

**all this fearless speaking
is really fearful screaming:
diogenes, foucault and
the american crisis of bad
parrhesia**

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INTRODUCTION

I am writing this in the summer of 2024, and the specter of polarisation is looming darkly over the United States. While the primary engine driving the discord are structural factors – ranging from the ownership dynamics of contemporary mass media to the misuse of artificial intelligence – rhetorical factors provide the fuel. Michel Foucault’s discussion of *parrhesia* offers us a way to articulate and understand those rhetorical factors.

Parrhesia is originally an ancient Cynic term typically understood to connote

“fearless speech.” The Cynics conceived it as agonism, i.e., provocation, confrontation, and adversarialness. Millennia later, Foucault interprets *parrhesia* more dynamically, and crucially, he also discerns how it can turn rotten.¹ As I interpret him, “bad” *parrhesia* can be thought of as a reduction of fearless speech to agonism, i.e., equating fearlessness *with* adversarialness. Put more simply, fearless speaking goes bad when it becomes less about being genuinely fearless and more about the appearance of it.

The bad *parrhesiast*, then, is a sort of pseudo-Cynic. Pseudo, because when the Cynics are understood correctly, the intention behind their agonism was ultimately pro-social. Parrhesia goes wrong when this point is missed, distorted, or simply not cared about.

With this conceptual framework in hand, my central argument in this paper is that bad *parrhesia* pervades both the Right- and the Left-wing today. To already be absolutely clear at this early juncture, when properly understood and correctly wielded, it can be the lifeblood of democracy. The problem is its corruption. The solution, though, is terrifying: we must end our increasingly rigid commitment to agonism.

What is really at stake here is not even speaking per se, but *what it means to be fearless*, and it is paramount that we expand our conception of it beyond sheer adversarialness. We Americans must become fearless about fearlessness. Specifically, I propose that we consider four kinds of fearlessness in addition to the agonistic form we know all too well: *fearless silence*, *fearless listening*, *fearless curiosity*, and *irenic fearless speaking*. The last of these – to speak fearlessly in a manner that seeks consensus and harmony – will be the most difficult for us to understand and embrace, as at first glance it seems contradictory and even in its own way very dangerous.

Different stakeholders in the United States today will have different relationships to these other kinds of fearlessness. In my view, any or all four of these are ethically

tenable for members of the general public to take on wholesale. It is a different story for journalists. While they can also engage in all four of these other forms of fearlessness, they must ultimately prioritise fearless speaking. Yet, they must also do so in a way that strikes a balance between agonism and irenism. More precisely, they must be sensitive to the needs of their historical circumstances, and right now, the need is for more irenic *parrhesia* than its agonistic counterpart.

What did I mean when I suggested a moment ago that irenic *parrhesia* might seem, in its own way, very dangerous? Amidst the storm of agonism roaring all around us today, these four forms of fearlessness may seem to fall afoul of Martin Niemöller's poem, "First they came..." Niemöller can be interpreted as describing the failure to be agonistic against the fascism of 1930s-40s Germany. He recounts how the Nazis rounded up various groups for enslavement and extermination, one after another – communists, socialists, trade unionists, Jews – and each time he "said nothing" because he was not a member of any of them. Eventually, "they came for me, and there was no one left to speak for me." In light of his warning, we may rightfully wonder whether, if we are fearlessly silent, do we not let evil win? If we fearlessly listen or are fearlessly curious, of what utility are we? And most of all, if we do not shout louder than the enemy, what is the point of speaking at all?

It requires intuition to discern the terrible truth of our present situation: all of our fearless speaking has really been fearful screaming, and that screaming is bringing us perilously close to our own authoritarian crisis. We must be brave. We must stop screaming. There is no other way.

1.1. OVERVIEW

The deterioration of public discourse in the United States is firmly established. Conceptualisations of our discordant rhetoric have varied widely, e.g., our discourse has become "radicalized (sic)," "hyper-partisan," "tribalistic," it has fallen prey to "siege mentality" and evinces a feeling of "circling the wagons," and more.² In my view, these ways of thinking about the present crisis are valuable,

but they tend to lack the necessary philosophical precision to really capture what may be happening *beneath* the rhetoric. This is why I suggest we instead consider bad *parrhesia* as an interpretative framework, as it enables us to discern that the problem in American public discourse today is that our rhetoric has become deeply fearful.³ It is crucial that we discern the influence of fear in our discourse, for it has been hidden, voiced with the pitch and cadence of fearlessness.

A technical note is needed here before proceeding. In order to discuss *parrhesia*, it is important to distinguish between three rough-hewn roles: (i) the *parrhesiast* (the would-be fearless speaker), (ii) the recipient (the object of their fearless speech), and (iii) the audience (the beneficiary of their speech). While the *parrhesiast* speaks *about* the recipient, directing their speech *to* or *at* them, they do so *for the sake of* the audience. In practice, though, these distinctions can be imprecise and fluid. Take for example Tucker Carlson, whom I will be discussing at length below as an example of a bad *parrhesiast*. Schematically, he portrays himself as speaking truth to an immoral American elite (his recipient) on behalf of a moral American everyman (his audience), but concretely, he actually addresses the latter.

Now, it is impossible to separate Foucault's conception of *parrhesia*, both "good" and "bad," from his viewpoint that both society and the self are ultimately crystallisations of power relations.⁴ In a Foucauldian framework, *parrhesia* is good and authentic when it is sensitive to, and sincere about, the power relations that inform the act of speaking itself – which is to say, the deep and often unseen systemic conditions that have influenced who plays the roles of *parrhesiast*, recipient, and audience – and it goes wrong when they are either insensitive to, and/or insincere about, these relations.

Foucault specifically identifies two varieties of bad fearless speech: (a) the reckless type, in which the *parrhesiast* is voicing their thoughts about their target without regard for power relations, and (b) the duplicitous type, in which the *parrhesiast* is not what they seem, for they are actually camouflaging the status quo in a veneer of boldness. Hence, the reckless *parrhesiast* is such because they either fail to see,

or they forget, that they exist in the same web of power relations as their target, and so they lose their compassion, while the duplicitous *parrhesiast* sees the web and manipulates it.

