



JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY AND CONTEMPORARY ISSUES

Volume 2, Number 3 (July 2026)

ISSN: 1595-9457 (online); 3093-060X (print)

Website: <https://jppssuniuyo.com/jpci> Email: jppssuniuyo@gmail.com

Received: June 10, 2026 Accepted: July 30, 2026 Published: July 31, 2026

Citation: Fasiku, Gbenga C.; Emmanuel, Stephen & Onuche, Sani. (2026). "AI and Crisis of Parrhesia in Michel Foucault: A Philosophical Critique of Machine-Mediated Truth-Telling." *Journal of Philosophy and Contemporary Issues*, 2 (3): 163-179.

Article

Open Access

AI AND CRISIS OF *PARRHESIA* IN MICHEL FOUCAULT: A PHILOSOPHICAL CRITIQUE OF MACHINE-MEDIATED TRUTH-TELLING

Gbenga Cornelius Fasiku¹, Stephen Emmanuel² & Sani Onuche³

ORCID: 0009-0009-3107-7661¹

Department of Philosophy, Prince Abubakar Audu University, Anyigba^{1, 2 & 3}

Corresponding Email: gbenga.fc@ksu.edu.ng¹

Abstract

The growing presence of artificial intelligence (AI) in communication has sparked concerns about misinformation, bias and accountability. However, a deeper philosophical question remains whether AI can genuinely tell the truth. This paper examines this question through Michel Foucault's concept of *parrhesia* (fearless truth-telling) and African philosophical conceptions of personhood and moral responsibility. For Foucault, truth-telling is more than communicating accurate information; it is an ethical act in which a speaker risks personal consequences in expressing what they believe to be true. Such truth is inseparable from courage, accountability and the lived experience of the speaker. The paper argues that AI, while capable of producing factually correct statements, cannot engage in genuine *parrhesia* because it lacks consciousness, vulnerability and the capacity to bear responsibility for its words. The paper also draws inspiration from African communitarian philosophy to contend that truth is rooted not only in the content of speech but also in the moral character and relational obligations of the speaker within a community. Thus, by separating speech from personhood, AI creates a form of discourse without an accountable subject. The paper concludes that the most significant challenge posed by AI is not merely the spread of misinformation but the potential erosion of authentic human truth-telling. As communication becomes increasingly mediated by machines, society risks losing the ethical, relational and existential dimensions that make truth-telling a distinctly human practice.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, *Parrhesia*, Foucault, African philosophy, Truth-telling.

Preamble

The emergence of artificial intelligence (AI) as a dominant force in contemporary communication has generated intense scholarly interest across disciplines ranging from

Copyright © 2026 By JPCI. Publishers: Omega Books

This is an open access article which permits unrestricted use provided the work is properly cited.

computer science and media studies to ethics and philosophy. Public debates have largely focused on concerns such as misinformation, algorithmic bias, privacy violations and the displacement of human labour. While these concerns are significant, they often overlook a more fundamental philosophical question: can artificial intelligence genuinely tell the truth? The question is not merely whether AI can produce factually correct statements, but whether it can participate in the ethical, existential and relational dimensions of truth-telling that have historically defined human communication. This paper argues that the challenge posed by AI extends beyond the accuracy of information to the nature of truth itself and the conditions under which truth becomes meaningful within human communities.

The distinction between information and truth has occupied a central place in philosophical inquiry. In modern technological societies, truth is often reduced to factual correctness, data verification, or correspondence between statements and observable reality. However, several philosophical traditions have challenged this narrow understanding. Among the most influential is the work of Michel Foucault, who developed the concept of *parrhesia*, often translated as fearless or courageous truth-telling. For Foucault, truth-telling is not simply the communication of facts but an ethical practice in which a speaker openly expresses what they believe to be true despite the possibility of personal risk or punishment (Foucault 2001: 15). The value of *parrhesia* lies not only in the truth of what is said but also in the courage of the speaker who places their social standing, reputation, or safety at stake in the act of speaking. Truth, in this sense, is inseparable from responsibility and vulnerability. This Foucault's understanding raises important questions regarding AI-generated communication. Artificial intelligence systems are capable of generating coherent, persuasive and often factually accurate responses. But they do so without consciousness, conviction, or personal investment in the content they produce. Unlike human beings, AI systems do not fear exclusion, punishment, ridicule, or death. They cannot suffer the consequences of their words, nor can they assume moral responsibility for them. Consequently, while AI may simulate truth-telling, it remains uncertain whether it can genuinely engage in the practice of *parrhesia* as understood by Foucault. The absence of risk calls into question whether machine-generated communication can ever possess the ethical character that distinguishes authentic truth-telling from mere information transmission.

As such, at the heart of this paper lies the distinction between truth and factual statement. Contemporary discussions of artificial intelligence often assume that truth consists primarily in the accurate representation of facts. Such a view reduces truth to a problem of information processing and verification. However, human traditions of philosophical reflection have long understood truth-telling as something more profound than factual correctness. A factual statement may be accurate without involving commitment, accountability, or personal risk on the part of the speaker. Truth-telling, by contrast, is an ethical act performed by a moral agent who assumes responsibility for what is said and remains vulnerable to the consequences of speaking. The significance of truth, therefore lies not only in the content of a statement but also in the relationship between the speaker, the statement and the world in which the statement is uttered. This paper argues that genuine truth-telling presupposes the existence of a moral agent capable of responsibility, vulnerability and self-disclosure.

The paper maintains that truth emerges where a speaker places something of themselves at stake in the act of speaking. The *parrhesiast* does not merely communicate facts; he or she risks reputation, security, social acceptance, or even life itself in fidelity to what is believed to be true (Foucault 2001: 15). Similarly, African philosophical traditions

often locate the moral significance of speech within the character and communal accountability of the speaker rather than in the propositional content of speech alone (Menkiti 1984: 172; Gyekye 1997: 39). From this perspective, truth is inseparable from responsibility. The central contention of this paper is that while artificial intelligence may generate factually accurate statements, it cannot participate in truth-telling in the fullest sense because it lacks the defining characteristics of a moral agent. It bears no responsibility for its utterances, experiences no vulnerability arising from them and possesses no self whose integrity is implicated in the act of speaking. Consequently, the growing substitution of human communication with machine-generated discourse raises concerns not merely about misinformation but about the erosion of those ethical conditions that make truth possible as a human practice.

