



# Care of the Self and the Construction of the Moral Subject

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## Abstract

*Parrhesia*, defined as the act of speaking the truth frankly and completely, functions as a pedagogical practice within the framework of the care of the self and thereby guides individuals in establishing a relation to truth. First, the subject constituted through the care of the self is a subject engaged in practices of freedom. Second, through the subject's spontaneous training in *parrhesia*, the ultimate aim is the realization of an autonomous mode of life. Finally, the care of the self extends beyond concern for the soul alone to encompass both body and mind; the body itself must become the embodiment of the unity of knowledge and action. At the same time, as a mode of being akin to virtue, *parrhesia* directs the subject toward the achievement of a flourishing life.

## Subject Areas

Philosophy of Education

## Keywords

*Parrhesia*, Care of the Self, Moral Subject

## 1. Introduction

Under the dominance of instrumental rationality, contemporary education has increasingly become subordinated to test scores and standardized answers. As a consequence, students are deprived of opportunities to care for and explore the self. Moral education in schools frequently remains at the level of external norm inculcation: students are required to comply with predetermined standards, while their inner constitution as moral subjects—their autonomous search for moral value and individualized formation—remains neglected. Yet students' lived experience and self-awareness ought to constitute the starting point of education.

Against this background, this study addresses the following question: within the institutional power structures of contemporary schooling, how might Michel Foucault's account of *parrhesia* be transformed from its historical context in ancient political practice and ethical cultivation into an educational model capable of fostering students' formation as moral subjects?

The central argument of this paper is that if *parrhesia* is understood as a pedagogical practice grounded in care of the self and evaluated according to the unity between one's way of life and one's *logos*, then it can not only reconfigure the relation between teachers, students, and truth, but also offer a practical model oriented toward the constitution of the moral subject in school education.

This paper contributes in three respects:

- (1) It proposes a pedagogical structure of "*parrhesia*—care of the self—moral subject";
- (2) It reinterprets Foucault's thought within the context of schooling;
- (3) Through a comparison of Chinese and Western traditions of moral education, it advances an understanding of happiness as a practice rather than as a consequence.

## 2. The Concept of *Parrhesia*

In *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, Foucault examines the relationship between truth-telling and subject formation, drawing upon Cynicism, Epicureanism, and Stoicism. In his discussion of Epicureanism, he introduces the concept of *parrhesia*. Epicurus criticizes those who boast of their cultivation and instead advocates *phusiology* ("natural inquiry"), a practice that equips the subject and the soul to confront life's contingencies. The result of such inquiry is the formation of individuals who take pride not in external goods but in the good they have cultivated within themselves ([1], pp. 239-241). *Parrhesia* thus appears as a manifestation of this "natural inquiry". It is not equivalent to freedom of speech; rather, it is a *techne* (indeed, *parrhesia* is a technical term), a practice commonly operative within relationships such as those between physician and patient or teacher and student. This relational freedom enables individuals, within the domain of genuine knowledge, to employ appropriate truth in order to transform and correct the subject, thereby constituting the subject as free ([1], p. 242).

Building upon Epicurus' conception, Foucault further clarifies *parrhesia* as "truth-telling": speaking truth without concealment, reservation, rhetorical ornamentation, or bureaucratic circumlocution—each of which risks distorting or obscuring the truth. *Parrhesia* is an attitude, a mode of being akin to virtue, and a way of acting. The *parrhesiast* is the one who speaks everything ([2], p. 10). The key to *parrhesia* lies in the subject's self-formation—that is, in caring for and attending to oneself, and in guiding one's everyday life.

## 3. The Genealogy of *Parrhesia*: From Political Practice to Personal Ethics

In *The Courage of Truth: The Government of Self and Others II*, Michel Foucault

undertakes an in-depth investigation of *parrhesia*, tracing its ancient origins and genealogical transformations.