It is tempting to further pose the duplicitous *parrhesiast* as someone who is themselves a member of the elite, i.e., they are the spider at the heart of the web. However, as I understand Foucault, such an interpretation would overlook the infinite relativity of power. A *parrhesiast* is duplicitous not because they are factually a member of an actual elite (although to be sure, like Carlson, they may very well be so). Rather, a *parrhesiast* is duplicitous when they meet two conditions: (i) they know they have more power in a *given situation* than either their speech's recipient and/or their audience – so to speak, they are “elite” relative to the other participants according to the power structures at play in the given moment of discourse – and (ii) their speech is intended to dissimulate or otherwise distract from their relative power. The duplicitous *parrhesiast* can thus be the abusive parent who denies their child's pain by portraying themselves as the unloved one, or the local male cop who insists the female rape victim had it coming because of the provocative clothing she was wearing, or the inveterate bully who asserts that the other kid is responsible for the fist fight because they were the ones who punched first. I could go on, as unfortunately, examples of duplicitous *parrhesia* are endemic to everyday life.

Although Foucault's distinction is certainly sound, I argue that bad *parrhesia* is more complex than what even he suggests, for fearless speech can also be (c) unjust. The unjust *parrhesiast*, either wittingly or unwittingly, sincerely attempts to speak truth to either the lesser powerful, the powerful in principle but not in fact, or the powerless. The distinction here is not that the just *parrhesiast* fearlessly speaks upward, at those higher in the hierarchy, while the unjust *parrhesiast* fearlessly speaks downward, at those lower in the hierarchy. Rather, the distinction here is that the unjust *parrhesiast* profoundly misjudges the capacities, constraints, and character of their recipient.

In my view, the misjudgment of the recipient's character is the root cause of *parrhesiastic* injustice. Such misjudgment typically involves conceiving power as an essential feature that some people inherently possess by dint of their nominal position within a hierarchy. Conceiving power in this way implies that people *are* powerful rather than *have* power. It follows that someone who *is* powerful cannot themselves ever experience powerlessness, and hence they can never experience injustice – including from the *parrhesiast*. Indeed, the unjust *parrhesiast* engages in a double injustice, one metaphysical, one concrete: metaphysical, in that they deny the humanity of the one whom they are confronting, and concrete, in that as a consequence, the restitution they seek has a higher chance of itself being wrongful.

I should note that *grey parrhesia* also exists and is very much a challenge in its own right, both philosophically and as a contributing factor to the rhetorical crisis rocking the United States. However, because my focus in this paper is on bad *parrhesia*, I will unfortunately need to explore this topic elsewhere. Suffice it to say for now that *grey parrhesia* mixes good and bad *parrhesia*. This can happen in any number of ways. For example, the unjust *parrhesiast* may not have the metaphysical commitments I have outlined here, but simply be biased or mistaken. Another potential example, albeit a more fraught one, is hate speech. The hate speaker may be fearless in one way, i.e., by sincerely confronting authorities or a mainstream consensus that is actively opposed to them, while the content of their speech is not fearless in another way, i.e., by promulgating essentialising narratives about entire demographic groups, thereby perpetuating injustice. The grey aspects of hate speech can also work the other way, for good fearless speech can be labeled “hate speech” precisely in order to silence it. We see this phenomenon in the former Soviet Union, such as the Kyrgyz Republic, wherein a law ostensibly intended to combat hate speech has been used to censor social-political critics.⁵

Back on track. To recall from above, I argue that what Foucault identified as bad *parrhesia*, and what poisons and distorts our public discourse today, is at root

a perverted form of the original Cynical model. Let me put it this way: fearless speech that is adversarial in character has come to be valorised in contemporary American discourse, such that as a matter of culture – especially Internet culture, which seems to dominate American society – we expect the *parrhesiast* to be a rhetorical gunslinger. The American *parrhesiast* is transgressive, remorseless, deadly, shooting down the powerful with the discursive bullets of truth.

By aligning bad *parrhesia* with the Cynical model, I believe it also becomes possible to see more clearly the need for, and possible forms of, a more expansive, democratic vision of *parrhesia*, and fearlessness in general. Moving beyond the present crisis of bad *parrhesia* will require recovering a more participatory, community-oriented conception of truth-telling. This is why I think that of the four other forms of fearlessness I laid out above and will discuss below, irenic *parrhesia*, difficult to articulate and seemingly paradoxical though the concept may be, is key.

1.2. PROCEDURE

This paper will proceed as follows. I will first delve into *parrhesia*, clarifying its good forms from its bad ones. In the spirit of the Cynics, I will illustrate bad *parrhesia* with anecdotes pulled from the headlines and my own personal life. Following this, I will discuss the proposed four other kinds of fearlessness and their relationship to the American general public. I will then close this paper with what I believe fearless speaking by American journalists needs to look like today.

2. FEARLESS SPEECH

This section is dedicated to explicating the differences between good and bad *parrhesia*. I will start with *parrhesia*'s original formulation by the Cynics, then move to its formulation by Foucault. With these in hand, I will then turn to the subtleties of its bad expression.

2.1. CYNICAL *PARRHESIA*

For Diogenes of Sinope and his fellow Cynics, fearless speaking effected what Darren Gardner calls an “immanent social critique.”⁶ They understood fearlessness specifically as provocation, expressing it as an antics-filled form of asceticism that was by turns sarcastic to the point of absurdity, and rude to the point of aggressive transgression. For example, the couple Crates of Thebes and Hipparchia of Maronea had sexual intercourse in full view of the public, while Diogenes lived on the streets with stray dogs, slept in a bathtub, and confronted people with a lamp, shoving it in their faces to see whether they were “honest.”

“Honesty” had many levels of meaning for the Cynics, but one meaning in particular had ultimate priority: it was the civilised rather than the uncivilised who were living a life of absurdity, aggressive transgression, and most of all, self-deception. In what way were the civilised being absurd, transgressive and self-deceptive? By living a life against nature.

An important subtlety often missed about the Cynics is that while Diogenes and his fellow “dogs” opposed society, they were not necessarily anti-social. It is highly likely that at least some of the movement’s members enjoyed the provocativeness of the *parrhesiast* lifestyle for its own sake, but for most of the Cynics it served a veiled pro-social purpose. A telling moment in their movement’s history occurred when Diogenes was asked about his citizenship: he replied by identifying neither with Sinope nor “*apolis*,” i.e., without a society, but with “*kosmopolis*.”⁷ As I interpret him, Diogenes may very well have seen himself as a member of a society, but one that encompassed and undergirded the tiny, frail, and egocentric societies of humanity.

