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ON THE PERSISTENCE OF CYNIC MOTIFS

You'll hunt me. You'll condemn me. Set the dogs
on me. [...] Because that's what needs to happen.
-*The Dark Knight*

I myself will show him how much he must
suffer for the sake of my name.
-Acts 9.16

Hero as Zero

At the end of Christopher Nolan's *Dark Knight* (2008), Batman learns what it means to be a superhero. It is not the unwavering respect and reverence of the people he has committed to protect that defines a superhero as such but rather the ability to assume, when required, the role of scapegoat. The hooded crusader must absorb the city's hatred and desire for vengeance in order to maintain its belief in a greater, higher good. The figure of Harvey Dent as embodiment of an undying faith in justice and the prevalence of good over evil must be upheld at the very point when Dent's actual faith is shattered. The world must believe that Batman is to blame for Dent's tragic death. And, it must be allowed to hunt him in the name of the values Dent once represented if those values are to survive.

Relegated to the margins of society, hunted by the authorities, forced to suffer no end of physical hardships as a result of the scandal of what he represents, Paul defines the role of apostle in a similar fashion. He, too, is more than willing to be cut off for the sake of the world. "For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people" (Romans 9.3). For superhero and apostle alike, this "darker" side must, necessarily, be coupled with the charismatic, philanthropic leader. For Batman, this role is fulfilled by his playboy alter-ego, Bruce Wayne; for Paul, these two conflicting identities are interwoven as he mediates between his churches and the authorities trying to shut him down.

Considerable attention has been paid to Paul's identity as charismatic leader. Such discussions tend to be predicated on the issue of whether Paul was founding a new community of believers or putting in place the institutional structures of the early Church. Bengt Holmberg's book *Paul and Power* makes a convincing case for the former arguing that Paul's authority is by necessity diametrically opposed to established, everyday forms of authority since it is concerned primarily with replacing existing social norms and codes with a totally new form of existence.¹ Moreover, much of the institutionalization which did take place occurred in Paul's absence as he travelled between churches. Feminist scholars such as Elizabeth Castelli and Sandra Hack Polaski, on the other hand, have drawn attention to Paul's reliance upon a rhetoric of pastoral power indicating that hierarchical structures were already (if precariously) in place within the early churches thus suggesting that a process of institutionalization was fully underway.² However, despite extensive debate on Paul's rhetorical and charismatic abilities, much less focus has been paid to the apostle as figure of hatred, object of disgust, and self-proclaimed "scum of the earth." In this essay I will make a case for Paul the scumbag. While acknowledging the existence of the charismatic Paul, I will argue that contemporary scholarship has invested too much in this version of the apostle. For Paul to fully deserve the accolade of militant revolutionary *par excellence* then he needs to be recast not as radical Jew or Stoic philosopher but as the Cynic who not only speaks but lives his outrageous message.³ Then, and only then, can Paul begin to have any real validity for twenty-first century political thought.

To highlight both the presence and the contemporary relevance of Cynic motifs within the Pauline epistles, I will draw heavily upon Michel Foucault's discussion of *parrēsia* (speaking freely) which, during his final lecture series at the Collège de France entitled *Le Courage de la vérité* (The Courage of Truth), he comes to associate as much with Cynic philosophy as with Stoicism. The specific relevance of *parrēsia* for Foucault as a form of both political and ethical subjectivity will be considered briefly before suggesting the renewed importance of the term as a political and philosophical tool. As Western politicians

¹ Bengt Holmberg, *Paul and Power: The Structure of Authority in the Primitive Church as Reflected in the Pauline Epistles* (Lund: Coniectanea Biblica, CWK Gleerup, 1978).

² See Elizabeth, A., *Imitating Paul: A Discourse of Power* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991); Sandra Hack Polaski, *Paul and the Discourse of Power* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999).

