

## Introduction

In *The Government of Self and Others*, Michel Foucault positions himself against the view that the interlinkage of politics and truth in ancient Athens—most notably in Plato's *The Republic*—was the birth of a totalitarian conception of politics; an argument that most thoroughly and elegantly has been presented by Hannah Arendt.<sup>[1]</sup> According to Arendt, the introduction of an “absolute”—such as truth; something indisputable, incontestable and “above the senses”—reduces politics to chains of command and obedience. Hence the realization of truth in politics is only possible in a tyrannical or totalitarian society. Furthermore, Arendt argues, when the idea of an absolute standard for politics is introduced into the shared world of men, anything can serve as “the truth”—race or the classless society—even “the criciest theory that some charlatan might come up with” (2005:3); anything goes and everything is possible. “In other words,” Arendt concludes “the realization of philosophy abolishes philosophy, the realization of the ‘absolute’ indeed abolishes the absolute from the world” (Ibid.).

In contrast to this gloomy picture of the relationship between philosophy and politics stands Foucault's analysis of the ancient practices of *parr?sia*, “truth-telling,” as a political life of resistance, critique and contestation. This life of “truth-telling” is not the political life of a statesman but modes of being which constantly, though in different ways, constitute their meaning in relation to politics. What ties all the manifestations of *parr?sia* together is, however, that none of them, according to Foucault, are concerned with “doctrines,” that is, none of them are concerned with laying out the “content” of politics. Though philosophy becomes meaningful in its relationship to politics, they are not identical to one another: politics and philosophy correlate but they do not coincide: “It is not for philosophy to say what should be done in politics” (Foucault 2010:354).

It is my ambition with this paper to argue that the stark difference between Foucault and Arendt does not reflect as deep a disagreement between the two thinkers. On the contrary, I

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argue that Foucault and Arendt in their late works and lectures<sup>[2]</sup> (which none of them lived long enough to complete) reflect a shared interest in understanding how an intellectual life can relate itself to the shared world of a public sphere. This shared interest in “critical thinking” is maybe best expressed in both thinkers’ “obsession” with the political writings of Immanuel Kant. Kant’s political writings play a pivotal role not only in Arendt’s *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy* but also in *The Government of Self and Others*, epigraphed by Kant’s short text “An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?” The shared theme in Arendt’s and Foucault’s late works, I argue, is the relationship between critical thinking and politics.

To argue this point, I have analysed and critically assessed the relationship between politics and philosophy, which Foucault sees manifest in the practice of *parrhesia* in the Athenian city state. To understand how and in what ways, according to Foucault, the *parrhesiastic* practices of “truth-telling” relate to and/or engage with politics and political life, I have looked at four “moments” of *parrhesia* manifested in four figures which all in different ways present important perspectives on the relationship between politics and philosophy: Pericles (“political” *parrhesia*), Plato (“philosophical” *parrhesia*), Socrates (“philosophico-ethical” *parrhesia*) and Diogenes (“ethical” *parrhesia*).

### **“Political” *parrhesia***

Though the idea of truth is central to *parrhesia*, it is important to understand that the practice of *parrhesia* is resolutely distinct from a life centred on the contemplation of the truth; the form of life generally associated with Arendt’s conception of the *bios theoretikos* or *vita contemplativa*. Though philosophy and *parrhesia*, according to Foucault, become intertwined in ancient Athens, *parrhesia* is always distinct from contemplation for Foucault. The life of contemplation is that of “the sage,” or, “the wise person” (2011:16ff). The pivotal difference between the sage and the *parrhesiast* is, according to Foucault, that the sage keeps his wisdom to himself: “the sage is wise in and for himself, and does not need to speak” (2011:17).