We see indications of this stance in the later Epictetus, a Stoic who revered Diogenes and actively drew inspiration from him. Epictetus once remarked that he was unafraid of exile: “Where can they send me? Nowhere outside the world, since wherever I end up, the sun will be there, as will the moon and the stars. There will still be dreams, birds of augury, and other means of staying in touch with the gods.”⁸ He did not fear being cast out of the *polis* because he realised he

was just cast into the *kosmopolis*, where all of us truly belong anyway.

Diogenes' *kosmopolis* was not an airy abstraction, but the corporeally and physically real. It was the biological instincts that human institutions and norms denied and suppressed. It was the vast natural environment that surrounded and succored human society, but which humanity in its folly had twisted and bent into buildings and tools. The Cynical *parrhesiast* was therefore not merely a critic or a punk, but an evangelist for the universe, prodding their fellow human beings to take humanity's proper place in the civilisation of being.

2.2. FOUCAULDIAN *PARRHESIA*

Both the Foucauldian and the Cynical model of *parrhesia* intuit the importance of individual fearlessness in collective well-being, but where the Cynics conceptualise it as confrontation and asceticism, Foucault understands that it *can also be*, and *often needs to be*, empathetic, sympathetic, and actively engaged in society. He frames fearless speech as having a constitutive role in democracy, and his viewpoint expands beyond his Cynical fore-bearers' focus on adversarialness.

Note that Foucault's insights into *parrhesia* are underpinned by his understanding of power relations as the source of both individual identity and societal structures. He proposes that the self and society are not static entities but are instead formed and sustained through power dynamics. Consider the current conflict surrounding sex and gender identity. While perhaps personally sympathetic to one side, as a philosopher Foucault would very likely perceive the rhetorical battles being fought over this issue as ultimately being less about the dichotomous philosophical oppositions portrayed by the Right and the Left's loudest speakers, and more about the complex ways power shapes individual and collective markers of identity *on both sides* of the dispute.

So, what is "good" – which is really to say, authentic – *parrhesia* in a Foucauldian framework? It is not merely about speaking truth to power, but also involves a critical assessment of when and how truth-telling can be most effective and

ethical. Good *parrhesia* is thus characterised by a willingness to engage with, and challenge, societal norms and institutions while simultaneously being mindful of the potential consequences for both individuals and the collective. The good *parrhesiast* is compassionate, but not to the point of being immobilised. As well as they can, they strive to strike the right balance between when to critique and when to be silent, and in which ways.

It is also important to note that Foucault highlights the importance of self-care as a form of resistance, not just fearless speaking. Self-care for Foucault does not mean withdrawal from social-political life, but rather a re-connection with the true self as a basis for more authentic and effective political engagement. And to be clear, the true self is not the one that exists Möbius strip-like with society, but is our baseline materiality. Hence, the reconnection with the self that occurs in self-care should be understood as a non-literal version of Epictetus' exile: it is re-embodiment, and as such, it is a curative to the disembodiment wrought by the power relations encoded in the "I" of the self and the "We" of society.

I feel it is important to highlight this aspect of Foucault's thinking because Foucauldian *parrhesia*, like its Cynical predecessor but in a subtler way, is as much about transforming oneself as it is about transforming society. Put in Cynical terms, it is necessary to depart the polis for the kosmopolis, but neither is the departure necessarily and always *literal*, nor is the kosmopolis inherently antithetical to the polis – very much to the contrary. And to gesture ahead, these notions will undergird the four other forms of fearlessness that I am proposing.

Back on track: to engage in good *parrhesia* as understood by Foucault, the speaker must engage in a critical examination of (i) the motives behind their desire to speak truth, and (ii) of the power relations their speaking incarnates, even if their speaking is intended to contest those power relations. Put simply, the would-be fearless speaker must consider to the best of their ability not just the content of what they will say, but also the context in which it will be said, and the effects it may have.

In form but not in spirit, Foucauldian *parrhesia* is thus the opposite of Cynical *parrhesia*. It is actively engaged with and in society; it takes seriously, and is sensitive to, the shifting sands of identity, and does not reject the desert as just a mirage; yet it still strives to challenge the status quo, although not through social-political renunciation, but by fostering a more inclusive and dialogic social-political culture. The Foucauldian *parrhesiast* does not see themselves as wielding truth like a weapon against the powerful. They understand that power is always mutating, and they are not seeking to emerge victorious from a gun duel, but instead to contribute to the well-being and freedom of speaker, their recipient, and their audience.

2.3. BAD *PARRHESIA*

According to Foucault, bad *parrhesia* generally occurs in two forms: either the speaker masks the status quo in the tone of fearlessness, or they voice the contents of their mind without regard for others. The adjective “bad” thus serves as a gloss for speaking fearlessly, recklessly, or duplicitously. This is a good start for understanding how *parrhesia* can be shameful or harmful, but it is only a start. I will also discuss how *parrhesia* can be unjust, as well as how all three forms of bad *parrhesia* – which I suspect are by no means the only forms of it – can, and often do, overlap or feed into each other.

Before I dive in, let me outline the bad *parrhesiast* as such: they are, so to speak, pseudo-Cynics who wield truth claims like a gun, either because they do not know how to wield such claims properly, or because they know full well what they are doing. Not only this, but what at root really distinguishes the good *parrhesiast* from the bad is how the two relate to fear, with the one ultimately having a positive relationship with it, the other a negative relationship.

Solidarity also plays an important tonal role. Where the good *parrhesiast* seeks the betterment of the collective – and in as maximal an understanding of that collective as possible – the bad *parrhesiast* is either unmindful of the collective’s

needs, seeks to undermine those needs, or as I will argue here, speaks tribalistically, prioritising *their* particular collective's needs over and against all others. The bad *parrhesiast* can therefore either (a) get caught up in playing the role of “enfant terrible truth-teller from the outside, whose only affiliation is the non-place of ‘kosmopolis’ where there is nature but not politics”⁹ – in which case they are being reckless; (b) they feign having solidarity with their audience – in which case they are being duplicitous; and/or (c) they actively reject having solidarity with their recipient, thereby dividing the world into allies and enemies – in which case they are being unjust.

