

Foucault's 1984 lectures: a summary

By Andrew Thomas, Spring 2009.

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Lecture one (1/2/1984)

So I decided to do what Anthony says and write down some lecture summaries of the latest Foucault course, *Le Courage de la Vérité: Le gouvernement de soi et des autres II*. It's a curious little book, and as I mentioned before, eagerly awaited by a number of us, not least because the status of the "ethical Foucault" may depend on its interpretation. We shall see.

First note then: the blurb includes a quotation of one of the things Foucault never said (the courses occasionally include bits from his notes that he didn't get time to say), and it seems interesting. They were going to be his last words on the course:

There is no institution of truth without an essential position of alterity. Truth is never the same. There can only be truth in the form of the other world and the other life.

This seems promising, not least for my project of understanding the flight to the desert (and its crazy return to the city). But the course starts a lot more prosaically, and for once without Kant.

The lecture of the 1st of February (he began late due to sickness) was available in mp3 form for a while on the net and so some of you might know it (the book divided it into two chapters, as they take a five minute break in the middle). It basically sums up the bare bones of the concept of *parrhesia*: it's all about risk, about saying your mind, about telling the truth. He's obviously fighting shy of Christianity: that's clearly where he's gonna end up, but the forms it took in antiquity were different for being non-institutional (p.8) even though fearless speech as a practice logically implies the ability to recognise the fearless speaker, the *parrhesiast*. Ultimately, he admits that he's writing the prehistory of confession and ultimately psychiatry and psycho-analysis (he's rarely this clear about it, actually).

The bit that Agamben remembers is actually important for the framework of the course as a whole. He wants to contrast the *parrhesiast* from the prophet, sage, and teacher. Schematically (as always for Foucault!) the distinctions go as follows:

- The *parrhesiast* risks the relation to the hearer by being obliged to say what he himself believes to be true.
- The prophet mediates another's (God's) relation to the hearer by being commanded to say what another (God) tells him is true.
- The sage freely speaks for himself regardless of the hearer the truth which he himself believes to be true.

The technician-teacher indwells the teacher-student relation by transmitting received truths which he himself believes to be true.

In his own words:

The parrhesiast is not a prophet that speaks the truth whilst unveiling, in the name of another and enigmatically, destiny. The parrhesiast is not a sage that, in the name of wisdom, speaks, when he wants to and against the background of his profound silence, being and nature (*phusis*). The parrhesiast is not the professor, the teacher, the man of a know-how who speaks, in the name of a tradition, a *technê*. He does not speak either destiny, nor being, nor *technê*. (p25)

There are some really interesting things here: firstly, he talks about logical necessity, and that's not like him or his historical method. Secondly, he explicitly relates this stuff to the Middle Ages, and there the Franciscans and Dominicans combine the prophet with the parrhesiast, whilst the universities combine the sage with the teacher.

Whilst Foucault kind of wants to use this scheme to do all sorts (he considers laying it over our current age), it's difficult to see how this might work when he has so clearly distinguished them all. He is clear, however, about one thing: these are not philosophical vocations – you aren't meant to find one person who does each of these (although Heraclitus is his example of a sage). They are meant to be “modes of veridiction” (or truth-telling). And that's what he takes further.

Lecture two (8/2/1984): Parrhesia in Democracy and Autocracy

The second lecture continues Foucault's analysis of *parrhesia*, and takes into consideration the political context. *Parrhesia* is argued to be suited to monarchies rather than democracies, and in its relation to the prince, its essential character is to be found. He starts off with some reflections on democracy, and curiously ends up with an almost Trinitarian-shaped account of philosophy.

Firstly, *parrhesia* simply doesn't work in democracies in antiquity. It is dangerous – either for the state or for the individual practising it. It is dangerous for the state because complete freedom of speech, an ubiquitous willingness to challenge the assumptions of common language, undermines the basis for conversation. It is dangerous for the practitioner because democracies are unable to respond to the challenge of *aude sapere*: daring to hear the truth is part of moral development, and democratic assemblies bear no moral development.

This statement about democratic assemblies is based for Foucault on the four principles of Greek politics: that there are always (1) a few (2) moral people (3) who wish the good of the city and (4) whose truth-telling requires a kind of privilege (which is never given them in democracies).

It is part of this argument, I suppose, that democracies nurture rhetoric, and Foucault mentioned in the first lecture that rhetoric is opposed to *parrhesia* point for point (pp14-15): The *parrhesiast* risks the relation to the hearer by being obliged to say what he himself believes to be true.

The rhetorician constructs a false relation to the hearer by deciding to say what he needs to say in order to be believed about what may or may not be true.

This incompatibility grounds a great deal of ancient scepticism towards democracy, particularly worked out in aristocratic critique, Platonist withdrawal, and Aristotelian hesitation. I'm afraid I'm not going to go into details about these interpretations here.

There are a number of examples given to oppose *parrhesia* in democracy to *parrhesia* towards princes (the obvious one is Pisistratus and the tax-free farmer). Fundamentally Foucault draws attention to the fact that Plato was disappointed with his failure with Denys in Sicily, whereas the failure of Athens to accept Socrates was structural.

So we have three poles: in order for truth-telling to take place, a political system has to be in place that allows for ethical discernment. Or in order for ethics to be possible, a truth-

teller is needed in a political situation that allows her to speak. And in order for politics to be effectual, truth has to be spoken about ethics.

For Foucault, any one or two of these without the third will be insufficient (as philosophy: obviously science, ethics, and political theory attempt each individually):

The existence of philosophical discourse, since Greece until now, is precisely within the possibility, or rather the necessity, of this game: to never post the question of *alêtheia* without at the same time re-launching, regarding this same truth, the question of *politeia* and of *êthos*. The same thing for *politeia*. The same thing for *êthos*. (p63)

It is curious, though, that he analyses the interaction of these three poles in ways that remind us of discussions of the trinity in late antiquity (and yes, I am thinking of Augustine), by overlaying them with the modes of truth-telling outlined in the last lecture.

- The prophetic attitude to philosophy predicts the ultimate reconciliation between the three poles;
- The attitude of the sage in philosophy attempts to speak a founding discourse that unites the three poles (presumably preserving their distinction).
- The attitude of the teacher-technician refuses to link them and keeps them apart (as separate University disciplines, we could say).

And I think the *parrhesiastic* attitude bears quoting:

It's the *parrhesiastic* attitude, the one which attempts to fairly, obstinately, and forever starting anew, to bring back to the question of truth that of the political conditions and of ethical distinction [*différenciation*] which opens it up; which perpetually and always brings back to the question of power that of its relation to truth and to knowledge on the one hand, and to ethical distinction [*différenciation*] on the other; and finally the one which ceaselessly brings back to the question of the moral subject the question of true discourse where this moral subject constitutes itself and of power relations where this subject is formed. (p65)

So the parrhesiastic attitude in philosophy is all about the irreducibility of ethics, power, and truth. And that's the Foucauldian program.

Lecture 3 (15/2/1984): A Cock for Life

The third lecture of 1984 (the 15th February) examines Socrates' appropriation of *parrhesia*. The transition I think he's getting at is from the kind of truth-telling that opposes the powerful for the good of the collective towards the kind of truth-telling that opposes vanity for the sake of the good life (and this is where life is inserted into philosophical practice). But the main *locus* for this history is the last words of Socrates.

There are a few names to throw out at this point. Firstly, Dumezil: Foucault is in contact with both Dumezil and Veyne during these lectures (he tells his students what they said when he went and asked them about particular words and so on), and he comments on press reactions to Dumezil's new book on Nostradamus and Socrates: *Le moyne noir en gris dedans Varennes" : sotie nostradamique ; suivie d'un Divertissement sur les dernieres paroles de Socrate*. I can't see whether the English edition actually retains both parts, or suppresses the Socrates "diversion" at the end. One of Foucault's points is that the latter tends to be ignored. He recommends his students to read this book in the lecture before this one, so if you were going to do a reading group on this text, that would be good background reading.