Truth beyond Facts: The Ethical Dimension of Truth-Telling

Contemporary discussions of truth are increasingly shaped by technological assumptions that equate truth with the accurate transmission of information. Within this framework, a statement is considered true if it corresponds to an observable fact or verifiable state of affairs. This understanding has become particularly influential in the digital age, where the proliferation of data, algorithms and artificial intelligence has encouraged the view that truth is fundamentally a matter of informational correctness. Consequently, debates surrounding misinformation, fake news and AI-generated content often focus on whether a statement accurately reflects reality. While such concerns are undoubtedly important, they risk reducing truth to a purely epistemic category and overlooking its ethical and existential dimensions. The result is a conception of truth that privileges factual correctness while neglecting the moral responsibilities and personal commitments traditionally associated with truth-telling.

The distinction between truth and factual accuracy has deep roots in philosophical thought. Although factual statements can be evaluated according to their correspondence with reality, truth has often been understood as involving more than the mere presentation of correct information. Human beings do not simply exchange facts; they make promises, testify, confess wrongdoing, bear witness to events and challenge structures of power through speech. In each of these cases, the significance of what is said depends not only on the accuracy of the statement but also on the relationship between the speaker, the statement and the audience. Truth, therefore, is not merely a property of propositions but also a practice enacted by persons who assume responsibility for their words. This distinction becomes clearer when considering ordinary examples of communication. A witness in a court of law may provide an accurate account of an event, but the moral significance of the testimony derives not only from its factual correctness. The witness is expected to stand behind the statement, accept responsibility for its consequences and subject themselves to scrutiny. Similarly, a confession is not merely the communication of information. It is an act through which an individual reveals something about themselves and accepts accountability for what has been disclosed. In both cases, truth involves an ethical relationship between speaker and speech. The truthfulness of the act depends not only on the content of the statement but also on the integrity and responsibility of the person making it.

The reduction of truth to factual accuracy is partly a consequence of the dominance of modern scientific rationality. Since the Enlightenment, truth has frequently been associated with objective knowledge and empirical verification. Scientific inquiry has undoubtedly expanded humanity's understanding of the world, but the success of scientific

methods has also encouraged a tendency to regard all questions of truth as questions of factual correctness. As a result, dimensions of truth that concern character, responsibility and ethical commitment have often been marginalized. Bernard Williams argues that truthfulness involves virtues such as sincerity and accuracy, both of which are essential for maintaining trust within human societies (Williams 2002: 11). Accuracy concerns the effort to represent reality correctly, but sincerity concerns the relationship between the speaker and what is said. A person may communicate accurate information without being sincere, just as one may speak sincerely while being mistaken. Truthfulness therefore cannot be reduced to factual correspondence alone.

The ethical dimension of truth becomes even more apparent in the work of Hannah Arendt. Arendt distinguishes between factual truth and the political conditions that allow truth to be spoken and recognized within society. She observes that factual truths are often fragile because they exist within political environments where power can distort, suppress, or manipulate them (Arendt 1967: 238). For Arendt, the preservation of truth depends not only on evidence but also on the willingness of individuals to defend reality against falsehood. Truth therefore requires actors who are prepared to uphold it even when doing so is difficult or dangerous. This insight shifts attention away from the content of truth alone and toward the moral courage required to sustain it within public life. A similar concern appears in Heidegger's understanding of truth. Heidegger challenges the traditional correspondence theory by returning to the Greek notion of *aletheia*, often translated as unconcealment or disclosure. According to Heidegger, truth is not merely the correctness of propositions but the process through which beings are revealed and made manifest (Heidegger 1962: 261). Human existence plays a central role in this process because it is through human engagement with the world that meaning emerges. Truth is therefore not simply discovered as an objective fact existing independently of human involvement; it is disclosed through the situated experiences of finite beings. This understanding introduces an existential dimension into discussions of truth. Human beings do not encounter truth as detached observers but as participants whose lives are implicated in what they reveal and conceal.

The ethical significance of truth is further developed by Michel Foucault through his analysis of *parrhesia*. Foucault argues that truth-telling is not merely an intellectual activity but an ethical practice characterized by courage and risk (Foucault 2001: 15). The *parrhesiast* speaks frankly because they believe it is necessary to do so, even when such speech may result in personal harm. What distinguishes *parrhesia* from ordinary communication is the relationship between truth and vulnerability. The speaker places something of themselves at stake in the act of speaking. Their reputation, security, social standing, or even life may be endangered by the truth they choose to express. Truth-telling thus becomes an ethical commitment rather than a simple transmission of information. The importance of vulnerability in truth-telling reveals a fundamental limitation of purely informational accounts of truth. Facts can be communicated without risk. A database can store information and a machine can retrieve it. Nevertheless, truth-telling understood as an ethical act, requires more than the communication of facts. It requires a speaker who assumes responsibility for what is said and remains exposed to the consequences of speaking. The burden of truth is therefore inseparable from the vulnerability of the truth-teller. Without vulnerability, truth risks becoming detached from the moral conditions that give it significance within human life.