³ The case for Paul as promoting a radical branch of first-century Judaism is made by Daniel Boyarin in *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994). Halvor Moxnes has suggested using Michel Foucault's discussion of Stoic ethics to shed light on Paul's notion of an ethical subjectivity in 1 Cor. 6.12-20. See Moxnes "Asceticism and Christian Identity in Antiquity: A Dialogue with Foucault and Paul," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, 26. 1 (2003): 3-29. Despite the potential usefulness in opening up a dialogue between Paul and Foucault via Stoicism, I would argue that the self-transformation proposed by Paul through "dying with Christ" is far more radical than anything Foucault is proposing and indeed appears to bear a closer similarity to a Deleuzian notion of "becoming." In relation to this see, Peter Hallward, "Deleuze and the Redemption from Interest," *Radical Philosophy* 81 (Jan. 1997): 6-21.

increasingly lay claim to such truth-telling in their “austerity” bills yet continue to embody the false consciousness of the master-cynic denounced by Sloterdijk,⁴ the call for a radical ethics of truth as scandal and suffering appears all the more urgent.

Dangerous Truths

Throughout his career Foucault remained focused on the role played by the notion of truth in the formation of the subject. In *The Archeology of Knowledge*, Foucault rejects the idea of truth as something absolute or fixed, identifying a series of discursive practices which enable something to hold as true at a given moment.⁵ Discourses are, according to Foucault, based upon a principle of exclusion. What is included and excluded can be defined in terms of three categories: what can and cannot be said, where and when it can and cannot be said, and who can and cannot say it.⁶ For example, psychoanalytic discourse gains its “truth” value from the use of specific pseudo-scientific terms spoken against the backdrop of the clinic or hospital by the appropriately qualified psychoanalyst. The rules or strategies which organize discursive practice enable discourses and the concepts defined within to transform and mutate whilst maintaining the appearance of coherence.⁷ These rules are not static, ahistorical, but are themselves subject to constant change. They exist in a series of complex relationships to one another, which Foucault describes as “pre-discursive.” Where they underlie the formation of discourse, they themselves also belong to the realm of discourse. There is nothing outside discourse.

While Foucault’s archaeological method aimed at identifying the discursive structures underpinning truth claims in order to challenge their validity, his subsequent genealogical approach focuses on how these discourses come to mean “something,” how they come to act as truth in a given time and place. In an interview later published under the title “Truth and Power,” Foucault explains that we should recognize truth as “a thing of this world:”

Each society has its regime of truth, its “general politics” of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the

⁴ For an excellent account of how authentic forms of Cynicism (*kynicism*) came to be replaced within Western society by a more prevalent and dominant form of cynicism which criticizes yet fails to take any form of direct action against the existing social order, see Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynic Reason*, trans. Michael Eldred (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

⁵ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 131.

⁶ Michel Foucault, “The Order of Discourse” in *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader* ed. Robert Young, (London and New York: Routledge, 1981), 52.

⁷ Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 71-8.

acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true.⁸

As such, truth or truth claims are to be regarded with suspicion. During the mid-seventies, Foucault launched an aggressive yet meticulous attack upon the way in which such discourses operate to produce, manage and control individual subjectivity. For Foucault, individuals do not possess a true, innate identity, inner being or soul. Identity is a social product aimed at better managing and situating the individual in relation to other individuals. Thus, the obligatory articulation of hidden or repressed desires, emotions, fears and so on first employed by the church as part of the confessional and then adopted by criminal and psychiatric institutions functions not as a form of absolution, rehabilitation or therapy but, rather, as a means of capturing the individual in a closed circuit of power and knowledge.

