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Performative, Passionate, and Parrhesiastic Utterance:

On Cavell, Foucault, and Truth as an Ethical Force

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In this essay, I start from Stanley Cavell's analysis of passionate utterance and draw inspiration from it in order to discuss Michel Foucault's study of *parresia*. Since I am not a philosopher of language, I will deal with Cavell's enlargement of J. L. Austin's theory of performatives and with Foucault's analysis of truth telling essentially from an ethico-political perspective. Cavell too does not conceive his essays on passionate utterance as a contribution to the philosophy of language, but rather as a series of observations "in service of something I want from moral theory, namely, a systematic recognition of speech as confrontation, as demanding, as owed . . . , each instance of which directs, and risks, if not costs, blood."<sup>1</sup> Cavell presents his interest in

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\* A version of this essay was given as a talk to the International Workshop "Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow: Stanley Cavell and the Aesthetics of the Ordinary" at the University of Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, and to the Workshop "Foucault and the Critique of Our Present" at Goldsmiths, University of London. I am indebted to Stanley Cavell, Arnold Davidson, Colin Koopman, Sandra Laugier, Layla Raïd, Ariane Revel, Daniel Schultz, Paul Standish, Martina Tazzioli, and Daniel Wyche for their helpful comments.

<sup>1</sup> Stanley Cavell, *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow* (Cambridge, Mass., 2005), pp. 186–87; hereafter abbreviated *PDT*.

and development of the theme of passionate utterance, out of what Austin called performative utterance, as an elaboration of Austin's idea of the perlocutionary effect—an elaboration that Austin himself “for some reason did not make.” Indeed, according to Cavell, passionate utterance is “just one form in which perlocutionary effect structures itself: moralistic abusiveness is another; hate speech another; political oratory another” (*PDT*, p. 5).<sup>2</sup> The question I wish to address in this essay is thus the following: should we consider *parresia* too as another form in which perlocutionary effect (what is done not *in* but *by* saying something) structures itself? I will argue that we should, firstly, because the consideration of *parresia* from the perspective of the perlocutionary effect can shed new light on Foucault's study of *parresia* itself and, secondly, because the consequent enlargement of our knowledge of the perlocutionary field can in turn shed new light on Cavell's study of passionate utterance.

In the first chapter of *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow*, Cavell introduces what he calls his “interest in Austin's sense of the powers of speech,” linking it with his “interest in the voice in opera” (*PDT*, p. 11)<sup>3</sup> because “opera is the Western institution in which . . . the human voice is given its fullest acknowledgement.” It is precisely this link that pushes Cavell to ask whether Austin's theory of language as action “may be extended, in a sense re-begun, in order to articulate a theory of speech as passion” (*PDT*, p. 15). But in addition to some famous examples drawn from opera, as well as from literature and cinema, Cavell claims that a theory of passionate speech should illuminate

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<sup>2</sup> Perlocutionary effect in the form of hate speech is an especially important and complex topic, which I hope to address in future work.

<sup>3</sup> On the theme of the voice in opera, see Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises* (Cambridge, Mass., 1994), pp. 129–69.

other examples of utterances that lie more explicitly within the framework of classical moral philosophy. Thus, he borrows a list of examples from A. J. Ayer's *Language, Truth, and Logic*—such as “‘You acted wrongly in stealing that money,’ ‘Tolerance is a virtue,’ ‘You ought to tell the truth’”—and recalls that, according to Ayer, these ethical propositions (or “moral judgments”) are compromised in their meaningfulness on the ground that “‘they do not come under the category of truth and falsehood.’” They are rather “‘pure expressions of feeling . . . calculated to provoke different responses.’” This is precisely, Cavell explains, “the thesis to which Austin, in his theory of speech acts . . . , provides massive classes of counterexamples,” discussing cases in which to utter a sentence, in the appropriate circumstances, “‘is not to *describe* my doing of what I should be said in so uttering to be doing,’” or to state that I am doing it, but “‘it is to do it’” (*PDT*, p. 16; see also pp. 160–61).<sup>4</sup>

However, there are two problems with Austin's move. The first one is the problem that Cavell emphasizes and tries to solve through his theory of passionate utterance, namely, the fact that Austin does not really discuss Ayer's above-cited examples of ethical propositions nor their descendants. More generally, according to Cavell, Austin “seems unable to do much with the field of the perlocutionary comparable to his mapping of that of the illocutionary.” This is why Cavell suggests that Austin's theory must be restarted, paying attention “to the fact of the expressiveness and responsiveness of speech as such” (*PDT*, p. 17). Call this Cavell's move. But there is a second problem in Austin's move. Ayer claims that utterances like “‘You acted wrongly in stealing that money,’” “‘Tolerance is a virtue,’” or “‘You ought to tell the truth’” (1) are pure expressions of feeling, (2) are calculated to provoke different responses, (3) do not

