

The Subject of Truth: On Foucault's *Lectures on the Will to Know*

Miguel de Beistegui *

Abstract

This essay argues that in order fully to appreciate the reorientation of Foucault's lecture courses from the 1980s around the concepts of "truth" and "subjectivity," it is necessary to read closely his very first lecture course at the Collège de France, *Lectures on the Will to Know* (1970-1971), in which, for the first time, Foucault focuses on the *event* of truth itself, rather than on a discourse of truth within the social or human sciences. The lectures delineate the Aristotelian "morphology of knowledge" and "system of truth" that have dominated western thought, and, with Nietzsche, question its underlying assumptions. Specifically, they bring out a deeper, more complex phenomenon, identified as the "will to know," which reveals the inextricable bond between truth, knowledge and power. Foucault's genealogy of truth reveals the historical and contingent conditions of emergence of a morphology of thought which presents itself as natural, necessary, and disinterested. In doing so, however, Foucault also leaves open the question of whether a different morphology, and a different subject of truth, might be possible – a question to which he returns in the 1980s.

Key words

Subjectivity, Knowledge, Will, Power, Truth, Aristotle, Nietzsche, Apophantics, Sophistics, Ethics, Tragedy, Homer, Truth as Ordeal, Oedipal knowledge.

* Professor of Philosophy at The University of Warwick. His books include: *Truth and Genesis: Philosophy as Differential Ontology* (2004), *Immanence and Philosophy: Deleuze* (2010), *Proust and Philosophy: the Art of Metaphor* (2012), *Aesthetics After Metaphysics* (2012).

I.

Now that all (but one) of Foucault's lecture courses at the Collège de France have been published, a general picture of the trajectory of his thought between 1970 and 1984, and of the philosophical context within which the books he wrote during that period, begins to emerge. Specifically, what has become apparent is that, with *Du gouvernement des vivants*, delivered in the winter of 1980, and under the title "truth and subjectivity," Foucault's thought begins to move in a different direction.¹ Indeed, the lecture course signals a shift away from the analysis of the discourses and regimes of truth which, up until then, he had focused on, initially, and in the period that stretched between 1972 and 1976, in relation to specific *dispositifs* of power (such as punitive, psychiatric, disciplinary, or bio-power), and then in relation to what, beginning in 1978, he referred to as the problem of the "conduct of conducts," or of "governmentality."² What begins to take place in *Du gouvernement des vivants*, and is carried out most explicitly in *Subjectivité et vérité*, is a reorientation of his project around the problematic and genealogy of the subject, and specifically of the government and care of the self. This general reorientation is confirmed in the subsequent lecture courses, and ends, somewhat abruptly and prematurely, with *The Courage of Truth*.³

But why truth? And truth in what sense? In this paper, I want to argue that, in order fully to grasp the significance of the shift in question, and by way of contrast, we need to go back to Foucault's very first lecture course at the Collège de France (*Lectures on the Will to Know*), in which he defines the fundamental orientation of his research for the years to come.⁴ In other words, I want to show that the first lecture course lays the

¹ M. Foucault, *Du gouvernement des vivants. Cours au Collège de France (1979-1980)*. Edited by Michel Senellart. Paris: Hautes Etudes/Gallimard/Seuil, 2012. Translated by Graham Burchell as *On the Government of the Living: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1979-1980*. London & New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014.

² See M. Foucault, *Sécurité, territoire, population. Cours au Collège de France (1977-1978)*. Edited by Michel Senellart. Paris: Hautes Etudes/Gallimard/Seuil, 2004. Translated by Graham Burchell as *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France*. London & New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. Henceforth *STP*, followed by French and English pages. See also M. Foucault, *Naissance de la biopolitique. Cours au Collège de France (1978-1979)*. Edited by Michel Senellart. Paris: Hautes Etudes/Gallimard/Seuil, 2004. Translated by Graham Burchell as *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France*. London & New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

³ M. Foucault, *Le courage de la vérité. Le gouvernement de soi et des autres II. Cours au Collège de France (1983-1984)*. Edited by Frédéric Gros. Paris: Hautes Etudes/Gallimard/Seuil, 2009. Translated by Graham Burchell as *The Courage of the Truth (The Government of the Self and Others II)*. London & New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

⁴ M. Foucault, *Leçons sur la volonté de savoir. Cours au Collège de France (1979-1980)*. Edited by Daniel Defert. Paris: Hautes Etudes/Gallimard/Seuil, 2011. Translated by Graham Burchell as *Lectures on the Will to Know: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1979-1980*. London & New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012.

ground for the so-called ethical turn of the 1980s, albeit only negatively, that is, by leaving open the question of whether the question of “truth” can be deployed outside the “morphology of the will to know” that came to dominate the very “systems of thought” that Foucault analysed, exposed and criticised in the 1960s and 70s.