The assertional nature of the bad *parrhesiast*'s truth claims must also be reckoned with. For starters, it has become widespread in recent years to invoke Harry Frankfurt's concept of “bullshit” and Stephen Colbert's notion of “truthiness” to describe what it is about disinformation that can make it so persuasive.¹⁰ Now, I do think these are apt applications of these ideas; I also think disinformation is a form of bad *parrhesia*, so *mutatis mutandis* these are apt for what the bad *parrhesiast* does, as well. However, I do think the role of truth in bad *parrhesia* should be parsed, in at least two ways.

First, the bad *parrhesiast*'s truth claims may be objectively accurate, argumentatively sincere or, per my purposes here, genuinely fearless, but they may also not have some or all of these qualities. Broadly, when they have these qualities, yet are engaging in bad *parrhesia*, they probably can be categorised as being reckless, and when they do not have these qualities, they can be categorised as duplicitous. Unjust bad *parrhesia* is a more complicated phenomenon, as the unjustly bad *parrhesiast* may be *both* accurate and inaccurate, sincere and insincere, fearless and fearful. The bad *parrhesiast*, then, can be speak truthfully yet ill-formedly (reckless), ill-targetedly (unjust), or in a manner manipulative of the audience's biases (duplicitous), or some mix of these.

Second and relatedly, there is also the issue of when the bad *parrhesiast*'s truth claims give voice to genuine subjective perceptions, i.e., that they are *subjectively*

accurate, as opposed to being *objectively* accurate; and not only this, but also are subjectively *advocative*. We see this frequently in disinformation and conspiracy theories, the rhetorics of which often entail an element of empowerment, enjoining the audience to “think for themselves” or hold to their viewpoint on a given issue.¹¹ This poses a real devil of an ethical issue, as while there is nothing inherently wrong in pushing for subjective truths, it can be done at the exclusion of other considerations.¹² Put differently, to paraphrase the saying that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, what is true and false are *not* in the eyes of the audience, but they are also *not* in the eyes of the audience, as well. Nevertheless, as will be clear when I discuss Carlson below, I do hold that there is a meaningful distinction still to be drawn between the subjective and objective dimensions of reality.

2.3.1. RECKLESS *PARRHESIA*

At least three kinds of reckless *parrhesia* can be conceptualised within a Foucauldian framework: egotistical, egoistical, and philosophical. The first two are rooted in a lack of proper fear on the part of the *parrhesiast*; the third has a more complicated relationship to fear. Also note that these can occur at the same time, such that the reckless *parrhesiast* can be egotistical or egoistical *and* philosophical.

When *parrhesia* is reckless because of egotism, it is innocent, which is to say, it is because the speaker genuinely does not realise the harm they may be doing to their recipient. However, when it is because of egoism, the speaker is focusing on their own needs and desires at the conscious expense of the recipient; they may even take pleasure in transgression for its own sake. In both, the bad *parrhesiast* lacks fear in the sense of wishing to avoid causing unnecessary or excessive harm to their recipient, but in egotism, they are just unaware or immature, while in egoism, they do not care.

Philosophically, reckless *parrhesia* is different from the other two, for it is not a function of emotion, but of conceptualisation. Specifically, it arises from conflating speaking *freely* with speaking *fearlessly*.¹³ While free and fearless speech

are connected and are equally valuable, they are not the same thing. They entail different conditions for the speaker, free speech *external* conditions, fearless speech *internal* conditions: speaking freely primarily entails the cultivation of non-censorship within society, while speaking fearlessly entails the cultivation of spiritual qualities within the individual, such as depth, honesty, sensitivity, and bravery.

My point here is that the presence or lack of freedom does not inherently make an act of speech fearless. Of course, speaking freely in the face of censorship can usually be rightly considered speaking fearlessly; this is why it is easy, even natural, to conflate the two kinds of speech.

This does, though, lead to the uncomfortable topic of hate speech. On the one hand, hate speech may be rightly considered speaking fearlessly (at least, in a banal if still not non-trivial sense) in the face of censorship. On the other hand, many believe that the content of hate speech *should* be censored. In other words, suppressing hate speech may be the right thing to do, but by doing so, the hate speaker may be placed into the position of being a fearless speaker.

To recall from above, I consider hate speech to be a possible form of grey *parrhesia*. Although it is outside the scope of this paper, I mention it here because it is pertinent to an important case of philosophically reckless *parrhesia* that is happening right now: Elon Musk's decision to "return free speech" to Twitter (now X) following his purchase of the platform. Concretely, this has looked like either restoring a moderation-free form of online discourse which has not been seen in the West for the last several decades,¹⁴ and/or actively permitting hate speech to flourish on the platform.¹⁵

Obviously, I do not have privileged access to Musk's mind, but it does seem to me that he has conflated the free and fearless speech. His platform's users may be able to speak freely – or at least, more freely than under the previous ownership – but per the terms I have laid out here, that does not necessarily mean they are

speaking fearlessly.

2.3.2. DUPLICITOUS *PARRHESIA*

Although duplicitous *parrhesia* can be difficult to discern in practice due to its manipulative nature, it is easy to grasp conceptually: the speaker is not really the fearless truth-teller they present themselves to be. More fundamentally, they manipulate their audience's fears, and are themselves afraid of being found out. The aforementioned Carlson is a textbook case: a wealthy, Christian man of European descent who, prior to his ouster from Fox News in April 2023,¹⁶ sat atop an enormous agenda-setting apparatus. And yet, both while at Fox News and since, he positions himself as a *parrhesiast* defending the interests of the everyman by speaking truth to the elite. This elite, largely comprised of social-political liberals and social-political conservatives not aligned with Donald Trump, is variously in thrall to a deep state, a uni-party, or a cabal of pedophiles.

Immediately, it is tempting to ascribe duplicity as a function of the *parrhesiast*'s demographic background. Carlson's audience is like Carlson himself, largely been composed of viewers who are upper-income, male, and identify as strongly conservative,¹⁷ often even more than other Fox News watchers,¹⁸ and they tend to be of European descent and/or with a Christian heritage.¹⁹ These generally are also the demographics of the American elite.

