Dialogue or Drama? The Role of Language as Seen by Gadamer and Foucault

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Gadamer and Foucault, who were both influenced by Heidegger in different ways, took from him the notion of 'event' as what characterizes thinking: We think within an event. They both apply this notion to speech and, linked to it, to interpretation. Gadamer says that understanding or interpretation is an event (Geschehen) and Foucault uses Heidegger's expression in Being and Time of a 'history of the present' (Geschichte der Gegenwart) to describe what he does, which he also calls a 'turning into events' (événementialisation) or 'eventifying'. Both Gadamer and Foucault want to treat what they investigate as an event, analysing it in its singularity and, at the same time, they recognize their own interpretation to be an event and a singularity. For both, interpretation has to be mindful of its situation and of the status of the interpreter. Let us start with two preliminary remarks about their connection to Heidegger and to each other.

About their connection to Heidegger, Gadamer repeatedly acknowledged his profound debt to Heidegger in many essays, acknowledging, for example, that 'Heidegger's criticism of transcendental inquiry and his thinking of "the turn" form the basis of my treatment of the universal hermeneutic problem.' In the case of Foucault his acknowledgement is more muted, but no less explicit. 'Heidegger has always been for me the essential philosopher .... All my philosophical development has been determined by my reading of Heidegger .... Nietzsche and Heidegger, this was a philosophical shock!' Indeed, whoever has read Foucault from The Order of Things (1970) to his last lectures at the Collège de France on the hermeneutics of the subject (1982–4) can only marvel at how much Heidegger's influence must have been at play in his views and at how few references are made to Heidegger. When he examines the genealogy of the subject in The Hermeneutics of the Subject, answering a question from the audience, he says:

Let's say that there have not been that many people who in the last years – I will say in the twentieth century – have posed the question of truth. Not that many people have posed the question: What is involved in the case of the subject and
truth? And: What is the relationship of the subject to truth? What is the subject of truth, what is the subject who speaks the truth, etcetera? As far as I am concerned, I see only two. I see only Heidegger and Lacan. Personally, myself, you must have heard this, I have tried to reflect on all this from the side of Heidegger and starting from Heidegger.

Despite this common Heideggerean influence, Gadamer and Foucault did not interact with each other. While Gadamer made some general references to Foucault, Foucault did not return the favour. The index of his massive, more than 3,400 pages long, *Dits et écrits* does not even list Gadamer. The reason for the lack of interaction may be due to the fact that they saw themselves on opposite sides when it comes to philosophical investigation: Gadamer founded a 'philosophical hermeneutics' while Foucault rejected and dismissed hermeneutics. When Gadamer put much of the energy of his 'philosophical hermeneutics' in 'dialogue', Foucault's main focus was on 'discourse' and, later on, 'practices'. Yet despite their profound differences they offered us two original approaches to language that have several commonalities and share the same goal of avoiding the two extreme views that language is an 'expression' of some mental content or a 'dissemination' of any intent. In addition, they view language in its use by speakers, in its performance, but a performance that is not scripted as pragmatics theorizes it. While a performative act, such as 'I promise', can be uttered by anybody and is submitted to the rules of a promise, the performance Gadamer and Foucault present, independently of each other, is a living one – a dialogue for Gadamer and a drama for Foucault. What they reintroduce in the speech act is, in a sense, the perlocutionary that the speech act theory had not theorized. But they reintroduce it not as external to speech, as if it were a mere effect on listeners, but precisely as what gives traction to speech and has a return effect on speakers. For both Gadamer and Foucault, speaking means accepting a position of vulnerability, of not knowing at the moment of speech what will happen. Dialogue, Gadamer tells us, may take an abrupt turn, putting the speaker on the spot as someone who has to answer. For Foucault, speaking is a drama that requires courage on the part of the speaker for being put on the stage of a representation, one that consists in telling the truth. In both cases, dialogue and drama, the speaker is transformed by speech.

Because their own interpretation is also made through language – the interpretation they perform and the works they wrote – and because the object of their investigation is also of a linguistic form – documents or books – they apply their views on speech as event to their own task as interpreters. Understanding (Gadamer) or analysis (Foucault) is an event as well. To say as they do that their own investigation is an event, *Geschehen* or *événement*, is not just the view that an account 'takes place' at some time and thus, in an obvious sense, 'happens', nor the view that there may be a 'performative' aspect to thinking or speaking such that an 'act' of interpretation or speech 'happened'. Rather, they both link the investigation and the object of investigation. The view they both defend is a two-pronged approach. First, the ontological make-up of things is permeated through and through by language (Gadamer) or is formed discursively (Foucault). Second, their own enterprise of description is also historically situated.
Thus, their own discourse tries to account for the singularity of what they investigate from the vantage point of the singularity that their discourse represents.