Foucault’s goal, in his first lecture course, is to define the contours of a system or *analytic* of truth, marked by the strict rules governing the possibility of distinguishing between the true and the false; but it is also, and crucially, to reveal the procedures of “exclusion” and “domination” that underpins such a system. The analytic in question, and the general morphology of thought that it enables, he argues, is a very specific procedure, which we have come to take for granted, but which initially needed to impose itself against other morphologies of thought and competing forms of truth. The morphology in question is expressed most clearly in Aristotle’s metaphysical and logical writings, which Foucault scrutinises in his lectures. Throughout the 1970s, Foucault described, analysed, and criticised the many faces or incarnations of that irreducibly exclusive or dominating dimension of the analytic of truth, the mechanisms of power it presupposes, and the specific discourses it generates. When read against the backdrop of the Aristotelian morphology of truth, the lectures and publications from the 1980s, which sketch the genealogy of something like an *ethics* (as opposed to an analytic) of truth, and raise the question of an “alethurgy” that would not be rooted in “apophantic” discourse, take on a new meaning and importance.⁵

II. The “system” of truth

To be sure, the problem of truth was at the heart of Foucault’s thought from the very start. In the 1960s, the French philosopher focused on those *énoncés* or discourses which, in the classical age, were constituted as discourses of truth, on the effects and the subjects they produced, the institutions they generated or transformed, and the experiences they made possible. In the 1970s, and the so-called genealogical period, Foucault became more concerned with revealing the close links between the

⁵ By *logos apophantikos*, Aristotle means the discourse that, saying that something is the case, it happens either that it is indeed the case, in which case it is true, or isn’t the case, in which case it is false; or again, saying that a thing is not the case, either it is (and then it is false) or it is not (and then it is true). See Aristotle, *De interpretatione*, 4–17a2 et seq: “...not every sentence is a statement-making sentence, but only those in which there is truth or falsity.” English translation by J. L. Ackrill, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, Vol. One, 26.

procedures of veridiction, or the *énoncés* of truth, and the various *dispositifs* of power (sovereign, disciplinary, biopolitical) which constitute our political space and our subjective experience, thus justifying his characterisation of philosophy as the “politics of truth.”⁶

The connection and continuity between those two periods is perhaps most apparent in Foucault’s inaugural lecture at the Collège de France, published in 1971 as *The Order of Discourse*.⁷ He begins his lecture with a few words regarding the sort of work that he has been engaged in thus far. His overall aim, he says, is to analyse the “production of discourses,” or how, when, and under what conditions those discourses are produced. His claim is that the production of discourses always involves a number of “procedures,” which are generated in order to master or reduce an essential and, according to him, irreducible dimension of discourse, namely, contingency, chance, and arbitrariness. Every discourse, in short, *is* a contingent event that tries to disguise itself as a necessity. Now the procedures in question can be of various types, but all have one thing in common, and that is the fact that they amount to a process of “exclusion.” Exclusions, and the systems they generate, can themselves be of various types. Foucault identifies three such systems: 1. the system that excludes by prohibiting certain propositions or statements, and declares that not everything about anything can be said at all times; 2. the system that excludes through a process of division and segregation, for example between reason and madness; 3. the system that excludes by appealing to the distinction between the true and the false. It’s the latter system of exclusion that Foucault focuses on in the *Lectures on the Will to Know*. Before turning to the system in question, let me note that, in his inaugural lecture, Foucault introduces the distinction between the true and the false as a “procedure” of discourse, but that, as the lectures progress, he ends up treating it as a “discursive event,” that is, as an historical phenomenon calling for its own genealogy. The 1970-71 lecture course, then, focuses on one specific, and indeed foundational event – the event of truth itself.

Foucault is aware of the strangeness of his claim, which consists in saying, firstly, that there is a history of truth, and, secondly, that the history in question, far from being necessary and inevitable, is itself contingent and accidental. He is not

⁶ M. Foucault, *STP*, 5-6/17.

⁷ M. Foucault, *L’ordre du discours* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971). Translated by Ian McLeod as “The Order of Discourse” in Robert Young (ed.), *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader* (London & Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul), 51-77. Henceforth *OD*, followed by French and English pages.

speaking of the history of *truths*, of what was established as true, for example scientifically, or of what was once considered to be true, and subsequently proven to be untrue, or vice versa. Rather, he is speaking of the historical conditions under which what we could call epistemological truth, and which consists in the possibility of distinguishing the true from the untrue, emerged and triumphed. So, he is not claiming that truths themselves are contingent: if we place ourselves at the level of a given proposition, that is, within the discourse in question, the division between the true and the false isn't arbitrary, or modifiable, or institutional, or violent. What's true is true, what's false is false. But, he adds, when we place ourselves outside the system in question – outside, that is, not truth itself (as opposed to error), but outside the system that distributes propositions between true and false, and adopt a historical, and specifically genealogical standpoint, we are able to question truth without presupposing truth, ask a different type of question, and see a different kind of phenomenon emerge. Specifically, we are able to question the connection between knowledge and truth, which we take for granted, and ask whether truth is indeed the goal and *raison d'être* of knowledge. We begin to ask about the *will to truth* and *the will to know (savoir)* that sustain the desire for truth and knowledge. Only then can the “principle of exclusion,” which lies at the root of all knowledge, and “has crossed so many of our centuries,” become visible.⁸ Foucault's claim is obviously a Nietzschean one – unsurprisingly, as the lecture course as a whole unfolds in the midst of Foucault's systematic reading of, and engagement with, Nietzsche.⁹ The genealogical turn itself, it goes without saying, would not have been possible without that engagement. Without Nietzsche, Foucault would not have been able to raise the question of truth from the point of view of the *will* that sustains it, and thus situate himself outside the very distinction that's presupposed in the system of truth itself. In other words, he would not have been able to claim that behind or beneath the “system” of the true and the false, the principle of veridiction and the *desire* to find and speak the truth, which we consider to be part of human nature, and with which philosophy itself identifies, there is a “phenomenon” of an entirely different kind, namely, a struggle, a *will (volonté)* to appropriate, dominate and

⁸ M. Foucault, *OD*, 16/54.