Yet, duplicitous *parrhesia* is not about demographics, but about phenomenology. It preys on how the audience *experiences* themselves and their world – and how they interpret their experience.

Carlson's audience feels out of step with mainstream American society. To be sure, there is some credence to their feeling, for as younger Millennials and Zoomers rise in influence, the United States is indeed gradually becoming more demographically diverse and socially-politically liberal.²⁰ However, the country as a whole, despite its many internal divisions, actually remains largely centrist.²¹ Carlson's duplicity can be found in two things: (a) how he does not reassure

his audience of this fact, but instead reinforces their sense of themselves as the “silent majority” – even though that is not who they are;²² and (b) how he directs their feelings of isolation toward the conspiracy theory of the “Great Replacement,” according to which the shadowy establishment is actively seeking to “replace” whites and Christians with “preferable” demographics.²³ He thus not only construes their subjective viewpoint *as an objective reality*, but he also *poisons* it with distortions and falsehoods.

Carlson’s October 2022 interview with Kanye West demonstrates his duplicitous *parrhesia*. I will focus here on two key points from their conversation: when West expressed feeling constrained by supposedly not being able to voice his Right-wing political opinions in his private and professional circles, and when he gave his reasoning behind wearing a shirt with the slogan, “White Lives Matter.” Regarding his feeling constrained, West explained that he felt pressure from intimates and colleagues in the entertainment industry not to express his support for Trump publicly. As for “White Lives Matter,” West explained that he interpreted the slogan as a self-evident statement that white American lives are not inconsequential compared to the lives of other races in the United States.

Extreme care is warranted here before proceeding, specifically regarding West’s support for Trump. It would be easy to fall into the trap of accusing him of being a “race traitor.” Some citizens of the United States of African descent have been shifting their support away from the Democratic Party to the Republican Party,²⁴ and that is their sacred right.

While West’s claim that the entertainment industry has overall become politically liberal is merited,²⁵ the extent of its liberalism, to say nothing of its sincerity, much less its dogmatism, are all debatable. Yet, he portrayed his impression of that industry as sincerely and extremely liberal as an objective fact. As for “White Lives Matter,” if we are charitable to West, he was either gravely mistaken, or making a decision to interpret those words as he saw fit. Nevertheless, the historical reality is that “White Lives Matter” is not a statement of self-evident

fact but a white supremacist slogan. It emerged in 2015 and gained traction among the Far Right during the violent protests that erupted in 2021 in response to death of George Floyd.²⁶ The slogan has been a key rhetorical component of the Great Replacement: its coiners and proponents openly admit to using it to raise awareness of a supposed “white genocide” and to build support for a white ethno-state.²⁷

To be sure, West and Carlson shared the agenda of critiquing Left-wing identity politics, and West’s worldview in general aligned with the worldview of Carlson’s audience. Obviously, these were major factors in West’s decision to be interviewed by Carlson. Nevertheless, beneath the surface there were deep rhetorical and power imbalances at play between them.

On the rhetorical front, as the interviewer and platform-provider, Carlson had a responsibility to challenge West’s claims and provide context for his statements. By allowing West to speak without pushback on the credibility of his claims, Carlson effectively amplified West’s views to an audience predisposed to agree with them. Looking ahead to the question of journalism in the current crisis: good *parrhesia*, especially in a journalistic context, should develop the speaker’s credibility first, whereas bad *parrhesia* avoids taking responsibility. Moreover, good *parrhesia* in a journalistic context confronts the audience’s biases, whereas bad *parrhesia* confirms them.

With respect to power, it is also important to note that West, in expressing what appeared to be his sincerely held beliefs, did take on significant personal and professional risk, knowing he would likely face backlash. There is thus a real case to be made that he demonstrated reckless, or perhaps grey, *parrhesia*.

At the same time, Carlson misconstrued him as a fellow outsider, even though both were members of the cultural elite. Although West did eventually lose his stature in society due to his viewpoints,²⁸ what is key to underline here is that while he was an elite, Carlson exploited him. Authentic *parrhesia* seeks to uplift

individual and collective alike, whereas duplicitious *parrhesia* seeks to exploit one or some for the benefits of oneself or others. The tragic irony that Carlson was a white man exploiting West the black man makes his bad *parrhesia* all the more vile, for Carlson risked little of himself and amplified his own status, while the latter risked and lost much.

All in all, Carlson's interview of West used the pitch and cadence of truth-telling to bypass standards of rigorous, courageous, and ethical discourse that are as much *parrhesiast* as they are journalistic. He sought ideological amplification, not public enlightenment.

2.3.3. UNJUST *PARRHESIA*

There is a crucial difference between describing someone as *engaging in oppression* versus describing them as *an oppressor*, the former being an attribution of a state or action, the latter an attribution of essence. The unjust *parrhesiast* thinks in terms of essences. They speak according to a rigid oppressor/oppressed logic, approaching the world not in terms of patterns of oppression, but of two tribes: the oppressors and the oppressed.

In more precise philosophical terms, the unjust *parrhesiast* makes two missteps, one diagnostic, the other metaphysical: (i) wittingly or unwittingly, they speak truth to the lesser powerful, the powerful in principle but not in fact, or the powerless, and (ii) consciously or unconsciously, they conceive power as an essential feature that some people inherently possess by dint of their nominal position within a hierarchy. What makes the latter a misstep is that conceiving power in this way implies that those ascribed the status of being powerful cannot themselves by definition ever experience powerlessness, and hence they can never experience unfairness or injustice. History demonstrates that this is untrue.

To be as clear as possible, when power is properly understood, *all of us*, regardless of where we exist in this or that specific hierarchy, are due some fearless speech sooner or later. The flaw of unjust *parrhesia* is that of a broken clock being right

twice a day, yet still being broken. Just because the unjust *parrhesiast* may be correct that factually some people are engaging in oppression does not mean they are justified in ignoring, or being ignorant of, the power relations behind why those people are oppressing others. Nor are they justified in reducing them to either their act of oppression, their place in a broader system of oppression, and/or whatever benefits they may draw from their actions or status.

Relatedly, because truth can be painful, the listener's discomfort does not determine whether parrhesia is just. What does is the *parrhesiast's* mindset—i.e., their philosophical framework, the power dynamics shaping the exchange, and their intention. Is their logic a rigid oppressor/oppressed binary? Are they attentive to how they came to occupy the role of *parrhesiast* and the other the role of recipient? Are they seeking to uplift both speaker and listener, or to put the latter down?

