

# The teacher as parrhesiastes

Reflections on the Parrhesia project  
in relation to educational practice  
By Jan van Egmond

## Introduction

In this essay I would like to reflect on the relationship between the practice of parrhesia and the practice of teaching. The incentive for this reflection were notions of the Parrhesia project as formulated by SIGN gallery in cooperation with the department Image in Context, represented by Anke Coumans and Bibi Straatman (Centre for Art & Society, Hanzehogeschool Groningen). This project is a part of the Werkmanjaar 2015 as organized by the Werkman Foundation 2015. The project started off with a three day conference in October, centred around discussions of elements of parrhesia and the opening of the Parrhesia exhibition at SIGN gallery. Present members included 'theoricians' from several universities, digital media-based artists, social interventionist artists, art critics and writers. This brought about a diverse set of backgrounds from which parrhesia-related terms such as 'truth', 'communication', 'morality' and others could be approached.



The invitation to join the Parrhesia conference was directed to me as a student of the Frank Mohr Institute. However, I found that many elements in Foucault's own notion of parrhesia sparked my interest as a teacher. I see many similar elements in both practices, yet Foucault mentions clearly in his essay<sup>1</sup> that a teacher cannot be a parrhesiastes:

*"For instance, from the ancient Greek perspective, a grammar teacher may tell the truth to the children that he teaches, and indeed may have no doubt that what he teaches is true. But in spite of this coincidence between belief and truth, he is not a parrhesiastes."<sup>2</sup>*

I then wondered why my educational practice and the principles which guide it have such in common with parrhesia and yet they are not the same. Both practices are founded on a sense of truth and on a certain duty and willingness to communicate this truth. I would argue that teaching and parrhesia also involve a certain risk; a philosopher draws his right to criticize his sovereign from the sovereigns consent just as I draw most of my authority from the respect given by my students. Nonetheless parrhesia is a more abstract ideal whereas teaching can be as tangible as a 9-to-5 job; one can quit being a teacher as soon as one leaves the educational setting. But a parrhesiastes will always feel the moral obligation to voice his truth, at whatever place and time. Hence I presuppose that the parrhesiastic game is always a form of teaching while it may certainly not be the other way around. In this essay I will introduce parrhesia's characteristics and relate them to those of my educational practice in an effort to see how one practice can inform another.

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1 [\*"The Meaning and Evolution of the Word Parrhesia."\*](#) Michel Foucault. Essay in *Discourse and Truth: the Problematization of Parrhesia*, edited by Joseph Pearson, 1999. Source text for this essay.

2 Foucault, 1999. P3

## What marks the parrhesiastes?

### Characteristics of parrhesia

#### What does a parrhesiastes do?

As a lover of dictionaries, I was pleased that Foucault's essay started with an etymological explanation of the word parrhesia. 'Parrhesia' is a combination of 'pan', Greek for 'everything' and 'rhema', 'that which is said'. The parrhesiastes is one who says everything that he has in mind; he speaks openly about what he believes to be true and conveys this without rhetorical means to his audience. In this sense, to be a parrhesiastes indicates a relation between the speaker and his speech; he makes it clear that he believes his statement to be true *in his own opinion*.

This short introduction is already abundant in thought-provoking terms; 'truth', 'opinion', 'communication', 'openhearted language versus rhetorical means'. Within the discussions of the Parrhesia project these notions passed by quite often because it concerns the practical application of abstract terms. Can one be completely truthful, for example? Is there such a thing as *the* truth or can truth only be constructed within a subjective framework? William James states in his *Principles of Psychology* that thought is always singular; one cannot communicate his thoughts directly to another mind, thus thoughts are always misconstrued up to a certain extent because two people interpret a concept differently. Perhaps truth is to fact what content is to subject matter, speaking in art terms; subject-matter can be determined on sight, whereas the content is a reflection of the viewers mind who projects his interpretation of the work's elements back onto the work. The fact is a given, whereas truth is interpreted.