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In contrast hereto, *parr?sia* is exactly truth-telling (*dire-vrai*) or free-spokenness (*franc-parler*) (Foucault 2010:42-43): the emphasis is thus on language and speech. *Parr?sia* is not so much about the content of the truth; it is a particular way, or particular ways, of telling the truth (2010:52,192). In contrast to the truth of the Platonic ideas which could be contemplated alone by the philosopher, *parr?sia* cannot exist without language and speech. Thus, *parr?sia* is an activity that involves more than one person. It is, in some way or another, a public activity which takes place in a constituted political space (2010:192). The nature of this activity and the people involved do, however, take many different forms in Foucault's sketch of a genealogy of *parr?sia*.

The practice of *parr?sia* has, according to Foucault, its origins in politics and "political" *parr?sia* is therefore historically prior to "philosophical" *parr?sia*. The practice of *parr?sia* was, according to Foucault, one of the core principles of Athenian democracy together with—but sharply distinguished from—*isonomia* and *is?goria*; principles that are roughly translatable as equality before the law and the equal right to address the assembly for all citizens of Athens (2010:150). Though all Athenian citizens have an equal right to speak (*is?goria*), only a small elite, those who are in the foremost rank (*pr?ton zugon*) and of extraordinary personal and moral qualities, claim their right—and are meant to claim their right(!)—to address the assembly (2010:188, 300, 318). Where *is?goria* (at least formally) is for everyone, *parr?sia* is for the few. These few are those who aspire to ascend in the ranks of society through the agonistic game of recognition in order to take charge of the city through their *parr?siatic* practice (2010:156). The game of truth-telling is the institutional framework designed in order to select the genuine elite among the competitors.

Thus, ancient democracy has an ambivalent relationship to political elitism: on the one hand, the right to speak is equally distributed (*is?goria*), on the other hand, not everyone can speak (*parr?sia*) (2010:183). Democracy and *parr?sia* therefore relate to each other in a paradoxical way: *parr?sia* is only possible within the formally equal democratic agonistic game of truth-telling, but at the same time *parr?sia* introduces elitism into democracy completely different from the egalitarian structure of democracy (2010:184). *Parr?sia* is therefore a threat to democracy. However, at the same time, democracy cannot do without *parr?sia* since it is the core of the democratic form of government.

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Though paradoxical, the game of *parrhesia*, Foucault argues, is necessary for the survival of democracy. *Parrhesia* is the institutional framework that allows the political elite to ascend in a legitimate manner in order to take charge of the city (2010:158, 178). Where the institutional framework of modern democracy makes it possible for the political elite to be selected by elections, the institutional framework of ancient democracy had the political elite selected by the agonistic game of *parrhesia*. This game of truth-telling, which allows for the genuine political elite to take charge of the city through their practice of *parrhesia*, is what Foucault presents as the core of ancient democracy (2010:180-1). Foucault's ideal typical example of "political" *parrhesia* is Pericles as he is represented in his famous speech in Thucydides' *The Peloponnesian Wars* (Foucault 2010:179).

In order only to have the genuine political elite ascend in the democratic game of truth telling, the *parrhesiast* speaks at a very high but uncertain risk which might include ostracism or death penalty. The *parrhesiast* should therefore find what he wants to say so important that he is willing to risk his life in order to frankly say what he finds to be the truth; an institutional check that one would think discourages most people from addressing the assembly. This is why courage is needed in order to engage in the practice of truth-telling.

The problem is, however, that after the death of Pericles the institutional check of the risk of truth-telling no longer was perceived as successful (Foucault 2010:181). The core of the critique of the fourth and fifth century B.C, but also more generally of the ancient democratic institutional framework characterized by *parrhesia*, is, according to Foucault, that it cannot discriminate between "good" and "bad" *parrhesia*. That is, the political practice of *parrhesia* can be misused by the good rhetorician or the demagogue through flattery or "false truth-telling" (2010:180ff). The problem is that the institutional framework of democracy, constituted in order to have the elite ascend, allows all good speakers to ascend; also those who do not have the extraordinary qualities of Pericles. The game of truth-telling can therefore not distinguish between the rhetorician and the *parrhesiast*. At least, Foucault points out, this seems to have appeared as a problem for the Greeks after the death of Pericles (Foucault 2010:181). A more contemporary formulation of the problem is that of populism: those who have the ability to charm the assembly will be able to take charge of the city.