Intention, too, is subtle, for whether the *parrhesiast* feels powerful as a consequence of their fearless speaking is not in-itself a determining factor of whether they are speaking justly. In some cases, a speaker may feel empowered by speaking truth to the powerful, and this feeling of empowerment can be a positive force for change, within themselves and, ultimately, the collective. However, when the desire for power becomes the *primary* motivation behind their speaking, overshadowing any commitment to truth and justice, then their speaking is moving in the direction of injustice. This is particularly problematic when the *parrhesiast* is not actually challenging power structures, but rather reinforcing them by targeting those with less power. In such cases, their desire for power, coupled with a lack of reflection on the real power dynamics at play, results in unjust *parrhesia*, for they are speaking more to gain personal gratification than engage in genuine critique.

In today's discursive battlefield, if Carlson is any measure and duplicitous *parrhesia* can be said to be a tendency of the contemporary Right, unjust *parrhesia* would be a tendency of the contemporary Left. It is easy to see why that would be the case, as after all the Left is characterised by a keen focus on social justice.

Consequently, it will be from the Left that I will seek a case study of a rhetorical practice in which we can often hear unjust *parrhesia*: privilege checking.

The concept of “privilege” is supposed to connote any systemic, non-systemic and even purely context-specific unfair advantages that have been afforded to a demographic group primarily on the basis of them being that demographic.²⁹ Take for example something as seemingly innocuous as extroversion, a personality trait. An extrovert will likely have an unfair advantage over an introvert in a setting that has been structured to prioritise extroversion and also lacks any correctives for introversion. What is key here is the relative nature of the extrovert’s privilege, for when they are removed from that setting, their unfair advantage may dissipate.

Privilege checking is a practice typically undertaken by Left-wing social justice activists to flag behaviors which they consider to have been undertaken due to a lack of sensitivity to relevant power imbalances. It is usually performed by one person literally telling another person to “check” their privilege, but it can be less direct and explicit. Note that it is also supposed to be a practice people do to *themselves*, so that they foster the appropriate sensitivity and avoid, as much as is possible, reinforcing power imbalances.

However, it is easy for the would-be privilege-checker to slip from flagging a *behavior* as privileged to a *person* as privileged. Indeed, privilege checking has come under criticism in recent years from across the ideological spectrum, but especially from the Right, in part for precisely this.³⁰ To be absolutely clear about my own personal stance, I believe privilege checking, when authentic and properly done, has its rightful place. My argument here is that when privilege checking, as a form of *parrhesia*, slides into a wholesale criticism of a person’s very being, thereby it becomes unjust.

Apropos the Cynics, I will briefly share two personal anecdotes of when I think privilege checking was enacted in an unjust manner. The first anecdote concerns “Griffin,” a journalist colleague who encountered injustice in their career but

seemingly refused to recognise it for what it was because of their own racial identity. The second anecdote concerns “Salih,” a non-journalist colleague who nearly committed injustice against my own person. In both anecdotes, my colleagues seemed either hesitant (Griffin) or unaware (Salih) of the injustice actually happening because they perceived privilege, and by extension power, as an essential feature of a group, namely, men of partial or full European-descent and either Christian belief or heritage. Griffin, like me, was themselves a member of that demographic; Salih was an immigrant from a non-European and non-Christian country.

Before proceeding, a few important ethical notes are required. To begin with, I have not requested permission from either of Griffin or Salih to share these anecdotes, and I want to be very clear in advance that my purpose here is not to portray the one as a victim and the other as a villain. We must also be mindful that because these are anecdotes, what I am really recounting here are snippets of my colleagues, very specific moments in their lives and my interactions with them that do not in any way necessarily represent the sum total of their viewpoints.

Now, the specifics of the injustice encountered by Griffin do not matter; they boiled down to someone attempting to block their much deserved promotion for reasons, as I understand it, purely of personal enmity. This came up in the context of a conversation between Griffin and I about privilege. My colleague had courageously dedicated not only their entire career to social justice, but also their private life, having made conscious choices about the constitution of their family that they felt served the greater good. I asked Griffin whether they themselves had ever experienced injustice, and they were confused by my question. When I used their promotion situation as an example, they downplayed it. They recognised the unfairness of the situation, but there was something disembodied in how they did, as though the unfairness was not really being done to them, but to someone else who happened to be them. I was struck by the sad irony: despite being a fearless speaker for the rights of others, they were seemingly mute about their own rights.

The specifics of the situation with Salih also do not matter; we were having a legitimate dispute about finances when they suddenly advanced the claim that I owed them money because I was privileged and they were unprivileged. What is important to stress here is that they were not being disingenuous and manipulative; no, they genuinely believed that they had a right to my money because of their immigrant status in the United States. I confronted them with my own impression that they were making this claim out of their own sense of entitlement. They retorted that I had “a way with words,” insinuating that I was being deceitful.

The incident with Salih revealed two things. First and importantly was the depth of their frustration as an immigrant in the United States – that should not be denied or diminished, as their emotional state does provide important context. However, second and pertinent to my purposes in this paper was their conception of privilege as something that I *inherently* possessed, and that they *inherently* did not and could not possess. In their mind, we existed in two fundamentally different ontological classes, meaning that privilege-checking was something that they were right to do to me, but not something I was right to do to them (although in fairness, I was wrong to attribute the motive of their claim specifically to entitlement rather than an unjust sense of privilege). Indeed, when it became clear I was not going to give them my money, they bitterly remarked, “I guess I’ll always be just an immigrant.”

What these anecdotes are meant to illustrate is that there is privilege checking as a sincere effort to make society more just, and there is privilege checking as an *ad hominem* rhetorical fallacy used against those perceived to be privileged. In simpler terms, there is privilege checking as good *parrhesia* and there is privilege checking as bad *parrhesia*. When the privilege checking is just, the provocation, even if done in-artfully, is intended by the *parrhesiast* to jolt the recipient into being more conscious of power relations in society, but when it is unjust, the provocation is intended to hurt the recipient and make the *parrhesiast* feel powerful. Perversely, unjust privilege checking even establishes a new kind of privilege, if of a purely

rhetorical nature. This rhetorical privilege grants an unfair advantage to those without, so to speak, real privilege: privilege not in a substantive societal sense, but in a discursive sense, in the here-and-now of a concrete dispute between concrete parties.