⁹ In February 1969, and whilst still at the University of Vincennes, Foucault taught a course on “Nietzsche and Genealogy.” In April 1971, he gave a lecture at McGill University, now included in *LWK*, on “How to think the history of truth with Nietzsche without presupposing truth.” Still in 1971, he published “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon, in Donald F. Bouchard (ed.), *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews by Foucault* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 139-164.

subjugate – in short, a will to *live* and to *power*. This, in turn, means that there is nothing natural or self-evident about the system in question, nothing innate about knowledge and the desire of truth. It means, also that the Subject of truth is only the emergent point or tip of the will in question, and not its basis, and that for the Subject in question to emerge and prevail, other desires, instincts and dimensions of the will need to have been dominated, neutralised, suppressed:

Let us say that we will call knowledge-*connaissance* the system that allows desire and knowledge-*savoir* to be given a prior unity, reciprocal belonging, and a co-naturalness. And we will call knowledge-*savoir* that which we need to drag from the interiority of knowledge-*connaissance* in order to rediscover in it the object of a willing, the end of a desire, the instrument of a domination, the stake of a struggle [*l'enjeu d'une lutte*].¹⁰

Minimally, Foucault's claim suggests that, in his effort to analyse the origin of the system of truth that underpins our epistemes, philosophy is going to be of no use. Indeed, philosophy, the canonical expression of which is to be found in Aristotle, and in the opening sentence of the *Metaphysics* in particular, is the discourse that takes for granted or presupposes that which is precisely in question, namely, the connection between knowledge and truth. Human beings, philosophy believes after Aristotle, are *naturally* inclined or *innately* disposed towards truth: "All men, by nature [*phusei*], desire [*borengontai*] to know [*ton eidenai*]," Aristotle writes in the opening sentence of the *Metaphysics*.¹¹ Aristotle's demonstration regarding our universal and natural desire for knowledge revolves around the very specific type of satisfaction or pleasure, namely, *agapēsis*, which we experience in connection with certain sensations that aren't immediately useful, and which, as such, reveal our ability to detach ourselves from the necessities of biological, animal life. Those sensations signal, and in a way set us on the way to, our ultimate end, namely knowledge (*episteme*) and wisdom (*sophia*), which themselves can't be subordinated to another, practical end. Aristotle's proof, then, requires that a strong connection be established between *sophia*, as the highest form of knowledge, and ἀγάπησις as a specific kind of pleasure, or *hedone*, and one that, it turns out, is very close to true happiness, or *eudaimonia*. The proof amounts to claiming that

¹⁰ M. Foucault, *LWK*, 18/17.

¹¹ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, A, 1, 980 a 21-24.

the subject of truth is *a priori* capable of truth, and that the access to truth is a function not of some exterior motivation or shock, but some internal and natural order. Nothing, *in principle*, stops us from having access to truth, from becoming *subjects of truth*. Borrowing a term from Deleuze, whose work Foucault was reading, reviewing, and engaging with at the time, we could refer to that opening statement of the *Metaphysics* as the first postulate of the “dogmatic image of thought.”¹² In a sense, all that Foucault does in that lecture course is ask: how did that “natural” affinity become so obvious, and how was Aristotle able to take the “desire to know” for granted? How did the subject of desire constitute itself as a subject of knowledge (*connaissance*) and truth? Furthermore, why does that connection appear so obvious to us today? It’s only when we adopt an historical perspective on the matter, and trace the history of truth from Archaic Greece to the classical period, that we can understand the remarkable transformations that were required in order for that supposedly natural disposition, from which our system of knowledge unfolds, to emerge. Far from being natural, this connection between man, knowledge (*connaissance*) and truth, via desire (*désir*), was established as the result of a certain procedure, which presupposed a series of exclusions, and thus the exercise of a certain violence.

It’s this “will to truth” that, Foucault tells us, he wants to question, in the lecture course as well as “in the coming years.”¹³ This means that the various historical (archaeological) analyses of the “systems of thought” he had developed in the 1960s (on psychopathology, medicine, general grammar, or natural history), and which, he says, he intends to continue to develop in the years to come (in relation to the penal system, the market and political economy, as well as the science and history of sexuality), all presuppose this will to truth, which he thinks is in need of a rigorous analysis. His immediate goal, then, is to develop a “theory of the will to know that could serve as the basis for the historical analyses” in question.¹⁴ His intention and programme is then twofold: firstly, the theme of the will to know is to be carried out in a series of historically specific and localised analyses, such as the analysis of how, between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, the *savoir* of economic processes emerged, or how the *savoir* of sexuality was organised and set up in the nineteenth

¹² See G. Deleuze, *Différence et répétition* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1968), Chapter 3. For Foucault’s reviews of Deleuze’s *Différence and Repetition* and *Logic of Sense*, see “Theatrum Philosophicum” in *Critique* 282 (1970), 885-908.

¹³ M. Foucault, *OD*, 53/66.