African philosophical traditions provide additional resources for understanding this

relationship between truth and responsibility. Across many African societies, speech is not regarded as a morally neutral activity. Words possess social and ethical significance because they emerge from persons embedded within networks of communal relationships. Menkiti argues that personhood is achieved through participation in communal life and the fulfilment of moral responsibilities rather than being automatically possessed by virtue of biological existence (Menkiti 1984: 172). Within such a framework, speech carries ethical weight because it reflects the character of the speaker and affects the well-being of the community. Correspondingly, Gyekye emphasizes that communal life requires individuals to cultivate virtues that sustain social harmony and mutual trust (Gyekye 1997: 39). Truthfulness occupies a central place among such virtues because communities depend upon reliable communication for their continued existence. The significance of truth therefore, extends beyond factual correctness to include the moral integrity of the speaker. A statement may be factually accurate, yet if it is delivered without sincerity, responsibility, or concern for communal well-being, it may fail to embody the fuller meaning of truth recognized within African moral thought. These philosophical perspectives collectively challenge the tendency to identify truth exclusively with factual correctness. While facts remain indispensable, they do not exhaust the meaning of truth. Truth also involves sincerity, accountability, courage and self-disclosure. It presupposes the existence of a moral agent who accepts responsibility for what is said and who remains vulnerable to the consequences of speaking. This ethical dimension has often been obscured by technological understandings of communication that prioritize information over responsibility and efficiency over authenticity.

The rise of artificial intelligence makes the recovery of this distinction increasingly urgent. Contemporary AI systems are evaluated primarily according to their ability to generate accurate and useful information. Such an evaluation reflects the assumption that truth is fundamentally informational. But if truth involves responsibility, vulnerability and moral commitment, then the production of accurate statements alone may be insufficient for genuine truth-telling. The question is no longer simply whether a statement is factually correct but whether there exists a responsible subject who stands behind it. This shift in focus transforms the debate from one concerned solely with epistemology to one concerned with ethics and moral agency. Reclaiming the ethical dimension of truth requires recognizing that truth is not merely something that is said but something that is enacted through responsible speech. Facts are indispensable components of truth, but they become meaningful within human life only when embodied in practices of accountability, sincerity and courage. The challenge posed by emerging technologies is therefore not merely the possibility of false information but the gradual erosion of those human conditions that make truth-telling possible. Any adequate account of truth must therefore move beyond facts and recover the ethical responsibilities that have historically distinguished truth-tellers from mere transmitters of information.

Foucault on Courageous Truth-Telling

Among contemporary philosophical accounts of truth, Michel Foucault's analysis of *parrhesia* provides one of the most profound explorations of the ethical conditions that make truth-telling possible. While much of Foucault's earlier work examined the relationship between knowledge and power, his later lectures turned increasingly toward the question of how individuals constitute themselves as ethical subjects through practices of truth. Central to this inquiry is the concept of *parrhesia*, a Greek term commonly translated as "fearless speech" or "courageous truth-telling." For Foucault, *parrhesia* is not merely a linguistic act

nor simply the communication of accurate information. It is an ethical event in which a speaker freely chooses to tell the truth despite the risks that such truth may entail (Foucault 2001: 15). This understanding challenges modern tendencies to reduce truth to factual correctness and instead situates truth within the moral character and vulnerability of the speaker. Foucault's discussion of *parrhesia* emerges from his broader concern with the relationship between truth and subjectivity. Throughout much of Western philosophy, truth has often been treated as an objective matter independent of the person who speaks it. The focus has been placed upon the validity of propositions, the accuracy of observations, or the coherence of arguments. He does not deny the importance of these considerations. However, he argues that an exclusive emphasis on the content of truth neglects the ethical dimension of the act of speaking. The question is not merely whether a statement is true but also what it means for a person to commit themselves to that truth. *Parrhesia* therefore shifts attention from the truth of propositions to the truthfulness of persons.

According to him, several characteristics distinguish *parrhesia* from ordinary communication. First, the *parrhesiast* genuinely believes the truth of what they say. The speaker does not merely repeat information or recite accepted opinions. Rather, they express a conviction that they regard as true (Foucault 2001: 19). This element of personal belief is crucial because it establishes a direct relationship between the speaker and the statement. The truth spoken is not detached from the individual but reflects a commitment for which the speaker assumes responsibility. Second, *parrhesia* involves frankness. The speaker expresses their thoughts openly and directly rather than concealing them behind rhetorical manipulation or strategic ambiguity. The *parrhesiast* says what they believe without disguising it in ways designed to avoid consequences. Such frankness distinguishes *parrhesia* from forms of communication aimed primarily at persuasion, flattery, or self-interest. The purpose of courageous truth-telling is not to secure advantage but to reveal what one sincerely believes to be true. Third and most importantly, *parrhesia* involves risk. Foucault repeatedly emphasizes that truth-telling becomes *parrhesiastic* only when the speaker exposes themselves to potential harm (Foucault 2001: 16). The risk may take various forms. A citizen may criticize a ruler and face punishment. A friend may confront another friend and risk damaging the relationship. A scholar may challenge dominant assumptions and encounter professional marginalization. In every case, the speaker chooses truth despite the possibility of negative consequences. The significance of *parrhesia* therefore lies not only in what is said but in what the speaker is willing to sacrifice for the sake of saying it. This element of risk reveals why responsibility occupies a central place in Foucault's account. The *parrhesiast* cannot retreat behind anonymity or deny ownership of their words. They openly identify themselves as the source of the statement and accept accountability for its effects. Truth-telling thus becomes an ethical burden. The speaker assumes responsibility not merely for the factual accuracy of the statement but also for the decision to speak. In this sense, truth is inseparable from moral agency. Only a being capable of responsibility can engage in genuine *parrhesia*.

The relationship between truth and responsibility becomes particularly evident when Foucault contrasts *parrhesia* with other forms of discourse. In rhetoric, for example, the primary concern is persuasion. A rhetorician may seek to convince an audience regardless of whether they personally believe what they are saying. Success is measured by effectiveness rather than truthfulness. *Parrhesia* operates according to a different logic. The *parrhesiast* speaks because they feel ethically compelled to do so, even when doing so may be ineffective or harmful to their own interests (Foucault 2001: 13). Truth is therefore not a tool

employed for strategic advantage but a moral obligation undertaken at personal cost. This understanding of truth-telling highlights the intimate connection between vulnerability and moral agency. Vulnerability is not an accidental feature of *parrhesia* but one of its defining conditions. The courage of the truth-teller derives precisely from the possibility of suffering consequences. If no risk exists, the ethical significance of truth-telling diminishes. A statement made in complete safety may still be accurate, but it lacks the distinctive moral character that Foucault associates with *parrhesia*. Courage presupposes danger; responsibility presupposes the possibility of consequences. Without vulnerability, truth-telling becomes detached from the ethical conditions that give it meaning.

