

**POST-TEXTUAL ETHICS:
FOUCAULT'S RHETORICAL WILL**

STUART J. MURRAY

In this essay, Murray argues for a concept of will that underwrites ethical behaviour, thereby challenging the view that ethics is the domain of an altogether free and rational subject. He begins with a reading of Descartes, whom we usually expect to align ethics with reason, but Murray sets out to demonstrate that even in Descartes a self-recursive and errant will underlies rationality. Murray deploys this notion of the will to help understand Foucault's discussion of free speech or *parrhesia*, and argues that it is here that a rational and textual ethics gives way to an ethics (or ethos) founded in errancy, rhetoric, and a style of life.

This essay challenges the view that ethics is the exclusive domain of a free and rational Cartesian subject, a subject whose ethical choices are believed to proceed from knowledge and truth. It also begins to imagine how we might discuss ethics without resorting to theism and humanism—those foundational, grand narratives upon which a traditional view of ethics relies. I turn to the late work of Michel Foucault, who argues that ethical life relies on the kind of relations that obtain between subjects, and foremost in the very relation I have to myself. Foucault's ethics is often summed up as a non-prescriptive and non-universalizable "care of the self." And yet, what it is to be a "self" in this instance shares little with Cartesian subjectivity as it is typically formulated; I argue, rather, that the ethical self is a particular modulation of the will—a will which cannot be said to proceed on the basis of knowledge and truth.

At issue in Foucault's "care of the self" is the self's relation to itself ("*un rapport à soi*"), and moreover, in that self's capacity to stylize a life for itself, to create new relations, new styles of life. The self-self relation is thus both aesthetic and ascetic (from *askesis*)—literally, an exercise, a manner of work on the self. In this view, the self strives to be free to refuse those entrenched identities by which it is defined, and through which it achieves social recognition and political intelligibility. How, Foucault asked, can the self "get free of itself [*se déprendre de soi-même*]" (1985: 8)? As a provisional answer, the self must become a work of art, it must work to break free from the norms within which this self is inscribed and made viable

(literally, liveable), and open itself to the possibility for becoming otherwise. This is not a purely rational endeavour; it is an injunction to become something new, something perhaps not yet imagined or imaginable, ultimately in the effort to reshape social and political institutions through a care of the self.

As a way into the wilful dimension of ethical life, consider the following example offered by Foucault. In 1979, Foucault wrote a series of controversial journalistic essays discussing the events of the Iranian Revolution in which the secularist and post-colonial Shah was overthrown and replaced by a religious leader, the Ayatollah. In an essay titled “Is It Useless to Revolt?” Foucault reflects on the act of revolt itself. His description is fascinating. For the man who revolts, he writes, “there is no explanation”; “his action is necessarily a tearing that breaks the threads of history and its long chain of reasons” (1981: 5). It is thus impossible to answer the question Foucault poses in his title—*is* it useless to revolt?—because this would import a kind of reason that makes no sense to the one who revolts. Foucault argues that revolt is not a choice based on the strategies or calculations of a rational, sovereign subject; the “I” does not revolt with epistemic certitude, but through a powerful will to be otherwise. Revolt is the promise of something to come, a future possibility, “that moment,” Foucault writes, “when life will no longer barter itself” (1981: 5). Unsurprisingly, we find religious themes operating here: “the promises of the beyond, the return of time, the waiting for the saviour or the empire of the last days, [and] the indisputable reign of good.” Taking up a religious rhetoric, then, the one who revolts is “‘outside of history’ as well as in it” (1981: 6). So, while from the outside the revolution is an historical event, its life-force or manner of being lived also exceeds or transcends history while allowing for historical rupture. The “I” is located outside of history, but also inside: through its actions, the “I” suspends *chronos* in a moment of *kairos*¹—lending the “I” a significance greater than history or reason can contain. The revolt is a speech act in which the biological life of the body is risked, but through its self-sacrifice, the “I” risks a life symbolically greater than itself, face-to-face with the uncertainty of death, projecting itself into a future of uncertain possibility, reason suspended indefinitely. The “I” goes forth without epistemic certitude, heeding the call despite overwhelming odds, to bring about an uncertain and as yet inchoate possibility, spurred on by a life and a will that seem to come from the promised future.