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<sup>4</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 79–80.

come under the category of truth and falsehood, and consequently (4) are not in the literal sense significant. Neither Austin nor Cavell are willing to discuss or to question the third claim, namely, that these ethical propositions do not come under the category of truth and falsehood. Cavell's move consists, in fact, in starting over with Austin's theory in order to throw some fresh light upon "a philosophical interest in the question of the relation of passion to speech" (*PDT*, p. 156). And according to Cavell, with his study of performatives, Austin aimed precisely "to lift the non-descriptive or non-assertional or non-constative gestures of speech to renewed philosophical interest and respectability, and to bring, or prepare the ground on which to bring, the philosophical concern with truth down to size" (*PDT*, p. 159).<sup>5</sup> Cavell declares himself sympathetic

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<sup>5</sup> This claim apparently contradicts what Cavell argues in order to defend Austin from Jacques Derrida's critiques:

Austin's introduction of an idea of force, his "substitution" of something about force for something about truth is meant not as a revelation of truth as illusion or as will to power (if something of the sort is what Derrida signals as "Nietzschean"), but rather as specifying the extent to which what may be called the value of truth—call it an adequation of language and reality, or a discovering of reality—is on the contrary as essential to performative as to constative utterances. . . . Austin's counter to positivism . . . depends upon an understanding of the performative utterance as *retaining* an adequation to reality (to certain factual conditions) equal to that of verifiable statements. Which is a way of saying that Austin's work in the theory of performatives is designed precisely to retain "the value of truth."

with this program but not ready to pay the price of “the relative, continued neglect of the passions, or say the expressive, in speech” because Austin’s theory of language “pictures speech as at heart a matter of action and only incidentally as a matter of articulating and hence expressing desire” (*PDT*, p. 159; see also pp. 163, 170).

Therefore, Cavell does not consider the question of the truthfulness or falseness of ethical propositions as a problem worthy of being discussed again. On the contrary, in this essay I would like to take seriously Ayer’s claim that these expressions of moral judgement do not come under the category of truth and falsehood, describing in detail what I shall call Foucault’s move. Foucault’s study of *parresia* highlights a peculiar class of utterances, and more specifically of ethical utterances: the question of their truthfulness—which is something different from the question of their logical truth-value—is essential in the act of uttering them and plays a fundamental role with respect to the ethical status of the subject who utters them and to the (intended and unintended) consequences they provoke. I am not of course suggesting that we should consider parrhesiastic utterance as true from a logical point of view; *parresia* too, as performative and passionate utterance, is neither nonsense nor true or false. Thus, the study of *parresia* also helps bring the classical philosophical concern with (logical)

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However, we should note that Cavell immediately specifies that Austin actually *did* substitute the “logically defined concept of truth” with another concept, namely that of felicity: “Statements, if adequate to reality, are true, if not, false. (This defines the concept of a statement.) Performatives, if adequate to reality, are felicitous, if not, then, in specific ways, infelicitous.” Therefore, what Austin retains is not the value of (the logically defined concept of) truth, but rather the value of the adequation of language and reality, which is of course something different (*ibid.*, pp. 80–81).

truth down to size, but it does so in a way that I think has not been adequately appreciated and explored so far.

If Austin's move with respect to Ayer consisted in showing that there is a huge class of ordinary human utterances (what he called performative utterances) that are not compromised in their meaningfulness on the ground that they do not come under the category of truth and falsehood; and if Cavell's move with respect to Austin and Ayer consists in extending Austin's theory toward the perlocutionary, adding to his study of performative utterance the exploration of passionate utterance—that is to say, a kind of utterance in which “the feelings and actions I wish to provoke (Ayer) or bring off (Austin) are ones I can acknowledge, or specifically refuse to acknowledge, as appropriate responses to my expressions of feeling” (*PDT*, p. 17)—then, Foucault's move or, better, the move I am suggesting by introducing into the picture Foucault's historical and philosophical analysis of *parresia*, consists in posing again, from a different point of view, the question of the truthfulness of certain ethical utterances (namely, parrhesiastic utterances) in order to shed new light on Ayer's warhorse examples of moral judgements.

Foucault spoke of *parresia* for the first time in his 1981–1982 lectures at the Collège de France, placing it within the framework of his study of care of the self in the Hellenistic and Roman world.<sup>6</sup> Then, he devoted the last two years of his life to the exploration of this notion, coming back to classical Greece and analyzing *parresia* in Euripides's tragedies, in the crisis of the Athenian democracy, as well as in Socrates,

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<sup>6</sup> See Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1981–1982*, trans. Graham Burchell, ed. Frédéric Gros (New York, 2005), pp. 371–409.