Secondly, Alexander Nehamas, who has more or less made an industry out of describing the problem Foucault takes up in this lecture, namely: why are Socrates' last words about sacrificing foul to Asclepius? You can see this in his concluding chapter to *The Art of Living* (University of California Press, 1998) where he despicably points out how very much he resembles Socrates, Nietzsche and Foucault. Well done, Alexander, you managed to find Foucault's lectures before they were published. Maybe you should also try doing some work now and earn that oversized reputation.

Foucault's first question is: how come Socrates didn't stand up against the stuff going on in his city that he knew was screwed up? That's basically the accusation the Laws bring against him in the *Crito* dialogue. It's what killed him: if he'd worked to change his city during his lifetime, maybe it wouldn't have caused his death. As it stands, his only real claims to fearless speech are when he was more or less forced into public service.

It's not just that *parrhesia* works best under despotism: there were plenty of instances of Socrates' life when Athens was clearly not being ruled by the people. Why didn't he speak out?

The answer given (by Socrates himself) that if Socrates had engaged in politics, he would have died. Why not bite the bullet? Because his divinely-given task lies elsewhere.

And this task is what the Socrates event is all about: not like Solon, not like Diogenes. It is all about Socratic truth-telling. And this kind of truth-telling has three parts:

Searching: Socrates has to look for the wisest person on earth.

Examination: Socrates has to interrogate people to see if they really are wise.

Care of the self: Socrates has to lead people back to themselves, to concern themselves with themselves and with adjusting the way they are in the world (the care of the self: this section resonates with the 3rd volume of the *History of Sexuality*).

It is these three elements that make up Socratic *parrhesia*: looking for people, finding out if they are wise, and then leading them back to the correct concern for the self (unfettered by vanity, self-deceit, etc). And these form a kind of courageous speech that is quite different from political defiance.

Before moving on to Dumezil, Foucault relates the new kind of *parrhesia* to the other forms of truth-telling (prophecy, the sage, and the teacher/technician) and notes that it is still useful for the city. It's a kind of formation of good citizens. And that's why it is a political act, but also a pedagogical act.

The second half of this lecture is all about the interpretation of Socrates' last words, that appeal to the ritual act thanking the god for a healing. Since they are spoken on his deathbed, many interpreters (including Nietzsche) have thought that Socrates is referring to his healing from this wretched life. But this is unsatisfactory because neither Plato nor Socrates seem to think of life as a disease. Dumezil refers to the Crito dialogue (to whom the final words are addressed) to present his solution, and Foucault backs it up with reference to Sophocles and Euripides. Socrates is celebrating his healing from the disease of popular opinion. He has not sold out, he has not agreed with his persecutors or compromised, and Crito has not swept him away from the city (as he had planned). So they have both been healed from the temptation to conform.

This kind of self-propelling from the masses (Bernauer's "Force of flight") is itself a form of care for the self. Which is why Foucault draws attention to the very last words: Socrates tells Crito that they owe Asclepius a cockrel, and then "do not forget, do not neglect". The Greek word *amelêsête* is a cognate of the key word for care of the self – *epimeleia seautou*. So Socrates has managed to stay attentive to his own thoughts, and Crito must continue to be on the alert.

This lecture revolved around the final words of Socrates, as particularly related to the *Apologia*. The next lecture is a reading of the *Laches*.

Lecture four (22/2/1984): Plato's Laches

Foucault's fourth lecture on the *Courage of truth* is a reading of the Plato's *Laches*. He says that no self-respecting professor of philosophy can avoid giving a course on Socrates and his death at some point in his life, and so this is it ("Salvate animam meam" he adds). This lecture sketches out a few more details concerning Socratic *parrhesia* before he leaves the period and goes on to talk about the Cynics. This is also the only lecture he gave this year without a break. I don't think that's significant...

He starts off with some etymological hypotheses about the key "care of the self" word: *epimeleia*, and its root *meleo*. He basically reckons it might be something to do with melodies, and the way in which they make appeals to our person. This stands alone and is a thought in such a raw state that it's difficult to make anything of it. He passes quickly to the exegesis of the dialogue.

Foucault wants to oppose the *Laches* to what seems like his favourite dialogue, the *Alcibiades*. Whereas the latter brings up the problem of care of the self and leads it into a consideration of the soul, the former does more or less the same thing but lands up in giving an account of one's *life (bios)*. This is the kind of thing that will presumably end up in the ascetic exercises of middle Platonism and early Christian asceticism. I don't know if there is a further transition to Agamben's bare life (*zoe*) at some point, but I'm waiting in anticipation.

Bibliographical note: it seems Foucault was really excited about Jan Patočka's work on *Plato and Europe* as it gives a central role to the care of the self. But it is precisely with the reading of *Laches* and the role of one's life (rather than soul) in these spiritual exercises that separates the two.

The dialogue is basically about two young men (Lysimachus and Melesias) requesting help from two old men (Laches and Nicias) in bringing up their children. They are conscious of having led unremarkable lives and appeal to the old men's experience and courage as a basis for helping them.

Predictably enough, Socrates is wheeled in to solve the issue – is Nicias or Laches the best qualified to teach young people the truth about courage? And of course, no-one present is qualified to speak the truth, because truth-telling requires a particular honest mode of life, so everyone has to look after themselves. But Socrates is the only one who has already started. He doesn't lead them, but he asks them to adopt his own program. It's a kind of direction of open-endedness. (And the entire discussion is an example of Socratic *parrhesia*, whereby the people are tested, give their consent to Socrates' frankness, and so on)

This paradoxical status of Socrates, whereby he forces the conclusion that the problem is not one of techniques and discipleship, but at the same time sets himself up as a kind of guide, is demonstrated in the conclusion. Both Nicias and Laches admit their deficiency, and Socrates has already done so. Yet at the same time, both old men recommend the younger men to send their children to Socrates. The pedagogical conclusion reflects our current situation – the unease with which we retain pedagogical institutions, with all their necessary apparatus of power, and the task we give them to nurture critical thinking, independence, and even suspicion of power. I experienced this recently by conforming to the mandate given me by the Norwegian state by teaching my students about civil disobedience.

Socrates leads the discussion away from the political contest of expertise, away from received wisdom and techniques, and into the discussion of ways of life.

It's not a matter of expertise, it's not a matter of technique, it's not a matter of mastery, or of an oeuvre. What is in question here? It is a question – and here the text takes it a bit further – of the way in which one lives (*hontina tropon nun te zê*) (p134)

Frustrating quotation – is the transition from *bios* to *zoe* the “little bit further” he means here? Or is this simply proof that Foucault translates both words in the same way, about the same thing? It is in any case passed over with no further comment here.

The conclusion of all this is that the truth about courage is available only to those who engage in the care of the self. And the care of the self consists in listening to a truth-teller. So we have a symmetrical relation of truth and care which is central to the Foucauldian question of truth and subjectivity:

Truth telling in the order of the care of men is to put their mode of life into question, to attempt to test this mode of life and to define what can be validated and recognised as good, and what on the other hand must be rejected and condemned in this way of life. That is where you see the organisation of this fundamental chain, which is one of care, of *parrhesia* (of frank speech) and of the ethical division between the good and the bad in the order of *bios* (of existence). We have here, I believe, the sketch, the design that is nevertheless already firm, of what this Socratic *parrhesia* is, which is not at all the political *parrhesia* of which I'd spoken of last time. It is nothing less than an ethical *parrhesia*. Its privileged object, its essential object, is life and the mode of life. (p139)

Lecture five (29/2/1984): Arts of Existence

Foucault's fifth lecture is an excellent example of how surprising it can be to read his stuff. There are three parts to it: first he wraps up *Laches*, then he introduces Cynic philosophy, and finally sketches out some of the ways this school can be detected in European history. It's surprising because it involves discussion of Gregory of Nazianzen, the aesthetics of existence, Paul Tillich, the modern revolutionary, Dostoevsky, Christian spirituality and suicide bombers.

