

A conversation*

M. Foucault - G. Preti

PRETI. Professor Foucault, you have said that, as discourse, philosophy is first and foremost a diagnostic activity. I should like to ask you a question in that connection. Does making a diagnosis not entail placing oneself outside, raising oneself onto a different level of reflection, a level higher than the objective field to which the diagnosis is applied?

FOUCAULT. I should first like to explain that there are various ways of acquiring diagnostic knowledge. By diagnostic knowledge I mean, in general, a form of knowledge that defines and establishes differences. For instance, when a physician makes a diagnosis of tuberculosis, he or she makes it by establishing the differences that distinguish the tuberculosis sufferer from a patient suffering from pneumonia or any other disease. In this sense, diagnostic knowledge is obtained within a particular objective field defined by the disease, the symptoms etc.

PRETI. From outside the disease, however: the physician *talks* about the disease, but does not suffer from it; nor is his or her discourse a symptom of this or that disease.

FOUCAULT. Yes, inside an objective field, but outside the disease. On the other hand, however, there are forms of diagnostic knowledge that are not located inside an objective field, but which, on the contrary, make it possible to reveal a new objective field. For example, when Saussure defined what “*langue*” was compared with “*parole*,” or synchrony compared with diachrony, he revealed a new sphere of potential study, a new objective field that had not existed hitherto. That, too, is a form of knowledge through diagnosis, albeit a very different form from the first one.

* Or. in “I problemi della cultura. Un dibattito Foucault-Preti”, *Il Bimestre*, 22-23, settembre-dicembre 1972, pp. 1-4.

PRETI. In any case, however, one has to resort to metalanguage, a language for describing a language.

FOUCAULT. Not always. It depends on the science in question. I do not think it can be said that a medical diagnosis is an instance of metalanguage.

PRETI. If we consider the symptoms of the disease as signs, the physician's discourse is metalinguistic as far as those signs are concerned.

FOUCAULT. If you give metalanguage the very general meaning of discourse on a system of signs, it is true that it is a metalanguage, but only if you accept that very general definition.

PRETI. Metalanguage is a discourse on a discourse.

FOUCAULT. Yes, but then I will tell you that I am slightly worried, because the term "metalanguage" is being used nowadays in a very broad, very general, very lax sense. There is talk of metalanguage with regard to literary criticism, history of science, history of philosophy, and so on. So of course there may be talk of it in connection with medicine. I ask myself whether it would not be more advisable to go back to the stricter definition of metalanguage, the one according to which it is discourse through which the elements and rules for constructing a language are defined.

PRETI. Indeed, in mathematics, the metalanguage is the language used to formalize mathematics. Regardless of definition, however, the main aspect of the issue is a different one, by which I mean that the structure of the metalanguage may not be the same as that of the language.

FOUCAULT. It is possible.

PRETI. But then do I conduct my discourse inside or outside the "episteme" of my civilisation?

FOUCAULT. But what meaning do you attribute to the term "episteme"?

PRETI. The one you place on it.

FOUCAULT. Precisely, I should like to know what it is.

PRETI. As far as I am concerned, the good neo-Kantian that I am, I would cite categories.

FOUCAULT. This brings us to the point. What I called an “episteme” in *The Order of Things* has nothing to do with historical categories, by which I mean the categories that were created at a particular time in history. When I talk about an “episteme,” I mean all the relationships that existed in a particular era between the various fields of Science. I think, for instance, of the fact that, at a given point, mathematics was used for research in physics, that linguistics or, if you prefer, semiology, the science of signs, is used by biology (for genetic messages) and that the theory of evolution was used by 19th century historians, psychologists and sociologists or served as a model for them. All these phenomena of relationships among the sciences or among the various “discourses” in the various scientific spheres go to make what I call the “episteme” of an era. So the “episteme,” as I understand it, has nothing to do with Kantian categories.

PRETI. But when you refer, for example, to the concept of “order” in the 17th century, is it not a category?

FOUCAULT. I have simply observed that the problem of order (the problem, not the category), in other words, of the necessity of introducing an order among a series of numbers, living beings and values arises in many different disciplines simultaneously in the 17th century. This makes for communication among those different disciplines, with the result that, for example, the person who set out to create a universal language in the 17th century was fairly close in his approach to the person who set himself the problem of cataloguing living beings. It is a problem of relationships and communication among the various sciences. This is what I call an “episteme”; so it has nothing to do with Kantian categories.

PRETI. But I call them categories, because they are formal, they are universal and they are empty.

FOUCAULT. Do you regard historicity, for example, as a category?

PRETI. Yes, it is a category of the culture of the last century.

FOUCAULT. But that is not the Kantian meaning of “category.”

PRETI. It depends on how one reads Kant.

FOUCAULT. Then I acknowledge that mine are categories as well, in that sense.