¹ *Kairos* is a Greek term which roughly means the opportune or highly propitious moment for the occurrence of an event—a sacred break into or rupture of profane chronology.

In this brief depiction of revolt, what is at stake is the subject's capacity to craft for herself a new subjectivity, to make for herself a new and better life. Significantly, this work on the self is uncertain, groping; it does not proceed according to a system of categorical knowledge. The relation she has to herself—what Foucault calls a “self-stylizing”—is an inevitably errant relation, marked by an insuperable opacity. Errancy is not simply the mistake or error that results from uncertain knowledge or a lack of truth, but it is an erratic self-stylizing, a wandering, a becoming. Indeed, I shall argue that such errancy informs our ethical life and the kind of will that will inform this life as it is lived in the public sphere.

This chapter has three sections. First, I turn to Descartes because he serves as a kind of modern touchstone for rational subjectivity, setting the conditions for truth and knowledge as that which is “perceived clearly and distinctly” or “by the natural light of reason.”² It is precisely this foundation that I am challenging here, particularly insofar as ethical life is concerned. Thus, rather than shoring up a subject of truth and knowledge, my reading of Descartes excavates another mode of subjectivity that lies buried in his work. I am calling this the subject of will—a will that is decidedly neither cognitive nor conceptual, an embodied will that is marked by errancy and a fundamental unknowingness.

Second, I turn to a discussion of Foucault on the virtue of free speech or “*parrhesia*.” Here my concept of will is cast as properly rhetorical: this is a problem of the *speaking* subject whose capacity to tell the truth has a wilful dimension, and whose narrative “I” along with the language it speaks must fall under scrutiny. Foucault demonstrates that the ethical subject is not a true “subject” in the Cartesian sense, not a subject who would self-knowingly stand in possession of its own will, but the errant modulation of will itself. Thus, Foucault suggests a very different model for ethics—a model which does not presume a subject, but which relies on a form of will that ultimately unseats our comfortable subjectivity.

Third, my discussion of “ethical life” concludes by briefly returning to the question of life itself: what kind of relation prevails between life and the possibility of truth and error? If error or errancy is decisive for the life of the subject as she crafts for herself a new subjectivity, how will we now understand self-knowledge, and what kind of rhetorical or communicative practices will foster an ethical life?

To begin, I turn to a reading of Descartes on the subject of will, and I shall argue that despite his best efforts to shore up a cognitive subject of

² I am referring here to Descartes' *lumen naturale*, along with his famous dictum: *omne illius verum est, quod clare et distincte percipitur*.

knowledge, the Cartesian subject is nevertheless underwritten by a will that is neither cognitive nor conceptual. Here in Descartes I propose to demonstrate a lesson that might have been derived more readily from Schopenhauer (1966)³ or from Nietzsche (1967)—an unruly and intransigent will that is not wholly in the subject's control—a will that has theoretical implications for the project of truth and for the place of the human subject within this project.

A Cartesian Kind of Error

In his famous *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes employs a method of hyperbolic doubt as a kind of reality testing. We are called to critically examine our everyday belief systems by putting out of play our epistemological prejudices and habits—in effect, we must submit what we ordinarily hold as true to a kind of proto-phenomenological *epoché*. We must suspend belief. Why? Because we have each been mistaken, have held false opinions to be true, and, given such human error, Descartes is led to ask: how can we know what we know, and know it with certainty?⁴

Undoubtedly, we are familiar with the epochal shift in subjectivity that Descartes is said to inaugurate. Descartes proposes that the philosophical subject is a kind of shorthand for a sovereign, rational, autonomous, and supposedly free-thinking stuff. But in an Enlightenment world, freed from the regular intervention of a Mediaeval God, the existence of evil, human error, and illusion are no longer theological problems to be answered by theology or faith. Effectively, with the Enlightenment, the problem of error has become a human problem, cast in human terms. Descartes reasons that God could have allowed (or even have caused) human error and illusion, but he resorts to the fiction of the evil genius to explain this possibility. The evil