This leads them to reject the common-sense approach, so entrenched in philosophy, that the object of investigation is static, has an intrinsic self-identity independently of any discursive framework in which this object becomes salient to human concerns. They thus accept the view that there are multiple accounts—‘interpretations’ for Gadamer and ‘discursive formations’ for Foucault. However, against historicism or relativism, they both claim that the ‘what’ that is interpreted or discursively formed cannot be appealed to as an independent entity over against so-called multiple accounts. Interpreters and investigators operate from their present and bring their present with them when approaching their object of investigation. Rejecting both a direct realist view—that we can recover what really happened and what was really meant—and a reconstructive view—that we project our own questions and ideas onto what we investigate—both Gadamer and Foucault recognize that the correlation between the investigation and the object of investigation is in fact productive of history. When we investigate what is no longer present, we make history. This new approach has significant consequences for what we call the truth by accounting for the place of the concrete investigator in the discourse about truth. In the first part I examine Gadamer’s notion of dialogue in language and in the second part what Foucault calls the dramatic of speech.

**Gadamer: Dialogue in language**

In the third part of *Truth and Method* Gadamer explores what he calls Sprachlichkeit—‘the dimension of language’—which is the beating heart of interpretation. It is a dimension and thus not a mediation, for example, between the mind and objects, which would take the form of the expression of concepts. Rather, Sprachlichkeit is the soil out of which concepts arise. Gadamer’s focus is on language in its exercise or in its performance. He was struck by how the early Heidegger made use of the medieval distinction between the actus signatus—what is conveyed and thus named by the proposition—and the actus exercitus—the performance of the act or the act in its exercise. Language is not just a tool, but it has an operation. What Gadamer draws from this is that we cannot strictly separate the thinking from the speaking or the conceptual dimension from the linguistic dimension. Sprachlichkeit is thus not ‘linguisticality’, as it is often translated, but precisely a dimension that overcomes the false opposition between concepts and words. Language operates, is in exercise, and we are in it.

We are in the dimension of language, and the ‘are’ is not a location or a situation but an ontological condition. Being ‘in’ language negatively means, first, that when speaking we do not have mastery over language as if only choosing the expressions for what we have already articulated in concepts. It also means, second, that it is not language that speaks as if we were an echo chamber for another voice. Positively, being ‘in’ language means, third, that what is verbal is inchoately conceptual or is, as Gadamer uses the expression, conceptual in its very exercise as verbal. Thus, language
neither expresses what would already be thought at some nonverbal level nor directly speaks through us, using us as channels or vectors. As he explains,

To be sure, what comes into language is something different from the spoken word itself. But the word is a word only because of what comes into language in it. Its own physical being exists only in order to disappear into what is said. Likewise, that which comes into language is not something that is pregiven before language; rather, the word gives it its own determinateness. 7

When Gadamer states that being is language, it is not what Karl-Otto Apel calls a 'linguicism' — everything is language — nor a Derridean dissemination — ‘the subject is a function of language’9 — but the recognition that it is only within an articulation in words that something can gain saliency and enter the realm of what makes sense. To Derrida’s emphasis on the dissemination of signs — which Gadamer examines in a masterful manner in his essay ‘Hermeneutics on the Trail’10 — and to Heidegger’s stress on the original speaking of language, Gadamer re-affirms, after Plato, the articulating role of the dialogue.

The dialogue he considers is not to be understood according to a communicative theory that already presupposes ‘subjects’ or ‘communication partners’, as if the origin of sense were to be found in the mind (intuition, volition, judgement, etc.). Dialogue is not primarily a speaking to and fro, but more fundamentally an exchange that leads the partners in discussion to find their own status as speakers. It is a performance with its effects on subjects: listeners, but also speakers. Dialogue thus has a historical dimension, turning the subject away from the maker of sense and back towards a historically situated speaker who is at the receiving end of a process that started before the speaking.

There is indeed a dissemination and there is indeed a first speaking before our actual personal speech, but the first initiative is neither by signs nor by language. The first impetus in language as dialogue is the existential and historical situation of those who speak, in which situation a dialogue partner has the power to initiate a discussion or redirect a debate. Gadamer attempts to keep the Sprachlichkeit or dimension of language away from any reduction to a semiotic or metaphysical instance, and to locate it in its activity or what he calls a ‘play’, within which, we, human beings, find our place — always historically situated — and our voice — always responsible and accountable. ‘Language … has its real being only in the fact that the world is presented in it,’11 and because we are in the world we are also ‘involved’ in language in ways that can never be fully clarified. This is not due to a lack, but to the fact that both objects and subjects change and are mutually transformed by their interactions.

To say, as in the passage above, that the world is presented in language has significant consequences for how we understand both the object and the subject. On the side of the object or ‘reality’, if thinking is this ‘coming to understanding’ with others in a dialogue and if language is the vehicle for those interactions, reality cannot lie frozen in the position of a referent of discourse. Because there is language and because language is in operation, what we call reality is in fact what is susceptible to be talked about or it is what is negotiated in the dialogues, the interactions among people, and in the
language used. Reality then is of the order of a transaction. It is what is negotiated by being spoken of, by being presented in discourse. Gadamer writes:

Something is placed in the center, as the Greeks said, which the partners to the dialogue both share, and concerning which they can exchange ideas with one another. Hence reaching an agreement on the subject matter of a conversation necessarily means that a common language must first be worked out in the conversation. This is not an external matter of simply adjusting our tools; nor is it even right to say that the partners adapt themselves to one another but, rather, in a successful conversation they both come under the influence of the truth of the object and are thus bound to one another in a new community. To reach an understanding in a dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one's own point of view, but being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were.12

Against any simplistic idealism, this negotiated reality or this reality that is of the nature of a transaction is not fixed, but always susceptible to be presented again. It is thus not simply what is projected by speakers – as if it were a mere construction – but rather what sustains the dialogue in the ambiguous sense of what nurtures it – what Sartre called the 'coefficient of adversity' – and what underlies it. Reality is interpreted, but it is not a fabrication. Dialogue determines the boundaries of the transaction as well as the framework for the vocabulary used in the transaction and the parameters agreed upon.