The earliest appearance of the term is found in the works of Euripides. There, *parrhesia* belongs to the political sphere and to the institutional domain of democracy: it denotes the right to speak publicly, the right of citizens to express views concerning the interests of the *polis*. Foucault distinguishes four modes of truth-telling ([2], pp. 15-25). First, prophetic truth-telling, in which the prophet mediates between present and future, revealing truths concealed by time. Second, the truth of the sage, whose speech expresses his own wisdom and is ultimately oriented toward himself. Third, the truth of teachers and technical instructors, who articulate the knowledge they possess because such truth is bound to transmission. Fourth, the *parrhesiast*, who differs from all the above: he does not foretell the future but unveils what already lies before us; he does not disclose what is in terms of ontology, but helps another recognize who he is. The truth of *parrhesia* resides in the singularity of persons and situations rather than in the essence of beings. Moreover, the *parrhesiast* speaks at personal risk—not for self-interest, but for the interest of the interlocutor.

From Plato through Isocrates to Demosthenes, however, a crisis of *parrhesia* emerges. The concept becomes fractured: on the one hand, it degenerates into a dangerous license, granting anyone the right to speak indiscriminately; on the other hand, “good” *parrhesia* exposes the speaker to peril, such that democracy offers no secure place for it ([2], pp. 34-38). The case of Socrates exemplifies precisely this danger. From Socrates’ example, Foucault identifies a shift from political to ethical *parrhesia*.

In his interpretation of the ethical field of *parrhesia*, Foucault references two texts: the *Apology* and the *Phaedo*. In the *Apology*, Socrates explains his refusal to assume a political role in the city, since once he entered politics he would likely face death. His opponents were lying, yet they were eloquent enough to make Socrates “forget who he was.” Moreover, when Peisistratus began to rule and arranged a bodyguard for himself, openly signaling his intention to exercise tyranny, Solon came to the assembly armed with armor and shield, criticizing both those citizens who did not understand the truth and those who understood it but remained silent. It was precisely this kind of *parrhesiastic* practice that Socrates was unwilling to undertake. The task assigned to Socrates by the god was to guard against point-less risks of politics ([2], p. 81). This kept him away from the possibility of speaking the truth in a political form and led him instead to establish another form of truth-telling: philosophical truth-telling. When the Delphic oracle declared Socrates to be the wisest of men, he adopted this form in order to test the oracle. The first stage involved self-questioning, searching (*zētēsis*), and practicing verification through discussion (*elegkhos*), testing the validity of the oracle by questioning and refuting what others said. The second stage took the concrete form of investigation (*planē*): by examining people from different social strata, Socrates discovered that they believed they knew certain things, but in fact did not. After these two stages,

Socrates aroused much hostility, and in the third stage he responded to this hostility in his defense ([2], pp. 84-85). Philosophical *parrhesia* thus serves two aims: first, to care for the rationality, truth, and soul of others; second, to enable each rational being to care for himself and to establish a relation to truth grounded in his own soul ([2], p. 86).

In the *Phaedo*, Socrates leaves a famous final injunction, asking his disciples to sacrifice a rooster to Asclepius as the repayment of a debt. For two thousand years, most scholars have interpreted this final injunction as meaning that Socrates' sacrifice was an expression of gratitude to Asclepius for curing him of the disease of life. Foucault does not agree with this view. Citing an article by Dumézil, he shifts attention to Crito's attempt to help Socrates escape. Socrates ultimately refused to flee and persuaded Crito to choose obedience to truth rather than to public opinion. Foucault thus hypothesizes that the rooster sacrificed to Asclepius was offered precisely because Crito's disease had been cured: through discussion with Socrates, Crito was able to free himself from the opinions of the multitude, avoid the corruption of his soul, and thereby choose and determine a correct judgment grounded in himself and in truth ([2], p. 105).

In sum, the concept of *parrhesia* is originally rooted in political practice and the formation of problems surrounding democracy, but later shifted toward the domain of personal ethics and the construction of the moral subject ([2], p. 8). With the emergence of the crisis of *parrhesia*, *parrhesia* moved away from political practice and became an ethical demand placed upon individuals: that every rational person care for himself, establish a relationship between himself and truth, and care for the reason, truth, and inner life of others.