The summary of the *Laches* is also closing his discussion of Socratic *parrhesia*. The main theme here is the development of an *ascesis* of the self in addition to, and alongside an ontology of the self. If *Alcibiades* represents the latter, then *Laches* represents the former:

On the other hand, in the *Laches*, which has the same starting point (giving an account of oneself and taking care of oneself) the positing of oneself does not take place in the mode of the discovery of a *psukhê* as a reality ontologically distinct from the body, [but] as a way of being and a way of acting, a way of being and a way of acting where – it's said explicitly in the *Laches* – it is a case of giving an account during the whole of one's existence. (pp147-8, square brackets original)

Here Foucault points out that whilst these two influential streams of platonic philosophy – ontology and *ascesis* – work in parallel, and you never really get the one without the other, it is perfectly possible for each one ontology to work parallel to a number of different *asceses*, and vice versa. For example, consider the Christian metaphysic and ascetic:

You could find in Christianity, always in reference to this metaphysics that remains more or less constant, styles that have been successively very different. The style of Christian asceticism in the IVth or Vth century of our era is very different from [that of] the asceticism of the XVIIth century for example. So: a relatively constant metaphysic, with however a stylistics of existence that varies. (p152)

What I found curious about this summary is not as much the setting up of *ascesis* alongside ontology – this is the kind of Hadotian move we'd expect from the late Foucault – but the way he portrays Socratic *parrhesia* as a practice of the self that is both an individual practice, and useful for the city. It is different from the earlier political forms of *parrhesia*,

...even though, of course, this moral *parrhesia*, this ethical veridiction presents itself and justifies itself, at least in part, by its usefulness to the city and by the way in which it is necessary to the good government and salvation of the city. (p145)

This combination of ethical technique with political utility, and particularly when he puts it in terms of governmentality (*bon gouvernement* – a curious word in French) is surprising. Anyone familiar with the Tanner Lectures “Omnes et Singulatim” (<http://www.tannerlectures.utah.edu/lectures/documents/foucault81.pdf>) will note that Foucault describes modern *raison d'état* – and thereby police states, governmentality, secular pastoral power, and so on – as the combination of these techniques of the self inherited from antiquity, with the more Greek game of the salvation of the city. This is a major turning point for Foucault's history, which he describes in no uncertain terms:

We can say that Christian pastorship has introduced a game that neither the Greeks nor the Hebrews imagined. A strange game whose elements are life, death, truth, obedience, individuals, self-identity; a game which seems to have nothing to do with the game of the city surviving through the sacrifice of the citizens. Our societies proved to be really demonic since they happened to combine those two games - the city-citizen game and the shepherd-flock game - in what we call the modern states. (Omnes et Singulatim, p239)

But in this chapter, Foucault backdates this cataclysmic event to the time of Socrates. Whether this is because he sees the logical necessity of universalising individual political techniques, or just has changed his mind on this is really difficult to see. It is in any case curious, and potentially revolutionary for our readings of Foucault's meta-narrative.

The summary of the Cynic school of philosophy is basically Foucault's reading of a series of texts (and this is where Gregory of Nazianzen comes in: his eulogy of Maximus the monk in Homily 25 praises him in terms of a philosophical, and specifically cynic, hero) that associate it with *parrhesia*. But what is peculiar to the Cynic mode of *parrhesia* is that the fearless speech is allied to their way of life. They live as witnesses to uncomfortable truths. This way of life – that is radically independent from honour, reduced to the bare essentials of life, and resistant to contingent convention – is their message, without their having to be bold to their friends, enemies, and disciples.

In sum, Cynicism makes of life, of existence, of *bios*, what we could call an alethurgie, a manifestation of truth. (p159)

In his development into posterity – which Foucault admits is highly hypothetical – Foucault uses some time to establish what is the essence of the Cynic philosophy. And he goes through a bit of modern literature, mostly post-war German literature (including Tillich), in order to affirm the idea that the core of the Cynic philosophy is a kind of individualism,

affirmation of self, exasperation with particular, natural, and animal existence, in the face of the dislocation of social structures of antiquity and the absurdity of modern life (paraphrase of second paragraph of p166).

The first major influence the Cynics have had is (predictably?) to be found in Christian asceticism. He draws on Augustine, for example, to demonstrate the relation between the philosophical life of the cynics and the ascetic life of monks. This continues into the Middle Ages with spiritual movements, in a kind of eulogy of Christian spiritual revolution that theologians like us have become used to hearing from Foucault. This will no doubt be added to the canon of Foucault quotes that vindicate him as a theologian *manqué* (you can find a load of them in J Joyce Schuld's *Foucault and Augustine: Reconsidering Power and Love*, but I guess Carrette and Bernauer's *Foucault and Theology* has a load of them too):

The choice of life as scandal of truth, the stripping of life as a way of constituting, in one's very body, the visible theatre of truth appear to have been, throughout the history of Christianity, not only a theme, but a particularly lively, intense, and strong practice, in all the reform efforts that have opposed the church, its institutions, its self-enrichment, and its slackening of morals. There has been an entire Christian cynicism, an anti-institutional cynicism, a cynicism that I would call anti-ecclesiastical, whose forms and traces were still lively and detectable on the eve of the Reformation, during the Reformation, within the Protestant Reformation itself, and even in the Catholic Counter-Reformation. You could do a long and complete history of this Christian cynicism. (pp168-9)

The second descendant of the Cynic philosophy is revolutionary practice, and here Foucault begins once again with Christian spirituality, although he soon goes on to outline three main forms this could take: secret societies, militant public institutions, and transformative ways of life:

This style of existence attached to revolutionary militarism, that assures the witness [to truth – AJT] by one's life, is a rupture, has to be a rupture with the conventions, habits, and values of society. (p170)

This style of existence witnesses to truth (as I suggest in my square brackets – witness to truth is a theme that recurs in these chapters) but also to an other life. And this is where Foucault comes closest to an appeal to monasticism, in my view.

Cynic revolution can be seen in history in a variety of *loci*: Foucault names specifically Dostoevsky's Russian nihilism (and we could of course question that

designation), European and American anarchism, and terrorism with its limit situation of suicide bombers. This latter Foucault sees as based on one of the fundamental principles of the Greek courage of truth. He then goes on to sketch out European discussions of revolutionary lifestyle.

The third descendant is modern art. It is curious that it is here, rather than in the description of Christian spirituality, that Foucault appeals to the carnival tradition. This may be because he specifically mentions Bakhtin's study. In any case, he mentions comedy, satire, carnival, and that whole tradition here, as the descendants of cynic philosophy, and the foundation stone of modern art forms. The hermeneutical key, around which he gathers Flaubert, Manet, Beckett, Bacon and Baudelaire, is the stripping of existence to its bare essentials:

Anti-platonism: art as place of the irruption of the elementary, existence made naked (*mise à nu de l'existence*). (p174)

All these exegetical transgressions and schematic hypotheses are to my mind not as much an invitation to just fill out parallels, but an opening for research into more charitable readings of the various locations for revolutionary practice. It certainly is meant to be an inspiration for further research, as some of the above quotations imply. But not simply research into the cynic heritage as such. I think Foucault wants us to draw out the ways in which Christian spirituality, modern art, discussions of styles of existence can all be interpreted as techniques for transforming values, challenging ways of life, and thinking differently. And that is what I've tried to do with my analyses of desert fathers and holy fools: not in order to vindicate them, but to increase our revolutionary toolbox. Foucault described his work as a series of explosive devices rather than one great big thesis (although it is clear that I still think he had an idea of the broad stretch of history): that's the kind of work he is trying to get others to do here.