However, like the power operations and relations which effectively transform themselves and pursue other directions on reaching an impasse, in the early eighties Foucault's own project transformed itself from an analysis of power operations on and through the subject to an examination of the practices and exercises involved in the construction of an ethical subjectivity. The later Foucault is a celebration of power's ability to produce and transform the self, not in terms of the criminal, deviant and docile bodies of eighteenth and nineteenth century legal, medical and psychiatric discourse described so vividly in *Discipline and Power* and *The Will to Knowledge* but rather in terms of a life lived beautifully, whether by the free male citizens of Ancient Greece, the Hellenistic philosophers or, indeed, Foucault, writing in order to transform himself once more. Consequently, the notion of *parrēsia* associated with Cynic philosophy is of especial importance to Foucault since it involves a notion of truth not as discourse but as a form of ethical existence, a way of life which is totally alien to the idea of truth as something hidden to be revealed and, where necessary, treated. As Louisa Shea has pointed out, Foucault approaches the notion of *parrēsia* through a double lens, considering its specific application as an "exceptional practice among the Greeks" and as a "transhistorical category" in Western moral philosophy.⁹ *Parrēsia*, which Foucault translates as "franc-parler" is not simply the act of speaking openly but involves constructing a truth of the self through the practices and techniques, which one carries out upon the self. *Parrēsia* is a limit-experience for Foucault since it always involves a risk.¹⁰

⁸ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interview and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York, NY and London: Prentice Hall, 1980), 109-132.

⁹ Louisa Shea, *The Cynic Enlightenment: Diogenes in the Salon* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 175-6.

¹⁰ Michel Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1982-1983*, trans. Graham Burchell (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 61. The expression "limit-experience" is used most notoriously by Foucault to describe his final trip to San Francisco in 1983 at the height of the AIDS epidemic. However, while it tends to be associated with Foucault's experimentation with drugs and alternative sexual practices in his later life, the expression is, in fact, taken from Maurice Blanchot's *L'Entretien Infini*, published in 1969. Here, limit-experience is employed by

It is worth considering briefly what *parrēsia* might have meant for Foucault's personal ethic. Foucault did not speak up for political causes any more than any other celebrity philosopher in France did during the 1960s and 1970s. Attempts to pay homage to his "courage de la vérité" in terms of his political protests and campaigns miss the point of what this really represented for Foucault. Such courage is far more likely to be found in his continued frequentation of the bathhouses of San Francisco during the height of the AIDS epidemic. This was not, as James Miller has implied in his controversial biography, because of a death wish but attests to Foucault's desire to speak the truth, act the truth, practice the truth even at the risk of catching AIDS and dying a painful and shameful death.¹¹ Philosophy is a way of life. It is less about the truth-value of the statements one makes and more about the practices and techniques one develops in relation to the self.

In various interviews which touched on the subject of his sexual orientation, Foucault called for a shift in focus from desire and identity to that of pleasure and transformation of the self. "The problem is not to discover in oneself the truth of one's sex, but, rather, to use one's sexuality henceforth to arrive at a multiplicity of relationships."¹² Naturally, this rejection of a gay identity was met with some puzzlement from those looking to Foucault, as a public figure, to express his solidarity through shared sexual identities and established definitions of gayness. Yet for Foucault, homosexuality meant much more than one's preference for sexual partners of the same sex. It offered the opportunity to discover pleasures not limited to sexual activity or prescriptive 'heterosexual' definitions of desire. Transferring these prescriptive identities onto same sex relationships seemed to defeat the object. Defining oneself as "gay" was no more liberating than defining oneself as "straight" but instead constituted the way in which one limited and restricted oneself according to essentialist social norms.

Blanchot as a means of developing Georges Bataille's notion of "expérience intérieure." While Bataille's understanding of transgression and limits and his association of eroticism and death provides an obvious source of inspiration for Foucault's fascination with the affirmation and negation of one's identity and self, Blanchot's perspective on writing and literature is equally influential in informing Foucault's understanding of the writing process and his relationship with his work.

¹¹ James Miller, *The Passion of Michel Foucault* (London: Flamingo, 1994). While some may argue that Foucault lacked an ethical responsibility in continue to frequent the bathhouses when he knew he had been infected, it is important to emphasize the lack of concrete knowledge about AIDS and the HIV virus during the early 1980s. Moreover, he may have decided that it was preferable to take such risks than to succumb to an oppressive discourse of fear being spread throughout the gay community. With the re-emergence of "bare-backing" in the late nineties, the debates surrounding sexual risk-taking have arisen once more. See, for example, David Halperin, *What Do Gay Men Want? An Essay on Sex, Risk and Subjectivity* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2007).