The importance of vulnerability can be illustrated through historical examples. Throughout history, many individuals have become symbols of truth-telling precisely because they accepted personal risks in speaking against prevailing authorities. Political dissidents, whistleblowers, investigative journalists, reformers and activists are often celebrated not simply because they communicated facts but because they were willing to endure suffering in defense of those truths. Their authority derives as much from their courage as from the content of their statements. Society recognizes in such figures an ethical commitment that transcends informational accuracy. Foucault's analysis therefore suggests that truth possesses an inherently relational dimension. Truth is not merely a correspondence between language and reality but a relationship between the speaker, the statement and the audience. The audience trusts the *parrhesiast* not only because the statement may be correct but because the speaker demonstrates sincerity through their willingness to accept consequences. The credibility of truth thus depends partly upon the ethical character of the person who speaks it. Truth becomes embodied in a life rather than existing solely within a proposition.

This observation has profound implications for contemporary discussions of communication. Modern technological systems increasingly treat communication as the transfer of information from one point to another. The emphasis falls on efficiency, accessibility and accuracy. While these goals are valuable, they risk obscuring the ethical dimensions of speech that Foucault seeks to recover. Information can circulate without responsibility. Data can be transmitted without commitment. Facts can be repeated without courage. *Parrhesia* reminds us that genuine truth-telling requires more than informational exchange; it requires a responsible subject who stands behind what is said. The significance of this point becomes especially apparent in the context of artificial intelligence. AI systems are capable of generating statements that appear truthful, coherent and persuasive. They can reproduce vast quantities of information and present them in ways that resemble human communication. However, from a Foucauldian perspective, the crucial question is not whether AI can generate accurate statements but whether it can bear the burden of truth. Can a machine assume responsibility for what it says? Can it experience vulnerability arising from its speech? Can it risk reputation, exclusion, punishment, or death in defense of a conviction? The answer appears negative because AI lacks the conditions necessary for moral agency. An artificial intelligence system may produce information that corresponds to reality, but it cannot commit itself to that information. It possesses neither belief nor conscience. It cannot experience fear, courage, shame, or accountability. Most importantly, it cannot place itself at risk through speech. Consequently, while AI may generate factual statements, it cannot engage in *parrhesia* in the Foucauldian sense. The absence of vulnerability means that machine-generated discourse lacks the ethical dimension that transforms information into courageous truth-telling.

This distinction reveals the broader significance of Foucault's concept for contemporary philosophy of technology. The central challenge posed by AI is not simply the possibility of falsehood or misinformation. Rather, it concerns the gradual displacement of responsible truth-tellers by systems that can generate speech without bearing any burden for it. As communication becomes increasingly mediated by technologies incapable of vulnerability, society risks confusing factual production with genuine truth-telling. The danger is not merely epistemic but ethical. What is threatened is the very relationship between truth and responsibility that has historically defined human moral agency. Foucault's account of *parrhesia* demonstrates that truth is inseparable from courage, accountability and vulnerability. Truth-telling is not merely a matter of saying what is correct but of accepting responsibility for saying it. The *parrhesiast* stands before others as a moral agent whose words are backed by conviction and whose life is implicated in the act of speaking. In reclaiming this ethical understanding of truth, Foucault provides a powerful framework for evaluating contemporary forms of communication and for questioning whether technologies that lack moral agency can ever participate in the human practice of truth-telling.

Personhood, Speech and Accountability in African Philosophy

The relationship between truth and responsibility is not unique to the Western philosophical tradition. Across diverse African philosophical traditions, speech has long been understood as a morally significant act that derives its authority not merely from the content of what is said but from the character, social standing and accountability of the speaker. Unlike modern technological conceptions of communication that often reduce language to the transmission of information, many African philosophical perspectives view speech as an expression of personhood embedded within a network of communal relationships. Truth, therefore, is not simply an epistemic matter concerning the correspondence between statements and reality; it is also an ethical matter concerning the moral responsibilities of the person who speaks. This understanding provides an important framework for evaluating contemporary forms of machine-mediated communication and for questioning whether truth can exist independently of a morally accountable subject. A central theme in African philosophy is the notion that personhood is not merely a biological or psychological condition but a moral achievement. One of the most influential articulations of this view is found in the work of Ifeanyi Menkiti. According to Menkiti, the individual does not enter the world as a fully constituted person. Rather, personhood is gradually attained through participation in communal life and through the fulfilment of social and moral obligations (Menkiti 1984: 172). The community serves as the context within which individuals develop moral character, acquire responsibilities and earn recognition as persons. Consequently, personhood is inseparable from accountability. To be a person is not merely to possess certain capacities but to be capable of responsible action within a moral community. This understanding has significant implications for the ethics of speech. If personhood is constituted through moral responsibility, then speech cannot be regarded as a morally neutral activity. Words become extensions of the person who utters them. They reveal character, establish trust and create obligations. In many African societies, an individual's credibility is closely connected to their reputation for honesty, reliability and integrity. A person's words carry authority not only because they may be factually correct but because they originate from someone whose moral standing has been established through responsible conduct. Truthfulness, therefore, becomes a virtue rooted in personhood rather than a mere property of propositions.