Plato, and the Cynics.<sup>7</sup> Since the reconstruction of such a rich and complex intellectual journey goes far beyond the scope of this essay, I will limit myself to a few general remarks. Foucault's analysis of *parresia* has an essentially historical dimension, and it was not conceived as a contribution to the philosophy of language. This implies that Foucault was not seeking to give a unique and unambiguous definition of *parresia*, since *parresia* was not for him an abstract class of statements he was describing but a historical object whose meaning and use remarkably changed over history. Hence, Foucault does not provide any coherent philosophical theory of parrhesiastic utterance. Aware of this fact, I will discuss two specific but crucial examples of *parresia*, using them as the main ground for my observations.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> See Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1982–1983*, trans. Burchell, ed. Gros (Basingstoke, 2010), hereafter abbreviated *GS*; *Fearless Speech*, ed. Joseph Pearson (Los Angeles, 2001); *The Courage of Truth: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1983–1984*, trans. Burchell, ed. Gros (Basingstoke, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> I will leave aside, in this essay, the case of Cynic *parresia*, which is of primary interest but would require a completely different and much longer discussion. I just note that Cavell's claim according to which perlocutionary effects are "readily, sometimes more effectively, achievable without saying anything," since "the urgency of passion is expressed before and after words," and for this same reason "passionate expression makes demands upon the singular body in a way illocutionary force (if all goes well) forgoes," opens up a very promising field of confrontation between passionate utterance and Cynic *parresia* (*PDT*, p. 173).



Firstly, I would like to take what Foucault himself defines as “an average case . . . of *parresia* from almost exactly mid-way between the classical age and the great Christian spirituality . . ., in which we see this notion of *parresia* at work in a traditional but very well-defined field of philosophy” (*GS*, p. 47). Foucault draws this case from Plutarch’s *Parallel Lives* and in particular from the life of Dion, the brother-in-law of Dionysius the tyrant of Syracuse, as well as Plato’s disciple, sponsor, and host when Plato came to Sicily:

Their conversation having got under way, the basic theme of the discussion was virtue, but more especially courage. Plato showed that tyrants were anything but courageous; then, moving away from this subject, he elaborated on justice and showed that the life of the just man was happy and that the unjust man was unhappy. . . . The tyrant could not bear these remarks . . ., which he thought were directed at him, and he did not conceal his displeasure at seeing the other admiring auditors being charmed by the discourse of the great man. Finally, filled with anger and exasperation, Dionysius asked Plato: “What have you come to Sicily for?” And Plato replied: “I am looking for a good man.” The tyrant replied: “By the gods, it is clear that you have not yet found one!” Dion thought that Dionysius’ anger would end there, and he put Plato, who was in a hurry to leave, on a trireme taking Pollis, the Spartan, back to Greece. But Dionysius secretly asked Pollis to kill Plato on the journey, if it was possible, and if not, at least sell him into slavery. [*GS*, pp. 48–49]

Commenting on this text, Foucault argues that Plato’s *parresia* is “exemplary:” “a man stands up to a tyrant and tells him the truth” (*GS*, p. 50). As a second example, I

would like to discuss a text—the incipit of Seneca’s seventy-fifth letter to Lucilius—that Foucault analyzes during his 1982 lecture on *parresia* at the University of Grenoble.<sup>9</sup> We are here confronted with the problem of *parresia* within the framework of philosophical care of the self in the Roman world and with Seneca’s description of *his own* parrhesiastic discourse:

You have been complaining that my letters to you are rather carelessly written. Now who talks carefully unless he also desires to talk affectedly? I prefer that my letters should be just what my conversation would be if you and I were sitting in one another’s company or taking walks together,—spontaneous and easy; for my letters have nothing mannered or artificial about them. If it were possible, I should prefer to show, rather than speak, my thoughts. Even if I were arguing a point, I should not stamp my foot, or toss my arms about, or raise my voice; but I should leave that sort of thing to the orator, and should be content to have conveyed my thoughts to you without having either embellished them or lowered their dignity. I should like to convince you entirely of this one fact: that I think whatever I say, that I not only think it, but love it. . . . Let this be the kernel of my idea: let us say what we think, and think what we say; let speech harmonize with conduct. That man has fulfilled his commitments who is the same person both when you see him and when you hear him.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Foucault, “*Parrēsia*,” trans. Burchell, *Critical Inquiry* 41 (Winter 2015): 000–00; hereafter abbreviated “P.” Foucault discusses this letter also in *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, pp. 401–7.

<sup>10</sup> Seneca, *Epistles*, trans. Richard M. Gummere, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1989), 2:137–39; trans. mod.

Even if the two examples are very different, it is possible to highlight some common features between them. Above all, what is remarkable is that the word *truth* does not appear either in the first or in the second text; it is Foucault who introduces it, while commenting on them. I think Foucault is right when he claims that “in the first place, *parresia* is the fact of telling the truth” (GS, p. 51), but this still does not make clear what *parresia* exactly is since “it is not just any way of telling the truth:” for instance, “when Plato said in one of his dialogues that the life of the just is happy and that of unjust unhappy, . . . he was not giving proof each time of *parresia*. It is only in this precise situation and context that he gives proof of *parresia*.” Thus, according to Foucault, “*parresia* is a way of telling the truth, but what defines it is not the content of the truth as such” (GS, p. 52). So, what *does* define it? No single or simple answer to this question is possible.