¹⁴ M. Foucault, *LWK*, 3/2.

century. In each instance, it's a matter of asking how a specific object – the sexual instinct or drive, the market, the criminal – is constituted as an object of truth, precisely through the exercise of a certain “will” or “power;” how a certain object falls under, and is actually constituted as a result of, the authority of a certain discourse and a “will to know.” Now that aspect of Foucault’s project, which he carried out throughout the 1970s, is familiar to all readers. It’s the second aspect of the project, as it’s formulated in the lectures on the will to know, which comes more as a surprise. For, interspersed with the analyses just mentioned, and no doubt more rarely, Foucault adds, it will be a question of treating the theme of the will to know and the will to truth for itself and in isolation, and this with a view to asking whether it might be possible to envisage it as a “basis” (*fondement*) for the historical analyses just mentioned. In other words, in addition to the specifically historical-archaeological work with which we normally associate his work, Foucault, on at least one occasion, and in connection with a critical, Nietzschean reading of Aristotle, raised the question of the *foundation* of the various discourses of truth he concerned himself with throughout his life. Where, he asks, does this will to truth, that is, this will to distinguish the true from the false, come from? How was this historical system of exclusion constituted? Furthermore, is there a single “morphology” of the will to truth that traverses the entire history of European thought, or are there several, competing morphologies, even if, in the end, one of them came to dominate our systems thought?

The “basis” or “foundation” in question is not to be understood in transcendental or ontological terms. In other words, the “system of truth” that’s in question here, which Foucault defines as the play of opposition between the true and the false, and which Aristotle was the first to formalise under the name of *logos apophantikos*, is not rooted in the transcendental constitution of human subjectivity, whether understood in terms of a priori faculties, as in Kant, or existential structures, as in Heidegger. To be sure, the latter derives precisely the possibility of propositional truth, or of truth as “correspondence” and “correctness,” from the existential, ecstatic truth of existence. In other words, apophantic truth is only secondary and derivative with respect to the ontological truth of Dasein.¹⁵ Foucault may be giving the impression of following in Heidegger’s footsteps, to the extent that he too sees the

¹⁵ See M. Heidegger, *Plato’s Sophist* (WS 1924-25), §26; *Logic: The Question of Truth* (WS 1925-26), §§10-14; *Being and Time* (1927), §44.

phenomenon of truth defined in opposition to the false, or the incorrect, as made possible by a phenomenon of a different kind. But the phenomenon in question isn't a more fundamental and more obscure sense of truth, that is, truth as *Erschlossenheit* and *Unverborgenheit*. It's not, in other words, the *essence* of truth. In a way, Foucault's entire lecture course, whilst agreeing with Heidegger's claim regarding the derivative sense of apophantic truth, is an attempt to prove, against Heidegger, and with Nietzsche, that there is no *essence* of truth. But he does not follow Nietzsche all the way – all the way, that is, to understanding the will to power in naturalistic, and especially vitalistic terms. Instead, he prefers to claim that there is only a *history* of truth, that is, a history of various systems of truth – like there is a history of the notion or system of “man,” the only difference being that the system of truth we live under was born some two thousand five hundred years ago, and may come to an end one day.

But how are we to understand history here? At this point, one could object to my previous point on Heideggerian grounds, by saying that, in the 1930s and 40s, Heidegger understands essence and truth in purely historical terms, and claims that the emergence of metaphysics in Platonic and Aristotelian thought, precisely as the system of truth that Foucault seeks to analyse and question, was indeed an historical phenomenon. But Heidegger's sense of history and, as a result, of the historicity of truth, is very different from that of Foucault. Like Foucault, Heidegger sees the emergence of truth as correctness and correspondence as a major *event*, constitutive of what it means to know and think even for us today. But whereas Heidegger locates the primacy of truth thus understood in the necessary withdrawal of the essence of truth (as untruth, or *lethe*), or, if you prefer, in the structure of truth itself, a structure or essence that, in the technological age, we have become entirely oblivious to, Foucault attributes its emergence to a series of far more modest, empirical, and contingent events and discontinuities. In other words, history (*Geschichte*) is not destiny (*Geschick*), and the history of truth, which in many ways defines who we are today, or the sort of subject that we are, isn't the outcome of the epochal essence of truth, or the “sending” (*Schicken*) of Being as presence. This disagreement comes out clearly in the inaugural lecture, when Foucault warns against the temptation to posit behind or beyond the discourses and their systems of exclusion, “a vast unlimited discourse, continuous and silent, which is quelled and repressed by them, and which we have the task of raising up by restoring the power of speech to it.” We must not imagine, he adds immediately, in

what is an implicit reference to Heidegger, “that there is a great unsaid or a great unthought which runs throughout the world and intertwines with all its forms and all its events, and which we would have to articulate or think at last.”¹⁶ Unlike Heidegger, then, Foucault doesn’t try to reconstruct the (linear and homogeneous) history of Truth as such. Where Heidegger thinks the *essence* of truth, that is, truth in its historical unfolding, and history itself as the unfolding of truth, from *aletheia* to *veritas*, from *veritas* to certainty, and from certainty to technology, Foucault aims to describe the emergence of the apophantic system of truth against the backdrop of a series of struggles and exclusions, to which I now turn.

III.

The exclusions in question are essentially of two types. The first type concerns the discourses and forms of knowledge that the philosophical, apophantic discourse excludes – discourses that, traditionally, and in Aristotle’s time, claimed some legitimacy and authority. The question, then, becomes one of knowing how a specific system of truth, namely, the play of the true and the false, managed to prevail over against other contenders, how the discourse of apophantic truth became the discourse of authority. Then there is the question of how the apophantic system in question came into existence in the first place, and what other systems, if any, it eclipsed, suppressed or replaced. I shall analyse them in turn.