The communitarian foundations of African philosophy further reinforce this connection between speech and accountability. African thinkers frequently emphasize that human beings exist within webs of relationships that shape identity and moral obligation. The often-cited principle associated with *Ubuntu*, expressed in the phrase "a person is a person through other persons," reflects the view that individual existence is fundamentally relational (Ramose 1999: 49). Human flourishing depends upon participation in communal life and moral virtues are cultivated through relationships with others. Within such a framework, communication performs a crucial social function because it sustains the trust upon which communal life depends. Truth-telling occupies a privileged position within these relational structures. Communities cannot function effectively without confidence in the reliability of speech. Agreements, promises, testimonies and social expectations all depend upon the assumption that individuals will speak truthfully and accept responsibility for their words. The breakdown of truthful communication threatens not merely the exchange of information but the moral fabric of communal existence itself. Consequently, truthfulness is often regarded as a communal virtue rather than a purely individual achievement.

Kwame Gyekye's conception of moderate communitarianism further illuminates this relationship between individual agency and communal responsibility. While acknowledging the value of individual autonomy, Gyekye argues that persons remain embedded within moral communities that shape their obligations and identities (Gyekye 1997: 35). Individual actions acquire significance because they affect others within the community. Speech is no exception. The act of speaking carries ethical implications because words influence relationships, establish expectations and shape collective understanding. Truthfulness, therefore, becomes a responsibility owed not only to oneself but also to others. This perspective contrasts sharply with contemporary understandings of communication that prioritize efficiency and information transfer. Modern technological systems often treat speech as data that can be generated, transmitted and processed independently of the speaker. In such frameworks, the identity of the communicator may appear secondary to the accuracy of the information communicated. African philosophy challenges this assumption by insisting that speech cannot be separated from the moral character of the person who speaks. The authority of language depends not solely on its factual content but on the ethical integrity of the speaker.

The significance of moral character in communication is particularly evident in traditional African approaches to leadership and public discourse. Elders, community leaders and custodians of tradition are often expected to demonstrate wisdom, integrity and accountability. Their words carry influence not merely because of their social position but because they are presumed to embody virtues developed through experience and moral discipline. Speech acquires legitimacy through the ethical standing of the speaker. Truth, in this context, is inseparable from trustworthiness. This connection between speech and character reveals an important distinction between knowledge and wisdom. Knowledge may consist of facts, information, or technical expertise. Wisdom, however, involves the ethical application of knowledge within the context of human relationships. African philosophical traditions frequently emphasize wisdom as a moral rather than purely intellectual achievement. A wise person is not merely someone who knows many things but someone who understands how to act responsibly within a community. Truthful speech therefore requires more than informational accuracy; it requires the wisdom to recognize the moral consequences of one's words.

Another significant contribution of African philosophy to the present discussion

concerns the relationship between speech and moral presence. In many African traditions, words are not viewed as detached abstractions but as actions that carry real consequences. To speak is to intervene in the social world. Words can heal or harm, unite or divide, build trust or destroy it. Because speech has consequences, speakers are expected to assume responsibility for the effects of what they say. Accountability thus becomes an essential component of communication. This emphasis on accountability is particularly relevant when considering the nature of truth-telling. A truthful statement is not merely one that corresponds to reality. It is also one for which a speaker is prepared to answer. The moral weight of truth derives partly from the willingness of the speaker to stand behind their words. This understanding resonates strongly with Foucault's concept of *parrhesia*. Both traditions emphasize that truth-telling involves a commitment that extends beyond factual correctness. In both cases, the speaker becomes personally implicated in the truth they express. However, despite their different historical and cultural contexts, Foucauldian *parrhesia* and African communitarian philosophy converge on a crucial point: truth requires a responsible subject. The *parrhesiast* accepts risk in speaking truth, while the African moral agent accepts accountability to the community. In both cases, truth is inseparable from personhood. The significance of a truthful statement depends not only on its content but on the existence of a speaker who can be praised, criticized, trusted, or held responsible. This convergence provides a powerful framework for evaluating contemporary developments in artificial intelligence. AI systems are capable of generating vast amounts of information, but they do so without personhood in the moral sense articulated by African philosophy. They possess neither character nor communal obligations. They cannot cultivate virtues, earn trust, or be held morally accountable for their utterances. Although they may simulate human communication, they remain fundamentally detached from the ethical relationships that give communication its moral significance.

From an African philosophical perspective, this absence of personhood presents a serious challenge. If truth is rooted in the moral responsibilities of persons, then speech generated without personhood cannot fully participate in the practice of truth-telling. An AI system may produce factually accurate statements, but it cannot assume responsibility for them. It cannot experience guilt for falsehood, pride in honesty, or shame for deception. It cannot answer to a community for the consequences of its words. Most importantly, it cannot embody the virtues that make truthful speech possible. The implications of this argument extend beyond questions of technological capability. The increasing reliance on AI-generated communication risks normalizing forms of discourse detached from moral accountability. As individuals become accustomed to interacting with systems that generate speech without responsibility, the connection between truth and personhood may gradually weaken. Communication may come to be evaluated solely in terms of informational output rather than ethical commitment. Such a development would represent not merely a technological transformation but a profound shift in the moral foundations of human communication. African philosophy thus offers an important and helpful rectification to this tendency by reminding us that truth emerges within relationships of responsibility and trust. Speech acquires meaning because it originates from persons who are accountable to others. Truthfulness is therefore not merely an intellectual achievement but a moral virtue grounded in communal life. By emphasizing the inseparability of personhood, accountability and speech, African philosophical traditions provide a compelling framework for understanding why genuine truth-telling remains fundamentally tied to the existence of responsible moral agents. In doing so, they illuminate a critical limitation of machine-

mediated communication and prepare the ground for a deeper examination of whether artificial intelligence can genuinely participate in the human practice of truth-telling.

