

Testing and Experimenting: Part 4: coda:
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Testing and Experimenting: Parrhesia as truth-telling, indispensable for the city and the individual.

From a contemporary perspective, looking at the reduction in the development of human thought and action, it becomes more and more difficult for humankind to survive beyond this century. There is little doubt that aspects of thought still provide contributions to effective continuation, but they are substantially insufficient in the contemporary context.¹ These matters and weathers can be focused into the fore through some works by contemporary poets, as the examples given today begin to indicate, but only just about, given the fraught nature of so much of the best stuff. Already the sleepers awaiting the lines of steel are laid out in equally spaced formation, just before the entrance to the circular form of the sewage plant. What is becoming apparent at express momentum is the viable attention to articulation in the shift from 'know thyself' at the ancient Temple of Apollo, to the late Modernist work by George Oppen, to the subsequent understanding of the construction of the self as other.²

Throughout the first months of 1984, and until his death in June in that year, Michel Foucault 'set out a ... concept of truth which [he proposed] had a major presence in ancient philosophy [and] which has been largely hidden by the modern regime of discourse and knowledge.' (Frédéric Gros 2011: 344)³ Foucault proposed a typology of styles of veridiction in ancient culture, different from the post-Aristotelian tradition that ranked discourses according to their logical form. Foucault distinguished the truth-telling of parrhesia from the truth-telling of teaching, prophecy, and wisdom, proposing that parrhesia aims for the transformation of the ethos of its interlocutor, involves a risk for its speaker, and belongs to the spacetime of present reality. In so doing the problem of the government of people becomes dependent upon an ethical elaboration of the subject that is able to bring out in an interlocutor and in front of others the differences of a discourse of truth. He characterised three components of praxis, which I have elaborated into four, these are: Knowledge, Power, Aesthetics and the Self. These components, of course, need unpacking and explaining, but I will not try to overstep my task here by attempting it. For our purpose here today I can note that Knowledge is fraught with the difficulties of veridiction. This brings focus into what Merleau-Ponty eloquently named *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945, translated into English 1962), which Charles Olson began to develop, largely from different sources, in his poetry and his work on history and proprioception. We can quickly recognise what will be involved in elaborating on Power when we hear of Foucault's late preference for the term governmentality, which he immediately links to subjectivation and thus the Self. Aesthetics is that component which informs and makes eloquent knowledge, power

and the Self, and is so doing is the ground from which any ethics can be made efficacious.

Frédéric Gros, Foucault's editor, notes how Foucault begins to bring some of these components together when he says, "To the possible reproach that he had not got involved in politics, Socrates replied: If I had done so I would have long been dead. However, Foucault shows that this answer does not signify a fear of dying, but rather the attempt to preserve for as long as possible a mission given to him by the gods; the care of others: that insistent and perpetual vigilance aimed at checking whether everyone is taking proper care of themselves.' (2011: 347) 'It is in order to be able to safeguard this task [to take care of themselves correctly] that Socrates refuses to engage in politics. It is not out of fear of dying; it is fear of his crucial mission being compromised by his disappearance.' (2011: 348)

Taking the famous phrase of Socrates, 'Crito, we owe a cock to Asclepius; take care of it',⁴ Foucault calls on an interpretation by George Dumézil:⁵ if Socrates thanks Asclepius in his last moments, it is indeed because he has been cured, but cured by philosophy of the disease of false discourse, of the contagion and dominant opinions, of the epidemic of prejudices.' (Gros 2011: 348) 'Of all diseases, the one which is genuinely mortal is the disease of discourses (false clarity and deceptive self-evidence), and right to the end philosophy cures me of it.' (2011: 348) Socrates last words (take care of it, don't neglect my request) refers to the care of the self, dear to Foucault and which Foucault wanted to place at the heart of ancient ethics, will have been in fact the last word on Socrates lips.' (2011: 348) That is in the light of the self as an invented, or rather constructed, condition. This care of the self is implicitly a care for truth-telling, 'which calls for courage, and especially a care for the world and for others, demanding the adoption of a "true life" as continuous criticism of the world.' (2011: 349) Socrates is the person with the courage to assert this requirement of truth in the visible fabric of his existence, it will make it possible to pose the problem of the "true life" and hence provide a general theoretical framework for the study of ancient Cynicism. (2011: 349)

Two major directions of thought and feeling are then derived, one from *Alcibiades*, a work once attributed to Plato, but now thought to be by an unnamed person writing in the fourth century BCE, in which the idea of know thyself is best gained through a philosophical friendship and where we see ourselves, as if in a mirror. Charles Olson begins to take this up in his work in the 1960s. The second direction may be thought of as problematized in the *Laches*, where courage is a kind of wisdom, an aesthetics of existence pursuing the task of giving a visible, harmonious, beautiful form to life. These directions put the poetics here into a significant connectedness between constituted knowledge and the proposal to test and experiment, that is to take a particular stance or attitude.

