

## A Student's Tribute to Kimon Lycos (1933-1995)

### Matthew Sharpe

A recent theorist has written that, in order to be taken by philosophy, one must have at least once heard the voice of a master. I do not know about that. I think it is probable, though, that one must have witnessed at least once a philosopher in the classical sense at work, *doing* philosophy. And it is in this way that, for my very small part, I still gratefully remember Kimon Lycos, who passed away during semester in 1995. As Kim's contemporaries were fortunate enough to know first hand, Mr. Lycos made an indelible contribution to European and classical philosophy in Australia, including writings on Plato, Freud, Nietzsche, the German idealists, and decades of teaching in Queensland, the ANU and Melbourne. It is with this in mind, and because of Kim's unique *elenctic* mode of teaching which arguably embodied the Socratic principles that underscore *parrhesia*, that we wanted to offer something of his work, as a tribute, in the first edition of *Parrhesia*.

I did not know Kim Lycos personally. I took two classes with him, including the Greek Philosophy class on metaphysics and epistemology he was taking at the time of his death. I doubt he would remember me. A star-struck 19-year old, only once did I even work up the courage to approach him in the corridor and ask – for what else does a nineteen-year old have? - “I'm sorry to bother you, Mr Lycos, but what is your opinion of Nietzsche?”<sup>1</sup>

The first class I took with Kim, the year before, was a second and third year unit, “Philosophy and Literature”. Mr Lycos had been given what I considered to be the unenviable task of introducing us to Augustine's *Confessions*. As a convinced

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<sup>1</sup> He replied, in a way that still makes me wonder, that Nietzsche was the first philosopher since the Greeks to do philosophy in anything like the Socratic sense

existentialist, and a former student at an Anglican school, I confess that this part of the syllabus hadn't been what had enticed me to enroll. Not only was Augustine a Saint who had been dead for nearly two millennia. When I initially tried to read his *Confessions*, I was convinced that the staid letters of his dead text did not hold together all that well. To be sure, everyone knows that *Confessions* starts spicily enough. But by the end, Augustine had proceeded through his conversion – incongruously, so it seemed to me – by way of some *fairly* unfathomable reflections on memory and the infinity of the soul, on to some *utterly* unfathomable reflections on the book of *Genesis*. In short, by the time the classes were due to start, I was lost and bemused, and looking forward to getting on to Dostoevsky and *Ecce Homo*.

But all that changed pretty soon after Kim's classes began.

What first of all captured you about Kim's lecturing was his obvious and intense enjoyment of just *doing* philosophy, literally thinking on his feet. He had notes, to be sure. And his lectures formed a thoughtful and formidably coherent whole (more on that in a moment). But he would leave these notes in the course of a class, as the material took him. All the while he would pace to and fro. When his hand was not being used expressively, to demonstrate or to emphasize, it would find its way back to his chin, which he would rub thoughtfully as he talked. And – most infectious and wonderful of all, for me – when a thought struck him, Kim would literally give a small, almost unconscious, but distinctly respectful *chuckle*, before re-gathering himself to continue.

When Kim Lycos lectured, that is, it was as if the ancients had returned from the dead and were standing up there with him, very much alive and our contemporaries, putting their thoughts to Kim for the first time, and more than getting their own back.

By the end of the four or five weeks on Augustine's *Confessions*, what had appeared to me like a loosely tied bundle of fairly stale straw had been repackaged as what I still remember Kim describing cosmologically as a "spiral of presuppositions". Augustine's staid reflections had become a captivating process of soul-searching: an all-too-human, if

almost epic, wrestling with himself in order to come to terms with his relation to God, time and eternity. And what I remember being struck by most of all at the end of it was just how truly *dull* I had been not to see what Kim had effortlessly displayed: that Augustine could *only* end his *Confessions* at his beginning, and not only at *his* beginning, but with a meditation on the first things, absolutely.