¹² Michel Foucault, "Friendship as a Way of Life," in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth. Essential Works of Michel Foucault Vol. 1* trans. John Johnston, ed. Paul Rabinow (London and New York: Allen Lane: The Penguin Press, 1997), 135.

Foucault's interest in *parrēsia* should therefore be understood in light of this active rejection of prescriptive identities and social norms.

Paul's Radical Cynicism

In *The Government of Self and Others*, Foucault describes the notion of *parrēsia* in relation to political power. The *parrhesiast* speaks frankly and openly to those in power, avoiding flattery and rhetoric. The obvious danger of such activity is that since those in power are not used to such direct criticism, thus they tend to be shocked and offended by this behavior and the *parrhesiast* ventures the possibility that the offense he causes in speaking frankly will lead straight to his death. Foucault focuses on the example of Plato who is invited by the tyrant Dionysus to speak frankly to him (recounted in *Alcibiades*). The consequence of such *parrēsia* was that Plato was forced to flee to escape being condemned to death.¹³ In many ways this is precisely the type of risk Paul was at pains to avoid. Believing that the parousia was at hand, Paul did not want to draw any unnecessary attention to the community of believers, which might result in persecution from the authorities. This is why he says that worldly authorities should be respected in Romans 13. Paul wanted the early church to stay under the radar; it was not a question of fighting for recognition as an established religion by the authorities, but of quietly expanding the number of believers throughout the Roman Empire before the end of the world.

In *Le Courage de la vérité*, Foucault explains the problematic relationship between *parrēsia* and politics. The role of *parrēsia* in politics is both highly necessary and extremely dangerous for two reasons. Firstly, as Plato's experience with Dionysus demonstrated, when power is held by a prince or tyrant, speaking frankly can endanger one's life if those in power are not ready to hear criticisms concerning the way they govern their people, even when they invite such criticisms in the first place. The prince might acknowledge the need for *parrēsia* but is not always prepared to accept the harsh truths about his rule that this actually involves. Secondly, in the case of a democracy where *parrēsia* does not incur the same risks of punishment and death, the danger lies in the misuse of *parrēsia* since everyone has the right to speak freely. The result is that *parrēsia* becomes the means by which people express their opinion about politics based on their individual interests and not the interest of the city as a whole. Here, it is not the individual who is put in danger by *parrēsia* but the city itself. This is why Socrates, who for Foucault is the *parrhesiast* par excellence, dissociates his own *parrēsia* from politics believing he can do more good in the city if he does not get himself killed by speaking frankly within the sphere of politics. Instead he develops an ethos which involves inciting all those he encounters to practice a care of the self. In this way Socrates considers himself to be helping the city at large. *Parrēsia* becomes, for Socrates, a mission, a way of life which takes the well-being of the entire city as its objective. Similarly, it is this idea of *parrēsia* as a mode of existence that one finds in the figure of the Cynic.

¹³ Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others*, 56.

As Downing has pointed out, there are many reasons why Paul would have wanted to distance himself from a possible association with the Cynics. Most obviously, and this also applies to Stoicism, he would not have wanted people to have his message branded as another form of philosophy. Secondly, the Cynics were notoriously anti-establishment and being linked to them would have encouraged unfavorable attention from the authorities, something Paul is anxious to avoid.¹⁴ In his rejection of social convention, the Cynic sought an existence which was closer to nature. Hence the famous account of Diogenes masturbating in the town square because it was something which he thought of as natural as eating or drinking and therefore acceptable public behavior.