The problem of the inherent danger of “bad” *parrhesia* in a democracy is according to Foucault of serious nature for the Athenian democracy because *parrhesia* is the governmentality of the *polis*: “If democracy can be governed, it is because there is true discourse” (2010:184). The relationship between democracy and *parrhesia* is thus paradoxical in yet another way: on the one hand, democracy cannot exist without *parrhesia*, but on the other hand, the equality of democracy gives birth to the “bad” *parrhesia* that is a constant threat to the survival of *parrhesia* within democracy. Thus democracy and *parrhesia*, though mutually constitutive, present inherent threats to one another. In light of Foucault’s narrative, “political” *parrhesia* seems doomed to fail.

### **The myth of the ideal city**

One question seems to have been of particular importance in context of the problematic relationship between democracy and *parrhesia*: the question of whether an ideal city exists in which the truth can appear without the dangerous game of *parrhesia* (Foucault 2010:195)? This question is of course extensively dealt with in Plato’s the *Republic*, which concluded that the best city is that in which the philosophers rule; the conception of politics in which Arendt sees the birth of Western totalitarian thought manifested.

Interestingly enough, however, Foucault argues that Plato’s understanding of the relationship between truth and politics should neither be found in the *Republic* nor in the *Laws*. These works were, according to Foucault, not “serious” philosophical works and they should “be handled as cautiously as a myth” (Foucault 2010: 253). Though it is a quite astounding thesis that the *Republic* and the *Laws* are “unserious” works, it is even more curious that Arendt, though for different reasons, presents the same argument in her *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*. Arendt sites Pascal’s words as a possible exaggeration that however does not “miss the mark”:

*“We can only think of Plato and Aristotle in grand academic robes. They were honest men, like others, laughing with their friends, and when they wanted to divert themselves, they wrote the Laws or the Republic, to amuse themselves.”*

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*That part of their life was the least philosophic and the least serious. The most philosophical [thing] was to live simply and quietly. If they wrote on politics, it was like laying down rules for a lunatic asylum; if they presented the appearance of speaking of great matters, it was because they knew that the madmen, to whom they spoke, thought they were kings and emperors. They entered into their principles in order to make their madness as little harmful as possible" (Arendt 1992:22).*

According to Arendt, Plato wrote the *Republic*, in order to justify that the philosophers became kings, not because they would enjoy to rule, but in order that they should not be ruled by worse men than themselves that would interfere with the quiet and absolute peace that constituted the best conditions for the *philosophical life* (1992:21). Even for Aristotle, Arendt argues, the *bios politicos* was there for the sake of the *bios theoretikos* (Ibid.). The purpose of politics was thus *not* to realize a philosophical doctrine but to create a possibility for, or merely not intervene in, the life of the philosophers: the birth of totalitarianism in the *Republic* must therefore be understood, not as a realization of philosophy, but as a problematic means to the philosophical life.

What Foucault and Arendt seem to agree on is that the core of philosophy for the Greeks was not doctrine (*mathesis*); a set of principles that could be learned and applied. For this reason, as Foucault points out, Plato stressed that philosophy could not be written down (2010: 252); philosophy was an activity or a way of life. It is not, and ought not to be, the task of philosophy to prescribe the content of politics. This is why the *Republic* and the *Laws*, according to Foucault, should be dealt with as cautiously as the myth: "So what philosophy has to say will certainly be said through this nomothetic game, as it is through the mythic game, but in order to say something else" (2010: 253). Philosophy can thus not give an answer to the question: "what is to be done?" This does, however, not mean that philosophy does not relate to politics, according to Foucault. On the contrary, Foucault argues, the test of philosophy's reality, in the case of Plato, is whether philosophy "escapes the danger of being no more than *logos*" (2010: 255).