Can a Machine Bear Truth? Artificial Intelligence and the Absence of Moral Agency

This paper defends a single thesis that *artificial intelligence cannot participate in truth-telling because truth-telling presupposes moral agency and AI lacks moral agency*. While AI systems can generate coherent and often factually correct statements, such output should not be confused with truth-telling in the ethical sense developed in this study. The distinction between factual correctness, semantic generation and truth-telling is therefore central. AI may satisfy the first two conditions, but it fails the third, which is the only sense of truth under investigation here. Artificial intelligence is capable of producing linguistically coherent responses by identifying statistical patterns in large datasets. This enables it to generate statements that resemble human communication and, in many cases, correspond accurately to external facts. However, this capacity concerns semantic generation and informational accuracy, not truth as an ethical act. A statement may be factually correct without being an instance of truth-telling, just as it may be linguistically coherent without being grounded in responsibility or commitment. What is absent in AI-generated communication is not structure or correctness but moral ownership of what is said.

Truth-telling, as developed in this paper, requires more than correct representation of facts. It requires a subject who believes, commits and assumes responsibility for what is said. AI lacks belief, intention and self-awareness understood as reflective endorsement of its own utterances. It does not affirm propositions as true; it generates outputs based on computational probability. More significantly, it does not bear consequences for what it produces. It cannot be praised, blamed, held accountable, or placed at risk in relation to its speech. This absence of responsibility is not incidental but constitutive of its operational structure. From a Foucault's perspective, this limitation becomes decisive. For him, truth-telling in the form of *parrhesia* involves courage, risk and vulnerability. The *parrhesiast* speaks truthfully while exposing themselves to possible harm, whether social, political, or existential (Foucault 2001: 15). Truth, in this sense, is inseparable from the willingness to suffer consequences for speaking. AI cannot satisfy these conditions because it is not a vulnerable subject. It cannot experience fear, loss, shame, exclusion, or death. Since nothing is at stake for it, it cannot engage in *parrhesia*. Without vulnerability, there is no courage; without courage, there is no truth-telling. This point can be stated more formally thus:

Premise 1: Truth-telling requires a moral agent capable of responsibility and vulnerability.

Premise 2: Responsibility and vulnerability presuppose the capacity to bear consequences for one's speech.

Premise 3: Artificial intelligence lacks responsibility, vulnerability and the capacity to bear consequences.

Conclusion: Therefore, artificial intelligence cannot participate in truth-telling, even if it can generate factually accurate statements.

One might object that human beings themselves often repeat inherited discourse or operate within pre-structured linguistic systems, raising the question of whether humans are truly autonomous truth-tellers. However, even within such constraints, human speech remains embedded in a framework of accountability. Human speakers can be questioned, challenged, praised, or condemned for what they say. They can also reflect upon, revise, or withdraw their statements. Most importantly, they remain answerable for their utterances. AI systems,

by contrast, do not occupy this normative space of answerability. Their outputs circulate without ownership in the moral sense. From an African philosophical perspective, the absence of moral agency in AI further reinforces this limitation. As established in the previous section, personhood is understood as an achievement grounded in responsibility, relational embeddedness and moral character (Menkiti 1984: 172). Speech acquires authority because it issues from persons who can be held accountable within a community. AI systems do not possess personhood in this sense. They do not participate in communal life, cultivate virtues, or bear obligations to others. Consequently, their outputs cannot carry the moral weight associated with truthful speech within a communitarian framework. The implication is not that AI is incapable of producing useful or accurate information. Rather, it is that such production does not amount to truth-telling in the ethical sense under consideration. AI operates at the level of information generation, not moral disclosure. It can simulate the form of truth without embodying the conditions that make truth meaningful as a human practice. What is missing is not linguistic competence but moral subjectivity. This distinction becomes clearer when the three relevant categories are held apart:

1. Factual correctness: correspondence between statement and reality
2. Semantic generation: production of coherent language based on patterns
3. Truth-telling: responsible, vulnerable and accountable speech by a moral agent

AI satisfies (1) and (2), but not (3). The error in many contemporary discussions of AI and truth is the collapse of these categories into one another, leading to the assumption that accurate output is equivalent to truth. This study rejects that reduction. As such, the inability of artificial intelligence to bear truth is not a technological deficiency but an ontological one. Truth, as understood here, is not merely a property of statements but a relation between speech and a responsible subject. Without moral agency, there can be no *parrhesia*, no accountability and no truth-telling. AI may therefore expand the production of information, but it does not enter the ethical space in which truth becomes a lived and risky commitment. In this sense, it remains a tool of communication rather than a participant in the human practice of truth.

The Crisis of Truth without Truth-Tellers

The preceding analysis has argued that truth is more than factual correctness and that genuine truth-telling presupposes the existence of a vulnerable and responsible moral agent. Through Foucault's conception of *parrhesia* and African philosophical understandings of personhood, it has been shown that truth emerges not merely from the content of speech but from the ethical relationship between the speaker, the statement and the community. Artificial intelligence, despite its capacity to generate accurate information, lacks the moral agency necessary for genuine truth-telling. This conclusion raises a broader and perhaps more troubling question: what happens to society when communication becomes increasingly dependent upon systems that can produce information but cannot bear responsibility for it? The central concern is not simply that AI may generate falsehoods. Rather, the deeper crisis lies in the possibility of a future characterized by truth without truth-tellers. Modern discussions of artificial intelligence frequently focus on technical problems such as algorithmic bias, misinformation, hallucinations and data privacy. These concerns are legitimate and deserve careful attention. However, an exclusive focus on such issues risks obscuring a more fundamental transformation occurring within human communication. The most significant danger may not be that machines occasionally generate false information but that human beings gradually abandon the practices through

which truth is responsibly articulated, defended and lived. In other words, the crisis concerns not merely the quality of information but the erosion of the ethical conditions that make truth meaningful (Fasiku & Adinoyi, 2025: 108). This concern becomes clearer when viewed through the lens of authenticity. Authentic communication involves more than the exchange of information. It reflects the presence of a speaker who is personally invested in what is said and who accepts responsibility for the consequences of speaking. Authenticity requires a degree of self-disclosure because the speaker reveals something of themselves through their words. A confession, testimony, promise, apology, or act of dissent carries significance because it expresses the commitments and convictions of a particular person. Such speech cannot be reduced to information alone because it embodies the moral presence of the speaker.