An emphasis in these late concerns in Foucault is that ‘The truth, definitely, is that which is unbearable, as soon as it leaves the domain of discourse to be embodied in existence. The “true life” can only manifest itself as “other life”.’ (2011:353) But this true life is, with any poetry worth its salt, ‘a scandalous, disturbing, immediately rejected and marginalised “other “ life.’ (2011: 354)

In the last lectures, by pushing the reading of the discourses by Epictetus as far as possible, he is able to say that this life is at the same time the criticism of the existing world and supports the call for “an other world”, ‘giving rise to the demand for a different world.⁶ The ascesis [severe self-discipline] by which Cynics force their lives, ‘to permanent exposure, radical destitution, unrestrained animality, and unlimited sovereignty (the four reversed meanings of truth) is hardly designed ... merely to guarantee inner tranquility as an end in itself, albeit edifying at the same time. The Cynic strives for the “true life” so as to get others to see that they are mistaken and have lost their way, and to explode the hypocrisy of accepted values. ... This critique, presupposes a continuous work on self and an instruction to others, should be interpreted as a political task. And this “philosophical militancy,” as Foucault calls it, is even the noblest and highest politics: ... Certainly the virtue of this reorientation was first of all polemical, since it involved deposing the classical privilege of self knowledge and contradicting Christian ascesis, entailing self-renunciation and obedience to the other, with an ancient ascesis leading to a self-construction.’ (2011: 354) For Foucault this is a social practice, ‘and even an invitation to good government (correctly caring for the self in order to care correctly for others).’ (2011: 354) ‘... the Cynics represent in fact the moment at which the value of ascesis consists in it being addressed as a provocation to others, since it involves constituting oneself as a spectacle which confronts each individual with [their] own contradictions, so that the care of self becomes precisely a care of the world, the “true life” calling for the advent of an “other world”. (2011: 355)

The poetic life that tests truth, cannot fail to appear to most people as a transgressive other experimental life. In 1984 Foucault wants to emphasise that the hallmark of the true is otherness: that which makes a difference in the world and in people’s opinions, that which forces one to transform one’s mode of being, that whose difference opens up the perspective of an other world to be contrasted, to be imagined. The philosopher and poet thus become those who, through the courage of their truth-telling, make the lightning flash of an otherness vibrate through their life and poetry. (2011: 356) On the last page of the manuscript of Foucault’s final lecture he wrote:

“... there is no establishment of the truth without an essential position of otherness; the truth is never the same; there can be truth only in the form of the other world and the other life.” (2011: 356)

It is the work of some of the poetry I attend to, that the æsthetic component of these potentials and positions are realised. It remains to be understood how effective these matters will become in human existence this century. In any effective poetry now, it continues to be necessary to test and to experiment.

¹ There is little doubt that aspects of thought (in, for instance, Heraclitus, in the translations and commentaries of G. S. Kirk (*The Cosmic Fragments, A Critical Study*, 1954, corrected 1962), Charles H. Kahn (*The art and thought of Heraclitus*, 1979), Brooks Hoxton (*Fragments, The Collected Wisdom of Heraclitus*, 2001) and S. Marc Cohen (Heraclitus lecture, 2002, revised 2006) still provide contributions to effective continuation, but they are substantially insufficient in the contemporary context. I am thankful to two of the interlocutors for drawing my attention to Kahn and to Cohen.

² The extended attention this brings can be first articulated through Foucault's late work, including the last lecture in 1984 and its preceding work in 1983, Michel Foucault (2005) *The Hermeneutics of the Subject, Lectures at the College de France 1981-1982*; Foucault (2010) *The Government of Self and Others, Lectures at the College de France 1982-83*; Foucault (2011) *The Courage of Truth. The Government of Self and Others II, Lectures at the College de France 1983-1984*; all of these were edited by Frédéric Gros and translated by Graham Burchell, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

³ Frédéric Gros (2011) 'Course Context', Foucault (2011).

⁴ Plato, *Phaedo*, 118a. G.M.A. Grube's translation reads: 'Crito, we owe a cock to Asclepius; make this offering to him and do not forget.' John M. Cooper notes: 'Socrates apparently means that death is a cure for the ills of life.' (*Plato Complete Works*, edited by Cooper [1997], Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing).

⁵ Georges Dumézil (1984, 1999) *The Riddle of Nostradamus. A Critical Dialogue*, translated by Betsy Wing,, Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press.

⁶ See Foucault (2011): 271 pp. Foucault is reading Epictetus' discourse III-22,