### **“Philosophical” *parr?sia***

The seriousness of the Platonic philosophy is, according to Foucault, to be found in Plato's *Letters* (Foucault 2010: 254-5). The letters are important in order to understand how philosophy was perceived not merely as a reflection upon politics but also an intervention into politics (2010: 210); something “more” than *logos*. Foucault is especially interested in letter VII, in which Plato narrates his journey and *séjour* at the court of the Syracusan tyrant Dionysius. Letter VII is, according to Foucault, a part of a general shift of the political scene from the *agora* and the *?kkl?sia* towards the court of the sovereign (the prince's soul) (Ibid.). *Parr?sia*, therefore, cannot be understood as praxis peculiar to the democratic form of government; “the problem of *parr?sia* arises under any form of government” (Foucault 2010: 212).

This shift away from the “political” *parr?sia* of democracy is explained by Plato (or whoever is the author) in letter V: bad *parr?sia* has corrupted the Athenian population to such an extent that they are beyond the scope of reform (2010: 213). According to Foucault's reading of letter VII, the shift is, however, not merely away from democracy but also from political action as such. In light of Plato's negative experiences both with oligarchy and democracy (exemplified by the unjust treatment of Socrates both by the thirty tyrants and by the *ekkl?sia*), Plato realized that political action and *parr?sia* no longer were possible (Foucault 2010: 216-7).

Plato, Foucault argues, therefore turns to a new *parrh?sia*stic praxis; the education of the prince's soul by the philosopher in the role of the counsellor. The philosophical *ergon* thus become that of the educator or counsellor in order to make the king into a philosopher (Foucault 2010: 218): “there will be no cessation of evils for the sons of men,” it is stated in letter VII “till either those who are pursuing a right and true philosophy receive sovereign power in the States, or those in power in the States by some dispensation of providence become true philosophers.”[\[3\]](#)

It is here important to clarify that the role of the philosopher as a *parr?sia*stic advisor does

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not consist in stating what the content of politics should be; the philosopher is not a “political expert.” The education of the Prince’ soul, the philosophical *ergon*, is the education, not primarily in *math?sis* (content of knowledge, or a philosophical doctrine) but in *ask?sis* (a mode of life, the philosophical life): “the reality of philosophy is its practice” (Foucault 2010:219,242,247). This practice is however not primarily philosophy as discourse (*logos*) but the work on oneself, or a relationship of self to self: “The reality of philosophy is the work of self on self” (2010:242). The role of the philosopher is, so to speak, not to teach the prince what he has to do, but who he has to be (Ibid.).

Philosophical *parr?sia* is the education of the prince’s soul in the philosophical mode of life, *ask?sis*, which is a government of oneself in order make the prince become a philosopher (Foucault 2010:219). In this way, philosophy and politics correlate in the education of the prince’s soul. Philosophy and politics ought not to coincide in a doctrine (Arendt’s fear): “I think that the misfortune and ambiguity of the relations between philosophy and politics,” Foucault writes “stems from and are no doubt due to the fact that philosophical veridiction has sometimes wanted to think of itself in terms of (...) philosophical doctrine [...] Philosophy and politics must exist in relation, in a correlation; they must never coincide. This, if you like, is the general theme that we can extract from Plato’s text” (2010:289). The only place where philosophy and politics coincide is in the soul of the well-educated prince (2010:293). This is, according to Foucault, the genuine Platonic meaning of the “philosopher king” and the true meaning of the “mythical game” of the *Republic*.

### **“Philosophico-ethical” *parr?sia***

In his discussion of Socrates as a parrhesiast, Foucault develops the conception of philosophical *parr?sia* as a mode of being, a relation of the self to the self, in more detail. One important aspect of the philosophical selfhood, according to Foucault, is expressed in how the conflict between philosophy and rhetoric is portrayed in Plato’s the *Apology* (Foucault 2010:310). This conflict is important for Foucault because he argues that a fight over the monopoly of *parr?sia* took place between philosophy and rhetoric (2010:304). Where rhetoric is a skill (*tekhn?*) which allows the speaker to persuade his audience independently of the