³ Schopenhauer writes: “It is therefore the will that gives consciousness unity and holds all its representations and ideas together, accompanying them, as it were, like a continuous ground-bass. Without it the intellect would have no more unity of consciousness than has a mirror, in which now one thing now another presents itself in succession, or at most only as much as a convex mirror has, whose rays converge at an imaginary point behind its surface” (1966: 140).

⁴ Although beyond the scope of this essay, it is worth mentioning Descartes' famous distinction between *morale par provision* and *morale definitive*—provisional morality and definitive morality. Until such time as a definitive morality could be established textually, Descartes argued, a provisional morality would have to suffice to guide human behaviour. Curiously, however, Descartes believed that we would not have long to wait, suggesting that a definitive morality would be established—textually codified, as it were—by the end of his lifetime. Here we can glimpse Descartes' faith not just in human reason, but in the power of the text itself.

genius here acts as a rhetorical extension of what God would be, if He were evil. There is just one problem, however: there is still no way for humans to know with certainty that God is not the evil genius, which has the same rhetorical effect—God might just as well be an evil genius.⁵ The cloud of unknowing results in the same existential doubt. After all, what response is there to a god whose justification and whose grace rely on the caprice of divine election? This is a god to whom we cannot appeal with any certainty to guarantee our salvation. This crisis was, arguably, one great impetus toward modern secularism, in which human scientific progress replaces the rhetorical function of Christian eschatology. In response to a god who does as he or she wills, humans constructed a counter-world of elementary rationality and manipulability—and they found some comfort in such a regular world.

Was this epochal shift—this human self-assertion—was this an assertion of human reason? Or was it an assertion of a human will to power, to wrest power from the gods? The decidedly modern distinction here between human will and human reason or knowledge is not obvious, and I wish to muddy this distinction somewhat because we take it too much for granted. In Descartes, the relation between will and reason lacks strategic clarity, as I shall argue below. What *is* the relation between knowledge and will? Is this relation a form of knowledge or is it a form of will?⁶ Perhaps it is neither; but which has the upper hand? And more importantly, where can we locate the subject here, if at all?

Philosophy tends to favour a discussion of knowledge as the true “first philosophy,” and it frequently ignores questions of the will when grappling with Descartes. Philosophers leave the will to those rogues, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, preserving for themselves a kingdom of pure reason, free from the exercise of will. Thus we learn almost as a philosophical axiom that Descartes aligns the “I” with the *res cogitans*, a “thinking thing” or “thinking stuff.” But what does it mean to be a thing that thinks? In Meditation Two Descartes answers directly: “A thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, wills, refuses, and that also imagines and senses” (1993: 20). But these myriad activities will soon become overly expansive, messy, and too imprecise. By Meditation Four, it is the body, along with its will and its affects, that has become the source of all error—a demonization of the will that goes hand in hand with the exaltation of reason into Truth. And at first blush, this characterization seems to fit well into Descartes’ famous mind–

⁵ For the argument in this paragraph I am indebted to Hans Blumenberg. Cf. Blumenberg, 1985: 184.

⁶ The same link was sought for the relation between mind and body, for Descartes ultimately situated in the famous question-begging pineal gland.

body dualism, where an unextended thinking stuff (*res cogitans*) is paired with a wholly other, extended stuff (*res extensa*). But matters soon become less discrete.

