both *logos* and *polis*? *Parrhesia* consists in making use of *logos* in the *polis* – *logos* in the sense of true, reasonable discourse, discourse which persuades, and discourse which may confront other discourse and will triumph only through the weight of its truth and the effectiveness of its persuasion – *parrhesia* consists in making use of this true, reasonable, agonistic discourse, this discourse of debate, in the field of the *polis*. (Foucault 2010, 105)

In other words, authentic democracy, beyond the constitutional forms and principles, leaves space for the “agonistic” game, for relations of power. The paradox of democracy could be understood as follows: equality before the law (isonomy) is necessary to *parrhesia* and in *extremis* could be a real danger for democracy, the danger of an egalitarian system in which there exists a fundamental right of everyone to speak and the need to choose between those who are capable of
parrhesia, capable of governing the city. These people should have the courage of verbalization in the public space. This is how authentic democracy involves not only the constitutional formalism, but also the ethical characteristics of citizens. Authority develops through courage, risk, ethos, ethical differentiation in relation to the other citizens. This ethical differentiation is indispensable for an authentic democracy. There is a circularity between democracy and parrhesia: equality is the condition of possibility of parrhesia and parrhesia is the difference in democracy. The difference, parrhesia, could be endangered by democracy itself. The fragility of parrhesia in democracy is a result of both the principle of isegoria, of its juridical background, of the citizens' rights and of the differentiation, of power, from the actual political game of democracy. The problem could be therefore formulated as follows: how could we ensure the game of difference within democracy? This is firstly a brave speech that the speaker is giving in front of the citizens. Parrhesia opens an agonistic structure in democracy, so that there is no authentic democracy without the existence of a parrhesiast discourse, both risky and brave.

But it is impossible to have parrhesia outside a political system which does not offer the freedom and equality of speech to everyone. This is why the crisis of democracy is the sliding from the political sphere to the ethical one. During the crisis of the ethos of democracy it is not the polis that becomes the reference of parrhesia. For example Socrates, instead of using a political parrhesia, is aiming his speech towards the ethos of individuals, leading them to care for their own self. This care takes the shape of a therapy. In the work of Plato there are two irreducible matrices in thinking the care of the self: the first is the Alcibiades-matrix, where the care of the self has as its object the soul (psyche). The second is the Laches-matrix, where the care of the self has as its object life itself, the way of living (the bios). In Alcibiades, the object of the care of the self is the soul, considered as distinct from the body and here parrhesia is closely connected to the metaphysics of the soul. In Laches, the object of the care of the self is not the soul as a reality distinct from the body, but the way of living, the bios. In the two platonic dialogues – Alcibiades and Laches – Foucault finds the source of two important philosophical orientations: in Alcibiades, where Foucault sees the problem of the relation between knowledge of the self and care of
the self, the discovery of the self goes through the instauration of the self as an ontological reality separated from the body, a reality which explicitly designates as being the soul (psyche). The knowledge of the self takes the shape of a contemplation of the soul in itself, in the mirror of its own essence. In Laches, Foucault identifies a new aspect of the ethics of truth. This aspect, hidden by the history of philosophy, is the courage of truth.

Taking into account this distinction, Foucault draws the two lines of Western philosophical practice: on one side there is the Alcibiades paradigm, where philosophy is placed under the sign of the knowledge of the soul – a metaphysics of the soul; on the other side the Laches paradigm, where philosophy is defined as a way of living, as the art of stylistic existence, an art of existence. The Socrates moment is the moment when the techniques of life are intertwined with the pressure of a beautiful life. This connection is an aesthetics of existence through which life and truth are indexed to the aesthetics of existence. Starting from the study of Laches, of bravery as an ethical fundament of truth, of life as an object of attention, Foucault opens up the path for the study of Cynicism. Philosophy is thought as being the complete articulation between parrhesia and the way of life. In the practice of Cynics the production of truth is made in the form of life itself. The Cynic exposes the truth into the life (bios) under the shape of the scandal of truth. The Cynic is the one for which the attention for life will make the parrhesia to be entirely coextensive to life. The Cynic parrhesia is studied within the general background of the general parrhesia, as a consequence of a certain way of life.

