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Writing 101: Democracies Bodies

Project 3 Assignment 3

First Draft

### Foucault's Parrhesia: Why Elizabeth Costello Misses the Mark

In today's society, disagreement is often labeled as impolite and disrespectful. It is commonplace to over qualify one's statements to avoid offending one's interlocutor. This can result in dishonest dialogue. Living in a democratic society and viewing everyone as equal, makes it difficult to hold minority opinions. It is difficult for one to trust their own opinion if the majority of their equals feel differently. As a consequence, minority opinion holders can be silenced. However, individuals known as parrhesiastes speak their truth regardless. The concept stems from Ancient Greece, but it has been adapted for contemporary purposes. As defined by Michael Foucault in his essay titled *Fearless Speech*, to be a parrhesiastes the speaker must have "a specific relation to the truth through frankness, a certain relationship to his own life through danger, a certain type of relation to himself and other people through criticism (self-criticism or criticism of other people), and a specific relation to moral law through freedom and duty (5)."

Using Foucault's criteria, Elizabeth Costello in *The Lives of Animals* is not a parrhesiastes on the following grounds, which I will argue for throughout my paper. Costello qualifies her statements to mask what she believes, and she does not face any real danger. Additionally, she holds a position of power above whom she speaks, and she cannot regard her truth as a duty given she herself does not fully believe it.

**Commented [VH1]:** Is the hesitancy to speak more frankly driven by distrust of one's own belief, or by a fear of unsettling those with whom we disagree?

**Commented [VH2]:** Perhaps before you offer this assertion, you might prepare for it by saying something about why Foucault's definition is inappropriate or too stringent for EC. Remember that you have just said how difficult it is these days for persons to speak their minds freely, which would signal to readers that you will turn to parrhesia as an alternative to this problem.

Costello fails to identify precisely what she means in her speech, and she hides behind the veil of qualifiers when she does offer her own opinion. Following her speech, a questioner in the audience looking for further clarity states, “Are you saying we should close down factory farms? Are you saying we should stop eating meat? Are you saying we should treat animals more humanely, kill them more humanely? .... Can you clarify? Thank you (Coetzee 36).” Costello replies with the following, “I was hoping to announce principles. If principles are what you want to take away from this talk, I would have to respond, open your heart and listen to what your heart says (Coetzee 37).” Still unclear with her response, the questioner followed up asking for more clarity and yet again he was met with vague responses that dodged all of his questions. Costello’s reasoning fails to demonstrate “exactly what the speaker thinks (Foucault 2).”

Furthermore, when Costello does make bold claims, she tends to rely on qualifiers. At the start of her speech, Costello asserts “I am an old woman. I do not have the time any longer to say things I do not mean (Coetzee 18).” Costello makes a logical appeal to her status as an old woman to excuse her unconventional speech. Another instance where Costello uses a qualifier is following the analogy she makes between the concentration camps and animal slaughterhouses. She says, “[p]ardon me, I repeat. This is the last cheap point I will be scoring (22).” The point is cheap regardless of whether Costello qualifies it as such. By qualifying her statements and unclearly stating what she thinks, Costello does not meet Foucault’s criteria for frankness.

Costello, also, does not face any real danger when she gives her speech regarding animal rights. As an elderly woman with an already illustrious career, the potential financial costs of her speech are not a great concern. In addition, Costello’s relationship with her family would not suffer in the long term because they were all aware of her radicalism beforehand. The arrangement of the family’s dinner tables highlights this awareness. Coetzee writes, “[t]he

**Commented [VH3]:** What makes her imperative to “open your heart and listen” inadequate? What seems overly qualified about that remark? Or, is it its ambiguity that troubles you?

**Commented [VH4]:** Is she evasive or is her response just not adequate? In some ways, we should recall perhaps, her response couldn’t be more “genuine” or more “exact,” given her beliefs.

**Commented [VH5]:** Ethical?

**Commented [VH6]:** Insofar as being old may mean that she is cognitively diminished? That would seem to suggest that she says things she does not mean. I’m not yet sure how you read this as qualification on her part.

**Commented [VH7]:** I believe this example may more closely illustrate equivocation, especially calling her vastly important point “cheap.”