In his lecture from 9 December 1970, Foucault claims that Aristotle’s “philosophical operator” was based on a triple exclusion: that of transgressive, forbidden or *tragic* knowledge; that of sophism; and that of memory. In what follows, I will focus on the first two forms of exclusion, and on that of sophism in particular. I’ll begin with a few words about tragic knowledge, but will return to the figure of Oedipus when I discuss the historical process of exclusion that led to the birth of apophantic discourse.

It’s relatively clear that, whenever knowledge is at stake in Greek tragedies, the tragic hero is far from desiring knowledge *naturally*. If he desires knowledge, it’s not because he is moved by a natural impulse inscribed in his nature from a moment of pleasant sensation, or *agapēsis*, as Aristotle claims in his demonstration. Rather, it is

¹⁶ M. Foucault, *OD*, 54/67.

because a word has been pronounced from afar and above – an enigmatic word, with double meaning, which he does and does not understand, which reassures him, but nevertheless troubles him. This is a point that Foucault develops quite extensively in the lecture entitled “Oedipal Knowledge,” which he delivered in 1972, first at SUNY Buffalo and then at Cornell.¹⁷ In the case of *Oedipus the King*, the trigger is the reported rumour of Oedipus’ responsibility in the murder of Laius, and in the pollution (*miasma*) that has befallen Thebes as a result. Oedipus embodies the transgressive and excessive knowledge, which leads him to his own downfall and tragic fate. He is, Foucault insists, one side or half of a literally symbolic truth, which is reconciled with its other, divine half only to find himself mutilated, cast away and exiled. We also need to note that, insofar as it’s excessive and transgressive, the knowledge in question is fearsome and dangerous: it blinds the one it concerns. All of this to say – it’s actually Foucault’s conclusion – that “the Aristotelian themes of a knowledge which goes from pleasure to happiness, of a knowledge towards which one is carried by a natural impulse, through the intermediary of words that teach and do not prophesize, and a memory without forgetfulness or enigma – are all opposed to tragic knowledge.”¹⁸

I now turn to the exclusion of sophistic discourse, to which Foucault devotes two entire lectures (6 and 13 January 2013). He sees this act of exclusion expressed in the following statement from Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*: “...as for sophistics, it is only an apparent philosophy without reality.” We should note here that, unlike Plato, who targets the Sophists themselves, Aristotle is concerned to deconstruct and refute sophisms, that is, arguments that aren’t exactly faulty, but are semblances or simulacra of reasoning. There is faulty reasoning either when the conclusion is true but has been reached from false premises, or when the conclusion is false. And this form of faulty reasoning is subdivided in turn; the conclusion may be false either because a premise is false, or because the two premises are true but the conclusion has not been deduced properly.¹⁹ What’s remarkable about sophistic discourse is that it’s neither true nor false, but escapes the logic of truth altogether, whilst giving the *illusion* of truth and reasoning. That is why it is dangerous, and the extent to which it is opposed to, and at the same time challenges, true, *apophantic* discourse. The Sophist is thus “a man who

¹⁷ The lecture is included in the volume of the *Lectures on the Will to Know*.

¹⁸ M. Foucault, *LWK*, 15-16/14.

¹⁹ See Aristotle, *Sophistical Refutations* in *Organon*, 176b 30; *Prior Analytics*, II, 2.

makes financial profit from an apparent but unreal wisdom.”²⁰ To that extent, Aristotle’s critique reiterates that of Plato in the *Sophist*, and Foucault’s insistence on its operation of exclusion echoes the Deleuzian claim, developed in “Plato’s Simulacrum,” according to which the Philosopher recognises in the Sophist his greatest rival and the greatest threat to his authority and power.

Now many tactics of sophistry, such as speaking very quickly, or reversing the order of questions, are of the order of the crude trick. Some are more complex and pose real grammatical or logical problems. But what matters here is what sophisms have in common, and that is their effect, or the effect they try to produce – effects not of *truth*, such as those produced by syllogisms, but of *victory*: “what [the sophism] ends up with is not a true proposition which has to be acknowledged by everyone, but the silence of one of the two partners, who can no longer continue to speak...”²¹ What they try to achieve, then, by manipulating language accordingly, is a certain efficacy based on the materiality of language. What does Foucault mean by “materiality” here? Negatively, it can be defined as the negation or refusal of the ideality of language, that is, of *meaning* as the decisive dimension of language; instead of reasoning and arguing, sophistic manipulates words, capitalises on the identity of sounds, the separability of words, or the possible permutation of groups of words, and is thus able to say two different things with one word or expression. Positively, sophistic can be defined as the speaking subject’s will, determination and skill to hold to what he or she has said, no matter what. Sophisms don’t state facts, or point to the correspondence between a statement and an external reality that is capable of verifying the statement. As such, they can’t be refuted. Rather, the statement binds the speaker to what he or she has said, so that it resembles more an act of commitment, or an oath, than a true proposition. It too is a declarative statement, but one that does not follow the rules of signification or ideality. By limiting his discourse to the materiality of words, and names especially, to their sounds and letters, sophistic inhabits the space of pure particularity and contingency. Words aren’t able to signify things, or reflect them, or express them, and bear no resemblance to the things they are supposed to speak about. They speak of nothing. They are nothing beyond their ability to destabilise and confuse, to reduce the other speaker to silence, and claim victory.

