

TRUTH-TELLING

- Who can you trust to be your advisor or guide, and for whom could you effectively perform this role?
- Who can effectively undertake truth-telling (*parrhesia*) without just talking bombast or nonsense? (The word *parrhesia* is related to the word *rhetoric*, but it carries a sense of ‘truth’ not found in the often-negative connotations of ‘orator’/‘rhetoric’ (rhetor). The Quaker adage of “speak truth to power” carries this ancient, politically charged sense. It also entails risk to be effective, in that anonymous advice—which could be capricious or whimsical—cannot perform the same duty of honest or forthright report.)

“The unexamined life is not worth living.” Socrates (Apology)

Michel Foucault, in his book *Fearless Speech*, shows “care of the self” (*epimeleia heautou*, or *cura sui*) to be deeply rooted beneath what we have come to understand from Socrates and Plato as the Greek end-of-life (*telos*): the Delphic oracle’s admonition to “know thyself” (*gnōthi seauton*) in order to gain access to the truth.

Among the practices of self-stylization and techniques of constituting the self, chronicled by Foucault, were Greek forms of ‘confession’ (self-diagnosis) and ‘salvation’ (self-testing or being true to oneself), essential to the training of the truth-sayer (*parrhesiastes*), who would later occupy a critical role in public life. Instead of focusing on Western philosophy’s obsession with correct reasoning and the truth of statements, an analytic approach to truth, Foucault turns attention to the critical tradition in which truth is an activity in which people train and engage: “the importance for the individual and society of telling the truth, of knowing the truth, of having people who tell the truth, as well as knowing how to recognize them.” In *Fearless Speech*, Foucault asks:

“Who is able to tell the truth? What are the moral, ethical, and spiritual conditions which entitle someone to present himself as, and to be considered as, a truth-teller? ... Should truth-telling be brought into coincidence with the exercise of power, or should these activities be completely independent and kept separate?”

Exercise in *Parrhesia*: In one or two handwritten paragraphs, and in frank but considerate terms, identify a problem with your school’s culture, or its political and emotional climate, that ought to be rectified. Write your paragraphs as though you are addressing personally those in charge (e.g., a teacher, administrator, coach, etc.). Make sure you say or claim something you can stand by (warrant as true), and put your name to the testimony.

Assurances: Your submission will only be read by your instructor, unless you wish to share it with the class or submit it for consideration by others.