So I still remember when we students showed up in the Arts Hall, not knowing, the day after Kim's death, expecting him to teach us again. The class was cancelled. I rode home on my bike, feeling numb. It was cold and windy, and I couldn't get my head around what had happened. Mr Lycos, it is true, had got rather behind on the lecture program in Greek Philosophy that year. It was late in the term, and we still hadn't finished with Socrates, although we were supposed to end with Aristotle. Kim had spent far too long on the *pre-pre-Socratic* Greeks, arguing that the emergence of philosophy in Greece must surely be related to specific, lasting tensions in the mythological universe bequeathed to the classical age by Hesiod and Homer. But the real problem had only come later, when we hit around 600 B.C. The truth is that Kim had been waylaid, without warning, by Parmenides, whose profoundly *unmoving*, 2600-year thought he had nevertheless been so passionately *gripped* by as to have felt compelled to venture – and to us his *undergrads* - his *own, new* interpretation of Parmenides' timeless poem.

That night, I recall trying to scribble down some words somewhere to do justice to the memory of Kim's teaching. Of course, I failed:

... can you imagine how I felt after that? Of course, I was deeply ashamed, but also I couldn't help admiring his natural character ... Here was a man whose ... wisdom went beyond my wildest dreams ... (*Symposium* 219d)

Kimon Lycos was born in Alexandria, Egypt in 1933. He migrated to Sydney, Australia in 1951, and died in Melbourne, Australia in 1995. Kim was educated at the Universities of Sydney and Oxford, finishing his BPhil in 1959. After returning to Australia in 1962, he was appointed Senior Lecturer in Philosophy at the Australian National University. He remained there until 1988, after which time he lectured at the University of Melbourne.

Kim also taught more briefly at York, Princeton, Macquarie, the University of Queensland, and La Trobe. He was a founding member of the Pluralist Society, and the Australasian Society for Ancient Philosophy.

Kim Lycos published one single-authored book, *Plato on Justice and Power*, which is an extended commentary on the first book of Plato's *Politeia* (published by Macmillan in 1997). His other book-length publications are the co-edited collection *Art and Reality: John Anderson on Aesthetics and Literature* (edited with Janet Anderson and Graham Cullum, published by Hale and Ironmonger in 1982) and *Olympiodorus: Commentary on Plato's Gorgias*, which he co-translated with Robin Jackson and Harold Tarrant, and which appeared with Brill in 1998. Mr Lycos also published articles in such leading refereed journals as *Mind*, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, *Philosophical Inquiry*, *Critical Philosophy*, and *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy*. A collection of his writings, entitled *Living Thought. The Philosophy of Kim Lycos*, is currently being prepared for publication by Dr Marion Tapper, his literary executrix.

The text of the lecture that follows, entitled “Foucault, Freedom, and Truth Emergence” is of course much too short, as a reflection of Kim Lycos’ teaching or, it goes without saying, of his life. As much as any writing retains, and although written texts surely have a kind of life of their own, with a teacher like Kim it is still fair to say that in some ways *one has to have been there*, and to have *participated* in it. To be sure, I do not mean by this to evoke some inscrutable force that would be beyond philosophical speech. What I do mean is that witnessing someone like Kim teach is to be awakened to, or reminded that, the word “philosophy” really is a *verb*, and that genuinely philosophical speech, as the Greeks Kim so loved knew, always involves a strange kind of *love*.

## Foucault, Freedom and Truth Emergence

### Kimon Lycos

#### I

Foucault's work from the late 1950s until his untimely death in 1984 has generated, and continues to generate, a good deal of controversy. It has also inspired and enthused some intellectuals, while others have found him obscure, unrigorous, reactionary, politically suspect, 'pessimistic' or, even, 'nihilistic'. These extremes of reaction are nothing to be wondered at; it is perhaps the very nature of creative thought to engender such polarisations. And there is good reason for this: as a concrete activity taking place at a particular time and place the articulation and *publication* of new thought tends to threaten or subvert not only, or not *merely*, the content of old and established ways of thought, it also, and *thereby*, carries the possibility of altering the 'field', or structure, of relations of power within which the *practices* of those adhering to the established ways of thought maintain their dominance.