The manuscript of a conclusion that Foucault didn't get time for is given, and its final paragraph seems worth giving in its entirety:

Cynicism and scepticism have been two ways of posing the problem of the ethics of truth. Their growth in nihilism brings out something essential very well, something central in occidental culture. This can be expressed briefly: it is where the concern for truth keeps bringing it into question, what is the form of existence that allows the question; what life is necessary when truth itself is not necessary? The question of nihilism is not: if there is no God, everything is

permitted. Its formula is rather the question: if I must confront myself with “nothing is true”, how am I to live? At the heart of occidental culture, there is this difficulty of defining the link between the concern for truth and the aesthetics of existence. That is why cynicism appears to me to be an important question, even if, of course, a number of texts exist on the subject and they do not allow us to see any well-founded doctrine. The history of doctrine is not important, what is important is to establish a history of the arts of existence. In this occident that has well invented diverse truths and fashioned so many different arts of existence, cynicism constantly remembers this, that there is little truth that is indispensable the one that wants to live truly, and that little life is necessary when you truly adhere to truth. (p175)

Lecture six (7/2/1984): Foucault wrings his hands about Cynics

The 6th lecture, from the 7th March, 1984, presents a picture of Foucault the Cynicism-researcher diametrically opposite to the last lecture. Whilst last time he drew wild parallels between the historical movement and the colourful developments in European art, politics, and religion, this lecture sees Foucault agonising – even obsessing – over the historical problems with studying Cynic philosophers in late antiquity. But then he's back on track again, and sets up Plato's notion of the true life as a framework against which to examine the transformations wrought by the Cynics.

The lecture starts, though, with a very telling aside. Someone sends him a note (and it wasn't me, the sender was female) saying that this is all well and good, but isn't it the Christian tradition that mediates the practice and theory of *parrhesia* to European modernity, and sending him to Cassian, John Climacus, the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, the church fathers, and so on. She doesn't give any contact details, so Foucault answers her in his lecture:

In any case, I say to her that effectively she's totally right. Her references are interesting, it is precisely in this direction I'd like to go, if I have time, this year: to show you how, across the very evolution of *parrhesia* in Greco-Roman antiquity, we have with Christianity arrived at a kind of dislocation of the senses of the word *parrhesia* that can be found in Christian literature. Certainly, when Gregory of Nazianzen, in his elogy of Maximus, presents him as a Cynic gifted with *parresia*, the word is employed in its completely traditional sense. But there will be brought to the word *parrhesia* an entire series of other significations, positive and negative. That is what I would like to try to study a bit later. (p177)

OK, so here are the four problems with studying Cynic philosophy in antiquity. Foucault's into lists in these lectures, and so I shall follow his style here:

There are a number of attitudes and forms of life that are recognised as Cynic. He contrasts the aristocratic recognisable philosopher Demetrius (admired by Seneca) with the tortured individual, the vagabond, Peregrinus (who, in a curious death scene, legislated for his fellow citizens whilst committing a very public suicide).

Appraisals are usually highly ambiguous. Cynics are condemned for their violence, for being anti-social and transgressive, whilst at the same time seeming to fulfil the ideals of every philosophical school. They are both particular – and particularly objectionable – and universal, in the sense of acceptable to all schools:

Cynicism appears, on that point, as the universal of philosophy, its universality and doubtless also its banality. But you see that herein lies a very curious paradox, since, on the one hand, we have seen Cynicism described as a very particular form of existence, on the margin of the most recognised institutions, laws, social groups: the Cynic is someone that is truly on the margin of society and circulates around society itself, without it being acceptable to receive him. The Cynic is hunted, the Cynic is errant. And yet at the same time, Cynicism appears as the universal core of philosophy. Cynicism is at the heart of philosophy and the Cynic turns society around without being admitted into it. Interesting paradox. (pp186-7)

Cynicism has little or no theoretical literature. This makes it convenient for a philosophy for the people. Foucault claims that cynics “had hunted logic and physics from the domain of philosophy” (p190). I suspect Hadot would have a problem with that, but we can leave that to one side.

Cynicism has its own brand of tradition. This follows from the above remarks. You have no theory, so no possibility of teaching, but at the same time the variety of lifestyles of philosophical protagonists have not allowed for a canon of virtues. This form of tradition produces the philosophical hero:

The philosophical hero is different from the sage, the traditional sage, the sage of high Antiquity, from the kind of sage that could appear in Solon or Heraclitus. The philosophical hero is no longer the sage, but he is not yet the saint or the ascetic of Christianity. Between the sage of the archaic tradition – the divine man – and the ascetic of the final centuries of Antiquity, the philosophical hero represents [a certain] mode of life that has been extremely important in the very era in which it was constituted, to which [this] model had been transmitted, to the extent this figure of the philosophical hero has modelled a certain number of existences, has represented a kind of practical matrix for the philosophical attitude. (p195, square brackets original)

In keeping with this image of the neurotic philosopher, Foucault goes on in the second half of this lecture to laying out the meanings of “the true life” in antiquity. It is perhaps surprising for readers of Foucault who have not been scouring his work for traces of the influence of analytic philosophy that he doesn’t appear to like the term very much. He makes excuses for its use, and tries to get the hearer away from modern analytic usage by a kind of suspension of disbelief:

What is the true life? Given that our mental figures, our way of thinking makes us conceive, not without a certain number of problems, how an utterance [*énoncé*] can be true or false, how it

may receive a truth value, what sense can be given to this expression “true life”? When it’s a question of life – you could say the same thing regarding a behaviour, sentiment, or attitude – how can one use the qualification true? What is a true sentiment? What is true love? What is the true life? This problem of the true life has been absolutely essential in the history of our philosophical and spiritual thought. (pp200-1)

He then goes on to draw up a kind of matrix that will follow us throughout the rest of the discussion of Cynic philosophy: truth is unveiled, unmixed, right, and immutable. Which is to say that it is not deceptive, nor compromised, nor deviant, nor changing. He then cashes out this characterisation of truth in terms of true love and the true life. His discussion of Cynicism will later elaborate on this, and since I think it’s fairly predictable to see how these four adjectives can apply to the true life, I won’t go into it here.

The final couple pages of this lecture transcript elaborates briefly on what we can now perhaps call the Goodchildean precept, in its original Cynic form: “change the currency!”

Here Socrates – with his Delphic message concerning wisdom – is contrasted with Diogenes, who was told by the Oracle at Delphi to change the currency. Foucault claims that this is a kind of motif for Cynic philosophy, which takes the ideals of ancient philosophy (the true life, etc.) to the limit, making them both logical and unrecognisable. Yes to the true life, but not this one. This is basically what I have been arguing the holy fools do to the asceticism of Christian late antiquity (which is probably the only thing that makes Kreuger’s thesis interesting). This is in keeping of course with what we said above about the paradox of Cynic philosophy – that it is condemned and claimed to be the summary of all philosophical ideals.

The Cynics tried to take the theme – traditional in philosophy – of the true life and make it grimace. Rather than seeing in Cynicism, because it was popular, or because it was never received admission into the consensus and the cultivated philosophical community, a philosophy that was one of rupture, we should rather see it as a kind of passage to the limit, a kind of extrapolation rather than exteriority, and extrapolation of the themes of the true life and a bringing back of those themes into a kind of figure that at the same time both conforms to the model, and however makes a grimace of the true life. It is much more a case of a kind of carnivalesque continuity for the theme of the true life than a rupture in relation to the received values of classical philosophy regarding true life. (pp209-10)

Lecture seven (14/2/2984): The Other Life

The seventh lecture, of the 14th March (I hope to catch up with myself and pretentiously post the final lecture on its 25th anniversary) takes us from the Cynic transformation of the philosophical understandings of the true life up to a mode of being that is beginning to resemble early Christian asceticism on a great number of points. That is where my interest in Foucault started, and so the points are more obvious (and perhaps contrived) to me, but he outlines these resemblances and transformations in the final lecture so everyone's clear about it. So we start the lecture with a philosophical account of Cynicism and end it with an examination of Cynic humiliation/humility.