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rhetorician's own beliefs, the philosophical speech takes its meaning, not from a relationship to the audience, but a relationship to the speaker himself. For this reason, Socrates describes himself as a truth-telling man without *tekhnē* (Foucault 2010:312). This non-technical form of speech is characterized by a harmony of truth (*alētheia*) and the belief (*pistis*) of the speaker. Where the rhetorical language is crafted to produce effects in the audience, the philosophical *parrēsia* is a frank statement of what the speaker believes to be the truth (Foucault 2010:314-315). Philosophical *parrēsia* is thus characterized by an authentic relationship to the self; a care for the self. It is characterized by a harmony between speaking and living; a life in harmony with virtue (Foucault 2011:169).

It is this care for the self that makes Socrates refuse to commit injustice, which he argues, that he has been asked to do both under the rule of the thirty tyrants and in the Athenian democracy (Foucault 2010:318). In both cases Socrates resists; a resistance that has become the ideal typical example of individual philosophical resistance hereafter (Foucault 2010:216). This refusal to comply is, according to Foucault, a manifestation of Socratic *parrēsia* (2010:319). The Socratic *parrēsia* is negative in the sense that it is a refusal to act and speak in the political field (as Pericles did). Socratic *parrēsia* nevertheless receives its meaning in relation to politics; in a refusal to commit an injustice. With Socrates, "philosophical" *parrēsia* shifts towards a manifestation of "ethical" *parrēsia*; Socratic *parrēsia* is "philosophico-ethical."[\[4\]](#)

Socratic *parrēsia* is, as Foucault notes, a quite "discrete" form of *parrēsia* because it exactly is an abstention from action (2010:319). Socratic *parrēsia* is an act of what we today know as civic disobedience: when ordered to arrest a man, Socrates does not comply and returns home openly and publicly (Foucault 2010:320). What is at stake is thus not discourse (*logos*) but action (*ergos*): "After all, *parrēsia* may appear in the things themselves," Foucault writes, "it may appear in ways of doing things, it may appear in ways of being" (2010:320).

"Philosophico-ethical" *parrēsia* is, however, for Socrates more than the refusal of becoming a subject of an unjust political action. The philosophical *parrēsia* which Socrates lives—"the task he had decided to pursue until his last breath, the task to which he had bound his life, and for which he refuses any payment or reward" (Foucault 2010:326)—is to *listen* to anyone, rich as poor, and help them understand that they should not care about wealth or

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glory, but about themselves. And, that caring about themselves primarily consists in “knowing whether or not one knows what one knows” (Ibid.). That is, philosophical *parrhesia* is for Socrates to cure people of the common and false opinion that corrupt their souls and have them think for themselves (Foucault 2011:105ff). A true life is a life free of prejudice. The site of philosophical *parrhesia* has thus shifted from the prince’ soul to the lives and souls of all the people Socrates met. Socratic *parrhesia* is thus practicing philosophy itself, caring for oneself and telling others to care for themselves (Foucault 2011:111-112).

The core of Socratic *parrhesia*, as for the Platonic *parrhesia*, is not the question of the content of politics but the question of the political subject: “Philosophy’s question is not the question of politics,” Foucault writes “it is the question of the subject in politics” (2010:319). What is at stake in Socratic *parrhesia* is not the safety of the city (as in the Periclesian *parrhesia* at the dawn of the Peloponnesian Wars). What is at stake is the integrity of the philosophical life as true life. With Socrates’ refusal to commit an injustice and his commitment to listen to anyone and help them to live a true life, *parrhesia* is no longer a particular way of speaking the truth; *parrhesia* is a way of living the truth through practices on the self by the self: “Being an agent of the truth,” Foucault writes, “and as a philosopher claiming for oneself the monopoly of *parrhesia*, will not just mean claiming that one can state the truth in teaching, in the advice one gives, and in the speeches one makes, but that one really is in fact, in one’s life, an agent of the truth” (2010:320).