Although Foucault points out that there was more than one version of the Cynic to be found in Greco-Roman society, the image of the Cynic with his cloak, walking stick and hand out begging, functioned as the dominant stereotype. As Foucault suggests: "For those living in Antiquity, holding one's hand out would have constituted the ultimate gesture of an infamous poverty and the most reprehensible form of dependence."¹⁵ Unlike the Cynic, Paul never preaches against wealth in his epistles since he recognizes the advantages of having those within the community who are able to provide resources and contribute to the collections for Jerusalem and other churches.¹⁶ Moreover, Paul is keen to dissociate himself from the notion of begging identified with the Cynic: "we were not idle when we were with you, and we did not eat anyone's bread without paying for it; but with toil and labour we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you." (2 Thessalonians 3.7-8) and also requires that all members of the community are capable of supporting themselves: "Anyone unwilling to work should not eat" (2 Thessalonians 3.10). Here Paul is making reference to the figure of the Cynic who, in shunning worldly conventions and occupations, somewhat ironically ends up depending upon those whose worldly status forms the object of his criticism.

Despite these clear differences between Paul and the figure of the Cynic there are nevertheless some powerful similarities which cannot escape our attention. Throughout Paul's letters, examples abound of his assertion as to the truth of his message and the risks he is willing to take to proclaim the gospel. Malherbe has identified numerous parallels between the language and imagery employed by Dio Chrysostom, a well known first century Cynic philosopher, and that found in Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians.¹⁷ Moreover, Downing has ventured to suggest that such similarities are far from chance occurrences and that Paul deliberately opted to depict himself in relation to the figure of the Cynic. "The Cynic strands in Paul's ascetic praxis and in his verbal articulation of it are so

¹⁴ F. Gerald Downing, *Cynics and Christian Origins* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992), 176.

¹⁵ Michel Foucault, *Le Courage de la vérité: Cours au Collège de France. 1984* (Paris: Gallimard, 2009), 240. Translations into English are my own.

¹⁶ See F. Gerald Downing, *Cynics and Christian Origins*, 9-17. For a detailed discussion of Paul's attitude towards financial assistance.

¹⁷ Abraham J. Malherbe, *Paul and the Popular Philosophers* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 47-8.

strong and so pervasive that it seems very unlikely that Paul could have been left unaware that it was in this light that people were seeing and hearing him.”¹⁸

Moreover, it is worth emphasizing here the key differences between Cynic and Stoic philosophy and behaviour. There are three main ways in which the Cynic differs from the Stoic. Firstly, his body functions as an “instrument of his truth-telling.”¹⁹ Secondly, the Cynic employs a harsh militancy in the propagation of his message. Finally, the Cynic’s message is both incredibly simple and highly scandalous making it available to all yet appreciated by few. Like the Cynic, every aspect of Paul’s physical and social existence embodies his message from his decision not to marry to the physical violence and hardships he experiences in spreading the gospel. Most notably, the themes of suffering and endurance can be found everywhere in Paul’s letters. Where endurance was an important part of Stoic philosophy since it prepared one for the unexpected, suffering for Cynics is not imagined or potential but an ongoing aspect of existence. Where in Romans 5.3-4, Paul evokes his suffering to emphasize the importance of training and endurance, as a means of preparing his readers through his own example, there are other times when his suffering is more closely identified with his specific role as apostle:

For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, as though sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels and to mortals. We are fools for the sake of Christ, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute. To the present hour we are hungry and thirsty, we are poorly clothed and beaten and homeless, and we grow weary from the work of our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we speak kindly. We have become like the rubbish of the world, the dregs of all things, to this very day. (1 Corinthians 4.9-13)

Here as in other passages, Paul is suggesting that the truth of his existence lies in suffering. The very nature of his ministry, like that of the Cynic, demands a mode of existence which entails suffering. Paul must undertake dangerous and difficult journeys in order to establish and visit his churches and in doing so faces the strong possibility of a hostile response from those he encounters, risking imprisonment and even death at the hands of authorities. Like the Cynic, Paul’s way of life is “a grimace of the true life.”²⁰ This grimace which people found so hard to tolerate is not simply a distortion of reality but, rather, a distortion of what society has come to accept as reality. Like the Cynic Paul is presenting the world with a vision of the truth as scandal. This is not only a result of physical appearance, the deformities he speaks of in his letter to the

¹⁸ F. Gerald Downing, *Cynics, Paul and the Pauline Churches* (London: Routledge, 1998), 308.

