Chapter 2

The Courage and Scourge of Truth

In his 1983/84 lecture series for the Collège de France (later published as *The Government of the Self and Others* and *The Courage of Truth*), Michel Foucault once again demonstrates his remarkable facility for distilling incisive genealogical insights from historically dubious source material. In the course of a wider discussion of selfhood, and the ways subjectivity is constituted through introspective and intersubjective processes of truth-telling [*dire-vrai*], Foucault presents two antitypes, the ‘Platonist’ and the ‘Cynic’—each of whom embodies a particular relationship between ‘speaking truth’ and ‘exercising power’:

[1]n the case of the Cynics we have a mode of connection of philosophical truth-telling to political action which takes place in the form of exteriority, challenge, and derision, whereas in Plato we have a connection of philosophical truth-telling to [political] practice, which is rather one of intersection, pedagogy, and the identification of the philosophising subject and the subject exercising power ... The Cynics are men of the street, of the agora. They are public men, and also men of opinion. The site of the relation between philosophical truth-telling and the exercise of political power, which is now in the hands of this new personage, this new political reality of the time, the monarch, thus took the form of the confrontation of *challenge-derision* which Diogenes exemplified in relation to Alexander. Where will the site of this necessary and non-coincident relation between philosophical truth-telling and political practice be for Plato? ... For Plato, the site of this non-coincident relation is not the public arena; *it is the Prince’s soul.*

Foucault’s primary source for his reading of Cynicism is, of course, Diogenes Laertius’ gallimaufry of vignettes. Somewhat more surprisingly, his interpretation of Platonist ‘advice’ draws heavily upon the Seventh Letter, the

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authenticity of which continues to be a subject of intense scholarly debate. For my own purposes I will draw from the Republic, partly because its connection to Plato is far less tendentious, but primarily because, among all the countless ‘lost writings' attributed to Diogenes, his extended comedic rebuke of Plato's utopia seems the most likely to have existed in some form. We will never learn the contents of Diogenes' Republic, but we can try to recover some of its critical intent by highlighting significant points of contrast between their respective philosophical outlooks.

According to Foucault, the Cynic's relationship to ‘power' remains asymmetric and disjointed; it is not conducted in the form of a dialogue with the ‘Prince,' but as a public remonstrance against the limitations, weaknesses, and absurdity of power. Diogenes does not advise Alexander the Great, nor offer moral counsel, nor even confront him with some radical ‘truth'; their first meeting is decidedly perfunctory:

[6.38] As he was sunning himself in the Craneion, Alexander stood over him and said, “Ask whatever you wish of me,” and he replied, “Stand out of my light.”

Here, Diogenes' words are directed as much to other bystanders as they are to Alexander; this ‘challenge-derision’ (even if it only amounts to feigned indifference) demonstrates political courage is still possible in a state of seeming powerlessness. Although we know Diogenes did not hesitate to beg money and favours from strangers, when he finds himself at the feet of Alexander, he demands to be left alone. Is it right to call this ‘courageous'? Foucault frames their interaction as another instance of Diogenes the parrhesiast fearlessly saying ‘whatever needs to be said,' and thereby exercising true sovereignty in opposition to Alexander's kingly dependency on military conquests and courtiers.4

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3 Interestingly, one of the main reasons to dispute the authenticity of the Seventh Letter is that it involves an almost comically literalist reading of the Republic—even though there is no evidence of Plato having any intention to become involved in politics in order to implement his utopian blueprint. This, in addition to any number of doctrinal incongruities (including the uncharacteristic repetitiveness of its style) have led some researchers to conclude that the epistle was either the work of a philosophically unsophisticated admirer, or perhaps a critic seeking to malign Plato's reputation as a friend to despots. See: Myles Burnyeat and Michael Frede, The Seventh Platonic Letter: A Seminar (ed.) Dominic Scott (Oxford University Press, 2015): 43–4; 167–8; 193–4.

4 “[Parrhēsia], the act of truth, requires: first, the manifestation of a fundamental bond between the truth spoken and the thought of the person who spoke it; [second], a challenge to the bond between the two interlocutors (the person who speaks the truth and the person to