PRETI. Let us move on now to a different issue. I should now like to ask you a question about your interest in Nietzsche. Which is the Nietzsche that attracts you?

FOUCAULT. Obviously not the one in *Zarathustra*; it is rather the one we see in *The Birth of Tragedy* and *The Genealogy of Morals*.

PRETI. The Nietzsche of geneses, in other words?

FOUCAULT. To put it in a nutshell, I will say that I find in Nietzsche a historical enquiry that does not centre on the "primeval," as many enquiries in Western thought do. Husserl and Heidegger challenge all our knowledge and its foundations, but they set out from what is primeval. However, this quest is conducted at the expense of any articulate historical content. What I like in Nietzsche is the attempt to challenge the fundamental concepts of knowledge, morality and metaphysics via positivist historical analysis, without going back to the primeval. However, this, of course, is not the only thing that interests me in Nietzsche.

I find another, more important aspect in his writings: the challenging of the primacy, or, if you prefer, the preference, accorded to the subject in the Cartesian and Kantian sense: the subject as consciousness.

PRETI. That is the very point on which I wanted to put another question to you. I have the impression that you, like the majority of French philosophers, see the subject as coinciding with consciousness.

FOUCAULT. It is not so in my case, but it is true that the overwhelming majority of philosophers from the 17th to the 19th century has identified subject with consciousness. Indeed, I would say that it is true of 20th century French philosophers as well, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty included. I think that this subject-consciousness identification at the transcendental level has been a feature of Western philosophy from Descartes to the present day. Nietzsche launched one of the first attacks, or at any rate, one of the most vigorous ones, on that identification.

PRETI. It is the consciousness as subject of the “I think,” but what I do not understand is the position of the consciousness as object of an “episteme.” If anything, consciousness is an “epistemising” tool, not something that is itself “epistemisable.”

FOUCAULT. Are you referring to the transcendental consciousness?

PRETI. Yes.

FOUCAULT. There you are: I am not a Kantian or Cartesian precisely because I reject an identification at the transcendental level between the subject and the thinking self. I am convinced that there are, maybe not actual structures, but certain operating rules for knowledge that have arisen over history, and within which the various subjects are positioned.

PRETI. I am afraid that all this is a trap in which we are imprisoned. What you say is undoubtedly true; on the other hand, however, it is this very transcendental consciousness that influences the shaping of our knowledge. It is true that the transcendental consciousness emerges at a particular stage in our history and civilisation, in a given situation, but it is also true that once it has emerged, it proves constitutive, not constituted.

FOUCAULT. I understand your position, but it is on that very point that our positions diverge. You strike me as a Kantian or Husserlian, whereas I strive, in my entire enquiry, to avoid any reference to the transcendental, which would be a condition of possibility for any knowledge. When I say I strive to avoid it, it does not mean that I am sure of succeeding. My method at the moment is a regressive one, I would say: I seek to adopt an increasingly detached approach with a view to defining the historical conditions and transformations of our knowledge. I am seeking to historicise to the utmost, so as to leave the transcendental as little scope as possible. I cannot rule out the possibility of finding myself faced, one day, with a residue that cannot be eliminated, which will be the transcendental.

PRETI. Let us try to address the question from a different point of view. Given that you are said to be a structuralist (if you will pardon me), I should like to know whether you think there is any relationship at all between the concept of “structure” and the Freudian concept of the “unconscious.”

FOUCAULT. I will answer very freely, all the more so in that I will begin with a statement of principle: I am by no means a structuralist.

PRETI. I know that, but your reputation places you among the structuralists.

FOUCAULT. I am forced to keep repeating it. I have never used any of the concepts that may be considered typical of structuralism. I have on several occasions mentioned the concept of structure, but I have never used it. Critics and journalists are not like philosophers, sad to say; they do not know the difference between “mentioning” and “using.” So if I talk now about structure and the unconscious, I do so utterly from the outside, and I do not consider myself bound by the answer I give. Moreover, I am somewhat unversed in this field. So I will say it strikes me that a major discovery has come about over recent years (I am talking as a historian of culture): the discovery of the existence of formal relationships, which may also be called structures, in the very areas that seem entirely ruled by consciousness: language and formal thought, for instance. It has been discovered, too, that these relationships existed and operated without the subject being really conscious of them (“conscious” primarily in the psychological sense, and then in the Kantian or Cartesian sense of the term). Linguistics, logic and ethnology have thus led to the discovery of a sphere that escapes consciousness in the commonly accepted sense of the word. Must that sphere be included in the realm of the unconscious, in the Freudian sense? The scholars of psychoanalysis have been faced with two alternatives. One is to assert that this “structural” unconscious, so to speak, is subordinate to the unconscious, in the Freudian sense. Luckily, many scholars have avoided that error or naivety and have posed the problem in different terms.