¹⁹ Shea, *The Cynic Enlightenment*, 179.

²⁰ Foucault, *Le Courage de la vérité*, 209; Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: La fondation de l’universalisme* (Paris : Presses Universitaires de France, 1997).

Galatians, no doubt resembling those of Cynic philosopher, crippled from years of hardship but also the very nature of his message which identifies a man put to death in the most shameful and dishonorable way (at least for the Jews) as the Messiah and savior of all humanity. The scandal of Paul's truth is therefore more radical and disturbing than that of the Cynic.

It is also interesting to note that the association Foucault makes between the Cynic and the militant revolutionary of the nineteenth century is echoed in Badiou's depiction of Paul as militant revolutionary *par excellence*.²¹ Thus, where Paul's use of military metaphors such as his call to "put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation" in 1 Thessalonians 5.8 and his image of "warfare" in 2 Corinthians 10.3-4 could be linked to a Stoic notion of training, there is equally the possibility that he is not simply referring to training but genuine combat which he perceives himself and his readers to be engaging in against the rest of humanity for the sake of humanity.

Cynic combat is therefore not simply military or athletic combat whereby an individual attains self-mastery thus enabling him to be of service to others. Cynic combat is a fight, an explicit, voluntary and ongoing aggression which confronts humanity in general, in its actual existence, with the horizon or objective being to change it and to change its moral attitude (ethos) while at the same time changing its conventions, its ways of living.²²

Furthermore, Paul's concept of his apostleship might be compared to the claim made by the Cynic that he is, in fact, king. In opposing himself to those he refers to as "super-apostles" (2 Corinthians 11.5), which no doubt included Peter and James, Paul is suggesting, with a similar arrogance to that belonging to the Cynic, that his apostleship is of a higher value since the other apostles rely upon the fact they were disciples to Jesus whereas his is based on the work he has done. "Indeed you should have been the ones commending me, for I am not at all inferior to these super-apostles, even though I am nothing. The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, signs and wonders and mighty works" (2 Corinthians 12.11). Despite being despised wherever he goes, the Cynic perceives himself as a king. He establishes his kingship as the sole form of sovereignty by contrasting it with other forms of kingship. "He is the king of anti-kings."²³ Since he does not depend on lineage, material wealth and military support to affirm his kingship, the Cynic considers himself as king above all. Given the respect and authority commanded by the original disciples, Paul's open criticism of Peter and the other apostles at Antioch, recounted by Paul himself in Galatians 2.11-21, is perhaps the most striking example of his use of *parrēsia*.

²¹Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: La fondation de l'universalisme*, 262; 301.

²²Ibid., 258.

²³Ibid., 252.

While leading an existence on the margins of society, the Cynic, somewhat paradoxically, offered a brand of philosophy which was open to all. Like Paul, the Cynic's message is addressed to the whole of humanity and as such is perceived as a universal ethic. Foucault suggests that the Cynic vocation appealed in particular to members of the lower classes, those born into menial professions such as cobblers, carpenters and wool spinners, or indeed tentmakers like Paul, with higher social aspirations. The Cynic is the poor man's philosopher. Consequently, the Cynic offers a shortcut to virtue since unlike Stoic philosophy it does not depend on achieving a certain level of knowledge of the world which is out of reach for most of the population but rather on a lifestyle based on suffering and endurance. Likewise, Paul offers a similar shortcut to salvation based on faith and not works. And as he reminds the members of the church at Corinth: "Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth" (1 Corinthians 1.26).