In saying this I have already broached a central concern of Foucault's: the link or connection between the desire for truth and knowledge and relations of power. It will be my task in this lecture to make clear this preoccupation of Foucault's by inquiring into why he thinks he has it, into what assumptions or presuppositions he needs in order to regard it as justified, and, finally, into the implications, moral, political, and philosophical, of making this preoccupation the lynch-pin of his analysis of who we are at the present moment and how we have made ourselves such as we are.

Before proceeding with this task let me issue a warning. When I spoke earlier of the tendency of new thought to subvert not only old thought but the relations of power within

which the old thought finds its dominance, I might easily be taken to have meant that what new thought threatens are the *vested interests* of those who subscribe to the old thought – interests that may be material, ideological, spiritual, institutional, political, or social. But this is precisely and emphatically *not* what I meant, and it is not what Foucault has in mind by the nexus of truth and power. For consider: if *this* had been what I meant we should have reason not to link truth and power but to *sharply separate them*. The truth or otherwise of beliefs (new and old), we could say, is quite independent of the motives and interests of those who believe in them. Whatever gains, material, spiritual, or institutional, accrue to me because I uphold a belief, they do not and cannot render that belief true (if it is false) or false (if it is true). How, then, can truth be linked to power? Is not truth not only different but sometimes in conflict with power in the sense of the vested and dominant interests in a particular social context? This is quite correct and I do not think that many – certainly *not* Foucault – would disagree with it.

But one can think and speak of ‘truth’ and ‘power’ in a way that is different and which has a different purpose – a way which is crucial to Foucault’s project and which, importantly in my view, is not at loggerheads with the one we have just considered. We can gain a preliminary glimpse of this other way of speaking and thinking about ‘truth’ and ‘power’ by reflecting on the familiar story of the Emperor’s new clothes.

At one level what we learn from the story is familiar and accessible – indeed, the story *registers* the familiar and commonplace. How the truth of the little boy’s disinterested perception, embodied in his incredulous cry of “But he is stark naked!”, blows away the thin fabric of error, illusion, and deceit woven around the Emperor, his court and attendants, and the assembled populace at the procession.

Let us be quite clear on this point. The boy’s cry is not merely the confrontation of a true belief with the false belief that the Emperor is clothed, a belief engendered by the trickery of the tailor and his assistants, and subscribed to by nearly the whole community because of various vested interests at stake. True enough such interests there were, and it would not affect the story if we thought that the tailor and his assistants came to believe for

various interests of their own (and they could be quite complex) that they were indeed fashioning the finest material ever made, so fine as to be invisible to ordinary mortals. The point of the story is not the banal one that so long as a belief is true it shows another one to be false, however unpopular the first and however popular the second. Such a point would hardly need a story.

Why, then, do we have the story? Well, at the very least because the boy's cry wrests or detaches the *power* of truth from 'the regime of the production of truth' (to use one of Foucault's phrases) within which it operated up to the point of his cry. Let me explain. Up to the point of the cry the power of truth was seemingly undetachable from the forms of hegemony and domination, social, economic, institutional, and cultural, represented by the Emperor, his wishes, the court, the tailors, etc. The determination of what counted as an authoritative or valid statement about 'being clothed' and 'finely clothed' was not only firmly in the grip of the whole system of relations of power represented by these figures, the *effect* of this regime of truth-production is well captured by the stunned and uneasy silence of the assembled population at the procession. The hooha and laughter that meets the boy's cry is not simply a change of belief as to whether the Emperor is clothed or not, but more significantly a shift, at that moment, in the relations of power within which the determination of the truth of statements about being clothed or not is to occur. It is as if the assembled people said, "Now *we too* can tell!".