He's still defending his study of Cynicism at the beginning of this lecture, and you can hear Hadot's analyses in the background: the various schools of classical philosophy had more common features than differences; the conception of the philosophical life is the main tenor of ancient Greek philosophy; spiritual exercises and detachment are shared ideals, etc. Foucault uses these kinds of insights to back up his point from the last lecture that Cynic philosophy takes ancient philosophy to its natural conclusion by turning it on its head:

Cynicism in a way plays the role of a broken mirror for ancient philosophy. A broken mirror where every philosopher can and should recognise himself, in which he can and should recognise the very image of philosophy, the reflection of what it is and what it should be, the reflection of what he himself is and what he himself would like to be. ... I will say that Cynicism seems to me to be basically, in Antiquity, a kind of inversed eclecticism. ... Cynicism constituted, and this is its paradox, the most common elements of philosophy in terms of the points of rupture of philosophy. (p214)

His two main reasons for studying Cynic philosophy, he tells us, is on account of their transformation of the courage of truth – from political bravado and Socratic irony to the scandal living out philosophical principles – and their tenacity to the importance of the philosophical life. They insist on asking the question “What may be the form of life that might allow the practice of truth-telling?” (p216)

After briefly discussing the relation between ontology and the philosophical life (in a purely historical light – he recounts which philosophers were concerned with linking them together – Montaigne, Spinoza, etc.), Foucault goes on to recount the four characteristics of the Cynic's *bios philosophikos*, and they are all totally banal and familiar to the study of philosophy in antiquity:

- philosophy is a preparation for life, a way of rationally ordering life;
- It is a mode of care of the self;
- It is a life of purely useful study, whereby knowledge is subordinated to practical concerns;
- It is consistent with the precepts which its practitioners formulate. (summarised from pp219-220)

The recounting of these familiar elements of philosophy serves to demonstrate that this is not where the Cynics sever their connections with their predecessors. They receive these ways of life and then transform them by consistently bringing them back from convention, opinion, law, etc. And this seems to be a main answer to the question of the possibility of truth-telling: the way of life that makes truth-telling possible is the one that avoids unreflected knowledge and living. And these are primarily to be found amongst the masses. To my mind, this transition is key in the development of an aristocratic philosophical life.

Foucault himself sums this up with a fifth characteristic of the philosophical life: changing the currency, whether in order to put a spanner in the works, or in order to bring it back to its true value. He refers to Julian's work *Against Heracleios* to elaborate this principle:

The fundamental precept is "reevaluate your currency"; but this reevaluation can not be done without the channel and the means of the "know yourself", which substitutes the false money of the opinion that one has of oneself, that others have of you, with a true currency which is that of the knowledge of self. It is possible to manipulate one's own existence, to care for oneself as if for a real thing [*comme d'une chose réelle*], it is possible to have in one's hands the true currency of one's true existence on the condition of knowledge oneself. (p223, my square brackets)

Foucault takes this principle further by connecting it to the affinity Cynicism has always had with the dog, and he refers to a commentator on Aristotle's *Categories* to see how this association was understood in antiquity. Cynics therefore embrace the life of the dog insofar the latter are:

- shameless in public
- indifferent
- aggressive

- good guards (*phulaktikos* – this is also a really important theme in early Christian asceticism). (summarised from p224)

These principles and ideals all lead the Cynic philosopher to self-alienation. They attempt to force their own flight (the reference to Bernauer is deliberate) from the normal masses (the reference to the proletariat is also deliberate). And if the true life is the alienated life (Foucault never uses the word alienated in this context, as it would be really confusing in French), then all philosophers should be aiming to project themselves from society. The true life is the other life.

I believe that with this idea that the true life is the other life, we arrive at a particularly important point in the history of Cynicism, in the history of philosophy, indeed in the history of occidental ethics. (p226)

Foucault spends the last few minutes of this half of the lecture clarifying what he means by “the other life”, and in doing so refers back to the sharp distinction he had already made in the fifth lecture (<http://augustinian.wordpress.com/2009/03/18/lecture-5-arts-of-existence/>) of between the metaphysics of the *Alcibiades* and the asceticism of the *Laches*. Whilst the former founded the notion of the other world – the world of purity, truth, and soul – the latter founded the pursuit of the other life – the life of asceticism and the care of the self.

These two lines of development – of which the one pursues the other world and the other the other life, both starting from the care of the self – are evidently divergent because the one will yield platonic and neoplatonic speculation and occidental metaphysics, whereas the other will in a sense yield nothing but cynic crudeness. But it will relaunch, as a question that is both central and marginal in relation to philosophical practice, the question of the philosophical life and the true life as other life. May not, and should not the philosophical life, the true life, be necessarily a radically other life? (pp227-8)

And if you expect me to insert a kind of Radical Orthodox interlude here about the way the only people who unite these two are the orthodox Christians with their formula that the other life leads us to the other world, and how this formula was lost with Scotus and the Reformation, you will be disappointed. I am deeply suspicious of any formula or movement that can be embraced as “safe”: that is my main criticism of the ethical Foucauldians. Foucault himself, however, is slightly more obliging, and slightly less orthodox:

In Gnostic movements, in Christianity, there was an attempt to think the other life, the life of rupture, the life of asceticism, the life without measure with [ordinary] existence as condition for

access to the other world. And that is the relation between the other life and the other world – so profoundly marked at the heart of Christian asceticism by the principle that it is the other life that leads to the other world – which will find itself radically questioned in the protestant ethic, and by Luther when access to the other world will be able to be defined by a form of life absolutely in conformity with existence itself in this world. To lead the same life in order to arrive in the other world is the formula of Protestantism. And it is from that moment that Christianity became modern. (p228, square brackets original)

The second half of the lecture is taken up with showing how point for point the Cynics attempt to transform the platonic conception of the true life.

The true life is unveiled, not pretended: whilst most classical philosophy practised this principle by allowing the return of all principles of shame, doubling their power, and insisting on adherence to social laws, the cynics were radically visible and impudent. And this is illustrated by the most famous Cynic stories, of people masturbating in the market place, having sex in public, etc. It is incidentally the Cynics who insist on radical visibility, in case anyone thought that visibility and the panopticon are evil in themselves (as I kind of did in an article in *Kirke og Kultur*

(http://www.universitetsforlaget.no/tidsskrift/vaare/religion_og_livssyn/kirke_og_kultur). The desert fathers also used the public eye to make themselves conscious of their lifestyle, but most of them ended up with impudence rather than normality too: both Crates and abba Ephraim attempted to have sex in a public place in the city.

The true life is unmixed, not dependent on external elements. Instead of being self-sufficient, it bears with poverty. Indeed, it embraces and pursues poverty in order to demonstrate its independence from the beauty of the world and the joys of pleasurable activity. Here, for once, Foucault openly shows his disgust for a philosophical move. He evaluates a historical occurrence (again as a cure for thinking that he thought the Greeks had the answer). Instead of Socrates' prioritising inner beauty over external beauty,

Cynical poverty, on the contrary, is the affirmation of the value pertaining to and intrinsic to physical ugliness, dirt, wretchedness. This is important and has introduced, simultaneously in ethics, in the art of conduct, and unfortunately also in philosophy, the values of ugliness from which they have not in the least yet departed. (p239)

On the other hand, their pursuit of inglory (*adoxia*) makes them uniquely capable in antiquity of resisting opinion, conventions, and beliefs. This becomes a central part of the practice of the life that is scandalously other.