²⁰ Aristotle, *Sophistical Refutations*, 165a 22-23.

²¹ M. Foucault, *LWK*, 48/49.

To that power – the power of the materiality of discourse – Aristotle opposes the power of proper reasoning and truth, that is, the power of the syllogism, or the ideal necessity of the apophantic. Whereas sophistics is deployed as a free tactic at the level of words themselves, independently of what they signify, the syllogism is subjected to the constraint of the concept. And whereas the sophism operates in the unlimited series of previous statements, the syllogism develops entirely between the two limits, namely, the agreement on the premises and the necessary truth of the conclusion. In the end, the struggle is between the materiality of discourse and the ideality of meaning; it is the struggle for the subordination of language to meaning and truth. Like Plato, Aristotle seeks to purge discourse, and the *polis* itself, of the shadow of sophistry, and establish a close connection between knowing (the true from the false, or, better said still, the system of truth from purely efficacious discourse, pseudo-argumentation and non-being) and *true* power, understood as natural desire.

The second type of exclusion, which apophantics presupposes, is in fact pre-philosophical. To locate it, Foucault claims, we need to go back in time and locate its conditions of emergence in transformations within the Greek judicial and economic system between the archaic, Homeric period, and the classical period. Given the length and complexity of Foucault's investigation, which relies on a variety of judicial and economic sources, as well as on the work of various historians of Greek antiquity, it can't be a question of reconstructing his entire argument. In what follows, I shall limit myself to a number of key points regarding the connection between the role and meaning of truth in legal disputes within the long period in question. But in order to introduce those points as economically and effectively as possible, a brief look at Foucault's lecture from 1972 on "Oedipal Knowledge" will prove helpful.²² Whilst a work of fiction, Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* can be read as a vivid illustration of the competing, yet ultimately compatible procedures of truth that dominated Greek society at the time. What Foucault says about the specific type of knowledge that Oedipus stands for, and which he distinguishes from the *divine* knowledge of the oracle, confirms what the lectures on the will to know seek to establish through a series of purely historical investigations between the Archaic and classical periods.²³ I need to emphasise from the start that, by reading Sophocles' play in that way, and seeing in

²² The lecture is included at the end of the volume of the lectures on the will to know.

²³ See M. Foucault, *LWK*, 27 January – 10 March 1971.

Oedipus the sign of a relation to knowledge and truth that anticipates the Aristotelian image of thought, Foucault doesn't identify (at least entirely) *Oedipus King* with the tragic form of knowledge I began by evoking. Rather, he contrasts the Homeric system of truth, based on oath, the honour of the parties involved, and the fear of divine justice, with the factual, forensic truth that Oedipus seeks to establish, and which reflects the recently introduced *nomos*. What *Oedipus King* sets up, then, is a confrontation between two systems of truth, which actually overlap in the figure of Oedipus himself. One is secular, democratic, and human; the other is religious, exceptional, and divine. One is inherited from archaic procedures around the recognition and force of truth; the other emerges from a series of transformations within the legal and monetary systems between archaic and classical Greece.

The model for the first system can be found not in a philosophical treatise, but in the archaic quasi-judicial dispute, which typically opposed two families or lineages, took the form of a challenge, and required that each party take an oath.²⁴ Truth is what needs to be confronted, what one is able (or not) to face. Truth is an ordeal (*épreuve*) and a force, which inspires terror and awe. The fundamental question is: who, amongst the two parties, will be able to confront the power of truth? Who will dare to swear? Truth is launched as a challenge by one party to the other, who may accept or decline it. The answer is a simple "yes" or "no." As such, the confrontation of truth has the ability to bring an end to the otherwise endless cycle of retaliation and revenge. In that respect, truth is literally and absolutely decisive, and has a power of efficacy that's unmatched in the classical system, which turned the figure of judge into the decisional power. In the archaic context, truth isn't on one side or the other, but is a third power, which isn't manifested in discourse: it isn't so much spoken, as in the classical age, and in the form of a factual observation, as approached, in the form of an imprecation. Truth doesn't denote the relation between what's said and what is or isn't the case. As an ordeal and an oath, the relation to truth, which need not ever become manifest, is one by which the parties involved expose themselves to the wrath and punishment of the gods, and the physical or mental torments they can generate:

²⁴ The dispute that, following the chariot race, opposes Menelaos and Antilochos in Book XXIII of the *Iliad* (v. 340-522), the regularity of which was questionable due to the action of Antilochos, is, in that respect, exemplary.

In the system we are referring to for the Homeric period, the non-verbal equivalent for the word of truth is the ordeal, the test: being exposed or exposing someone to undefined danger. Taking the oath of truth or exposing oneself to the danger of blows, the thunderbolt, the sea, wild beasts... In archaic judicial practice, the word of truth is not linked to light and looking at things; it is linked to the obscurity of the future and uncertain event.²⁵

In that respect, the role of the judge was limited to that of a witness, who only observed and declared the obvious victorious party, without having to look into the substance of the contest, reconstitute the object of the dispute, know the facts independently of the way they were experienced, call on independent witnesses, etc.