### **“Ethical” *parrhesia***

The understanding of philosophical *parrhesia* as a true life, or beautiful life, is even more thoroughly manifested in the life of the Cynics with Diogenes (most often referred to as “Diogenes the Cynic” or “Diogenes in the Barrel”) as the prime example. To underline this, Foucault refers to a description by Diogenes Laertius of Diogenes the Cynic: when Diogenes is asked what the most beautiful in men is, he answers: *parrhesia* (Foucault 2011:166). For Diogenes, the true life is the exercise of *parrhesia*. The Cynics’ *parrhesia* is the full manifestation of “ethical” *parrhesia* because they barely have a “doctrine,” that is, the theoretical framework of the cynics is rudimentary and that is exactly something they take

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pride in (Foucault 2011:165,204). What is at stake in Cynic philosophy is not *math?sis* but *ask?sis*; what is at stake is the true and beautiful life.

Though the life of the Cynics can be understood as closely related to Socratic *parr?sia* as living and speaking in accordance with a conception of the true life (Socrates' refusal to become an unjust man), the Cynics mode of life is more than a harmonic life in accordance with certain virtues such as temperance, courage or wisdom (Foucault 2011:169). The cynic life is a highly codified life; a true and beautiful life. The core of this life is that one practice the "scandal" of truth by words and deeds.

The cynic life is a life of renunciation of material wealth: "The Cynic is the man with the staff, the beggar's pouch, the cloak, the man with the sandals or bare feet, the man with the long beards, the dirty man" (Foucault 2011:170). The Cynic has no family, no household, and most astonishingly, no country (Ibid.). This renunciation of everything that for the Greeks signified a dignified life makes the Cynic independent and free. Since the Cynic does not depend on anyone his is "sovereign" of his own life (Foucault 2011:271, 307ff). No one can take his property because he does not own anything; no one can ostracise him from his fatherland because he has none.

This extreme renunciation of material wealth gives the Cynic the freedom to speak the truth to anyone: the life of the Cynic is the precondition for the exercise of *parr?sia* (Foucault 2011:171). The scene of *parr?sia* shifts with the Cynic away from the *?kkl?sia* (Pericles), the soul of the prince (Plato), the people of Athens (Socrates) to "humanity" (Cynics). The Cynic is the "scout" or "spy" for humanity: "if one wishes to be humanity's spy," Foucault writes "[and] tell humanity frankly and courageously all the danger it might face and where its true enemies are to be found, then one must have no attachments" (2011:170). The cynic life is a manifestation of what life is in its independence. For the Cynics, true life is therefore not merely life in accordance with principles; for the Cynics, *bios* as such becomes a manifestation of truth (Foucault 2011:172). For the Cynics, *parr?sia* is therefore more truth-*living* than truth-*telling*. Truth is manifested in *ask?sis*, discipline, and "the bareness of life" (Foucault 2011:173).

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Since *math?sis* plays next to no role in Cynic *parr?sia*, the only way to learn Cynic philosophy is by living a cynic life. For the Cynics, teaching philosophy did not consist in passing on knowledge but in moral training (Foucault 2011:204). Foucault gives an example hereupon by referring to the way in which Diogenes taught the children of Xenias: Diogenes taught the children to wait on themselves without calling upon servants or slaves, he taught them to wear simple clothes and walking without shoes, he taught them to walk on the streets and keep their eyes low, he taught them to hunt their own food etc. (Foucault 2011:204-5) In this way, the children went through an “apprenticeship in independence” (Ibid.). The Cynics are for this reason, according to Foucault, one of the first manifestations of philosophical “heroism”: the Cynic is one to follow and imitate if one desires to live a true life; a genuinely sovereign life. The cynic life is true life as the government of oneself.

### ***Parr?sia* as ontology of the present**

Though Foucault spends the vast majority of the two last lectures he gave at the *Collège de France* on the topic of ethics in ancient Athens, it seems to me that these lectures should be read, not primarily as a contribution to the history of ancient philosophy, but as a part of Foucault’s general project of writing an ontology of the present or an ontology of ourselves (Foucault 1984). This question of the present—the “what is happening today?” or “what is the meaning of our present reality?”—is according to Foucault the historically new question which Kant as the first thinker raised in “What is Enlightenment?”; the text that Foucault chose as the epigraph of *The Government of Self and Others* (2010:11ff).