Returning to the question of truth and error, not surprisingly, here the mind appears to become the source of all truth for Descartes, while the body, along with its messy volitions and affects, the source of all error. The one is described as good and godlike, while the other is, arguably, cast as evil. Let us suspend our moral judgment for a moment and look at the fascinating argument as Descartes presents it, for his language is telling. Descartes claims that God does not wish to deceive me; he writes, “[God] assuredly has not given me the sort of faculty with which I could ever make a mistake, when I use it properly” (1993: 36). But this is a circular argument, to be sure, and Descartes further complicates matters by introducing normative constraints—I must use my faculties “properly,” which suggests yet another, higher, reason to guide my reason. What, then, is the source of human error? Given Descartes’ strict mind–body dualism, we might quickly move to indict the wilful body, but matters are not so simple because Descartes claims that the power of willing is also a power he “got from God.” Consequently, our will is also “perfect in its kind” and, “taken by itself, [not] the cause of my errors” (1993: 39). The manner in which the will maps onto the body is therefore not straightforward. And thus far we can only be clear that the will is not simply and unilaterally the source of human error.

To repeat: what, then, is the source of human error? Descartes’ answer is perplexing and bears some consideration. He writes:

[My errors] are owing simply to the fact that, since the will extends further than the intellect, I do not contain the will within the same boundaries; rather, I also extend [the will] to things I do not understand. Because the will is indifferent in regards to such matters, it easily turns away from the true and the good; and in this way I am deceived and I sin. (1993: 39)

Remarkably, the will is said to “extend” further than my intellect, so the will is an extended thing (*res extensa*), like the body—and, if we hold to a strict mind–body dualism, because the will is extended, it must be of the body. But then it seems absolutely redundant for Descartes to write that the will “extends *further*” than the intellect. After all, the intellect is meant to be entirely unextended, in which case we could safely assume that everything extends further than it. And in this case, all will would extend further than the intellect. But Descartes cannot allow this either, because a good will—and there is a strong moral component here—a good will is that will that intersects with the intellect. Indeed, he argues that a good will is “contained” by the intellect—but this intellectual “container” is also a perplexing

metaphor for what is again meant to be entirely unextended.⁷ How can what is unextended “contain” anything at all?

At times, the will seems to mediate between the mind and the body, somehow able to intersect with each while being neither one nor the other fully. And sometimes the will seems foundational; for instance, at the beginning of the meditations, when Descartes performs a kind of *epoché* which is none other than a sovereign act of will—“Descartes” himself willing away his prejudices, his body, the dressing gown, the fire in front of which he warms himself, all empirical data, intellectually willed away in order to arrive at truth. Once these distractions are stripped away (or so the argument goes), Descartes hopes to prove that the intellect stands as foundational or in-itself, and as such a foundation, it is supposedly free from error and illusion. But ironically, he can only arrive at the certainty of knowledge through an act of will—an act of will that restrains that selfsame will, that wills itself to be contained by reason, *a will willing away the will in a gesture that is, arguably, more self-recursive and more originary than the self-reflexive cogito and its error-free reason*. Descartes writes: “for as often as I restrain my will when I make judgments, so that [my will] extends only to those matters that the intellect clearly and distinctly discloses to it, it plainly cannot

⁷ A similar discussion arises in Descartes' *Discourse on Method*, in which he discusses the ways we know with certainty that other men are conscious minds and not mere bodies or automata. There are two ways: the first is the human capacity for language and the second relies on “reason” as a kind of Aristotelian *organ-izing* soul. Of this second, “organic” test for reason, Descartes writes:

although [...] machines might execute many things with equal or perhaps greater perfection than any of us, they would, without doubt, fail in certain others from which it could be discovered that they did not act from knowledge, but solely from the disposition of their organs: for while reason is an universal instrument that is alike available on every occasion, these organs, on the contrary, need *a particular arrangement for each particular action*; whence it must be *morally impossible* that there should exist in any machine a diversity of organs sufficient to enable it to act in all the occurrences [*sic*] of life, in the way in which our reason enables us to act (1992: 42–43; emphasis added).