Interestingly, during the second lecture of *The Government of Self and Others*, Foucault devotes some time and energy to distinguish *parresia* from performative utterance or, better, to explain why he thinks that performative utterance is “a form of enunciation which is exactly the opposite of *parresia*” (GS, p. 61). This sudden irruption of an analytic topic in Foucault’s reasoning should not surprise us; as Arnold Davidson has convincingly shown, Anglo-American philosophy was for Foucault an important source of inspiration.<sup>11</sup> As early as 1967, Foucault claimed that the Anglo-

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<sup>11</sup> See Arnold I. Davidson, “Structures and Strategies of Discourse: Remarks Towards a History of Foucault’s Philosophy of Language,” in *Foucault and His Interlocutors*, ed. Davidson (Chicago, 1997), pp. 1–17; *The Emergence of Sexuality: Historical Epistemology and the Formation of Concepts* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001), pp. 178–91;

Americans allowed him to see how “to treat statements in their functioning”<sup>12</sup> and, in an unpublished lecture given in Tunisia and quoted by Davidson, “invoking among others the name of J. L. Austin, [Foucault] argued that the description of a statement was not complete when one had defined the linguistic structure of the statement, that the analysis of discourse could not be reduced to the combination of elements according to linguistic rules, that therefore ‘discourse is something that necessarily extends beyond language.’”<sup>13</sup> These ideas led Foucault to his famous analyses of discourse as a “strategic field,” as a set of “strategic games,” as a struggle, a weapon, a force,<sup>14</sup> and it is not possible to understand his interest in *parresia* outside such a long-term project. Thus, it is not surprising that in 1983 Foucault refers again to Austin in order to distinguish *parresia* from performative utterance. What is remarkable, instead, is the parallel that it is possible to establish between this move and Cavell’s careful explanation of why, in the case of passionate speech, the six necessary conditions or rules for the felicity of performative utterance are overturned “specifically and in detail” (*PDT*, p. 18; see also p. 177).

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and “Introduction,” in Foucault, “*Society Must Be Defended*”: *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–1976*, trans. David Macey (New York, 2003), pp. xv–xxii.

<sup>12</sup> Foucault, unpublished letter to Daniel Defert (1967); quoted in Davidson, “Structures and Strategies of Discourse,” p. 5.

<sup>13</sup> Foucault, “Structuralisme et analyse littéraire,” unpublished lecture; quoted in Davidson, “Introduction,” p. xix.

<sup>14</sup> Foucault, “Le discours ne doit pas être pris comme . . .,” *Dits et écrits, 1976–1988*, ed. Daniel Defert and François Ewald (Paris, 2001), pp. 123–24.

In what follows, I will draw inspiration from this challenging parallel in order to describe the seven necessary conditions of parrhesiastic utterance. In so doing, I will go beyond Foucault because I will be obliged to put into brackets the historical dimension of his analysis of *parresia*. As a consequence, even if I will often refer to the parrhesiast using male pronouns, the reader should not assign to them a fixed gender content but take them as potentially referring both to a man and a woman.

In the first place, Cavell notes that there is “no conventional procedure for appealing to you to act in response to my expression of passion (of outrage at your treachery or callousness, of jealousy over your attentions, of hurt over your slights of recognition).” Besides, this “freedom [of the interlocutor] in responding to my speech,” as Cavell puts it, is characteristic of every perlocutionary act. Cavell suggests to call such an “absence of convention the first condition of passionate utterance,” as opposed to performative utterance, for which “there must exist an accepted conventional procedure for uttering certain words in certain contexts” (*PDT*, pp. 18, 172, 18; see also p. 180). In confronting parrhesiastic and performative utterance, Foucault stresses a similar point:

In a performative utterance, the given elements of the situation are such that when the utterance is made, the effect which follows is known and ordered in advance, it is codified, and this is precisely what constitutes the performative character of the utterance. In *parresia*, on the other hand, whatever the usual, familiar, and quasi-institutionalized character of the situation in which it is effectuated, what makes it *parresia* is that the introduction, the irruption of the true discourse [i.e. the parrhesiastic utterance] determines an open situation, or rather opens the situation and makes possible effects which are, precisely, not known. [*GS*, p. 62]