In both good and bad privilege-checking, there is fearless speaking of what is perceived to be a hard truth concerning the interlocutor. However, in the one, the act of privilege checking is indeed only that, a check; in the other, it is an accusation. Put metaphysically, in good privilege checking (just *parrhesia*), the act of checking is intended to include the checked in the kosmopolis; in bad privilege checking (unjust *parrhesia*), it is intended to foreclose the possibility of the checked from participating in genuine discourse with the checker, thereby excluding them from the kosmopolis.

3. FEARLESSNESS

The unfortunate reality is that the United States' media and political system has immense algorithmic incentives to actively promote bad *parrhesia*. After all, adversarialness rivets attention to itself, and this can be both very financially profitable and very conducive to engineering electoral outcomes.³¹ So, given that the system thrives on all this fearful screaming, what can be done?

I propose that it falls to the public and journalists – both of whom, to be sure, have also been contributing to the crisis, each in their own way – to act truly fearlessly. The good news is that this does not require us to engage in yet more agonism. Agonism is only one form of fearlessness. There are other forms. I propose the following four, although doubtlessly this list can be expanded: fearless silence, fearless listening, fearless curiosity, and irenic fearless speaking.

Our ancestors and our ancestors' ancestors knew these other kinds of fearlessness quite well, we have just forgotten them. It must also be said that implementing these four is not always straightforward, and they can also become misused and corrupted; I will attempt to outline some of the complexities here. And also note

that none of these kinds of fearlessness are mutually exclusive; in fact, they can interact and reinforce each other.

3.1. FEARLESS SILENCE

In a situation in which we are all demanded to speak fearlessly for or against a side, the choice not to speak at all can be courageous. The fearlessly silent generally make one of two decisions: to take a side but not share it, so as not to become deaf to others; or to abstain from the debate, either because the parties are too garrulous and contentious to be listened to, and/or because the debate itself strikes them as deeply suspect. The fearlessly silent could also be understood as actualising Foucauldian “self-care,” turning inward toward themselves, their intimates, and their hobbies. They may even take the self-care to the point of a sort of asceticism.

Of course, events that are loud enough will reach even the most secluded hermit. Contemporary Luddites who renounce all digital connection still cannot escape the tumult, for it will pursue them through their intimates, strangers, or even just the errant broadcast or newspaper headline. Nevertheless, my impression is that fearless silence has already long been undertaken by many everyday Americans. One potential manifestation of it, or a phenomenon analogous to it, has been the movement to abstain from voting in presidential elections.³²

That said, I should also note that fearless silence has a potential downside: what if withdrawing is what the bastards want? Indeed, in a democratic context, if fearless silence results in either an uninformed vote or no vote at all, it may have been inadvertently damaging to both the silent and society. There is also the bedeviling question of whether and when fearless silence is not truly fearless at all, but fearful.

Beyond considerations of courage, there is also a moral dilemma to consider. Specifically, it is a dilemma that arises when we take seriously Niemöller’s call to speak fearlessly: when the stakes become so severe such that to care for yourself

is to forsake society, yet to care for society is to forsake yourself, which must you choose?

3.2. FEARLESS LISTENING

Listening fearlessly also entails a conscious decision to withdraw from the debate, but it is characterised by the additional conscious decision to stand within ambiguity and to hear what is being said, not only by all of the debaters, but also by those who may either not be participating or have been prevented from doing so. What makes this choice especially challenging is that the would-be fearless listener may be coming from one of the participating sides, or be very inclined to them.³³

Fearless listening does not necessarily require fearless curiosity, though they often occur in parallel. In some circumstances, it may be sufficient to simply observe and be studiously, if courageously, silent. Nevertheless, there are other circumstances in which being fearlessly curious in combination with listening fearlessly can be transformative. As with everything related to *parrhesia*, it requires discernment to know which kind of circumstance one is in.

And like fearless silence, “too much” fearless listening may be possible. This happens by giving ear to the undeserving, or giving ear to the deserving but for too long. Still, it is difficult to say precisely where the line is.

3.3. FEARLESS CURIOSITY

It might help to think of these four other kinds of fearlessness as concentric circles. At the center is the maelstrom of contentiousness, fueled by all manner of bad *parrhesia*. This maelstrom drives the need to choose or prioritise between the other forms of fearlessness. The four kinds here thus represent, in part, different levels of exposure to the swirling maw of fearful screaming. Fearless silence is the furthest away, and thus offers the most safety, while fearless speaking is the closest, and thus offers the most vulnerability. Fearless listening is also in the

outer orbit, but not as far out as fearless silence. Similarly, fearless curiosity is in the inner orbit, but not as near as fearless speaking.

Fearless curiosity is the conscious choice to ask sincere, tough, even potentially embarrassing questions – tough and potentially embarrassing questions not only for those queried, but also for the inquirer, hence the increased vulnerability. Because the inquirer is seeking the truth, fearless curiosity requires the moral preparedness not only to be wrong, but to be derided and portrayed as a potential conspirator against the “obviously” and “self-evidently” true. It is, e.g., the willingness to be denounced as a puppet of the patriarchy, capitalism, imperialism, and the like, for asking whether and how it could be possible for a biological man to be gendered as a woman, or to be ridiculed as a beta male, feminazi, East coast elite or some such for asking whether and how the Bible genuinely supports the traditional American heteronormative family.

Once again, it is possible for fearless curiosity to be misplaced, faulty, fearful. As an example, consider the difference between a conspiracy theorist and a conspiracist, the former dedicated to a specific framework or expression of paranoia, the other dedicated to paranoia itself. The nascent but sincere conspiracy theorist, thrust by discursive trauma into the illusory vortex of QAnon, could be described as fearlessly curious, insofar that the questions they ask are courageous, if ill-informed and dragging them further away from truth. However, as with hate speech, it is possible to be fearless in act but not in substance. Consider the conspiracist Alex Jones, whose questions are leading, transgressive, instigative. He knows what he is doing, yet he defends himself as “just asking questions,” – even when, as in the case of his slanderous attacks on the survivors of the Sandy Hook massacre, he has caused very real injury.