But if there are then no truths to be certain of being truthful, then we must question if the parrhesiastes beliefs also ring true to us. Foucault investigates the difference between truth as seen by the Greeks and by Descartes. He describes that in the parrhesiastic act there is always an exact coincidence between belief and truth.<sup>3</sup> But the former sees this coincidence occur in the very act of speaking parrhesiastically, whereas the latter distinguishes between personal truth or conviction and general opinion or consensus. So for the Greeks there is no questioning whether what a parrhesiastes says is true since he possesses a prerequisite moral quality. Hence he knows the truth and through speech, can coincide belief and truth for his audience. Personally I find this view to be hopelessly romanticized as well as a beautiful ideal to strive for. I think that I would not question the honest intention of something said by someone whom I consider to have 'complete' moral integrity.

On the other hand there is the Cartesian view whereby the coincidence between belief and truth is obtained in a certain (mental) evidential experience. Descartes separates the personal from the social or public consensus and creates a gap between the truth of the speaker and of the audience. Interestingly enough, who then decides that one is a parrhesiastes? Can truthfulness be based on mere statistics or can a parrhesiastes be so convinced of his truth that it is unshakeable? Is it the numbers of believers or the individual conviction of the believer that gives power to truth? In regard to the parrhesiastes, I think that the parrhesiastes must have such belief in whatever he sees to be true. He must draw his determination about his beliefs from both reason and intuition; he must *feel* that it is true, so that he still knows it to be true in the face of any argument or audience. Only then can he be confident that his belief will resonate with the audience and is seen as truth.

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<sup>3</sup> I wonder whether Foucault is aware of the precise meaning of 'exact' and thus uses it consciously in his statement. I ascribe to Schoenmaekers' definition, as given in his *Beeldende Wiskunde*, that the word 'precise' originates from the Latin 'preacisere', which means 'to cut (apart)' whereas 'exact' originates from 'exagere' (Latin) which translates to 'to make the innermost surface'. An exact coincidence would then pertain to a synergy of the essence of belief and truth, which sounds sublimely dramatic.

### Why does a parrhesiastes do?

A logical concern is then to ascertain if someone has sufficient moral integrity to 'take his word for it' that what he says is true. Foucault posits a strong indicator for this as he states that it is a measure of *courage* that sets the parrhesiastes apart. If someone has absolutely nothing to gain from speaking his mind or, even more so, has something to lose by speaking, then that probably marks him as a parrhesiastes. This brings us to another important part of the act of parrhesia, namely the situation in which the parrhesiastes functions; what is the social context and his own position or status within the social hierarchy? If a philosopher puts his life at stake by speaking out to a dictator, he is most likely a parrhesiastes for, as subject to the laws and will of his sovereign, he may be killed for voicing his critique. Another example would be a friend who risks his friendship by telling another friend that he disagrees with him. Interestingly, Foucault also mentions that a king cannot be parrhesiastic since he has nothing to lose by voicing an idea contrary to public belief. But I would argue that there is a fine distinction between a truly immune sovereign and a king; especially a king has much to lose and may do so if his people rises up against him or, in a constitutional monarchy, force him to abdicate. Could Louis XIV have been parrhesiastic when drawing upon his holy right to rule (Droit Divine) in a French revolutionary court of law? If he believed in the justness of his monarchy with the greatest determination, could he have swayed the revolutionaries? Or did he not possess a moral integrity on which to base his view as truthful, despite his life being at stake? Is it possible to speak parrhesiastically when your truth is a direct defendant of what you risk to lose? Since one could easily be swayed to change his opinion in the face of danger, it sounds impossible to be parrhesiastic when there is a direct relation between what is critiqued and what is at stake.

Foucault mentions here that this is most likely true since the parrhesiastic critique tends to appeal to the interlocutor's power to act; he who is central to the social construct, for example the sovereign or prime minister, can punish the parrhesiastes for his utterances. As Foucault explains:

*"...the function of parrhesia is not to demonstrate the truth to someone else, but has the function of criticism: criticism of the interlocutor or of the speaker himself. "This is what you do and this is what you think; but this is what you should not do and should not think." "This is the way you behave, but that is the way you ought to behave." "This is what I have done, and was wrong in so doing." ..."*<sup>4</sup>