For the Cynic, the notion of the true life involves a rejection of everything associated with social convention, laws, customs and relationships. Paul is essentially carrying out the same form of rejection both in terms of the Mosaic Law and forms of social existence which he deems as incompatible with life in Christ.²⁴ Paul's statement in Galatians 3.28 that "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female," is perhaps the strongest articulation of this rejection.²⁵ However, what is also more radical about Paul is that with the exception of activities which had a direct impact on the community life of the believers, he effectively rejects rejection since any active rejection of one's social status, gender or religion (as culture) would attribute a significance to such status that simply does not exist. This is why he insists that all believers "remain in the condition in which you were called" (1 Corinthians 7.20). With the deactivation of the law, social boundaries and identity markers are dismissed by Paul as irrelevant. Moreover, in actively living this suspension of the law brought about by the Christ-event, any public act or gesture concerned with casting off one's earlier, worldly identity would have been rejected by Paul as a waste of time, a distraction akin to affirming such identity.

When the truth isn't good enough

Because sometimes the truth isn't good enough. [...] Sometimes
people deserve to have their faith rewarded.
-The Dark Knight

[D]iscourse is little more than the gleaming of truth in the
process of being born into its own gaze.

²⁴ According to Downing, Paul's Cynic attitude towards the law is most pronounced in Galatians suggesting that Paul may have limited this identification in later epistles for fear of being misconstrued. *Cynics, Paul and the Pauline Churches*, 74ff.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 12.

-Foucault, *The Order of Discourse*

You know, I'm glad I met you. Because now I can forget all about you. My Jesus is much more important and much more powerful.
-*The Last Temptation of Christ*

Returning momentarily to *The Dark Knight*, Batman recognises that a violent rupture has occurred between the empirical circumstances of Dent's death and the truth that the city needs. A similar rupture is suggested towards the end of Martin Scorsese's film *The Last Temptation of Christ*, based on the novel by Nikos Kazantzakis during the scene where Jesus (Willem Dafoe) is experiencing his final temptation. He has been led to believe by the devil that the cross was just a test and he did not really have to die. Instead, he is let down off the cross and goes on with his life, marrying Lazarus' sister and having children with both her and her sister. One day he comes across Paul (Harry Dean Stanton). Paul is fervently preaching the message that Jesus Christ died and was resurrected. Unsurprisingly perturbed by this, Jesus stops Paul and points out that this did not actually happen—he was never crucified and he never came back from the dead. Paul has got it all wrong. To which Paul replies, "I don't care whether you're Jesus or not, the resurrected Jesus will save the world and that's what matters."

What is so brilliant about this scene is that it captures perfectly one of the central problematics of the New Testament and of Christianity in general. How does one access Christ if not through Paul? Yet in going through Paul does the real message, the real teaching of Jesus become lost, distorted or even betrayed? Scorsese's depiction of an imaginary meeting between Jesus and Paul raises three important questions: Firstly, would it matter if the Christ-event, the death and resurrection of Jesus, had never taken place? Second, would it matter if Paul knew full well that the Christ-event had not taken place? And finally, is it still possible to remain faithful to the event, even if the event is a fiction or fable? According to Nietzsche, Paul's obsession with Christ's death and resurrection obscures the true Christian message found in Jesus' teaching. For Nietzsche, Paul is the world's greatest liar and his version of Christianity is the world's greatest lie.²⁶

These questions have been reframed in relation to recent philosophical appropriations of Paul. For example, one of the questions leveled at Badiou's concept of the event is whether such an event really has to happen to provide the possibility of a new, universal politics. And if it does then what value does Paul have, even as an example, to an atheist audience? By decoupling the truth of an event from the notion of empirical fact, it is possible to see how any such question misses the point entirely. The truth of an event lies in the lived experience of those who understand its potential to break with the existing status

²⁶ Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *The AntiChrist, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols and other writings*, trans. Judith Norman, ed. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 37-8.

quo. Consequently, it is less the specifics of Paul's "theology" and more his active embodiment of this rupture, his *parrēsia*, which make him an exemplary figure.