“Acting from knowledge” depends on a kind of “particular arrangement” or proper proportionality of the organs, directed by the organizing soul—an Aristotelian characterization. For Descartes, this arrangement has a moral valence: the soul must order or “contain” the body's deviant and discordant organs. (Foucault will depict such morality as imprisonment: “the soul is the prison of the body” [1979: 30].) Although the word “will” is not used here, Descartes is concerned with the will as the moral interface between an organizing soul and organized body, where the failure to organize correctly is the result of a weak will, and a weak will the source of moral turpitude.

happen that I err" (1993: 41–42). The grammatical "I" operating in Descartes' sentence is rhetorically ambivalent, for it is unclear who "I" am who practises self-restraint in order to make judgments, or who judges in order to practise restraint. We must wonder who the narrative "I" indexes here—is it Descartes or his reader, and do we imagine that it is clearly "his," Descartes', "I" that is operating, or "my," the reader's, "I," both self-evident and able to act without any further ado, as it were; or, on the contrary, is the "I" spectral, futural, neither uniquely "his" nor "mine," but who acts in such a way that the "I" is woven into a rich tapestry of all it will become and whose wisdom is worldly, and not quite so clear, distinct, or plain? Is there an ethical injunction in these lines? The intellect issues a "restraining order," yes, but by what (or whose) authority? We might say by the authority of what is "clear" and "distinct," in the effort at full disclosure, perhaps, but "I" would need to know clearly and distinctly in advance in order to guide my restraint so that, in a circular logic that defies temporality, finally, "I" could be said to know clearly and distinctly. For both will and intellect there is a spectral "not-yet" which frustrates the primacy of both, unveiling a necessary kind of faith at work whenever I think, I am.

Descartes attempts to set universal truth-conditions for the "I's" knowledge, apparently insulating himself from critique, since in order for us to perceive the truth or falsity of Descartes' own statement, the "I" would nevertheless need to performatively meet these very truth-conditions if it is to guarantee the certainty of its knowledge. But who this "I" is who acts is not altogether clear. Reading Descartes rhetorically, we find a narrative subject at work—a narrative subject of will who threatens the certainty of the Cartesian mind. This "I" is not simply and unequivocally bodily; nor is its will. Instead, we find the "I" taken up in a discourse that doubles it, returning it to itself through will, but also through Descartes' language of command that would set forth strict truth-conditions: "I" will restrain my will, and "I" will *will* my will not to be "indifferent" in regard to its errors; in other words, I will *will* my will to be "contained" by my intellect, extending it only to those things that "I" understand. The "I" who speaks and the "I" who is spoken are not quite the same; there is a space opened up by language for becoming and for the subject's self-stylizing of herself. This relation of the self to itself is mediated by a language that necessarily allows for multiple "I's," ensuring that Descartes' truth-conditions do not command the authority of divine fiat—and that the "I" is free to refuse Descartes' command in its multiple modes of being and becoming. Without belabouring the point too much, we might even see a proliferation of subjectivities—the "I" who issues the restraint, the "I" who restrains, and also the "I" who is restrained but who wills not to be.

My discussion thus far suggests that Descartes was not altogether successful in “containing” the “I” intellectually, but that this “I” is also contained by a will that reflects on itself, trumping the law of reason. Moreover, the “I” is indexed through a language which has rhetorical effects, including commanding the “I,” guiding the “I,” but also providing the very means by which the “I” will be available to itself as a subject of will or of knowledge, and as a subject who is always in a mode of becoming, responding to ethical concerns. Reading Descartes rhetorically, then, we discover a multi-faceted “I” who is less concerned with answering Descartes’ truth-conditions or with the so-called truth of *what* exists. Instead, we find an “I” who is intimately concerned with a rhetorical *how*. By this *how* I mean the work of speech and language in general—those very terms by which the “I” is given to itself, and through which it is able to craft for itself a new subjectivity. This work also means that the subject is able to reflect upon, take up, and influence the prior and enabling conditions for the possibility of its speech, having a say in who it is who speaks, who is spoken, and how.