A parrhesiastes thus always speaks from a lower position wherein he is subject to the interlocutor's power over him. But since the parrhesiastes feels the moral obligation to speak out, he accepts the risk of losing his life or status. Foucault does not see a father or a teacher as a parrhesiastes because of this subjected position. A democratic assembly of leaders may be parrhesiastic though, since their power is drawn from the consent of the people whom they govern(!). This would be democratic parrhesia, as distinguished from the monarchic parrhesia used by a subject towards his sovereign. As I see it then, he or they who are in power can be parrhesiastic depending on the position they themselves assume within the social hierarchy. Just as a senate is formed by public consent for representation, a teacher can fulfill his duty only by consent of the student. If the public or the student rejects the leader's authority, he or she cannot lead; cannot risk this leadership; cannot be parrhesiastic. Of course there is still the difference between the Greek and the Cartesian view; in this instance the former would not mark the leader as a parrhesiastes since, if the audience rejects the parrhesiastes truth, he lacks the moral quality to convey truth. Whereas Descartes' idea of a parrhesiastes does not strictly require the audience to accept the parrhesiastes' truth.

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4 Foucault, 1999. P3

### **When does a parrhesiastes do?**

It is good to question why a parrhesiastes feels the need to subject himself to his audience. Has the teacher or the democratic monarch assumed this position because it is his only way to power or does he feel this to be morally correct? Why do I feel morally obliged to work by the consent of my students? We find the answer in the final aspect of Foucault's parrhesia, namely duty. It is duty that separates an ordinary speaker from a parrhesiastes, since an ordinary speaker can choose to stay silent instead of risking his life or reputation. A parrhesiastes speaks dutifully since he feels morally obliged to perform such duty, just as a teacher may feel obliged to help his students no matter in what hour or situation such help is required.

We can see that the characteristics of parrhesia relate quite closely to those of a teacher. A parrhesiastes must first be truth-having; to experience an exact coincidence between his belief and truth. Secondly he must convey this without rhetorics to his audience since he feels morally obliged to do so. And third he must ground the act of parrhesia within a dutiful attitude; he *does* as such because he *is* as such at all times.

### **When does teaching become parrhesia?**

A comparison of practices

Through our definition of parrhesia we can compare it with the characteristics of teaching. Here I will relate to both my idea of an educational practice in general as well as my own practice in the *PressPlay* Offcourse, an elective course on performance art given at Minerva Academy, Groningen. As said in the introduction, I wonder why my educational practice has such in common with parrhesia and what then sets them apart. Let us see how truth, communication, moral obligation and duty function within an educational practice.

In my opinion there is little difference between the coincidence of belief and truth that a parrhesiastes experiences and that of a teacher. I certainly would not teach my students anything that I do not believe to be true. But whether that truth is acknowledged, or properly conveyed as Foucault would say, is hard to pinpoint. Personally I ascribe to the Cartesian idea of truth as a mental construct; I may feel that my beliefs are true, but how could I listen to and even learn from my students if I thereby reject any contradicting beliefs of theirs? So in this view I might see myself as a parrhesiastes if I feel I speak the truth despite a legion of raised eyebrows among my students. At one time or another I may also use didactical devices or rhetorics to direct a student in a certain direction, but this I do not consider a default method. I would rather foster my students' practice through support (push them up) than through manipulation (pull them up). So in the Cartesian view, where my truth can differ from that of my students, I could be parrhesiastic as long as I convey my beliefs without rhetorical devices and manipulative didactics.

To this we must add the important requirement of giving critique; one who speaks of facts or mentions something about the curriculum does not conduct parrhesia. As Foucault states, a parrhesiastes only functions when his truth is a critique of the interlocutor. And holding a teaching position is much more than just critiquing a student or his work; one has to organize, instruct, prepare and run classes, from which process students create work that is eventually evaluated. And especially during an evaluation the educational hierarchy is not dissolved since the teacher must position himself as the interlocutor (or 'sovereign') to grade the student.

A teacher could perhaps take a risk in the sense that he is secondary to the development of a student, especially in on-on-one critique; his interest is with the student, hence he risks losing his

attention to his critique if his truth is too negatively received by the student. Perhaps the teacher could speak with a form of democratic parrhesia if he shows that his position is legitimized by the consent of the students? But this dynamic does not explicitly dissolve his prominence in the educational hierarchy, so I would think it far fetched for him to use parrhesia.