Interesting here is Foucault's comparison of Cynic humiliation and Christian humility,

...which is a state, an attitude of the spirit manifesting itself and testing itself by undergoing humiliations – and then this Cynical dishonour which is a play on the conventions concerning honour and dishonour, in which the Cynic, at the very moment when he plays the most dishonourable role, asserts his pride and supremacy. [*fait valoir son orgueil et sa suprématie*] (p242)

The true life is in line with the right. And here the Cynics transform the value of rights by refusing conceptions of the human. This is a theme that Foucault has himself appropriated: tell me what you think is inevitably human, and I will reject that humanity. It is the way of Bataille and Nietzsche.

The Cynics did what we cannot do and embraced animality. Today our models of being human are framed in natural sciences. This was not the case for Cynic philosophers, and so they embrace the animal life in order to ascertain the line which distinguishes us from animals (I believe Badiou does something like this but have no idea where or how). The point is that by doing this, they undermine the impressions of civilisation, dignity and urbanity embraced by their fellow philosophers.

The *bios philosophikos*, as right life, is the animality of human being held up as a challenge, practised as an exercise, and thrown in the face of others as a scandal. (p245)

Lecture eight (21/2/1984): Spiritual Combat

The penultimate lecture of the 21st March sets out to conclude Foucault's study of Cynic philosophy so that he may move on to early Christianity in the final lecture. Once again, he is ill at the point, and warns that he may not be able to complete. There is no sign that this lecture was any shorter than the others though. It is certainly packed full of insight: he finds the philosophical life and later asceticism on the notion of the sovereign self militantly exercising its athletic reason to change the world. He argues that the ascesis of enduring insults, celibacy and separation from the world are all logical outcomes of the ethical thought of the classical world. Cynics are at the centre of occidental ethics by their installation of love in the relation between insulter and victim. Their disgrace is part of their pedagogical task of teaching the world the difference between happiness and unhappiness. That is their political program.

The lecture starts by rounding up the return and transformation of the philosophical understandings of the true life, and the fourth interpretation becomes the sovereign life.

What is essential about the sovereign life – which is to be associated with owning oneself, becoming one's own, etc. – is that it institutes a relation to others. The relation is one of direction and aid, but also one of friendship.

Foucault seems to struggle with describing the connection between enjoying oneself, owning oneself, being independent on the one hand and on the other, becoming useful to, an example for, and guidance for others. He calls it an obligation, but in that case it is an obligation from nowhere. I suspect he is trying to avoid the obligation towards the city that I mentioned in my notes on lecture five (<http://augustinian.wordpress.com/2009/03/18/lecture-5-arts-of-existence/>). But he still makes use of words like “useful” and “obligation” (p250). The difference is that this duty is even applicable when the sage retreats from society. Foucault calls it “the other face of the relation to self” (p251): it is a surplus, an excess. Most of all, they are both aspects of *the same sovereignty*.

Being sovereign over oneself and being useful to others, enjoying oneself and oneself alone, and at the same time bringing to others the help they need in their predicament, their difficulties or even their misfortunes, that basically constitutes one and the same thing. It is the same foundational act of the self's taking possession of itself, that on the one hand, will give me the enjoyment of myself and, on the other hand, will permit me to be useful to others when they are in a predicament or misfortune. (p251)

The transformation of this theme, the way Cynics make it grimace, is to be found in the arrogance of the Cynic philosophers in claiming that they themselves are kings, and not the current political kings that everyone knows. Whilst Stoics (Foucault gives Seneca as an example) may boast of their influence because they are advisors to the king, Cynics proclaim themselves as kings, and so mock the kingly farce of the world. The cynic is an anti-king king, “*le roi anti-roi*”. The stock case of this comparison is of course Diogenes’ (mythical?) meeting with Alexander the Great, and Foucault notes four ways in which they differ radically, in spite of the shared sovereignty the narrative sets up.

- Alexander is dependent on his entourage and political activity for his sovereignty. Diogenes needs nothing for his.
- Alexander needed a past and an education, whereas “The royal soul is such by nature, without any *paideia*.” (p254)
- Alexander still has parts of the world and himself to conquer, whereas the sage is already enjoying his conquest of the vices.
- Alexander has to guard his kingdom, but Diogenes faces no threats to his. (summarised from pp253-5)

So the Cynic royalty is different from that of the world. It is more genuine, but it is also secret, hidden in the derision and nudity of the Cynic life. Foucault calls the Cynic the king of derision: always mocked, always throwing his life into danger and tests of endurance. It is a royalty of dedication: to care of the self and others, to healing, and to aggression. And in this latter lies the Cynic athleticism. Like the philosophers that came before them, they work on their selves, desires, and passions. But they also struggle with custom, habit, and a certain state of humanity.

This struggle is also a characteristic of their militant call: the struggle against others and for others. Of care and resistance. Foucault contrasts this proactive philosophical life with the somewhat similar proselytising on the part of the philosophical schools:

a militantism that precisely does not require an education (a *paideia*), but that has recourse to a certain number of violent and drastic means, not so as to form people and teach them, but in order to help and convert them, to abruptly convert them. It is a militantism in an open environment, in the sense that it claims to attack not simply this or that vice or fault or opinion which this or that individual may have, but also the conventions, laws, institutions that themselves rest on the vices, faults, weaknesses, opinions that the human race share in common.

It is therefore a militantism that claims to change the world, much more than a militantism that simply seeks to furnish its adepts with the means of attaining to the happy life. (p262)

This particular form of militant mock monarchy founds, according to Foucault, two major occidental experiences.

Firstly, the mock king, or the king and his grotesque fool (Foucault does not use the word grotesque himself). Here he makes the obvious reference to Lear.

Secondly, the Christian theme of the ascetic lives that save the entire world. And once again he refers to the mendicant orders, who seem to be at the back of his mind so often.

These themes are clearly central to the conception of the other life and the aspiration to the other world: two characteristics that are central to the Christian and modern experience, and yet so far from the majority of ancient thought. For Foucault, therefore, Cynic philosophy is a turning point:

So you see that the Cynic is the one that, taking up again the traditional themes of the true life in ancient philosophy, transposes these themes, and brings them back in the vindication and affirmation of an other life. And then, across the image of the figure of the king of wretchedness, he transposes this idea of the other life one more time into the theme of a life whose alterity must lead to the changing of the world. An other life for an other world. (p264)

The second half of the lecture consists in ascertaining the signs of the call to philosophy, in terms of free choice and divine call to the universal mission. The cynic philosopher ends up with an obligation to ascertain these in himself by the exercise of self-surveillance, which is also turned onto the world. The Cynic philosophers had bishops (“episcopes” – overseers) and their job was one of surveillance. This mission sends the Cynic to the human race, not for the sake of a city or even the community of humanity, but for all. Foucault does not say *omnes et singulatim* here, but it’s clearly close by.

So yes, the Cynic does embrace universal humiliation for the sake of universal conversion, for the good of all, out of love for others. But this is specifically not a political task in terms of forming people for the political life, as Stoic counselling was.

He [the cynic philosopher] does not discuss taxes, revenues, war and peace. What does he then discuss with all these men, Athenians, Corinthians, and Romans? “Happiness and misery, good and bad fortune, servitude and liberty”. Is it possible to exercise a greater authority than that? Is it not that (talking to all men about happiness and misery, good and bad fortune, servitude and liberty) true political activity, the true *politeuesthai*? (p278)

This kind of alterity, of other life for an other world, is what Foucault sees (in a part of the manuscript he never reached in his lecture) as the root of spiritual combat for the world: the mendicant orders, preaching, the movements before and after the Reformation, but also the revolutionary militancy of the 19th century. “The true life as an other life, as a life of combat, for a changed world.” (p279)

Lecture nine (28/2/1984): The Fear of Obedience

Foucault's final lecture (whose 25th anniversary was on Saturday: I celebrated by getting a cold) makes the move from Cynic sovereignty to Christian obedience. He marks out the clear differences between Christian and Cynic parrhesia, and then goes through the uses of the word in the Old Testament (LXX), the New Testament, and the church fathers and mothers. His conclusion is that it is basically in cenobitic, or at least with institutional monasticism that pastoral power has its main roots, but that mystical Christian experience – which he associates with intimacy and freedom before God – will always have the potential to resist the more sinister ascetic pole of Christianity.