**Commented [VH8]:** But perhaps continuing her firm and vocal beliefs will further exacerbate their division.

children are eating separately because Elizabeth does not like to see meat on the table, while Norma refuses to change the children's eating habits to change what she calls "your mother's delicate sensibilities." (16)." Her son John is familiar with his mother's beliefs and thus it is dubious that their relationship would be damaged by Elizabeth giving this speech. By the same token, Elizabeth and her step daughter Norma already have a tense relationship and thus it is also doubtful that giving this speech would worsen their relationship. However, some people may argue that Elizabeth faces the cost of being labeled as an anti-Semite. I would argue that this is not a potential danger. Costello claims, "[l]et me say it openly: we are surrounded by an enterprise of degradation, cruelty, and killing which rivals anything that the Third Reich was capable of, indeed dwarfs it, in that ours is an enterprise without end, self-regenerating, brining rabbits, rats, poultry, and livestock ceaselessly into the world for the purpose of killing them (Coetzee 21)." Although, Costello attempts to appeal to the emotions of her listeners, she conjures the wrong emotional response. By use of a poor analogy, instead of gaining sympathy for the slaughter of animals, Costello encourages disgust in her audience through the use of her appalling and cheap analogy. Anti-Semitism is not a potential danger of her argument, but a feature of it.

Another integral part of parrhesia is that the speaker must be "in a position of inferiority with respect to the interlocutor (Foucault 4)." Costello, on the other hand, is an invited guest to Appleton College to deliver the annual Gates lecture. Typically, annual lecture series at colleges and universities tend to bring in speakers that are highly esteemed in their respective fields. Therefore, it is likely that the college was prepared to respect whatever she had to say, even if they were caught off guard. To demonstrate respect for Elizabeth, the speech was to "be followed by a formal dinner hosted by the president (Coetzee 17)." One can also attribute the

**Commented [VH9]:** What do you make of her tacitly risky his position at the college? This isn't a risk to her per se. But is she risking their relationship by putting him in danger?

**Commented [VH10]:** I think this deserves its own paragraph since this is a very different consideration of EC's risks.

**Commented [VH11]:** Not sure I understand the distinction you're making. Isn't this a risk nonetheless since the audience may find her anti-semitic? For it not to be a potential risk, you would need to argue perhaps that her use of the analogy doesn't necessarily warrant that charge.

formal nature of the dinner as another sign that the Costello is in a high position relative to the students and even the faculty to whom she delivers her speech. Her ethos, as celebrated author, empowers her in relation to her audience.

**Commented [VH12]:** But is her presumed ethos prior to the actual speech in tact after the speech is given?

Costello does not entirely believe what she says is the truth, making it difficult to argue that she felt duty-bound to speak her truth. Roughly speaking, Costello's central claim is that there are no limits to the sympathetic understanding one can have for animals. Even identifying her central claim or truth was not easy because it is not distinctly articulated to her audience.

**Commented [VH13]:** How, then, did you unveil it? Doesn't she state this quite clearly?

However, Costello does not even wholly believe her truth. In relation to her analogy about the victims of Treblinka, she writes that it would have been "as little consolation to the victims as it would have been- pardon the tastelessness of the following- to ask the dead of Treblinka to excuse their killers because their body fat was needed to make soap and their hair to stuff mattresses with (Coetzee 22)." Costello uses this example to argue by analogy that the use of animal parts to make products is not consolation for their slaughter, again attempting to appeal to the audiences' emotions. However, later on the novel in response to the admiration of those around her, Costello says the following, "I'm wearing leather shoes... I'm carrying a leather purse. I wouldn't have overmuch respect if I were you (Coetzee 43)." By using the human parts analogy, she makes a shocking and bold comparison. However, by wearing leather she demonstrates that she does not even believe in the truth of this comparison. This results in a flaw in her reasoning because she does not live by the truth she established via the comparison between Treblinka prisoners and slaughterhouse animals. In wearing leather, Costello reveals that she has personal reservations about the unbound limits of sympathy.

**Commented [VH14]:** Review this. What prompts her to reveal this?

Parrhesia is an important concept to understand because Parrhesiastes challenge the way we think. Parrhesiastes think outside of the box and can offer a refreshing perspective on

**Commented [VH15]:** A powerful counter-example. Her choice of shoes and belt undermine her assertion, trouble her central claim. Her ethos is damaged.

contended ideas or widely accepted ideologies. Malala Yousafazi comes to mind when I think of someone who qualifies as a parrhesiastes. Malala is a women's rights activist who grew up in Taliban controlled Pakistan. In the face of great danger, she unequivocally stood by her truth in support of female education. People like Malala are the reason it is important to study Parrhesia. However, Malala does not stand alone. There are many other people who have in the face of great adversity, challenged the conventional way of thinking. Hopefully, studying parrhesia inspires those who feel compelled, to speak their truth.

**Commented [VH16]:** Not sure what the "however" relationship is between seeing her as an exemplar and that fact that others occupy this role.