#### **4. *Parrhesia* as an Education of the Care of the Self**

*Parrhesia*, understood as an education grounded in the care of the self, unfolds in three interrelated stages. First, *parrhesia* presupposes the practice of freedom and orients the subject toward care of the self and ethical formation. Second, through the care of the self, the subject advances toward an autonomous mode of life, wherein teachers and students complete processes of subject-formation through reciprocal truth-telling. Third, the care of the self expands from concern for the soul to the unity of body and mind, such that life itself becomes the manifestation of truth. In this sense, *parrhesia* constitutes a form of education grounded in the care of the self, with the ultimate goal of the subject's self-formation and the realization of a truthful life.

##### **4.1. Care of the Self as Free Practice**

In Michel Foucault's discussion of the "care of the self," pedagogy and educational questions occupy a central position. If *parrhesia* is to function as beneficial discourse and exert a positive effect within the city, it must be linked to good education, knowledge, and moral cultivation ([3], p. 107). Although the *parrhesiast* stands in a particular relation to truth, this relation differs from mere frankness

or courage; it must be constituted through education ([3], p. 137), that is, through processes of subject-formation.

When *parrhesia* shifts into an ethical demand placed upon the individual, it guides the subject to establish a relation to truth through the care of the self. Education thus mediates between *parrhesia* and truth. Yet not every form of education is capable of initiating the subject into the “games of truth”. Foucault seeks a non-manipulative form of education in which disciplinary power is minimized—where the school ceases to resemble a disciplinary institution of behavioral control and instead becomes a space of intellectual provocation and creative possibility. Historically, the relationship between subject and truth has appeared in two forms: one beginning with coercive practices (such as psychiatry and the prison system); the other taking the form of theoretical or scientific games (such as analyses of the richness of language and life). A transformation has now occurred: these games of truth no longer involve coercive practices but practices of the self’s formation [4]. In other words, a subject capable of entering games of truth must first be a subject of free practice.

First, the subject of care of the self is a free subject. Foucault assumes that for a free individual, proper care of the self entails a proper relation to others and right conduct toward them. If each citizen in a city were to care for himself appropriately, the city would flourish and a stable moral order conducive to long-term development would emerge. Second, the subject of the care of the self is a practical subject. *Parrhesia* must be understood not as an idea but as a practice—one that shapes the individual’s relation to himself. As a philosophical activity, *parrhesia* does not aim to persuade assemblies or fellow citizens to make better political decisions; rather, it seeks to persuade the individual that he must care for himself and transform his life ([3], p. 156).

## 4.2. From Care of the Self to a Life of Autonomy

In Foucault’s later work, his research interest increasingly focused on the historical forms of the relationship between the subject and truth, and on how this relationship was constituted in the West. Practices of truth-telling about oneself can, to some extent, be traced along a line back to Socrates’ injunction “know yourself”. When situated within a broader context, however, these practices belong to the notion of *epimeleia heautou* (care of self, application to oneself) ([2], p. 4). Foucault even argues that the problem of caring for oneself should be liberated from the authority of “know yourself,” allowing the latter to assume a secondary position ([1], p. 8).

Yet in the Western cultural tradition, because Christianity made self-renunciation a condition of salvation, care of the self came to be viewed as immoral, and “knowing oneself” replaced “caring for oneself”. In Christopher Lasch’s account, American society is depicted as selfish, greedy, and superficial; consumerism has profoundly reshaped the inner lives of Americans, and self-preservation has replaced self-perfection as the primary goal of existence. Lasch further identifies

forms of self-impairment accompanying narcissistic culture, including narcissistic privatization and weakened selfhood ([5], pp. 7-11). Over the course of historical development, “know yourself” gradually obscured and displaced care of the self; later, under the influence of global consumerism, care of the self was further alienated into selfish self-absorption and self-protection—living solely for immediate personal interests. People became concerned only with how much benefit they could obtain, while losing their connection to truth.