What then the story does, then, at the deeper but still familiar level, is to remind us that as well as the abstract idea of truth, of something's being so or not independently of whether anyone in any concrete historical situation has seen it to be so or not, we also operate with the idea that truth can *emerge*, that there is a moment when it comes to exist and conditions under which it exists. In this sense truth is originally and irreducibly situated in a field of social, historical, political differences of power, and the fact that it is so does not falsify its nature or make it something other than it is.

It might be thought that this is not so, that in the innocence of the boy's perception we have the assumption that truth 'itself' (the real article) is free from politics; that it takes

something external or accidental to the essential nature of truth to situate it in a field of political difference; that the only ‘truth’ that might function in the political exercise of power is a mere passing-for-true which is really false. But how can we think of the story this way without rendering the effect of the boy’s cry on the assembled company an equally external or accidental aspect of its truth? The boy’s cry does not merely put an alternative belief to that of the assembled company; it does not accidentally and by chance change their minds. We do not understand the story unless we see that the boy’s cry, however contingent its occurrence, *constitutes*, at one and the same time, the coming-into-existence of truth (N.B., not *a* truth) and the shift in power relations within which its determination occurs. It would be a mistake, then, to think that though the truth about the Emperor’s clothes was ‘always there’ (where?), the boy’s cry changed his audience’s mind by serving as a causal instrument to alter their vested interests. *We have no reason to suppose such an alteration.* The boy’s cry did not alter the ‘ideology’ or ‘alienated consciousness’ of his community; if that happened it would have taken a long time and would have involved a lot of other factors that belong to quite a different story. What the boy’s cry in our story does is not to pit ‘telling the truth’ against the lies and deceptions of all the others; rather, it registers dramatically how the emergence of truth is a political matter since the conditions of its existence lie precisely in *detaching* the power of truth from the ‘regime’ in which up to that moment it had existed.

I have spent some time on the story of the Emperor’s New Clothes because I believe we can understand a number of the puzzling features of Foucault’s work, and his thought about the relation between truth and power, in terms of the story’s structure. I turn now to this task of explanation.

## II

The most striking aspect of Foucault’s work over 25 years is that it takes the form of historical studies: about madness and the emergence of insane asylums, about disease and the emergence of clinics and general hospitals, about criminality and the emergence of prison systems, about knowledge and emergence of the new sciences of linguistics,

economics and biology. And in his late work on sexuality about how the emergence of new kinds of expertise (medical, psychiatric, hygienic, paediatric, nutritional, etc.) has fashioned our views and practices as ‘subjects of sexuality’.

In the work just prior to his death his attention had turned to what he called ‘technologies of the self’, the ways in which since antiquity people have tried to turn themselves into ‘ethical subjects’. At the same time he was also concerned with the ‘political technology of individuals’, the ways in which political knowledge in the modern state is not concerned with how people might be made happier or free or more virtuous, but with how looking after them as living, acting, productive beings can serve as a condition of the strength and survival of the state itself in comparison to other states. The art of government in the modern state, he thought, does not have the happiness of individuals as a goal (as it did in traditional political philosophy); rather, the happiness of individuals has become a *requirement* for the survival and development of the state itself. This is why, he thinks, the techniques and practices which give concrete form to the new political rationality seem to be able to bear the central paradox of our political reason: the coexistence in a political structure of large destructive mechanisms and institutions oriented towards the care of individual life in as many aspects as possible.

I cannot, of course, enter into the rich detail of any, let alone all, of these studies. Apart from the detail, there is clear evidence that Foucault’s thought went through a number of stages of development, becoming clearer after the completion of each book as to what it was that centrally concerned him, even if on the surface it looked as if he was turning his attention to a different field of study. Instead, I will try to sketch what is distinctive about these studies, and in the process delineate what gradually emerged as his central preoccupation about the relation between being a ‘subject’, power, and truth and knowledge.

1. The studies though historically based are not conventional histories; they are not social histories of the evolution of institutions or of the effect of various forces, social, political, economic, etc., on the lives of individuals. Yet, they include references to such factors.