From this stems another difference Foucault highlights between *parresia* and performative utterance: while, on the one hand, in performative utterance what matters is the social or institutional status of the speaker (since “the person speaking [must have] the status which permits him to carry out what is stated by making his utterance”), on the other hand, what characterizes parrhesiastic utterance is the fact that “the parrhesiast is someone who emphasizes his own freedom as an individual speaking.” Thus, “whereas the performative utterance defines a definite game in which the status of person speaking and the situation in which he finds himself determine precisely what he can and must say, *parresia* only exists when there is freedom in the enunciation of the truth, freedom of the act by which the subject says the truth, and freedom also of the pact by which the subject speaking binds himself to the statement and enunciation of the truth” (*GS*, pp. 65–66). I will deal with the delicate question of truth later; for the moment I suggest calling absence of codified effect and freedom of the individual speaking the first and second conditions of parrhesiastic utterance. Both of them apply also to passionate utterance since, according to Cavell, while a performative utterance “is an offer of participation in the order of law,” a passionate utterance “is an invitation to improvisation in the disorders of desire” (*PDT*, p. 19; see also p. 185).<sup>15</sup>

Thirdly, coming back to Ayer’s examples of ethical propositions, it is plain that when Plato uses *parresia* in front of the tyrant of Syracuse, he is uttering a series of

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<sup>15</sup> This “uncanny resonance between Foucault’s discussion of *parresia* . . . and Cavell’s treatment of the illocution/perlocution distinction in Austin” is highlighted also by Aletta J. Norval, “Moral Perfectionism and Democratic Responsiveness: Reading Cavell with Foucault,” *Ethics and Global Politics* 4, no. 4 (2011): 220–21.

statements that are analogous to “Tolerance is a virtue.” More precisely, we are told that Plato said that “Tyrants are not courageous,” that “The life of the just man is happy,” and that “The unjust man is unhappy.” These ethical propositions, uttered in a different context (to himself, in front of a class, in a book), would not have been considered parrhesiastic or, at least, not necessarily. They are parrhesiastic only because Plato uttered them in front of someone who had a reason to feel questioned by them—and questioned *from an ethical point of view*. Indeed, Plutarch claims that “the tyrant could not bear these remarks [because] he thought [they] were directed at him.” This condition of parrhesiastic utterance remains valid even when we turn to Seneca’s case: not every ethical proposition Seneca wrote down in his letters to Lucilius has to be considered a parrhesiastic utterance. But every sentence explicitly directed to Lucilius in order to question him in his very *ethos*, in his way of living and being, has to be considered a parrhesiastic utterance. The third condition of parrhesiastic utterance is thus the following: the proposition must be uttered *intentionally* in front of (or must be *intentionally* directed to) someone who has a reason to feel questioned by it in his moral conduct, in his *ethos*. Note that this condition is very similar to Cavell’s second and third conditions for the felicity or appropriateness of passionate utterance—what he calls “standing and singling out” (*PDT*, p. 18; see also p. 181). I would rather call criticism the third condition of parrhesiastic utterance.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> See Cavell, *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life* (Cambridge, Mass., 2004), p. 142:

That my actions are part of the life form of talkers (as Wittgenstein characterizes the human, at *Investigations* §174) makes them *open to criticism*. That I am open to, perhaps responsive to, the criticism of being insensitive, cruel, petty,

Consequently, *parresia* always takes place in circumstances such that it will, may, or must entail costly consequences for the speaker. Foucault describes this fundamental condition of parrhesiastic utterance in terms of the opening of a space of “unspecified” risk for the speaker: “parrhesiasts are those who undertake to tell the truth at an unspecified price, which may be as high as their own death” (*GS*, p. 56). But if it is easy to understand how this condition applies to the example of Plato facing the tyrant and thus risking his own life, it is more difficult to understand its appropriateness with respect to Seneca’s case. What is Seneca risking in writing to Lucilius? While in Plato’s case there is a radical asymmetry in the distribution of power between the interlocutors and the parrhesiast is completely exposed to the tyrant’s anger, in Seneca’s case it is Lucilius who freely asks the parrhesiast for help, thus declaring his willingness to listen and follow the parrhesiast’s advice. Nevertheless, Seneca too, in using *parresia*, was risking something. To understand why, we have to take seriously Pierre Hadot’s idea of dialogue as a *combat*—“amicable but real”—and the risk of breakdown that lies at the heart of every real dialogue.<sup>17</sup> Hence, I suggest considering Seneca’s *parresia* as a kind of utterance that *systematically* opens up, even in a friendly conversation, a space of unspecified risk (see *GS*, p. 63), which may be as high as the irreparable rupture of the

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clumsy, narrow-minded, self-absorbed, cold, hard, heedless, reckless . . . is as much a mystery as my being open to the charge of being imprudent or undutiful or unfair. That we are not transparent to ourselves means that such criticism demands confrontation and conversation. The mystery is not that we are impure but that we can be moved to change by speech, and (hence) by silence.