3.4. IRENIC FEARLESS SPEECH

One way to articulate the difference between Cynical and Foucauldian *parrhesia* is that the former is *necessarily* agonistic while the latter *can be otherwise*. The

Foucauldian *parrhesiat* could very well need to engage in agonism, but it is not their default stance; they are open to other possibilities, including seeking consensus and harmony. This is what I call irenic *parrhesia*, and probably the greatest challenge to imagining it is precisely the legacy of Cynical *parrhesia*.

To be absolutely clear, there is a place for agonistic *parrhesia*, and irenic *parrhesia* does not mean compromising on truth for the sake of consensus. The irenic *parrhesiast* must be prepared to speak truth, even if it challenges the status quo or provokes discomfort. However, the manner in which truth is spoken does matter. Rather than seeking to cajole and antagonise, the irenic *parrhesiast* aims to create a space for genuine dialogue and understanding.

This leads me to another point: within the Right and the Left, there is likely to be great reluctance to abandon agonism due to fear of a shallow centrism that creates false equivalencies and waters down positions that ought not be watered down. This fear is not at all unfounded. There certainly are bad forms of irenism, notably journalistic “both-sidism.”³⁴ Over the decades, both-sidism has actually facilitated disinformation on a host of issues, ranging from whether smoking causes cancer to whether global warming is a real phenomenon driven by human action.

Simply put, consensus and harmony are not always possible or desirable. In some cases, fundamental disagreements cannot be overcome, and the *parrhesiast* must be willing to stand their ground. However, even in these situations, the irenic approach to *parrhesia* seeks to maintain a spirit of good faith and respect for the humanity of the interlocutor. The goal is not to paper over differences, but to create the conditions for a more productive and empathetic exchange.

In the context of democracy, irenic *parrhesia* can play a vital role in countering the polarisation and tribalism that impede constructive public discourse. By deploying a mode of truth-telling that is firm in its convictions yet open to the perspectives of others, the irenic *parrhesiast* can help to foster a culture of critical reflection

and mutual understanding. This does not guarantee consensus and harmony, but it can help to create a shared basis for grappling with difficult issues.

Additionally, because speaking fearlessly but irenically is still speaking fearlessly, it is just as much at the threshold of today's maelstrom as agonistic *parrhesia*, meaning the irenic *parrhesiast* will still be whipped and lashed by the terrible winds of fearful screaming. To illustrate, here is a final personal anecdote.

Throughout the Israeli invasion of Gaza, I have chosen to be fearlessly silent, my sense of the situation being that those fearfully screaming right now – on both sides of the conflict – are screaming so very loudly that no one else can be heard. To be sure, there are very real moral stakes in this conflict; the fearful screaming is not without emotional merit. Yet, the screaming drowned out any space to discuss the crisis irenically. I experienced this the sole time I did attempt to speak via my Instagram account.

For context, my Instagram account is restricted, meaning that when I made my sole post about the conflict, mostly friends, *actual* friends, could see it. My tone was approachable, not accusatory and self-righteous, but I did make my point firmly: it was the responsibility of we the global public, not only governments but everyday people, to refrain from promulgating essentialising narratives about both the Palestinians and Israelis, such as the claim that Palestinian culture is fundamentally concerned with exterminating Jews, or the claim that Israeli culture is fundamentally concerned with stealing Arab land. I also argued that whatever sympathies and grievances we as individuals may have toward one or the other side, it is our responsibility to help them both achieve peace with each other.

Some in my Instagram audience viscerally rejected my statement. Muslim and Jewish friends accused me of both-sidism and being too “afraid” to speak the “truth” of the “evil nature” of the other side. I tried to point out them that it is possible for multiple truths to equally co-exist, e.g., that it is true the Hamas

attack on October 7, 2023, was genocidal, but so, too, has been the Israeli military response; that it is true those with an extremist temperament will always seek out a rationalisation for their extremist violence, and so in an important sense these actions cannot be justified by pointing to history, but it is also true that extremism does have an historical context composed of actions and reactions; and so on. They also rejected these ideas. For them, there was only one “hard truth,” and it was a horrifying one: the monstrosity of the enemy and the cowardice of the world.

This was disheartening, for sure. Yet, my attempt to be an irenic *parrhesiast* also aroused support, albeit privately through direct messages – from the silent, both fearless and fearful. In fact, my post aroused far more support than rejection. There were those who heard me, including Muslims and Jews. Some agreed with my stance, some did not, but they all appreciated the attempt to talk about the tragic situation in a manner that struck them as striving to be fearless *and* fair.

4. CONCLUSION

When the first three of these four other forms of fearlessness are combined, the result can be a transformed individual. When combined with the fourth form, though, the result can be a transformed collective. This is where distinguishing which of these four is appropriate for the everyday citizen and which is appropriate for the journalist is of paramount importance.

For example, whatever the ethical quandaries the choice to be fearlessly silent may pose, I insist it is a worthy one, but only for the everyday citizen; it is simply not a valid choice available to the journalist, who has a crucial role to play in resolving our crisis of bad *parrhesia*, precisely because it is their task in society is to be fearless speakers. Yes, they must be tactical about when and how they speak, but they must speak. At the same time, as *parrhesiasts*, they must have that Foucauldian sensitivity to discern what the present historical moment is actually calling for: is it more agonism, or irenism? I believe that a truly fearless assessment

will show that it is now time for irenism.

This is not to suggest that American journalism must absolutely avoid agonism, much less engage in facile both-sidism. Again, the truth must be spoken, and sometimes a side in a debate is prejudiced, unmoored from facts and evidence, fallacious, deceitful, misinformed or disinformed, and if so, they need to be shown as such. Not only this, but sometimes the claim that there is a debate is itself a manipulation tactic by those who know they are in the wrong.

Nor am I suggesting that American journalism must enforce an artificial conformity, tranquility or camaraderie onto the audience. That would be untruthful, if not authoritarian. People feel what they feel; it is the journalist's job to help them determine for themselves whether their feelings are founded, not to shame or censor them into feeling differently. The journalist, not unlike a shaman confronting evil spirits, must wrestle with their audience's biases. And, again not unlike a shaman, this means that the journalist must also constantly struggle within themselves between two desires: their fearful desire for something to *be* true, versus their fearless desire to know, and give voice to, what *is* true.

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