At this point, it should be clear that the position of the subject in the relation between thinking and willing, when it is conceived as a strictly epistemological (or thinking) relation, as Descartes forcibly does, ends in an aporia—a Cartesian kind of error we have long held as truth. I have addressed Descartes because it is with him and with post-Enlightenment modernity that the will becomes problematized, forcibly thought rather than understood rhetorically, or by its effects, and its wider context. For me, it is Foucault who dramatizes the Nietzschean insight that the relation between thought and will is not an epistemological relation of truth, but a volitional (or willing) relation of the will itself as this unfolds in language. At this juncture, then, I turn to Foucault’s Berkeley lectures from the fall term of 1983, for it is here that the theory of the subject is reformulated in a particularly suggestive manner as a speaking subject whose speech has ethical implications. I hope to show that Foucault offers us—tentatively—a way out of the Cartesian aporia.

Foucault and the Subject of Belief

At the beginning of his lectures on the Greek virtue of *parrhesia*, a term which means freedom or frankness of speech, Foucault makes a very important distinction between different types of subjectivity. He wants to capture the kind of subject which haunts Descartes—the rhetorical subject of will, as I have been describing it. Foucault says:

[...] since Descartes, the coincidence between belief and truth is obtained in a certain (mental) evidential experience. For the Greeks, however, the coincidence between belief and truth does not take place in a (mental) experience, but in a *verbal activity*, namely, *parrhesia*. (2001: 14)

He immediately adds that “*parrhesia*, in this Greek sense, can no longer occur in our modern epistemological framework.” This might be Foucault’s challenge to us to find a speech wherein the possibility of *parrhesia* is not altogether foreclosed. I am especially interested in the non-epistemological framework within which such speech occurs, and with the kind of subjectivity that is associated with this speech. Foucault is talking about the coincidence between belief and truth—a coincidence that is for the Greeks not epistemological but a “verbal activity” underwritten by will. It is in part because of the will that the body is able to speak in such a way that it bears an excess, and is able to reflexively influence the conditions of its very speech. Thus, in *parrhesia*, this is not an epistemological relation, and the influence of the *parrhesiastes* on his or her own conditions of speech and intelligibility does not simply entail rational persuasion; instead, it draws on an ethics of the will, a will which strives toward future freedoms. We might say that this wilful subjectivity is “purposive”—it has purpose or aim, but a purpose that is not rigorously tied to rational intent.⁸ This is true because it occurs in language, which is never perfectly or exactly referential, and because the subject’s speech involves her whole attitude, her relation to the world and to others, her mode of becoming, and her “style of life.”

To clarify, the *parrhesiastes* speaks what she believes to be true, but for this to be a true act of *parrhesia*, she must speak out in a rhetorical situation where her very speaking places her in danger or at risk. Usually, the audience does not want to hear what she has to say (even if that “audience” is herself), but she says it anyway, and this, Foucault suggests, is a virtue. Remarkably, Foucault insists that the act of *parrhesia* does not issue from a grammatical

⁸ I think Nietzsche is in agreement here. For him, the will is associated with the command, but in such a way that it exceeds and therefore critiques the command—through language. Nietzsche writes: “‘Willing’ is not ‘desiring,’ striving, demanding: it is distinguished from these by the affect of commanding” (1967: 353). What is commanded? It is intentional, but in a fictive and inventive intentionality, not in a rational or cognitive intention. He continues: “There is no such thing as ‘willing’, but only a willing *something*: one must not remove the aim from the total condition—as epistemologists do. ‘Willing’ as they understand it is as little a reality as ‘thinking’: it is a pure fiction” (1967: 353). The intentional will is thus affective, and the aim—what I am calling the “purpose”—must not be abstracted from the “total condition,” a life-condition (rather than a truth-condition) whose rational content cannot be abstracted from it perfectly.

subject: there is no sense of a self-evident or self-perspicacious "I" operating here, nothing like a mentalistic subject typical of the Cartesian mind. "I" do not speak! And so we must not presume a pre-constituted grammatical subject. In a very important respect, the act of speaking itself is the enabling condition for the belief, for it is in the very situated act of speaking—not in the grammatical "I" or in the narrative of the speech itself—that the subject believes.