<sup>17</sup> Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, trans. Michael Chase, ed. Davidson (Oxford, 1995), p. 91.



relationship between the two interlocutors. In other words, what we risk in using *parresia* in a friendly conversation, thus questioning our interlocutor's *ethos*, is nothing less than our friendship, say our life *together*: when “you see a friend doing something wrong and you risk incurring his anger by telling him he is wrong, you are acting as a parrhesiastes. In such a case, you do not risk your life, but you may hurt him by your remarks, and your friendship may consequently suffer for it.”<sup>18</sup> So parrhesiastic utterance necessarily requires the courage of the speaker, who decides to use *parresia* intentionally, fully aware of the risk it entails. Call dangerousness and courageousness the fourth and fifth conditions of parrhesiastic utterance.<sup>19</sup> And note that, in the form they take in Seneca's case, these two conditions apply also (even if in a slightly different way) to passionate utterance—where “failure to have singled you out

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<sup>18</sup> Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, p. 16.

<sup>19</sup> If we assume a different point of view, not that of the speaker but that of his interlocutor(s), we could argue that *parresia* implies also in this case the opening of a space of risk, and therefore an act of courage. Listening to a parrhesiastic utterance without getting angry but, on the contrary, taking seriously the ‘truth’ we are told about ourselves, requires of course the willingness and courage to put ourselves in question. However, the opening of a space of risk for, and the courage of, the interlocutor(s) are *not* to be considered as necessary conditions of parrhesiastic utterance: in fact, an utterance can be parrhesiastic even if these conditions do not take place. We should rather list them among the conditions for the establishment of what Foucault calls a “parrhesiastic pact” or “pact of frankness.” See, for instance, *GS*, pp. 163, 177–79, 203; *Fearless Speech*, p. 32; and *The Courage of Truth*, pp. 128, 142–43.

appropriately . . . characteristically puts the future of our relationship, as part of my sense of my existence, on the line” (*PDT*, p. 19; see also p. 184).<sup>20</sup>

In the sixth place, as opposed to rhetoric and every other art of discourse, *parresia* is a nonartificial way of speaking; parrhesiastic utterance is rhetoric degree zero (see *GS*, p. 53). It is direct, clear, and transparent. Seneca’s formula describes this condition perfectly: “If it were possible, I should prefer to show, rather than speak, my thoughts.” Therefore, *parresia* is a way to show, to make the other(s) see my thoughts without embellishing them through an elegant rhetorical style or altering them using oratorical tricks. I suggest calling transparency this sixth condition of parrhesiastic utterance.<sup>21</sup>

Finally, we must confront the delicate task of defining the seventh condition of parrhesiastic utterance, which I propose to call *alethurgy*, taking this term to mean “the act by which truth is manifested.”<sup>22</sup> Etymologically, a parrhesiast is someone who “says everything” (*GS*, p. 43)—and to say everything, of course, is not exactly the same thing as to speak the truth. However, I do not think Foucault is wrong in translating *parresia*

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<sup>20</sup> This is even clearer in Cavell’s discussion of remarriage comedies, where what is at stake is precisely the possibility for the central pair to overcome the threat, the risk of divorce, and to re-establish their relationship in the form of “a meet and happy conversation” (the “chiefest and noblest end of marriage,” according to John Milton). In those films, where the central pair’s relationship has “the quality of friendship,” according to Cavell “talking together is fully and plainly being together, a mode of association, a form of life” (Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* [Cambridge, Mass., 1981], pp. 87–88).

<sup>21</sup> See Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, pp. 404–5.

<sup>22</sup> Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, p. 3.

with truth telling because the link between *parresia* and truth is attested in many of the ancient texts he discusses.<sup>23</sup> But we should be careful and explore such a link without imposing on it our (logical and epistemological) conception of truth or truthfulness. First of all, we are indeed forced to recognize that a parrhesiastic utterance—like, to take Plato’s case, “Tyrants are not courageous” or “The unjust man is unhappy”—is *not* true in the logical sense of the term; that is to say, it does not possess any truth-value. Foucault’s move does not challenge Ayer’s, Austin’s, and Cavell’s theses on this point. Nevertheless, in the case of parrhesiastic utterance we cannot get rid of the question of truth so easily; in fact, it is essential for *parresia* that the speaker actually believes in the truthfulness of his utterance. But there is more because the parrhesiast does not only or simply *believe* in the truthfulness of his utterance; on the contrary, in the verbal act of uttering it (of uttering it *courageously* because he knows that in so doing he is opening up for himself a space of unspecified risk), the parrhesiast *ties himself* to the truthfulness he assigns to his utterance. This is why *parresia* is not just a question of sincerity.<sup>24</sup>

But this is still not enough. We should highlight another fundamental sense in which the parrhesiast ties himself to the truthfulness of his utterance, manifesting it through his own *ethos*, his own way of living and being. Seneca tells Lucilius that he does not only think, but love, what he says: “let speech harmonize with conduct. That man has fulfilled his commitments who is the same person both when you see him and when you hear him.” Foucault, in his lecture at the University of Grenoble, comments extensively

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<sup>23</sup> See Giuseppe Scarpato, *Parrhesia greca, parrhesia cristiana* (Brescia, 2001), pp. 55, 82, and *Free Speech in Classical Antiquity*, ed. Ineke Sluiter and Ralph M. Rosen (Leiden, 2004), pp. 6–7.