The epigraph is at first glance peculiar: how can we understand the significance of “What is Enlightenment?” and the question of the ontology of the present as the epigraph to a lecture series on the praxis of *parr?sia* in ancient Athens? I think the answer can be found towards the end of *The Government of Self and Others* where Foucault returns to modern philosophy and Kant’s philosophy in particular: “if I began this year’s lectures with Kant,” Foucault writes “it is inasmuch as Kant’s text on the *Aufklärung* is a certain way for philosophy, through the critique of the *Aufklärung*, to become aware of problems which were traditionally problems of *parr?sia* in antiquity” (Foucault 2010:350).

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In modern philosophy, and especially, in Kant's writings on the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, Foucault sees a reclamation of the praxis of *parrhesia* by philosophy in the form of critique (Foucault 2010:353-4). There is however, according to Foucault, two openings of philosophical *parrhesia* as critique in Kant's writings, which according to Foucault are mutually exclusive. Firstly, there is the critical form of thinking which according to Foucault is opened with the three *Critiques*, but first and foremost by the first *Critique*; a critical form of thinking that asks to the conditions for the possibilities of true knowledge (Foucault 2010:20). This, according to Foucault, is the opening of what we today call analytical philosophy (Ibid.) Secondly, there is a critical form of thinking, opened by Kant in his so-called "political writings" on the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, which, according to Foucault asks to the question of the ontology of the present or the ontology of ourselves (Ibid.).

It is this second form of critical thinking which Foucault wants to associate himself with. According to Foucault, philosophy in the form of critical thinking of the ontology of the present is a *parrhesiastic* praxis by way of its reinterpretation of three pivotal aspects of the *parrhesia* of ancient Athens: the relationship between philosophy and politics in critique, the frankness of critique with regard to prejudice and illusion, and critical thinking as a mode of being.

Firstly, philosophy as critique is, as the ancient praxis of *parrhesia*, not a prescription of the content of politics. However, as in the case of ancient philosophy, critique constitutes its reality in relation to politics: "It is not for philosophy to say what should be done in politics," Foucault writes "[philosophy] has to exist in a permanent and restive exteriority with regard to politics, and it is in this that it is real" (2010:354). Philosophy consists in questioning the significance of events, as Kant did with regard to the French Revolution. Secondly, the role of critique is "constantly [to] practice its criticism with regard to deception, trickery, and illusion" (2010:354). As for the Socratic praxis of *parrhesia*, it is the role of philosophy as critique to ask to the prejudices that haunt "common opinion," that is, to make us reflect upon whether we really know what we think that we know. Thirdly, philosophy as critique is always a way of life, *askesis*, which implies the possibility of the transformation of the subject. Critique is always also self-critique, care of self and government of self. Critique following the Socratic manifestation of *parrhesia* always and constantly implies the possibility that I, myself, might be wrong.

## Thinking and public life

In addition to the reasons stated above, I think that Foucault chose Kant's "What is Enlightenment?" because it opens the question of the public: "One of the interesting things about this text [...] is that it puts the notion of the public, to which the publication is addressed, at the very heart of its analysis" (Foucault 2010:11ff). The reason this is an important question is that it points to another pivotal theme of *parrhesia*, namely, that philosophy as critique can never be a solitary praxis. The ultimate meaning of philosophy as critique persists in the relationship of the self to others and thereby a critical relationship to oneself. Critical thinking as *parrhesia* has to be a transformative praxis both with regard to self and others. This, I think, is part of what is meant by Foucault's famous last cryptic words in *The Courage of Truth*: "there is no establishment of the truth without an essential position of otherness" (2011:326).