We are asked to imagine that the *parrhesiastes* is not a rational substance who preexists her belief and who would then come to "hold" the belief, but that this belief might be said to preexist her—calling her into being in the moment that she owns it and owns it by saying it and acting on it, putting her life or reputation on the line, risking her skin, literally or metaphorically. In this sense, through this act, we can say that she is instituted as a subject, and is not a ready-made or pre-constituted source from which the belief would issue as if fully formed. The belief owns her, as it were; she does not "will to believe," as if the will were now the apt metonym for the rational subject, as if the will would somehow also preexist the belief; she does not "will to believe" because this would presume yet another belief on the basis of which it could be said that she wills. Instead, she just believes. And it is from the belief and on *its* basis that she wills it, that she is a willing subject instituted *by* the belief, and that she wills it specifically *as* a belief, with temporal extendedness, the real possibility of error, as a volitional body with all its phenomenological "thickness," and specifically not willed as a thought that would reinscribe her as a thinking substance. Again, belief takes place through an act of speaking that firmly commits the speaker to the *socius*, a kind of will submitted to and imbricated with the will of the community, and not the kind of free-thinking enjoyed by the subject on account of her grammatical positionality. The subject of belief is both the subject who speaks and the subject whose speech binds her through her action to what is spoken; she is subjectivated by a belief that calls forth what Merleau-Ponty calls a speaking speech (*parole parlante*), a belief that can be said to speak. Thus, the subject speaks herself into being by virtue of a belief that speaks, speaks through her, and in speaking, she wilfully commits herself to an often unforeseeable course of action and set of consequences. As I mentioned above, this will is self-recursive, a kind of self-stylizing or self-subjectivation that allows for social and political commitments, but it can also foster critique and refusal, allowing some leeway for a subject to stylize herself anew, to choose other modes in which to be a subject who believes.

Importantly there is no short-circuit through an independent epistemological framework. Foucault says that the *parrhesiastes* speaks not what she thinks is true, but what she knows is true (2001: 14). There is an

immediacy to the truth that is expressed and felt through a bodily knowledge, by putting her body on the line, risking life and limb, risking her reputation. For Foucault belief and truth coincide in the verbal activity, but this is not just speech, plain and simple,—it is demonstrated in the style of life that the speaker leads: “In the Greek conception of *parrhesia* [...] truth-having is guaranteed by the possession of certain *moral* qualities: when someone has certain moral qualities, then that is the proof that he has access to truth—and vice versa” (2001: 15). Hence, if there can be said to be a “proof” for the authenticity of the *parrhesiastes*, Foucault tells us it was his courage—not just a matter of the heart—*le coeur*—but the heart as a metonym for the life-force of the whole body. The speaker’s language also embodies a creative or poetic force that will influence and yield life itself.

At this juncture, it is worth remarking that we have returned to a notion of life. In a rhetorical question whose formulation might easily be ascribed to Nietzsche, Foucault asks us: “Should not the whole theory of the subject be reformulated, seeing that knowledge, rather than opening onto the truth of the world, is deeply rooted in the ‘errors’ of life?” (1998: 477). The subject, then, must be reformulated in the direction of what I have called a subject of will; significantly, the will has no truck with truth or with various economies of knowledge based on truth. The will wills despite reason, without calculating the odds beforehand. The will represents a different kind of knowledge rooted, as Foucault says, in error, in the errors of life, a living errancy. Life, and its errors, are always overdetermined; and as we see with *parrhesia*, it is ultimately in staking one’s life, through an act of will that is incalculable, that we have some kind of guarantee for what will count as truth or error. In the next and concluding section, I shall elucidate the concept of life as that ultimate value which is the will’s own, drawing out the implications for a “reformulated” subjectivity.