<sup>24</sup> See Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, p. 14.

on this point, which he considers the real core of *parresia*: according to him, *parresia* is “the presence, in the person who speaks, of his own form of life rendered manifest, present, perceptible, and active as model in the discourse he delivers.” Foucault goes on explaining that the parrhesiast “says what he thinks not in the sense that he expresses his opinions, or says what he thinks true, but by saying what he loves, that is to say by showing what his own choice is, his *proairesis*. . . . I must be myself within what I say; I must myself be implicated in what I say, and what I affirm must show me really true to what I affirm.” And Foucault concludes, always speaking from the standpoint of the parrhesiast: “I do not content myself with telling you what I judge to be true, I tell this truth only inasmuch as it is in actual fact what I am myself; I am implicated in the truth of what I say” (“P,” p. 000).<sup>25</sup>

Therefore, the parrhesiast manifests his commitment to the truthfulness of what he says, not only in risking a friendship or his own life in order to utter what he thinks to be true, but also through the harmony, through the homophony he displays between his *logos* and his *bios*—that is, between what he thinks and what he says and at the same time between what he says and his real, actual way of living. This is the crucial point of Foucault’s discussion of Socratic *parresia* in 1983 and 1984,<sup>26</sup> but this is also, significantly, the second remark Foucault makes when opposing *parresia* to performative utterance; in a performative utterance, he explains, “the subject’s status” is of course important (because, for instance, the person who opens a meeting by saying “the meeting is open” must have the authority to do so); however, “there does not have to be a . . . personal relationship between the person making the utterance and the

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<sup>25</sup> See also Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, pp. 405–7.

<sup>26</sup> See Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, pp. 97–102, and *The Courage of Truth*, pp. 141–53.

utterance itself for the latter to be performative.” So, “it does not matter whether the chairman who says ‘the meeting is open’ is really bored by the meeting or if he dozes off; [in saying ‘the meeting is open’] he will have opened the meeting.” On the contrary, it is plain that in *parresia* this indifference with respect to the relationship between the subject making the utterance and the utterance itself is not possible because “the parrhesiastic enunciation is the affirmation that in fact one genuinely thinks, judges, and considers the truth one is saying to be genuinely true” (*GS*, pp. 63–64). We could find a sort of (imperfect) parallel to this in the fourth condition Cavell defines for passionate utterance, namely, the fact that “the one uttering a passion must have the passion” (*PDT*, p. 19; see also pp. 181–82).

I hope it is now clear why Foucault’s study of *parresia* can provide us with a class of ethical utterances that are neither true nor false but whose truthfulness plays an essential role for the speaker in the act of uttering them. We must not consider this truthfulness from a logical or an epistemological point of view but rather from a strategic point of view<sup>27</sup> because the truth manifested in *parresia* is clearly *a force* in a field of battle. This force is, as I have shown, an *ethical* force that challenges and radically puts into question the interlocutor’s way of living and being—thus inviting him to change, to transform, to transfigure it. In fact, through his own way of living and being, the parrhesiast shows us that it is not possible to consider true what he says without feeling the need to change our *ethos*.<sup>28</sup> Borrowing John Henry Newman’s distinction between notional assent and real assent, quoted by Hadot in his book of conversations with

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<sup>27</sup> See Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” trans. Leslie Sawyer, *Critical Inquiry* 8 (Summer 1982): 793.

<sup>28</sup> See Foucault, *Fearless Speech*, p. 106.

Jeannie Carlier and Arnold Davidson—“*Notional assent* is the acceptance of a theoretical proposition to which one adheres in an abstract way, such as a mathematical proposition, for example, 2 and 2 make 4. This commits one to nothing; it is purely intellectual. *Real assent* is something that involves the whole being; one understands that the proposition to which one adheres is going to change one’s life”<sup>29</sup>—we could say that *parresia* always requires that the speaker has already given a real assent to the statement he utters, while making it impossible for his interlocutor to give to that statement a simple notional assent.

All this partially finds a parallel in Cavell’s fifth and sixth conditions for the felicity of passionate utterance, namely, the fact that “the one singled out must respond now and here,” and “respond in kind, that is to say, be *moved* to respond, or else resist the demand” (*PDT*, p. 19; see also p. 182). Besides, especially if we refer to Seneca’s case, marked by the idea of conversation and mutual opening of the two interlocutor’s souls,<sup>30</sup> we can certainly borrow Cavell’s seventh condition for passionate utterance—

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<sup>29</sup> Hadot, *The Present Alone Is Our Happiness: Conversations with Jeannie Carlier and Arnold I. Davidson*, trans. Marc Djaballah (Stanford, Calif., 2008), p. 58.