This idea of the inherent otherness of critical thinking is a pivotal theme for Arendt in her late works. Though most of her writings are on politics and political life, and though she is well-known for a rigid distinction between the *bios politikos* and the *bios theoretikos*, several of her most famous works on politics address the relationship between thinking and politics in a quite different way. If Arendt ever believed that "the life of the mind" was a passive mode of being (which I however doubt), she definitely changed her mind before writing *The Human Condition*; her work on the *vita activa*. In the final chapter, Arendt addresses the possibilities of action as political freedom in our contemporary world, and surprisingly she concludes that the possibility of action in our contemporary world is to *think*: "Thought, finally—which we, following the premodern as well as the modern tradition, omitted from our reconsideration of the *vita activa*—is still possible, and no doubt actual, wherever men live under conditions of political freedom" (Arendt 1998:324).

Another notable example for the interconnection of thinking and politics is Arendt's judgment that the reason that Adolf Eichmann could commit the atrocities that he did was that he

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lacked the ability to think (Arendt 1971:4). Although Eichmann could recite the categorical imperative he did not have the ability to think; he did not have a critical relationship to himself and his actions (Arendt 2006:123). Thinking then, for Arendt as for Foucault, always receives its reality in relation to something different from itself. As for Foucault, thinking is for Arendt a praxis that involves an inherent otherness, which she famously describes with reference to Socrates as “the soundless dialogue between me and myself” (1971:185). Thinking as well as the government of self imply an internalization of otherness, which becomes visible in our communication of what we do or what we think: “*I govern myself*,” “*I know myself*” or “*I care for myself*.”

For this reason, I argue that if one—on the basis Arendt’s argument about the totalitarian aspect of the introduction of truth into politics—would conclude that a radical disagreement exists between Arendt and Foucault, one might miss what I see to be their shared project: the political potentialities of critique and self-critique as *parrhesia* (Foucault) or *thinking* (Arendt). What is shared by their writings on these matters is the quite astonishing idea that what we do when we think or even write is something *secondary* to a dialogue with someone else; it is an internalization of spoken language which always implies a listener. Philosophy and thinking are therefore inherently forms of shared and collective work which receives its meaning in relation to a community of other human beings; whether we call that politics (Foucault) or the public sphere (Arendt) is of less importance.

Foucault and Arendt are both Kantians in the sense that they belong to a tradition of thinkers that ask to the ontology of the present; to whom we are and what the significance of our present moment is. I therefore find it fitting to let Kant be the one to sign this essay with a statement taken from his political writings on the inherent public nature of what we do when we think:

*“It is said: the freedom to speak or to write can be taken away from us by the power-that-be, but the freedom to think cannot be taken from us through them at all. However, how much and how correctly would we think if we did not think in community with others to whom we communicate our thoughts and who communicate theirs to us! Hence, we may safely state that the external power which deprives man of the freedom to communicate his thoughts publicly also*

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*takes away his freedom to think, the only treasure left to us in our civic life and through which alone there may be a remedy against all evils of the present state of affairs" (Arendt 1992:40-41).*

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Plato, letter VII: [http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/seventh\\_letter](http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/seventh_letter).



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[1] See Hannah Arendt: "What is Authority?", in *Between Past and Future*. New York: Viking Press, 1961, but even more clearly the excerpt from Hannah Arendt's *Denktagebuch*, September 1951 in *The Promise of Politics*. New York: Schocken Books. 2005, p. 3

[2] Arendt's and Foucault's lectures which later have been collected and published with respectively the titles *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* and *The Government of Self and Others I-II*, were held respectively at the University of Chicago 1964 and then again at The New School for Social Research 1965-66, and, the at Collège de France 1982-84

[3] See Plato, letter VII: [http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/seventh\\_letter.html](http://classics.mit.edu/Plato/seventh_letter.html)

[4] In *The Government of Self and Others*, Foucault mainly describes Socratic *parrhesia* as "philosophical", but in *The Courage of Truth*, where his focus seems to have shifted a bit, he mainly describes Socratic *parrhesia* as "ethical." In my reading I hold that Socratic *parrhesia* are both "philosophical" and "ethical." For that reason I describe it as "philosophico-ethical"; a term Foucault does not use himself.

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