The increasing use of artificial intelligence in communication introduces a new dynamic into this relationship. Individuals now rely on AI systems to draft emails, compose essays, generate public statements, produce creative works and even formulate personal responses. While these technologies offer undeniable advantages in efficiency and accessibility, they also create the possibility that communication may become increasingly detached from personal reflection and moral commitment. Words may continue to circulate, but the connection between speech and the person speaking may become progressively weaker. This phenomenon can be understood as a crisis of authenticity. When communication is delegated to systems that lack consciousness, conviction and responsibility, language risks becoming detached from lived experience. Statements may remain coherent and persuasive, yet they no longer necessarily express the beliefs, struggles, or commitments of the individual presenting them. The result is a form of discourse that appears meaningful while lacking the existential depth traditionally associated with human communication. The concern agrees strongly with Martin Heidegger's critique of what he calls *Gerede* or "idle talk." Heidegger argues that modern societies often encourage forms of discourse characterized by repetition rather than genuine understanding (Heidegger 1962: 211). In idle talk, individuals repeat what "everyone says" without engaging in authentic reflection. Language becomes detached from direct experience and circulates as conventional opinion. Although Heidegger wrote long before the emergence of artificial intelligence, his analysis provides a striking framework for understanding contemporary developments. AI systems are trained on vast collections of existing human discourse and generate responses by identifying statistical patterns within that discourse. In a sense, they represent the technological perfection of idle talk: language produced entirely through the recombination of what has already been said.

The significance of this observation extends beyond concerns about originality. If communication increasingly becomes a process of recycling existing patterns rather than articulating lived experience, the human capacity for authentic thought may gradually weaken. Individuals may become accustomed to receiving ready-made formulations of ideas rather than undertaking the difficult work of reflection themselves. The danger is not merely intellectual dependence but the erosion of those practices through which persons develop moral judgment, self-understanding and responsibility. From a Foucauldian perspective, this development may also be described as a crisis of *parrhesia*. Courageous truth-telling requires individuals willing to risk themselves in defence of what they believe to be true. But if communication is increasingly mediated by systems incapable of risk, society may begin to lose appreciation for the ethical significance of vulnerability. Public discourse may become saturated with information while simultaneously lacking the courage and accountability that

characterize genuine truth-telling. The result would not be a society without facts but a society without *parrhesiasts*. Such a condition could be described as a post-*parrhesiastic* society. In a post-*parrhesiastic* society, information remains abundant, but the moral relationship between speakers and their words becomes increasingly fragile. Statements circulate widely, yet responsibility becomes difficult to locate. The authority traditionally associated with truthful speech is replaced by confidence in technological systems. Truth is measured primarily by informational accuracy rather than by the integrity and accountability of those who communicate it. The social consequences of such a transformation may be profound.

As discussed earlier, African conceptions of personhood emphasize the inseparability of identity, community and responsibility. Speech acquires meaning because it emerges from persons embedded within networks of moral obligation (Menkiti 1984: 172). Trust is sustained not merely by the accuracy of information but by confidence in the character of those who communicate it. The increasing displacement of human communication by machine-generated discourse therefore threatens more than individual authenticity; it also threatens the communal foundations upon which truthful relationships depend. A society increasingly dependent upon AI-generated communication may experience a gradual weakening of interpersonal accountability. If speech is no longer tied to identifiable moral agents, it becomes more difficult to establish trust, assign responsibility, or cultivate virtues such as honesty and integrity. Communication risks becoming an impersonal process governed by efficiency rather than ethical commitment. The communal dimensions of truth may consequently be overshadowed by technological considerations. Furthermore, the normalization of machine-generated communication may alter how individuals understand themselves as moral agents. Human beings develop ethical capacities partly through the practice of making judgments, expressing convictions, defending beliefs and accepting responsibility for mistakes. These activities contribute to the formation of character and personhood. If such practices are increasingly outsourced to artificial systems, opportunities for moral development may diminish. The danger is not simply that machines will speak for us but that we may gradually cease to speak for ourselves. This concern should not be interpreted as a rejection of technological innovation.

Artificial intelligence possesses considerable potential to enhance education, expand access to knowledge and support human creativity. The challenge lies in ensuring that technological assistance does not become a substitute for human responsibility. Technologies should serve as tools that facilitate communication rather than as replacements for the ethical agency upon which meaningful communication depends (Fasiku & Adinoyi, 2025: 112). The distinction is crucial because the future of truth ultimately depends upon the future of truth-tellers. No technological advancement, however sophisticated, can eliminate the need for individuals willing to assume responsibility for their words. Facts require interpreters, communities require trustworthy members and truth requires persons prepared to stand behind what they say. Artificial intelligence may assist in the dissemination of knowledge, but it cannot replace the moral courage, vulnerability and accountability that constitute genuine truth-telling. But, the greatest challenge posed by artificial intelligence is not the possibility of misinformation but the emergence of a communicative environment increasingly detached from moral agency. The risk is that society may become rich in information while becoming poor in responsibility. Such a condition would represent a profound crisis of authenticity, personhood and public discourse. From Foucault's concept of *parrhesia* and African philosophical understandings of

personhood, this paper has argued that truth remains fundamentally a human achievement because it depends upon the existence of vulnerable and accountable moral agents. The future of truth therefore depends not merely on improving the accuracy of machines but on preserving the human capacities that make genuine truth-telling possible. In an age of artificial intelligence, the most urgent task may be not teaching machines to speak but ensuring that human beings do not forget what it means to speak truthfully.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the philosophical foundations of truth-telling in the context of artificial intelligence, arguing that truth cannot be reduced to factual correctness or informational accuracy. Through an engagement with Michel Foucault's concept of *parrhesia* and African philosophical accounts of personhood and moral responsibility, the analysis has demonstrated that truth is fundamentally an ethical practice grounded in vulnerability, accountability and the lived reality of a moral agent. The central claim developed across the chapters is that truth, in its fullest sense, is not merely something that is stated but something that is enacted by a speaker who stands behind what is said and accepts responsibility for its consequences. The distinction between truth and factual statement has been central to this argument. While factual statements concern the correspondence between language and reality, truth-telling involves a deeper relationship between the speaker and their utterance. A statement may be factually correct without being truthful in the ethical sense if it is detached from responsibility, conviction, or sincerity. Conversely, truth-telling involves the presence of a subject who assumes ownership of what is said and is willing to bear the consequences of speaking. This distinction becomes particularly important in the age of artificial intelligence, where systems are capable of producing vast quantities of accurate information without any accompanying sense of responsibility or moral engagement.