Modern education similarly exhibits a detachment from care of the self. In contemporary teacher-student relationships, students are often led by teachers, acquiring the knowledge and skills required for examinations in order to achieve good grades and secure desirable jobs. Students endlessly drill problems, yet upon graduating from high school often do not know what they truly love; some even choose to end their lives under the pressure and suffering of academic competition. Within this chain of relations, teachers occupy the center: their emotions, preferences, and judgments determine praise and punishment, whose fundamental purpose is control. If education fails to teach students how to care for themselves and to build a bridge between subjectivity and truth, it is a failed education. Likewise, if teachers see themselves merely as instructors of knowledge, without touching students’ inner lives or guiding them toward care of the self and, ultimately, care for others, they are acting irresponsibly.

Whether *parrhesia* can guide students toward care of the self, care for others, and ultimately autonomous life depends crucially on teachers. In a lecture delivered on March 10, 1982, Foucault stated that for students to effectively receive true discourse in appropriate ways, at appropriate times and under appropriate conditions, such discourse must be spoken by teachers in the general mode of *parrhesia* ([1], p. 372). Here, *parrhesia* refers to teachers speaking frankly and freely all that must be said. This does not mean, however, that *parrhesia* is a top-down, didactic form of discourse. *parrhesia* involves two conditions: first, it occurs between two individuals; second, both parties must speak *parrhesiastically*. *parrhesia* is the manifestation of sincerity, and the *parrhesiast* must also be prepared to accept *parrhesia* from the interlocutor.

Concerns about *parrhesia* are linked to mathematics, knowledge, and education. *parrhesia* is not an activity that automatically reveals truth. Those who claim to practice *parrhesia* maintain a particular relationship with truth—distinct from mere frankness or sheer courage—a relationship that must be established through education, typically via processes of individual formation ([3], p. 113). Moreover, standards for *parrhesia* must be identified. These standards do not lie in civic status or competence, but in life itself—more precisely, in the harmony between one’s *bios* (life) and *logos* ([3], p. 156).

On the one hand, a *parrhesiast* must first be someone who genuinely desires to care for himself. Such a person requires an interlocutor capable of listening and engaging in dialogue—someone who is also a *parrhesiast*, not a flatterer. Yet merely seeking such an interlocutor is insufficient; the *parrhesiast* must also be

prepared to accept the truth spoken by the other. If the interlocutor responds with flattery or evasion, this actually indicates that the *parrhesiast* has not yet learned to care for himself, as he cannot accept *parrhesia* from others ([3], p. 27). Foucault uses a metaphor to illustrate this relationship: the speaker is the master, like a sheep; if one wants the sheep to graze, one must lead it to a lush meadow that stimulates its appetite. *Parrhesia* must therefore be genuinely spontaneous on the part of a subject who seeks a relationship with truth and is prepared to receive *parrhesia* from others.

On the other hand, the interlocutor must also be a *parrhesiast*. Care of the self seems to constitute the pedagogical, moral, and ontological condition of being a good leader [4]. First, the teacher must also care for himself and pursue truth. If responding to *parrhesia* is considered a form of “teaching,” its purpose is not to endow subjects with various skills, but to summon the soul ([1], p. 407). Teachers are teachers because they possess truth, and in order for truth to exert its effects during this summoning, they must follow certain rules. Thus, the primary responsibility in this dialogical process rests with the teacher: to care for the student’s soul and to intervene when the student is about to make choices that deviate from truth. Importantly, teachers derive no personal benefit from this *parrhesiastic* training; their aim is not to command or direct, but to influence individuals so that they cultivate a sovereign relationship with themselves and become wise and virtuous subjects ([1], p. 385).