At the other end of the historical period we're concerned with, and in the Greek city-state, the situation has changed radically: the judge represents the body politic or the community as a whole, as expressed in the *nomos*. An intermediate stage can be found in the emergence of a distinct legal procedure, and judicial system, in Crete in the sixth and fifth centuries: the so-called Gortyn law transformed the role of the judge by making him the bearer of truth, that is, the one who must speak the truth, take the oath, and thus expose himself to the power of the gods.²⁶ Thus, one model of justice (the *krinein*), based on the judgement passed by a judge who isn't concerned with facts and proofs, but with the pleading and oath of the parties involved, is progressively replaced by another (the *dikaizein*), in which the discourse of truth is now in the hands of the judge, and not the litigants. In the Athenian context, and the law of Solon, the judge embodies a sovereign, impersonal being that's superior to the parties involved, without being religious. *Dikè* has now descended from heaven and is placed at the heart of the *polis*, in the middle (the *agora*), visible and accessible to all, and *equal* for all. The judge can decide on his own, and according to the law (the *nomos*), which is seen as both a natural, fitting order, and an instrument to restore measure and equilibrium within the *polis*, which the *hubris* of men threatens. In the process, the notions of proof, testimony and judgement have changed radically. The judge must now bring to light a truth in relation to which he will need to come to a decision. Of the witnesses, he asks no longer that they side with one of the two parties, but that they take a different kind of oath, one that's related to the actual *facts* involved. Through this entirely new

²⁵ M. Foucault, *LWK*, 82-83/85.

²⁶ See M. Foucault, *LWK*, 3 February 1971.

conception of proofs and testimonies, the trial introduces a new technique of demonstration, of reconstruction of the plausible and the probable, of deduction on the basis of clues and signs. In that sense, the judicial activity contributes to the emergence and elaboration of a notion of objective truth, which the archaic, pre-nomos trial ignored completely. The *dikaion*, or the just (and the judge), is the one who is able to restore a natural and fitting balance, or order, by introducing the proper calculation or measure. This is how Foucault summarises the evolution in question:

The decisive oath is replaced (or at least begins to be replaced) by the judgement-measure. At the same time, the truth-challenge, truth by ordeal is replaced by truth-knowledge.²⁷

In that respect, a remarkable transformation of the meaning of truth has begun to take place, from a truth that “strikes down or protects” to a truth that “one *knows*.”²⁸ For the first time, a strong connection between truth and knowledge is established.

Foucault sees those two models of truth as developing in parallel, and coming into conflict, in *Oedipus the King*. Thus, Oedipal knowledge stands for a particular kind of relation to truth – the very kind that, some eighty years after the publication of Sophocles’ tragedy, Aristotle seems to take for granted in the *Metaphysics*. For who is Oedipus? On the one hand, he is the impure, and the cause of the *miasma* or the defilement that afflicts Thebes. As such, he is blind and has no access to truth. But he is also the one who knows, who defeats the Sphinx, and who rules justly. His specific kind of knowledge, or *technè*, and his power as a king, are intertwined: his sovereign legitimacy is derived from his wisdom. Most importantly, though, he is the one who brings together his *desire* to know or find the truth and certain procedures of truth, which circumvent the traditional, oracular procedure, available only to those who have the special gift of “seeing” the truth, or looking into the future and the past, and incarnated in the figure of the priest Tiresias. Oedipus bypasses those procedures. Instead of consulting the traditional “master of truth” – in this instance Tiresias – and leaving the revelation of truth to Apollo, instead of truth as divination, then, he introduces what, borrowing the term from the medieval lexicon, Foucault calls an *enquête de pays*, that is, a meticulous, systematic reconstruction of how things actually

²⁷ M. Foucault, *LWK*, 103/108. My emphasis.

²⁸ M. Foucault, *LWK*, 103/108. My emphasis.

happened, drawing on facts and witnesses – slaves and shepherds in fact, who have seen what he himself (a king, and the hero who saved Thebes!) was unable to see and know.²⁹ Those otherwise insignificant characters are now key in establishing a new modality of truth: factual, objective, independent of oath and oracular power. Oedipal truth is one that can be demonstrated, shared, and no longer a force to which one is subjected. It's no longer the priest who's consulted, but the witness, no matter how modest. In short, Oedipus is the one who not only *wills*, but also *discovers* the truth.

In the end, Oedipal knowledge, and the method it rests on, arrives at the same truth as the one that Tiresias had known and told all along. Oedipal knowledge doesn't challenge or contradict oracular knowledge. But Oedipus reveals that the same truth can be arrived at differently, and by anyone. Slaves too, and not just the masters of truth, as Plato will reveal in the *Meno*, are capable of truth. Everyone, a priori, is *capable* of truth, and knowledge is the most universally shared desire amongst men. It's accessible to all, by right or in principle. At the same time, we shouldn't forget that Sophocles isn't a positivist, and Oedipus not (quite) Sherlock Holmes. Fate catches up with him, and his immense knowledge doesn't protect him from the monstrous end to which he was destined. This is how Foucault puts it:

Turning his back on oracular methods for those of the inquiry, Oedipus is brought back by the latter to the former. The sovereign who wanted to see with his own eyes finds himself in this unexpected curve, in the possibility of being as seen as guilty by witnesses. Refusing to hear what was brought to him from elsewhere – from Delphi, from the Gods – he wanted to be the king-judge who “heard and saw.” Now finally he sees with his own eyes those who saw him with his own eyes, accursed child abandoned by Jocasta, lost child taken in by Polybus. Wanting to see for himself (*autos*), he has seen himself (*eauton*) in the visual testimony of others. He has seen himself as what should have never been seen, he can no longer bear to be seen by anyone, and never again will he be able to see anyone. That sovereign gaze – both instrument and emblem of a tyrannical knowledge which did not want to listen to divine orders or messages – must be extinguished.³⁰

²⁹ The term “master of truth” is borrowed from Marcel Detienne's *The Masters of Truth in Archaic Greece*, trans. Janet Lloyd (New York: Zone Books, 1996).