The only time when a teacher might dissolve the hierarchy most effectively is in the 'Ontschoolste' school, which is a pedagogical concept where the student's current development is centralized and the teacher proposes a development plan according to the students needs. Here he would dissolve his hierarchical position in terms of organization and 'planner' of development, to which he could add the dissolving of the educational hierarchy. Personally I enjoy 'teaching' in a bar; if I happen to meet Minerva students (whom I do not teach and have no power over) and we happen to discuss their work, then I enjoy giving advice as I would as a teacher. So it is akin to teaching, yet dispenses with the educational hierarchy that weights the teachers critique. I cannot impose my critique upon him as I could in class, but it also lowers my risk significantly since I literally have nothing to lose but his interest for as long as we are at the bar. Apparently the hierarchical structure that teaching necessitates can hardly fit the reverse hierarchy of parrhesia, even if only democratically.

As for the characteristic of duty, this is the reason that I see critiquing someone's work or process in a bar similar (at least in principle) to in the classroom. I enjoy helping people, giving advice and aiding their development as an artist or professional. This may differ from a strict moral obligation or dutifulness that a parrhesiastes feels, but I rarely decline feedback or dialogue to someone who asks me. I feel dutiful towards the students and to their practice since I would regret it if they could not get the best out of what they are doing. I feel dutiful to anyone who asks my help in the form of a critical opinion or an open, constructive dialogue. This is even more so in a proper educational situation. It is my first and foremost interest that the student can further him or herself, and hence I feel I must tell them the truth in a sincere, open way. Both in class as at 1am on a Friday night.

### **Practice versus ideal**

There are many characteristics of parrhesia that we can relate to an educational practice. They often overlap yet never so often does their essence. Let us shortly consider what a teacher may have in common with a parrhesiastes.

A parrhesiastes:	A teacher can use parrhesia, if he:
coincides belief and truth	speaks from his personal beliefs, which he takes to be true
Communicates this clearly and openly	refrains from rhetorics and manipulative didactics
Critiques himself or interlocutor	dissolves both his position as he who knows all (organisational hierarchy) and he who decides all (educational hierarchy). Impossible in educational setting, possible in informal setting (informal teacher mode; only teacher perceives himself in this role)
Risks something	draws his position purely from consent of students; democratic parrhesia
Feels dutiful, morally obliged to speak	always answers a call for help

As we can see, a teacher can fulfill the requirements of truth, honest speech and duty. The point of critique and risk seem to affect one another since one cannot critique if he is in a hierarchical position, yet does not risk anything if the student is not his responsibility. Only if a teacher feels morally obliged to do as he would do while teaching, in a setting where he has no authority based on his position as a teacher, he could perceive himself to be both a parrhesiastes and a teacher.

It seems to me that Foucault supports my informal bar teaching when he states that long continuous speeches are rhetorical devices, whereas a dialogue is typical for parrhesia.<sup>5</sup> This would also support the notion of parrhesia being possible in the 'Ontschoolste' school; in an openhearted, equal-footed dialogue there is certainly room for the exchange of truth. This room for truth is created, as Foucault mentions, because personal conversations are the most frank insofar as you can leave rhetorics and ornamentation behind. You do not have to construct or polish your language in any degree because you have a mutual understanding, a trustworthy relationship to one another.

Teaching thus involves most of parrhesia's characteristics yet remains different because of the hierarchical structure in our educational system. I think that this may be because teaching is a practice that manifests itself in the real world; it entails so many actions and practical problems that it is a down-to-earth profession which requires flexibility, experience, knowledge, social skills, and so on. It is then informed by ideals and theories from social sciences (pedagogics, psychology) and philosophies (archaic masters and modern thinkers), but its turf remains the classroom itself. Parrhesia is an abstract ideal that is informed by ancient Greek democracy, philosophy and other fields of study one most likely encounters in a university. Yet it hardly manifests itself as obviously as teaching does, even if only because it is a foreign concept to our culture and thus hardly recognized as parrhesia. Nonetheless, because of the great similarities with (my ideals of) teaching, I would say that parrhesia is always a form of teaching; sharing beliefs and improvement through critique. On the other hand, teaching is hardly parrhesiastic as defined by Foucault. And yet Foucault leaves some hope for veracious and dutiful educators when he says:

"Parrhesia is necessary and useful both for the king and for the people under his rule. The sovereign himself is not a parrhesiastes, but a touchstone of the good ruler is his ability to play the parrhesiastic game."<sup>6</sup>

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5 Foucault, 1999. P5

6 Foucault, 1999. P5