Nevertheless, while Paul's radical appropriation of Cynic motifs might provide us with a striking example of *parrēsia* and political militancy, the violence and scandal of his position are neutralized under the influence of two thousand years of Church doctrine. Writing in the shadow of Nietzsche, Sloterdijk's genealogy of cynicism identifies the emergence of the early Christian church as the beginning of a tradition deemed to evaporate all possibility of genuine Cynicism. The emancipatory belly laugh of Diogenes in his tub is replaced with the nihilistic sneer of the master cynic whether he occupies the role of clergyman, communist, fascist or liberal. Yet, as Louisa Shea has recently argued, for all its breath-taking rhetoric and insight, Sloterdijk's cautionary tale of the master cynic fails to provide any adequate suggestion as to how a Cynic ethics of rejection and anti-philosophy might be realized in contemporary society.²⁷ Considering Foucault's discussion of Cynic *parrēsia*, alongside Paul, this perhaps becomes clearer. As Shea suggests:

Where Sloterdijk dissolves Cynic violence in laughter and harmony with the world cosmos, Foucault, by contrast, seeks to account for the violence of Cynic rhetoric by proposing a concrete, intersubjective model of truth-telling grounded in the virtues of courage and magnanimity (the *parrhesiastic* game) and by positing violence as a realistic consequence of courageous criticism.²⁸

Moreover, like Paul, Foucault recognizes the impracticality of a world in which the Cynic ethics of suffering and rejection becomes the universal norm despite its message being open to everyone. Cynicism is a calling reserved to the few. This was how Paul understood his apostleship. Never does he wish his suffering upon his churches. Yet where Paul and Foucault assumed such responsibility and shaped it according to their own ethical subjectivities, the position of *parrhesiast* has long been vacant.

In today's twenty-first century society, politicians continue to embody the false consciousness of Sloterdijk's vehement attack—a false consciousness—that can only be met with the apathetic sneer of the masses. At the same time, there continues to be a disjunction between the critical discourse of intellectuals and their daily bourgeois existence, comfortably embedded within institutional structures and caught in a vicious cycle of publication and promotion. The figure of a dark knight prepared to speak the truth and suffer real hatred of the masses is desperately overdue. Even the recent financial crisis and the prevalent threat of widespread ecological disaster have thus far failed to produce the kind of Cynic society needs to awaken its ethical sensibilities.

²⁷ Shea, *The Cynic Enlightenment*, 185.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 189.

Recently, but perhaps this is cyclical, politicians have begun to latch onto the idea of *parrēsia* (although they don't refer to it as such) as a welcome antidote to the spin and hyperbole of recent decades. The British Prime Minister, to quote one notable example, regularly refers to himself as "Cameron Direct" and has come under attack during recent foreign visits for openly stating sentiments previously only implied by other politicians.²⁹ Yet, as products of existing power structures, it seems highly unlikely that today's politicians can fully assume the radicality of such a promise to speak frankly. As Foucault has pointed out, the *parrhesiastic* act differs enormously from the performative utterance of those in a privileged position of authority. Thus where a performative utterance "requires a particular, more or less strictly institutionalized context, an individual who has the requisite status or who is in a well-defined situation," the *parrhesiastic* act, on the other hand, "opens up a space of risk for the person who tells the truth; it opens up a danger, a peril, in which the speaker's very life will be at stake..."³⁰ Like Dionysus, politicians require others to speak frankly. They cannot assume this role which means living and suffering their message. More worryingly, perhaps, is the increased belief among politicians that they can. As "franc-parler" thus becomes a new form of political discourse intended to circumvent all discussion or opposition concerning "austerity" bills, tax increases and cuts to public spending, the subversive space of genuine *parrēsia* begins to close up.

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²⁹ The suffix -"Direct" is somewhat disingenuous as it is associated with several UK-based insurance brands such as "Direct Line" and "Claims Direct" and, as such, embodies the same marketing rhetoric employed by New Labour.

³⁰ Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others*, 61.