Again, they are not intellectual histories or histories of beliefs and ideas, of the way, say, various bodies of scientific knowledge grew out of confused and mistaken beginnings. Foucault's stories contain no finality, i.e. the end point towards which the progress of idea and theories was tending. Yet, they include considerable reference to what at different times was said and believed in. In fact the studies are too highly structured to be conventional histories; they resemble factually based stories with a message.

The plot of the madness book, which is repeated in several later books, will serve as an illustration. There are two notable events. First comes 'the great exclusion' in the mid-seventeenth century: a frantic locking up of deviants of all sorts and a building up of lunatic asylums. Much later, around the time of the French revolution, there was a spurious liberation, when a new body of psychiatric knowledge invented new ways to deal with the insane. At least in the old asylums, Foucault suggests, the mad were left to themselves in all the horror that implied. Yet the horror was not worse than the solemn destruction of the mad by committees of experts with their constantly changing manuals of cures and ways of dealing with the new thing 'mental illness'.

Foucault's stories are dramatic. He presents a reordering of events that we had not perceived before so as to show the gap or break during which one tradition of dealing with madness is transformed into another. Given the social value granted to psychiatry (and other expertises that deal with various 'social diseases') in our civilisation, the point of telling these stories is to alert us to the link between knowledge and exercise of power. However different or more 'humane' the practices of one period seem compared with another, the *value* accorded to them and the knowledge on which they are based is fundamentally an exercise of power. It would be a mistake therefore to think that the value of knowledge is one thing and the value of its use quite another. For in all cases what we have are ways of thinking *and* doing that construct 'subjects', i.e. ways of categorising or classifying individuals (as 'mentally ill', 'depressed', 'hysterical', 'delinquent', 'sexually deviant', etc.) in terms of which people and institutions relate to other people.

Foucault's point here is not to praise or condemn but to make us realise that such 'subjectifications', and the underlying desire to make aspects of human behaviour and 'object of knowledge' ('objectivisation'), are contingent, changing, forms of our invention that make possible new ways of relating to others (and to ourselves) while *closing* others. We consequently come to believe and act as if these ways are the *only* ways, that the 'subjectifications' are not the changeable things that they are but represent some underlying human essence. In writing his books, then, Foucault is inviting us to join him in a philosophical analogue of the little boy's cry in the story: nakedness may be a form of very fine dressing as everyone seems to think but we do not *have* to think of it that way, perhaps it is plain nakedness too.

2. The studies are not historically based analyses of the structures of social power such as individuals, group, institutions, classes, national and international governmental agencies, etc. might *exert over* such entities. Such analyses whether conventional or Marxist or Weberian usually operate with an explicit *theory* of power. Foucault denies he is proposing one; nor does he see his work as an attempt to arrive at one. Yet, his studies abound with references to *relations of power*, to *strategies* or *tactics* of power. He also says he is interested in an *analytics* of power and talks of the *microphysics* of power and of bio-power. These concerns become more prominent in his work on prisons and what he calls 'the disciplinary society', and in Volume 1 of *History of Sexuality*.

Put briefly Foucault's concern is this: his work on the emergence of prisons revealed to him that as well as the process of 'redefinition' of insanity, criminality, disease, etc., that went on in places of segregation like asylums, prisons, clinics, and so on, there was another and more productive process of domination, that of reorganising the body, what one did with it and to it, so as to produce 'docile bodies; that is bodies that are publicly controllable. The picture that emerges is that of a constellation combining modern humanitarianism, the new social sciences, and the new disciplines which develop in armies, hospitals, schools, and the work-place in the 18th century. These are seen as new modes of domination. Foucault draws a portrait of a new form of power coming to be. Where the old power depended on the idea of a public space and of public authority, the

sovereign, which essentially manifested itself in this space, which overawed the subjects and relegated them to a less visible status, the new power operates by universal surveillance. It does away with the notion of public space; power no longer appears, it is hidden, but the lives of all the subjects are now under scrutiny.