Conclusion: Life’s Errors

I have been arguing for a notion of error that is not epistemological, an error that is not simply a rational or cognitive mistake. Error implies a straying or a deviation from a rule or a norm. From the Latin *errare*, error means to wander, exiled perhaps, from the certainty of some truth, from the certainty of knowing that one knows. It takes a certain act of will to be able to sustain a condition of unknowing. And if we are straying or deviating from a rule or a norm that will circumscribe the intelligibility of who we are as subjects, it also takes a certain courage to risk being otherwise than what one is supposed to be. Such error or errancy informs the life of the self—a self who will be

errant in her wilful self-stylizing, her errancy the sign of her very livingness. We might see here how the rhetorical expression of life, through the will, is not a mere linguistic representation; instead, our living speech is overdetermined by a life-force, and participates directly in this original life-force or vitalism. It is this very life that the *parrhesiastes* places at stake (or at risk) in her speech, and which is mobilized as the self stylizes itself in new directions.

In this sense of the term, we can imagine "error" as a kind of political activism, a productive activity, a mode in which the "I" refuses to be governed by a certain set of norms. To be in error, in this sense, would be to refuse the terms of truth by risking one's life, by daring to live one's life otherwise. This would not amount to mere resistance, not simple disobedience, but outright refusal of the very terms through which intelligibility and truth are bestowed, and social and political recognition are granted. There are many examples of such error: political dissidents and revolutionaries are but the extremes. I began with the example of the one who revolts. We glimpsed a subject who is not merely engaged in a local resistance, but who is practising a larger refusal of the way he is governed, a refusal of the kind of life he is able to lead, with a view toward a new and better life. So, what is at risk in the way one chooses to live—and in one's ethical choices—relies on the value of life itself. This life is refracted, if you will, through the will—a will and a life that exceed the rational limits we might impose on them. Here we open instead onto an ethical domain that is a mode of rhetorical invention, of creation in speech and in language. The will opens onto and creates future possibilities of being and of being otherwise. Foucault conceives this as an act of "liberation"—a word he repeats in many contexts, and with deadly seriousness.

The kind of "subject" I have been glossing is a subject of will, not a subject who is produced discursively or textually, not a Cartesian subject, but a self whose ethical relation to itself is ever in question—a self that is not unilaterally formed by traditional grand narratives. This is a self who strives but who has not yet arrived, who has not yet achieved an identity in these terms, and who cannot be captured as a piece of knowledge or as truth. It is unquestionably a volitional and embodied self whose life exceeds it, making it a life worth living, worth preserving, worth fighting for, and even worth sacrificing. To ask, "*who* wills?" or "*who* is ethical?" or even "*what* is ethical?" is to ask the wrong question in the wrong way; such an approach would re-install a subjective "who" who would all too gladly be the bearer of its will and who would oversee its ethical projects. We must instead learn the terms by which to ask the more important—and critical—question of how *I* shall live an ethical life. And this kind of questioning is vital; it cannot be

answered in advance, nor can it be rendered into prescriptive ethical codes. I hope I have begun here to suggest the work of a somewhat new paradigm for ethical subjectivity—one that continues to value self-knowledge, and one that also considers the knowledge I have of myself as essential in my relations to others and for my ethical comportment in general. Yet, the knowledge I have of myself is also a relation of will: it is not an epistemological certitude: it is embodied, it is marked by life's errancy, and it bears a certain opacity to itself.

While there is a robust philosophical tradition that looks upon the language of rhetoric, literature, and the other arts with grave suspicion, I think the argument must be made time and again that philosophy does not have the last say on who I am. I must also examine those ways that my being is otherwise communicable or remains *incommunicable* altogether; I must acknowledge those ways in which I exceed my iterability, and how this itself might yield a more productive model for subjectivity and subjective life in the contemporary scene. If I am to know myself, to somehow answer the question, "Who am I?", I will therefore need to account for the very conditions under which I am able to *say* who I am; and, if I have begun to inquire into these conditions of being, then I have begun an ethical project in which new ways of being, new freedoms, and new possibilities for my life—and our life together—can be conceived.

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