³⁰ M. Foucault, *LWK*, 249-250/255.

All the same, Oedipus expresses a new morphology of truth, indicative of a transformation that was already underway, and that will eventually take the obvious, natural form that Aristotle mentions at the very start of the *Metaphysics*. That is the presupposition of philosophy, or the origin of what we could call the western *analytic* of truth.

IV.

What conclusions can we draw from Foucault's lecture course? Firstly, we need to recognise that, far from being a natural and inevitable phenomenon, the primacy of the *analytic* of truth in western thought required a series of struggles and exclusions – of discourses of efficacy and persuasion, for example – in order to triumph. Truth, in that instance, is only a means to an end – an end that's not qualitatively different from that of sophistic or oracular power. The end is *power*. Contrary to what philosophy and positivism claim, the power of truth is not the power to end power and eliminate struggles. Rather, truth, or the *will to truth*, is a way of reconfiguring and redistributing power relations. The truth about madness, crime, sex or immigration cannot be dissociated from the very discourses within which those objects or phenomena appear in the first place, the institutions within which they are inscribed, and the way those discourses and institutions shape subjects. Secondly, we need to recognise that the origin of the *analytic* of truth – and by that we need to understand the system of truth that we have come to take for granted, and which philosophy formalises by claiming that knowledge is an innate disposition, oriented towards truth, and experienced as an irrepressible desire – is itself a complex historical phenomenon, rather than a transcendental feature of human subjectivity. Its roots are multiple (judicial, economic, and social), and accidental. Behind or beneath the system in question, within which Foucault locates the emergence of all the discourses of the human and social sciences he analyses, rumbles this other phenomenon, which, for lack of a better word perhaps, and without any trace of psychologism, he calls the “will to know.” Although Foucault ends his lecture course by admitting that “the project of analysing the ‘Will to Know’ has not been carried out,”³¹ and although he never fulfilled his intention to analyse it in detail, the question regarding the possibility of dissociating truth from knowledge, and

³¹ M. Foucault, *LWK*, 190/197.

knowledge from truth, the question, that is, of a truth that would be otherwise than cognitive, or epistemological, and of a knowledge that would not be de facto plugged into power assemblages, continued to orient his thought, and surfaced explicitly in the 1980s.

Beginning with *Le gouvernement des vivants*, which is concerned with the invention of techniques of submission and obedience in monastic communities of the first centuries of our era, centred on the obligation to speak the truth about oneself to this Other that is the superior, Foucault becomes interested in the problem of subjectivity as shaped by specific technologies of the self, or techniques of existence. What he discovers, first in late antiquity, and then in classical Greece, are self-constructions of the self, which are at once ethical and aesthetic, and which reveal a space of freedom, invention and truth that are not derived from the dispositifs of power and the systems of knowledge he had been concerned with hitherto. How are we to understand his late immersion in a variety of sources from Greek antiquity, such as Plato's *Alcibiades* and *Laches*, or texts and fragments from the traditions of Stoicism, Epicureanism, or Cynicism, which all focus on the problem and practice of *parrhesia*, if not as an attempt to draw our attention to the fact that another discourse of truth once prevailed, one that understood truth in terms of a certain type of life, and thus as bound up with a sense of ethical and political responsibility, to which the analytic of truth would remain subordinated?³² How are we to think the progression from the "will to truth" to the "courage of truth," if not as a shift from the knowledge of discrete objects to self-knowledge, and as way of opening anew the question regarding the connection between truth and subjectivity? At stake, now, is the manner in which a certain type of life – the critical, self-examined life, the life that is subjected to a certain relation to itself, to an ascetic and an ethics – is the condition not of a *discourse* of truth, or a process of veridiction, but of a free and true *speech*. The question, now, is that of the specific kind of life that needs to be elaborated and moulded, of the various practices of the self that need to be invented and pursued, in order to gain access to truth. Foucault insists on understanding *parrhesia* as a modality of truth, but in connection with a truth-telling that involves an element of risk and scandal, a speech that bothers and disturbs the conventions and consensus – a truth, in short, that requires a certain attitude or *ethos*,

³² See M. Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1982-1983* and *The Courage of Truth: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1983-1984*.

and which, in his essay on Kant's *What is Enlightenment?*, he clearly identifies with the public place and role of the philosopher in the age of enlightenment. *Sapere aude*, Foucault repeats after Kant, is the motto of the enlightened attitude. But if one needs to *dare* to know, and dare to speak the truth, does it not mean that truth is itself essentially troubling, dangerous even? And by understanding truth in that way, does the philosophical attitude not reclaim the tragic knowledge that Foucault speaks of in his lectures on the will to know, and contrasts with the Aristotelian morphology of thought?