<sup>30</sup> “There is a *parresia* which is in a way a reciprocal opening of two partners when the one who guides the other implicates himself in what he says, not just in order to affirm that he is exactly true to the truth of what he says, but that he too is striving to arrive at it” (“P,” p. 000). This idea interestingly points to what Cavell calls moral perfectionism, but a serious discussion of *parresia* within the framework of moral perfectionism cannot be developed here. On this topic, see David Owen, “Perfectionism, *Parrhesia*, and the Care of the Self: Foucault and Cavell on Ethics and Politics,” in *The Claim to Community: Essays on Stanley Cavell*, ed. Andrew Norris (Stanford, Calif., 2006),

the “final asymmetry” he emphasizes with respect to performative utterance—and apply it to *parresia*, thus considering parrhesiastic utterances too “as instances of, or attempts at, moral education” (*PDT*, p. 182).<sup>31</sup> However, we should not overlap passionate and parrhesiastic utterance, which are and remain two different classes of utterances. Instead, it is important to stress, on the one hand, that the “primary effect” of both is perlocutionary, if we take this term to designate the effects upon the feelings, thoughts, or actions of the audience, or of the speaker, or of other persons, produced by uttering something “with the design, intention, or purpose of producing them” (*PDT*, pp. 177,

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pp. 143–47, and Daniele Lorenzini, “Must We Do What We Say? Truth, Responsibility, and the Ordinary in Ancient and Modern Perfectionism,” *European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy* 2, no. 2 (2010): 18–23.

<sup>31</sup> The theme of moral education through a “mode of conversation” is crucial also in Cavell’s discussion of remarriage comedies; see, for instance, Cavell, *Cities of Words*, pp. 38–48. As Cavell puts it in *Philosophy the Day after Tomorrow*, “what makes marriage worth reaffirming is a diurnal devotedness that involves friendship, play, surprise, and mutual education, all manifested in the pair’s mode of conversing with each other (not just in words),” and he adds: “The education of the pair by each other is not to provide an increase of learning but (as in Wittgensteinian instruction) a transformation of existence; those who cannot inspire one another to such an education are not married; they do not have the right interest for one another” (*PDT*, pp. 121–22). On this topic, see also Norval, “Moral Perfectionism and Democratic Responsiveness,” pp. 213–15, and Owen and Clare Woodford, “Foucault, Cavell, and the Government of Self and Others: On Truth-telling, Friendship, and an Ethics of Democracy,” *Iride* 25, no. 66 (2012): 307–11.

175). And, on the other hand, the study of passionate and parrhesiastic utterance is an essential contribution to the field of ethics, but with different goals: while Cavell is interested in exploring a domain of the perlocutionary that gives importance to human beings' ethical relationship to passions, Foucault aims to enlighten *another* domain of the perlocutionary, through the historical and philosophical analysis of a class of utterances whose primary function is the manifestation of human beings' ethical relationship to truth.

To conclude, I hope I have shown in this essay how the consideration of *parresia* from the perspective of the perlocutionary effect can help clarify Foucault's analyses. It allows us to list a series of necessary conditions for parrhesiastic utterance: absence of codified effect, freedom of the individual speaking, criticism, dangerousness, courageousness, transparency, *alethurgy*. This list can be very useful, for instance, to understand why *parresia* is not to be confused with sincerity, or with free association, or with confession. More generally, without attempting to provide a universal and univocal definition of *parresia*, a list of the main features of parrhesiastic utterance allows us to distinguish it clearly from other utterances that we commonly label under the rubric of truth telling. Moreover, an enlargement in our knowledge of the perlocutionary field, through the analysis of parrhesiastic utterance, can enrich Cavell's study of passionate utterance, too, shedding new light on some of his claims and extending his perspective toward a class of utterances that are of primary importance not only in our everyday life, or in literature, opera, and cinema, but also in the history of philosophy itself, from ancient Greece to our own present.



## **Abstract**

In this essay, I draw inspiration from Stanley Cavell's analysis of passionate utterance, as an enlargement of J. L. Austin's theory of performatives, in order to discuss Michel Foucault's study of truth telling (*parresia*) from an ethico-political perspective. I suggest that we should consider *parresia*, like passionate utterance, as a form structured around perlocutionary effect, and I show that this standpoint allows us to clarify Foucault's analyses by identifying seven necessary conditions for parrhesiastic utterance: absence of codified effect, freedom of the individual speaking, criticism, dangerousness, courageousness, transparency, and *alethurgy*. This list, which does not claim to be exhaustive, turns out to be essential to distinguish *parresia* from other utterances that we commonly label under the rubric of truth telling.

## **Keywords**

Truth Telling, Passionate Utterance, Performative Utterance, Perlocutionary Effect, Michel Foucault, Stanley Cavell, J. L. Austin.