Foucault's notion of *parrhesia* has provided a powerful framework for understanding this ethical dimension of truth. *Parrhesia* reveals that truth-telling is inseparable from courage, risk and vulnerability. The *parrhesiast* speaks truth not because it is safe or strategically advantageous but because they are ethically compelled to do so, even at personal cost (Foucault 2001: 15). This conception highlights that truth is not merely a cognitive act but a moral one. It requires a subject who is willing to expose themselves to danger in the name of honesty. In this sense, truth is deeply tied to the structure of moral agency and cannot be understood independently of the subject who speaks. African philosophical traditions on the other hand have further reinforced this insight by emphasizing the communal and relational dimensions of personhood. Within these traditions, personhood is not merely an inherent biological or psychological attribute but a moral achievement realized through participation in community and the fulfilment of ethical obligations (Menkiti 1984: 172). Speech, therefore, is never neutral; it reflects the character of the speaker and contributes to the maintenance or disruption of communal trust. Truthfulness becomes a virtue grounded in accountability to others rather than a purely abstract correspondence between propositions and reality. The authority of speech is thus inseparable from the moral standing of the speaker within the community.

When these two philosophical perspectives are brought into dialogue, a shared insight emerges: truth requires a responsible subject. Whether understood through Foucault's *parrhesiastic* courage or through African communitarian ethics, truth-telling presupposes a speaker who is capable of bearing responsibility, experiencing vulnerability and being held accountable for what is said. This insight becomes the basis for evaluating the

role of artificial intelligence in contemporary communication. Although AI systems can generate coherent, persuasive and often accurate statements, they lack the conditions necessary for moral agency. They do not possess consciousness, intentionality, or self-awareness, nor can they experience risk, shame, or responsibility. The implication of this limitation is not merely technical but philosophical. If truth is inseparable from moral agency, then artificial intelligence cannot be said to participate in truth-telling in the fullest sense. It may produce factual statements, but it cannot engage in the ethical practice through which truth acquires its human significance. Responsibility for AI-generated content ultimately rests with human actors such as designers, users, institutions and societies that deploy these systems. This displacement of responsibility raises important questions about the future of communication in technologically mediated environments.

One of the key concerns highlighted in this study is the emergence of what may be described as a crisis of truth without truth-tellers. In such a condition, communication becomes increasingly detached from the moral and existential commitments that traditionally grounded it. Language continues to circulate, but its connection to responsible subjects becomes weakened. As AI systems become more integrated into everyday communication, there is a risk that truth may be increasingly understood in purely informational terms, thereby neglecting the ethical dimensions that give it depth and significance. The danger is not simply the proliferation of misinformation but the gradual erosion of the practices through which individuals take responsibility for what they say. This development has broader implications for authenticity, personhood and social trust. If communication becomes increasingly mediated by systems that lack accountability, there is a possibility that human beings themselves may become less engaged in the practices of reflection, judgment and moral responsibility that constitute authentic speech. The paper relies on Heidegger's critique of idle talk and Foucault's concerns about *parrhesia*, to suggest that such a shift could lead to a communicative environment rich in information but poor in ethical substance. In such a context, truth risks becoming detached from the lived experience and moral courage of those who speak it. However, the conclusion of this paper is not one of technological rejection but of philosophical clarification. Artificial intelligence, while limited in its capacity for moral agency, remains a powerful tool for information processing and communication. Its value lies in its ability to assist human beings, not to replace the ethical structures that make truth meaningful. The task, therefore, is not to eliminate AI from communicative practices but to ensure that its use does not obscure the essential role of human responsibility in truth-telling. This paper affirms that truth remains a fundamentally human achievement. It depends upon the existence of vulnerable, accountable and morally engaged subjects who are willing to stand behind their words. Neither technological sophistication nor informational accuracy can substitute for this condition. Truth is not merely what is said; it is what is said by someone responsible for saying it. Preserving this understanding in an age of artificial intelligence is essential for maintaining the ethical foundations of communication, trust and communal life. The future of truth, therefore, is inseparable from the future of moral agency itself.

References

- Arendt, H. (1967). *Between past and future: Eight exercises in political thought*. Viking Press.
- Fasiku, G. C. & Adinoyi, A. P. (2025), "Vulnerability as Meaning: Reflections on the Loss of Human Fragility in Transhumanist Futures." *Abuja Journal of Humanities*. 6(2), 240-248.
- Foucault, M. (2001). *Fearless speech* (J. Pearson, Ed.). Semiotext(e).
- Gyekye, K. (1997). *Tradition and modernity: Philosophical reflections on the African*

- experience*. Oxford University Press.
- Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and time* (J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson, Trans.). Harper & Row. (Original work published 1927)
- Menkiti, I. A. (1984). "Person and community in African traditional thought". In R. A. Wright (Ed.), *African philosophy: An introduction* (pp. 171–181). University Press of America.
- Ramose, M. B. (1999). *African philosophy through Ubuntu*. Mond Books.
- Williams, B. (2002). *Truth and truthfulness: An essay in genealogy*. Princeton University Press.
- Foucault, M. (2011). *The courage of truth (The government of self and others II): Lectures at the Collège de France, 1983–1984* (G. Burchell, Trans.). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Searle, J. R. (1980). Minds, brains and programs. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 3(3), 417–457.
- Austin, J. L. (1962). *How to do things with words*. Oxford University Press.