In conclusion, within the spontaneous *parrhesiastic* training of a subject who practices the care of the self, the ultimate goal is self-perfection and the establishment of a profound connection with the truth. Furthermore, such a subject ultimately seeks to realize an autonomous life. Through the practice of “*parrhesia*,” students are guided away from the utilitarian acquisition of knowledge toward the “care of the self.” This process cultivates students’ subjective agency, enabling them to establish a relationship of sovereignty over themselves. Ultimately, this leads to a virtuous life—one that is both responsible for oneself and capable of inspiring others through the very way it is lived. *parrhesia* lies at the core of pedagogical discourse. When children learn, through *parrhesia*, to reflect upon their past actions and decisions, they develop subjective agency—that is, they learn how to live autonomously. For a child, this means at minimum being responsible for oneself, one’s actions, and those who depend on one’s care. For an adult, autonomous life becomes a form of existence capable of supporting and protecting others (disciples or friends). There is also another way in which such a life benefits others: it functions as a lesson. Through one’s way of living, through a life lived publicly, it educates humanity as a whole ([2], p. 272).

### 4.3. From Care of the Soul to Care of Body and Mind

As a form of philosophical reflection, “care of the self” first appears in *Alcibiades*, yet prior to this dialogue there already existed a set of techniques of self-cultivation related to knowledge as a path toward truth. Through his interpretation of

*Alcibiades*, Foucault clarifies the historical transformation of self-cultivation ethics in the West. Initially, self-cultivation appeared as a social privilege of the Spartan aristocracy: caring for oneself meant delegating labor to others in order to rule. In ancient Greece, self-cultivation was a required discipline for aristocratic youths destined to govern, aiming to free the mind from bodily constraints through breath control and concentration, thereby enabling reflection on one's relationship to others and to the *polis*. In the Hellenistic-Roman period, care of the self became a command imposed by rulers upon the ruled, requiring individuals—under the guidance of moral elites—to possess the time, capacity, and cultivation necessary to care for themselves and to distinguish themselves from the majority. Later, under Christian influence, self-renunciation became a new imperative, asserting that salvation required the abandonment of the self. By the Cartesian era, care of the self was transformed into “mental concern,” whereby certainty of the self was achieved through doubt. Step by step, practices of self-cultivation detached themselves from the body and turned exclusively toward the soul.

Socratic *parrhesia* focuses on one's way of life (*bios*). It does not involve chains of reasoning as in technical instruction, nor does it concern the ontological mode of existence of the soul. Rather, it concerns lifestyle, manner of living, and the form individuals give to their lives ([2], p. 144). Ways of life are directly linked to practices of truth-telling: *parrhesia* questions which forms of life can be recognized as good and which should be abandoned. In Socrates' final dialogue with Laches and Nicias, he asks: What is courage? Can you give a *logos* of your way of life? Both fail. Socrates concludes that they have not grasped the essence of courage, and thus suggests that all should attend to a single teacher—*logos* itself, the discourse that leads to truth ([2], p. 152). Socrates' own words and actions also exhibit harmony: the unity of *logos* and *bios* (life). Yet Foucault maintains that Socrates' project remains highly spiritual, as the formation of individual character through the soul constitutes the core of his philosophy.

Foucault then turns to ancient Cynicism, offering a detailed account of its way of life and praising it as a direct manifestation of truth. For Plato, the body is essentially uncontrollable and obstructive to knowledge of truth. By contrast, ancient Cynics placed the body at the center of pedagogical practice, earning the title of “body educator” ([6], p. 36). In their view, truth and wisdom are conditional concepts grounded in commitments to realization and fulfillment. While Plato sought to define the soul by separating it from the body and to establish a just and good order, the Cynics pursued the opposite path: to reduce “life to itself, to what it is in truth.” ([6], p. 38)

Although the Cynics were often despised for their coarse behavior and lack of shame, their disappearance reveals that the body was not initially marginalized; rather, it was gradually devalued once the superiority of the soul was affirmed, leading to the view that the body was impure and imprisoning the soul. Foucault rejects this position. He repeatedly asks: what is the true life? He outlines four meanings of truth: non-concealment, non-mixture, rectitude, and immutability.