Foucault opens with a few final comments on Cynic sovereignty, and we are sucked into his world of fine distinctions, which always reminds me of Wittgenstein's saying that we "We feel as if we had to repair a torn spider's web with our fingers." (Philosophical Investigations 106)

Firstly, he revises the two forms of derisory royalty: the Cynic is king both by being more truly royal than the kings of this present age, and at the same time a mock king by rejecting all the trappings of royalty with which they surround themselves. It is not in line with this division, however, but across it that Foucault draws his next series of results: the ways in which Cynic sovereignty can be practised.

Firstly, its practice founds a blessed life, though the acceptance of one's destiny. This theme is so familiar that Foucault doesn't go into it in any great depth. Secondly, it founds practices of the manifestation of truth. And here he uses the work of Epictetus (the Discourses) to unpack the ways in which the truth is manifested in the life and practice of the Cynic.

One way in which this is done is by the conformity of life and truth. The body and practice of the Cynic philosopher has to be in homophony with its truth. Hence it is open, stripped, consistent, etc.

The Cynic is therefore like a visible statue of truth. Stripped of all these vain ornaments, of everything that may be for the body a kind of rhetoric, but at the same time blossoming in full health: the very being of the true, made visible through the body. (p284)

A further way to manifest the truth in the life and practice of the Cynic is in his or her practice of self-knowledge, the self working its truth upon itself (*le travail de la vérité de soi sur soi*, p284). This knowledge again has two applications:

- Firstly, self-assessment: the Cynic inspects and adjusts his work like an athlete checking his equipment, muscles, and the working of his body.
- Secondly, self-surveillance. This is a way of becoming aware of the move of one's representations, and assessment of one's own capacity for knowledge.

This self-surveillance has to also become a surveillance of others. It is part of the manifestation of truth that it be perceived and applied to others. And here it is curious that Foucault's Epictetus seems to defend the Cynics from accusations of indiscretion and brutality:

He is not the kind of indiscreet person that comes to concern himself with everyone's private life, he questions this entire humanity of which he is a part. (p287)

The surveillance of others is designed to produce a change in others' conduct, in the way they perceive good and evil. As such, it is a surveillance of others for the sake of a new world. And the surveillance takes place from the perspective of an other life in order to bring people back to the life of fidelity to truth.

There can only be a true life as an other life, and it's from the point of view of this other life that the ordinary life of ordinary people will be made to appear as precisely other than the true. I live in an other way, and through the very alterity of my life, I show you that what you are looking for is elsewhere than where you are looking, that the road you are taking is an other road than the one you should be taking. (p288)

I could have numbered these a little, but my point in recounting this part was also to show that his enumerations are not the easiest nor the most appealing part of his work. It's all very tentative, all very schematic. And he is, of course, aware of this.

Foucault then turns to Christianity, and makes a few comments before he starts:

The comments that follow on Christianity are both a draft proposal and an incitation that others follow the theme up.

They are totally provisory, and very uncertain. If he were to follow this up, he would have to start differently.

He doesn't know what he will do next: maybe something on arts of living, maybe philosophy as form of life, maybe asceticism's relation to truth in Christianity.

The first thing he notes is that Cynicism and Christianity have a number of similarities. In particular the following:

1. Relations to food (much more important for early Christians than sex) in order to cultivate independence;
2. Indifference to opinion and embracing scandal;
3. The affirmation of animality (and here he seems vaguely aware of the grazers).

Foucault notes two major differences however: Firstly, returning to the above problem of the Platonic idea of the other world and the Cynic historical practice of world-criticism, Foucault notes that it is the Christians that manage to combine these two.

...one of the coups de force of Christianity, its philosophical force stands in this, that it has linked together the theme of the other life as true life and the idea of access to the other world as access to the truth. (p293)

The second difference consists in the principle of obedience (“in the broad sense of the term”). Christian obedience is, according to Foucault, a relation of the Christian to a master who represents God. It is the condition of access to the truth.

This is a theme he will expand on when he gets to the church fathers and mothers later, but note that this is a crucial distinction for Foucault, replacing all the caricatures of ancient philosophy and religion that he has consistently opposed:

It does not do to characterise the difference between paganism and Christianity as a difference between a Christian ascetic morality and a non-ascetic morality belonging to Antiquity. That is, as you know, a total chimera. Asceticism was an invention of pagan Antiquity, of Greek and Roman Antiquity. It will therefore not do to, in a Nietzschean way if you will, oppose Antiquity’s pagan non-ascetic morality to Christianity’s ascetic morality. Neither will it do, I think, to [oppose] an ancient asceticism, the violent and aristocratic one of Greece, to another form of asceticism that separates the soul from the body. The difference between Christian asceticism and other forms that were able to prepare the way for it and precede it is that be found in this double relation: relation to the other world to which access is granted through this asceticism, and the principle of obedience to the other (obedience to the other in this world, obedience to the other that is at the same time obedience to God and to the men who represent him). (p294)

The second half of the lecture goes fairly quickly through the biblical material before assessing the monastic movements: parrhesia in the Old Testament is a case of humanity’s relation to God, not least in prayer, whereby God is free to say what He likes, and humanity sometimes have the pleasure of saying what they like to God; in the New Testament, it

describes the Christian's assurance before God, and the apostles' boldness in the face of persecution.

With the early Christian ascetics, however, everything becomes more complicated. On the one hand, we have the resurgence of the old theme that parrhesia implies chaos and unfettered unimportant talk. This is not new, but Foucault says that it is expanded in Christianity. On the other hand, the theme of the apostles' parrhesia – so close to the pre-socratic political fearless speech – writ large in the martyrdom stories. These are of course transferred to the fearlessness of asceticism amongst the first anchorites.

Foucault then points out that fearlessness before people is only one side of the coin when it comes to Christian courage. Christians are also fearless before God. And of course, this kind of parrhesia never fails (as does that of Socrates, and Solon) because the confidence is in God's goodness, not a fragile parrhesiastic contract. Foucault mentions Jerome, and refers to Gregory of Nyssa's treaty on virginity.

Foucault claims that this jubilatory confidence (he really does wax eloquent on the theme) is only opposed by the practice of obedience, which subdues it under the will of God, and replaces it with the trembling fear of God. It is this obedience that lies at the heart of pastoral power (and all this is elaborated in more detail in *Security, Territory, Population*):

All this, of course, demands further elaboration, but you can see that – from let us say the fourth century, but more and more clearly in the fifth and sixth centuries – structures of authority develop in Christianity through which the individual ascetic will find himself embedded in the interior of institutional structures, like those of the cenobium and of collective monasticism, and those of the pastorate on the other hand, through which the conduct of souls will be entrusted to the pastors, priests, or bishops. At the same time as these structures develop, the theme of a relation to God that can only be mediated by obedience will drag with it, as condition and consequence, the idea that in itself, the individual is not able to make its own salvation, that of itself it is not able to rediscover this face-to-face meeting with God, this face-to-face meeting with God that may characterise its first existence. And if it is not able to attain by itself, by the movement of its own soul, by the opening of its heart, to this relation to God, if it can only have this by the intermediary structures of authority, that is the sign that, of itself, it should mistrust itself. (p304)

Foucault has been hunting down this mistrust in most of his histories. You can see one of the reasons why in his reaction to an invitation to psycho-analyse himself in the famous televised debate with Chomsky. You can see the roots of it in the Cynic attitude that criticises

its own participation in humanity, in the political willingness to transform oneself and others for the sake of a better world. With the monastic institutions, it becomes a requirement and so stagnates. The curious thing is that 1600 years after this stagnation, certain Foucauldian scholars can (against Foucault) present the demand for self-transformation as the touchstone of freedom.