. . . What we need to know is whether the unconscious as expounded by Freud is not, in turn, an area in which that same system of formal relationships – those which operate in language, which operate in formal thought, and are also to be found in certain social structures – is at work. Perhaps this structural unconscious is also embedded, so to speak, in the Freudian unconscious too. That is the point at which many psychoanalysts’ line of enquiry has arrived.

PRETI. But would this “structural” unconscious not coincide with Jung’s unconscious?

FOUCAULT. Definitely not. It may certainly be said that it is not an individual unconscious, in the sense in which psychoanalysis commonly understands the term. Nor, however, is it a collective unconscious, which would be a sort of collection or store of archetypes at the disposal of all individuals. This “structural” unconscious is neither one nor the other.

PRETI. I should like you to explain your interest in a writer like Sade. Maybe it is on account of the dissolution of the “self” or a particular aspect of eroticism, that sort of algebraic combinatorics that he adopts in his works?

FOUCAULT. Sade’s great endeavour, despite the even pathetic aspect it may have, lies in his attempt to usher the disorder of desire into a world dominated by order and classification. What he calls libertinage means precisely that. The libertine is a man possessed of a desire sufficiently strong and a mind sufficiently cold to comprise the whole potential of his desire in an absolutely exhaustive combinatorial system.

PRETI. . But do you not think that the death of desire is arrived at in Sade? Do those combinations that lack both the timing and the dynamics of desire, consisting solely in abstract sexual acts combining in every possible way, not lead to a situation that no longer has anything erotic about it, as the erotic turns into a mere pretext?

FOUCAULT. I can tell you two things in this connection. It is obvious that if I want to make love (or rather, when I want to make love), I do not resort to Sade’s prescriptions or combinations, not so much because I would not like to try them, but because I have never had the chance to. So I agree with you that, in these sequences of perfect combinations, desire cannot really grow or split, as it does in the works of Sade. But I do not seek a prescription for making love or a stimulus to make it in Sade. I regard Sade as a symptom of a curious movement that came about within our culture at a time when a manner of thinking that was fundamentally dominated by representation, calculation, order and classification gave way, at the same time as the French Revolution, to an element that had hitherto never been considered that way: desire, sensuality...

PRETI. Then you regard Sade as the last champion of the “esprit de géométrie”?

FOUCAULT. Precisely. I would say that I see Sade far more as the last relic of the 18th century (on account of the background he came from as well) than as a precursor of the future. The question, if anything, is why on earth we take such a passionate interest in him these days. Anyway, I do not deify Sade, I do not hold him up as the prophet of the present day; as I was saying, I take a fairly constant interest in him because of the historical position he occupies, at the point of transition between two forms of thought.

PRETI. Why do you think our era takes such an interest in Sade?

FOUCAULT. I think the answer might be that when Sade attempted to fit the infinite force of desire into the combinations of representation, he was forced, I would almost say on top of everything else, to oust the self from its predominant position. The self thus becomes just one element within a combination. The self reigned supreme in 17th and 18th century philosophy and thought. Later on, in the 19th century, the self was still uppermost, in the philosophy of will, albeit in a different way. However, as soon as the attempt is made to unite the two currents of thought, the self comes to be dissociated and scattered among the various combinations. I believe that one of the most noteworthy features of our age is the challenge to the predominance of the self. This dissociation characteristic of our age is already to be found in Sade.

PRETI. But do you not rather believe that Sade's popularity is due to the pansexualism that pervades our era, to the revolt against every order and every brand of morality? I think many people see Sade as representing, first and foremost, the liberation of Eros, the mind thumbing its nose at virtue, the victory of anarchic Juliette ("Vice") over timid, conformist Justine ("Virtue").

FOUCAULT. True, however I take the view that the desire to cast aside sexual taboos has always existed. Man has always been hungry, in sexual terms; no society without rules governing sex, and hence without attempts to get around the established rules, exists. We have to look at the form that this call takes on nowadays. It is true; we now back Juliette against Justine. But by doing so, do we not end up by admitting, by subscribing to a type of sexuality that goes beyond the subject, that, so to speak, lies behind the self and transcends it? That is why the type of sexuality demanded these days contributes, in practice, to the dissociation

of the self, at least in the form understood from Descartes onwards. We see, indeed, that the fundamental theme of Sade's *Juliette* is as follows: "I will do to you everything that my desire dictates, but it is understood that you will do the same to me. No part of you will escape my desire, and no part of me will escape yours." That way, neither of the two controls his or her body any longer, and each one's Eros communicates with the other's without the subject itself exerting real control. It is that very orgiastic nature of contemporary sexuality that ends up by challenging the position of the subject.

PRETI. But many people are talking about the liberation of the Eros in terms of an assertion of the self, Marcuse, for example.