Even so, this type of parrhesia is different from the Socratic model, as well as the Hellenistic one. In these models, parrhesia involves a subject who needs to demonstrate through the visible form of his existence the accordance between his words and his actions. In order to be a parrhesiast, we need to have harmony, an accordance between what we say and what we do. In this respect, parrhesia is a consequence of what we are. On the contrary, the Cynic parrhesia becomes one with life itself, it is coextensive to the visible form of existence. To be capable of parrhesia you need to free yourself of any obligation, of any engagement. The Cynic lifestyle represents an affirmation of life itself by means of the truth. By way of the radical elimination of anything superfluous and
useless, the Cynic takes to extreme the discourse of the truth. His endeavor is that of reducing life itself. Moreover, the relation between life and speech, between *bios* and *logos* is a relation of physical conformity, a corporeal one.

In this context, Cynicism, as a form of styling our existence, presents itself as a form of philosophy in which the way of life, the existence, the *bios* is a manifestation, an immediate “dramatization” of truth. The Cynic makes from the form of existence itself, from life, in its most material and actual sense, the immediate presence of truth. Verifying the principles of reason and of ethics, verifying them until the end, in the matter of life, this returns in order to produce the difference of another form of life. If for Plato true life (*alethes bios*) was not hidden, unconcealed, pure, unaltered, visible, independent, right, stable, etc., for the Cynics all these characteristics are taken to extreme: an open life becomes a life without conventions and impudent, a life in which the only interest is in the basic needs and in voluntary abnegation, a life which becomes vagrant. A fair life, according to the laws of nature is driven to animality. A stable and independent life, a life of self-control, open to the problems of others becomes a “militant” life, a life of battle, without rest, a life of fighting against oneself and for oneself, against the others and for the others.

Unlike the other philosophical schools in Antiquity that were dedicated to the training and education of a small number of privileged citizens so that they could lead a happy and independent life, the Cynics speak for everyone. They borrow the short way of gesture and public exercise. Their performances do not aim at teaching something or at educating someone. They have the purpose of showing the vices and defects of individuals and also of bringing to light the laws and institutions which make them possible. The life of the Cynics is a life we could call “militant”:

And this notion of militantism covers, it seems to me, many of the dimensions of that Cynic life which turns the beneficial sovereignty of the *bios philosophikos* into combative endurance... It seems to me that we have a somewhat different idea in the Cynics. This would be the idea of a militancy in the open, as it were, that is to say, a militancy addressed to absolutely everyone, which precisely does not require an education (a *paideia*), but which resorts to harsh and drastic
means, not so much in order to train people and teach them, as to shake them up and convert them, abruptly. It is a militancy in the open in the sense that it claims to attack not just this or that vice or fault or opinion that this or that individual may have, but also the conventions, laws, and institutions which rest on the vices, faults, weaknesses, and opinions shared by humankind in general. It is therefore a militancy which aspires to change the world, much more than a militancy which would seek merely to provide its followers with the means for achieving a happy life. If we are to talk of Cynic militancy, it is important not to forget the system to which it belongs, that it exists alongside many other forms of philosophical proselytism in Antiquity. But we should also recognize a particular form in this militancy: an overt, universal, aggressive militancy; militancy in the world and against the world. (Foucault 2011, 284)

How much truth can life incorporate? Truth is understood here as scission, refusal, provocation, the truth that everyone knows but no one tells – as exposure of lies. There are two great dimensions in Cynicism: the first is the usage of a tough, blunt and provocative speech and the second is a specific way of life – a life in solitude, a life of wandering, a public and voluntarily poor life. As I have already said before, life not thought becomes the fundamental condition of truth and the connection between life and truth takes the shape of scandal. The Cynic makes of his own life, of his own body – the provocative theater of truth.

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