This transformation is studied in Dorotheus of Gaza's comment on Agathon (which I was embarrassingly unaware of, even though I'd studied the Agathon saying he mentions). Dorotheus describes parrhesia as dangerous because it (1) knows no fear of God; (2) confidence in one's self; (3) confidence in the world. It is hard to see how 2 and 3 are new, but in any case, Foucault claims (outside any exegesis) that these necessitated respect in monastic communities:

Consequently: evacuation of parrhesia as arrogance and confidence in self; necessity of respect, that requires its first form and essential manifestation in obedience. Where there is obedience, there can be no parrhesia. Rediscovery of what I told you earlier, knowing that the problem of obedience is at the heart of this inversion of the values of parrhesia. (p307)

This analysis founds Foucault's assertion of the two poles of Christianity: the parrhesiastic pole that establishes a relation to truth in its face-to-face meeting with God, in response to the outpouring of divine love (the mystical tradition); and the anti-parrhesiastic pole (the ascetic tradition) that establishes the fearful and reverent obedience to God and is worked out in a suspicious decoding of self.

I think I'm going to have to post again on where I think Foucault has misread obedience here. It takes an unusual place in his thought: he is rarely so clear in his condemnation of anything. In general, anything can be dangerous, anything redemptive. Parrhesia is a case in point (he has already mentioned that it results in the normalising speech of psychiatry).

Foucault had not the time to finish what he wanted to say and put everything into the context of his broader project, but happily the publishers have been allowed to include (in footnotes) his manuscript notes on this point. And they are most revealing, not least with reference to the uniting of the metaphysical and ascetic traditions. After summarising these two dimensions of the heritage of ancient philosophy, he summarises them in more constructive terms, and I shall translate his last two paragraphs:

In posing the question of the relations between the concern for the self and the courage of truth, it seems that Platonism and cynicism represent two great forms facing each other that each give way to a different genealogy: on the side of the psychê, the knowledge of the self, the work of purification, access to the other world; on the side of the bios, the testing of the self, the reduction to animality, combat in the world against the world.

But what I would like to end by insisting on is this: there may be no installation of truth without an essential position of alterity; truth is never the same; there can only be truth in the form of the other world and the other life. (pp310-311)

Answering to Foucault

When I started reading the 1984 lectures, I was hoping that I'd be able to provide a different interpretation to that offered by the likes of McGushin and Bernauer, because their take seemed so unFoucauldian. As my notes have perhaps indicated, I believe these lectures are atypical Foucault in a range of ways that I'm not going into. The point is that some (but not all) of the arguments that made me uncomfortable did originate with Foucault and not his interpreters. So I feel obliged to give an answer to them, because I have taken these issues seriously. So in what follows, I will give my answer to Foucault.

Foucault's main criticism of Christian monasticism culminated in his sketch of two poles of Christian asceticism: the parrhesiastic pole and the obedience pole. Whereas the former yields a perpetual critique of the now through a self confident fearless speech, the latter establishes a scepticism concerning the self that hinders critique. "Where there is obedience, there may be no *parrêsia*." (p307)

My criticism will be twofold: firstly, it is precisely *parrhesia*, and not obedience, that founds the modern desire to confess. The two interact in a way that resists such an unambiguous (and uncharacteristic for Foucault) distinction. Secondly, the two poles are present in the historical figures that he also sets at the historical source of modern revolution (namely, the Cynics), but are related in an unsatisfactorily vague way. They are also both present amongst the early Christian ascetics, and related in such a way as to resist stagnation and provoke revolution.

Firstly, then, the modern desire to confess. In his earlier work on the history of sexuality, Foucault had established that Europe had generated a desire for confession in its various developments of a *scientia sexualis* and a range of other games of truth. The desire to confess produces a set of power relations around which strategies of government may be set. The desire to boldly and honestly tell the truth about oneself to a knowledgeable other is complicit with the aims of modern government that I have posted on [before](#). Based on compensation rather than discipline, it encourages people to pursue self-fulfilment and manages the selves that may be fulfilled through human sciences and a flexible administration that adjusts to human development.

The boldness to speak the truth about oneself is a part of this technique, and Foucault says as much towards the beginning of his exposition of *parrêsia* in general. It is fearless speech (not obedience) that develops into the techniques of spiritual guidance and truth-telling of which he has been so critical:

The study of *parrêsia* and the *parrêsiastês* in the culture of the self in the course of Antiquity is obviously a kind of prehistory of the practices that were later organised and developed around certain famous pairs: the penitent and their confessor, the directee and the director of conscience, the invalid and the psychiatrist, the patient and the psycho-analyst. I suppose it is this prehistory, in a sense, that I have tried [to write]. (p9, square brackets original)

For my money, I would argue that these disciplines also make use of obedience and the suspicion of the self, by preliminarily erasing all suspicion of manipulation in hearing boldly spoken truth without judgement whilst relying on an unspoken suspicion of the self to generate the need to confess. Non judgement precedes diagnosis and ultimately command. So the difference between obedience and fearless speech is not one of complete distinction, but one of progression and order.

It seems in any case strange for someone who has written so extensively on the power involved in getting people to boldly speak their own truth to then so unambiguously proclaim the greatness of fearless speech. Nevertheless, Foucault comes dangerously close to this in the final lecture (Bernauer swallows it wholesale in his contribution to *Foucault and Theology*), and my only excuse on his behalf is that he is perhaps thinking of the *parrêsia* of the governed in terms of state politics (cf. the interview he gave a couple weeks after this lecture, "An Aesthetics of Existence in *Foucault Live*, p453) rather than that of the directed person in a therapeutic relationship.

This understanding of confidence vs. scepticism regarding the self plays into the understanding of militant revolutionary practice amongst the Cynics. The Cynics were able to embrace the other life - the refrain "*la vie autre*" that haunts Foucault's last lectures this year - by checking themselves, exercising surveillance over themselves (cf. [lecture 7](#)). If the Cynics are to be credited with inspiring so much revolutionary and transformatory practice, what is wrong with questioning the self? It appears to be an entirely necessary part of generating the other life: question yourself to see what parts of your life are contingent social practices that you can break loose from. Foucault neither answers this question nor tells us why their surveillance of the whole world is different from the catastrophic universalisation of asceticism and morality (which he mentions two months later in his last interview "The return of morality").

This lacuna is all the more problematic when he proceeds to accuse the desert fathers and mothers of the kind of total obedience that undermines revolutionary practice. This is

problematic on a series of levels, not least because he fails to identify the practice of total obedience to another monk as a practice distinct from that of obedience to a code, or an authority. The latter forms can be found in coenobitic monasticism, and the former exclusively in (semi-)anchoritic monasticism. More importantly, the relation between confidence and questioning the self is explicitly reconciled and given a grammar in early Christian ascetic understandings of humility.

Without wanting to go into a great deal of exegesis (I can do that later, if someone's interested), the basic understanding of humility amongst the desert fathers and mothers at least was such that confidence was necessary to fend off static sadness (what we would call apathy today), and suspicion of the self was necessary to oppose static confidence. The point was that the *apatheia* that Foucault (in "[Omnes and Singulatim](#)") rather scandalously translates as "obedience" was an active state produced by humility in order to prevent the monk from assuming that he or she had arrived either at the discovery or the achievement of fixed values. Everything can and should be questioned. The demons (and one's own lazy thoughts) want one to 'consent to being completely comfortable with one's own presuppositions.' This is indeed a revolutionary attitude Foucault praises elsewhere ('For an Ethic of Discomfort' in the *Power* collection).

Obedience contributes to this process by allowing the self to be activated by one value (the truth and validity of one's master) that is entirely at odds with those of society. To that extent, it produces transgressive, rather than docile conduct. It can also later be transferred to the self. "He who cannot obey himself will be commanded." (Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*: part 2, "Of self-overcoming", Hollingdale's translation) It is the way to refusing to be placed.