FOUCAULT. I believe that Marcuse is seeking to use the old themes inherited from the 19th century to salvage the self, in the traditional sense.

PRETI. As I said, I take a different view. Pansexualism is a phenomenon similar to contestation: no more authority, no more morality. The battle being waged is not so much against the subject as against society as we know it, the establishment.

FOUCAULT. But when I talk about the particular forms that present-day eroticism takes on, I do not mean that it is the only factor leading to a dissolution of the individual. I believe we are going through a profound crisis of our civilisation, in which the self, the individual person in traditional terms, is being called back into question.

PRETI. You have written that, these days, moral problems are entirely reducible to political problems and sexual problems. Why?

FOUCAULT. I frequently happen to say something in order to stop thinking it, which is why I then have some difficulty arguing the point in question. Be that as it may, I made that assertion because I thought it and wanted to continue thinking it.

PRETI. You have gone even further: you have said that, all in all, sexuality may be traced back to politics...

FOUCAULT. I expressed that in the form of a hypothesis. However, what I meant was that nowadays, in our age (and I am still speaking as a

historian, although I try to be a historian of the present), moral problems hinge solely on sex and politics. I will give you an example. For a very long time, in the 17th and 18th centuries, the issue of work, or lack of work, was (or rather seemed like) a moral problem. People who did not work were regarded not as unfortunates unable to find work, but as evil idlers who refused to work. In other words, there was a work ethic; I need say no more, because Max Weber has said all this far better than I ever could. We are perfectly well aware nowadays that someone who does not work is someone who can find no work; he is an unemployed person. Work has left the realm of morality and entered that of politics.

PRETI. You are clearly not Italian...

FOUCAULT. At any rate, I find it hard to deny that work is no longer a moral problem these days. I mean, I would like someone to cite me an example of a moral problem, acknowledged as such by everyone, or by a large number of people, that is not traceable to sex or politics. Do you think my reduction is a little too radical?

PRETI. . I am from a different school. I see morality as a hierarchy of values, all values. Every time we have to make a choice between values, we face a moral problem.

FOUCAULT. But do you not think that it is sex and politics that define those values nowadays?

PRETI. . They define moral problems' most visible and most controversial part. I would say they rather define the ethical life (Hegel's *Sittlichkeit*). You are right as far as *Sittlichkeit* is concerned, not with regard to individual morality (Hegel's *Moralität*). The two things are by no means identical. Ethical life is custom: the customary, or in any case required, conduct of an individual in a social group, in his relations with the members and institutions of that group, or in any case in their "sight." Custom has its duties and its prohibitions, its idols and its taboos, which vary over history, from one era to another, from one place to another (a border checkpoint suffices to change ethics.). Morality is far broader and takes in ethics as a particular set aspect of itself, but it is compliance with values as such and in general (with "all" values) as an object of will ("ends"); it is, furthermore, compliance with the hierarchy of values every time some of them appear irreconcilable in terms of their

attainment, meaning that there is a conflict (hence the need for a choice). Robinson Crusoe has no ethical problems on his desert island, but he continues to have a morality, and, possibly, moral problems. Morality is a category of the objective mind, ethical life merely a particular value (and it may be merely instrumental if, as I think, the individual carries a higher value than the group).

FOUCAULT. We still face the same problem here: you believe in the transcendental, whereas I do not.

PRETI. But why do you think sexuality may be traced back to politics?

FOUCAULT. It is a question I have asked myself, but I am not at all sure. I meant that it might perhaps be argued that if a number of aspects of our sexual life (marriage, the family, the seduction of under-age girls, etc.) raise moral problems, it depends on a certain political situation.

PRETI. But everything we do is linked to the political situation. We no longer live in Rousseau's forest; we always come up against the law and the institutions in every sphere of our lives.

FOUCAULT. I was not talking about that. I was wondering how on earth sexuality can raise moral problems; I am not talking about problems of repression, but about exclusively moral problems. In what sense does whether or not to abandon a woman constitute a moral problem? I am not thinking in terms of the law, which varies from country to country. I think it comes about because certain deeds are linked to the political relationships that define our society.

PRETI. But what difference do you see between political relationships and social relationships?

FOUCAULT. I call everything that has to do with the class struggle "politics" and everything that derives from it in terms of repercussions on human relationships and the institutions "social".

PRETI. Everything that has to do with the struggle for power, and which thus constitutes, if anything, just one aspect of the class struggle, I regard as politics. Everything that has to do with human relationships in general is social.

FOUCAULT. If we give “politics” the sense that you attribute to the term, which (I have to acknowledge) is more precise, my definition does not carry weight. I, too, bestow on politics the meaning of struggle for power; but not power in the sense of government or state: it is a term that takes in economic power as well.

*(This debate was edited by Michele Dzeduszycki)
Translated from Italian by Alison Varley*