Truth can refer either to being or to modes of conduct; when applied to *logos*, it denotes a way of speaking rather than propositions or language ([2], pp. 219-220). For Foucault, the Cynics function as visible statues of truth: through healthy bodies free of superfluous ornamentation, they embodied truth and demonstrated that simple, austere living does not harm bodily health. Their lives made truth attractive and persuasive, and through their actions they manifested truth itself—the complete harmony between what is said and what is done ([2], p. 310). The body, rather than constraining the soul, can itself become an embodiment of the unity of knowledge and action.

### 5. *Parrhesia* and the Ethical Formation of the Moral Subject

Moral questions are inseparable from care of the self. Foucault argues that the term “*parrhesia*” involves moral qualities and moral attitudes—*ēthos* ([1], p. 372). In his view, truth is not only the foundation of morality but part of morality itself. Freedom is the ontological condition of ethics, and ethics is the deliberate form assumed by freedom. In the Greco-Roman world, care of the self was linked to personal and civic freedom and was regarded, to a certain extent, as a moral mode of being [4]. For a self-caring subject, the ultimate aim is to establish a relationship with truth and to become a virtuous subject—moving from care of the self toward autonomous life. *parrhesia* is thus inseparable from the construction of the moral subject; moral formation permeates *parrhesiastic* training, guiding subjects to care for themselves, pursue truth, and live the life they desire.

Yet the ethics of care of the self, as understood by Foucault, is profoundly demanding. It is an ethics of immanence, vigilance, and distance ([1], p. 530). First, it is an ethics of immanence: Greek morality centered on individual choice and an aesthetics of existence—existence as a personal project. Second, it is characterized by vigilance: care of the self does not imply narcissism or self-indulgence; the subject is extremely fragile and must remain vigilant against pleasure and pain. Finally, it is an ethics of distance: care of the self is thoroughly social, permeated by the presence of others. It urges action, shapes us as true agents of our conduct, and enables us to situate ourselves correctly in the world. In short, a *parrhesiast* is a free individual who cares for himself and possesses moral qualities. Care of the self requires establishing a relationship with truth through practice, while moral virtue requires knowing truth and being willing to speak it to others.

Western philosophers have long connected truth with the ultimate meaning or goal of life, often linking it to happiness, since happiness motivates all living beings. Moral education must therefore concern human flourishing. Western moral education typically trains individuals to apply universal rules, anticipate consequences, and justify choices; it resembles a process of analysis and calculation. By contrast, Chinese moral education resembles the cultivation of an art: moral excellence attracts others as artworks do. It emphasizes collective self-realization rather than rule application, thereby fostering social harmony ([7], pp. 33-36). Both *parrhesia* and Chinese self-cultivation aim ultimately at a happy life. Their differ-

ence lies in the fact that Western philosophy often asks whether moral life leads to happiness—happiness as a result of moral action—whereas in Chinese philosophy, moral life itself constitutes happiness ([7], p. 43). As expressed in *The Analects*: “How admirable is Hui! With a single bamboo dish of rice and a single gourd of drink, living in a shabby lane—others could not endure such hardship, yet Hui never altered his joy.”

## 6. Conclusion

As discussed above, the ultimate aim of a subject who masters the “care of the self” through *parrhesiastic* practice is the realization of a flourishing life. In this sense, Chinese philosophical theory may offer new theoretical inspiration for *parrhesia*. In the process of constructing the moral subject, we are in a perpetual state of advancing toward the truth. Although each of us remains an imperfect moral subject, we gradually learn to care for ourselves, lead autonomous lives, and eventually extend that care to others through every act of *parrhesia*. This process itself constitutes the essence of happiness. As educators, we must guide students to establish a bond between themselves and the truth through *parrhesia*, encouraging them to become subjects of “the unity of knowledge and action” within the practice of the care of the self. By pursuing truth and constructing their moral subjectivity, students can further extend their concern to those around them and to society at large. The appeal of education lies in the pursuit of truth and in witnessing students progress toward excellence. Therefore, the care of the self, viewed through the lens of *parrhesia*, is in itself a blissful way of life for both students and teachers alike.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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