The new philosophy of punishment is thus seen as answering the need or imperative to control, however humanitarian the reasons of its promoters. The new forms of knowledge serve this end. People are measured, classed, examined, and thus made the better subject to control which tends to normalisation. In particular, Foucault speaks of the medical examination, and the various kinds of inspection which arose on its model, as a key instrument to this. It is not the modern individual that invents this technology of control; rather, it is the rise of this technology that brings about the modern individual as an objective of control. The modern techniques of domination and normalisation have constructed the 'subject' we recognise as the modern individual. Consequently, the theories that present an image of power as turning on the fact that some give commands and others obey, or that some have the wherewithal to prevent or repress the actions of others – ways of thinking we still employ – are not adequate to explain the new form of power. For while they can explain prohibitions and restrictions of behaviour brought about by the actions of other agents, this new kind of power is *productive*; it brings about a new kind of subject and new kinds of behaviour and desire which belong to it. What is more this new kind of power is not wielded by a *subject*, such as the sovereign or an assembly or even a class. The new kind of power is not wielded by specific persons against others, at least not in this way. It is a complex form of organization in which we are all, examiners and examinees, caught in a spiral of mutual incitation to think and to speak about each other and to act towards each other in ways that seem not only natural but beyond anybody's control – victims of a strategy with no absolute origin and no clearly discernible goal.

Foucault believes that such a notion of power is required to analyse the various *experiences of* modern society and *in* modern society, but that one cannot theorise it for to do so would mean being able to see or think what would count as *liberation* from it; as

what it would be like to be on the other side of it. And it is not clear, thinks Foucault, that attempting to do so is a coherent project. To the extent that Foucault wants to use this notion of power to analyse how we came to have our ideas of ourselves as subjects of sexuality, power not only *affects* who we are and how we think and act, it is inseparable from what at any moment we think of as freedom; for freedom could not mean escape from this sort of power, in the way the citizens thought of dethroning the king, or the proletariat aimed at taking over control of the means of production from the capitalists. If we are to think of freedom in this new context of power it cannot be freedom *from* an agent or agency, individual or corporate. How, then, does Foucault think of freedom?

### III

Let me briefly sketch an answer, though the issue deserves a more thorough treatment. Let us note the following.

Though power in Foucault's sense is pervasive and penetrates the whole social context of action, it is not a matter of one person or group exercising control over another, of an imposition of will by some on others. Unlike legal or class power it is not conceived as a relation alongside others, social, economic, familial, sexual, etc., that people stand to each other. Built in to the common activity between doctor and patient, parent and child, teacher and pupil, etc. is a relation of power made possible by the common presumption that there is one who *knows* and the other has an overwhelming interest in seeking advice. But in such situations what we have is not necessarily *domination* but only 'power' (exercised) over'. The doctor's actions act not on the patient's actions but on the field of *possible* actions of the patient. Thus, it is only if, as often happens, the doctor's actions succeed in modifying the field of possible actions of the patient that we have 'power exercised over', and this is an inevitable characteristic of all social interaction. But such power does not always imply a real modification of the actions of others. It is precisely because power is exercised always between subjects of power capable of distinct actions, that there is always the possibility that the relations between agents are one of conflict. Therefore, relations of power are always in principle shiftable, reversible, unstable. It is

precisely because power is exercised on subjects of power that resistance remains always possible.

Consequently, it is only when the possibility of real resistance has altogether disappeared that the relation of power between two subjects becomes unilateral and partial. It is only when the play of conflictual relations is replaced by a more stable mechanism whereby the one agent can direct in a constant and more or less secure way the conduct of the other that we get the establishment of a state of *domination*. It is a situation analogous to what happens in chess when one player dictates, as we say, the game of the other player. Freedom in such contexts would consist in the adoption of positive tactics to avoid such closure of the possibilities of action, of making use of counter-moves that destabilise the other's exercise of power over me.

This is precisely what in the context of the story the little boy's cry achieves. It is an act of freedom precisely because it generates a possibility of thinking and acting that appeared closed before. And this can be so even if it is the case that the child remains in many other relations of power dominated or, even, coerced.