Things, Gadamer tells us, have a language: "The language that things have – whatever kind of things they may be – is not the logos ousias, and it is not fulfilled in the self-contemplation of an infinite intellect; it is the language that our finite, historical nature apprehends when we learn to speak."13 Dialogue thus offers stability and change; as transactions vary so does the reality that is transacted. There is thus no relativism of scheme over content, as, for example, Davidson understands it.14

With regard to the subject, this emphasis on the productive aspect of language means that subjects are interpreters. We recall that 'understanding' is for Heidegger in Being and Time one of the fundamental 'existentials' or ontological components of human existence, besides 'situatedness' (Befindlichkeit) and discourse (Rede). Because subjects are interpreters, they do not occupy a neutral position and cannot take a sideways view on reality. They are themselves situated in history; they fall into historical times within a language so that interpretation has to remain mindful of its own 'performance'. Interpretation is thus less a matter of judgement and more a matter of 'responding'. As Gadamer succinctly puts it, understanding is an 'event'.15 It is not an event in the sense of something that happens, but in the sense that history is part and parcel of the interpretation. History has an 'articulating' function so that the object of interpretation can neither be definitely 'past' and done with nor stripped of its historical garment. Because understanding or interpretation is an event, things, facts, and people are approached within the event with the result that any talk of an 'in itself' that things may have before being taken up by history can only be a matter for nostalgia – we can never fully understand – or dogma – sciences tell us what reality is made of.
To interpret from within the event thus means, on the one hand, to pay attention to the historical situation of what we investigate and, on the other, to be mindful of our own historical position. We recognize here Gadamer's famous 'fusion of horizons'. What allows history to have this articulating role is precisely language in the form of dialogue. This is how language can be the engine of history or, as Gadamer says, language is 'the experience of the world' (Welterfahrung). This view of the object of understanding being formed by understanding blurs the line between what is linguistic and what is conceptual. We recall that Sprachlichkeit names that dimension of language that is also conceptual. Gadamer makes us sensitive again to the fact that concepts, which we tend to take as rigid tools and free from genesis, actually have a birthplace. After Heidegger, but in a manner far more concrete and clear, Gadamer argues that concepts originate in language as it is used. Concepts, Gadamer says, do not predate language but are nurtured by language as used, grow out of it so that language neither precedes thinking, as if it were another thinking 'before' the actual thinking, nor merely expresses concepts. The 'hermeneutic experience', as Gadamer characterizes interpretation, is thus not 'an experience of thinking' (Erfahrung des Denkens) as an exercise that tries to 'free itself entirely from the power of language'. It is rather 'an activity of the thing itself [ein Tun der Sache selbst], an action [Tun] that, unlike the methodology of modern science, is a passion, an understanding, an event that happens to one'. We are transformed by our thinking.

This entanglement of language and thinking tries to avoid a sequential path from the world to the mind through concepts. Instead of a linear movement it is rather a spiral, as depicted in the famous 'hermeneutic circle'. We have to start where we are, but the starting point is always modifiable, re-engulfed by the path trodden. It is precisely the task of thinking to maintain the movement so that the positions of subjects and objects do not become rigid but remain placeholders. What matters, as Gadamer says, is to render 'passable again the path from the concept to the word so that thinking speaks to us again'. As a dialogue, thinking is a living enterprise that must keep us from confusing thinking with an argumentative game or solving puzzles. What keeps thinking alive, relevant, grafted onto the world as it goes is the exchange between language and concepts. As Gadamer recommends, 'We only should not think ... as though philosophical concepts were available in some warehouse to be simply hauled out from there ... we should follow the semantic life of language and this means: go back to the point where the concept emerges out of speaking itself, out of the "situatedness in life" [Sitz im Leben]. Concepts are fluid or, we could say, operative, as opposed to well-established rigid categories of thought or classification of reality.

When discussing subjectivity, for example, Gadamer reminds us after Heidegger that the word 'subject' comes from the Greek hupokeimenon and the Latin subjectum, which both mean what lies at the basis. This exercise does not give us a truer concept of the subject but only allows us to have a feel for the kind of transformation that took place when Descartes turned the subject from the sense of 'what lies at the foundation' into a 'thinking thing' that thinks itself. By doing what Gadamer recommends, we have not substituted another concept to the concept of subject and we have not eliminated the notion of subjectivity. We have only opened up a gap in the obvious character of subjectivity, which makes us aware of our own position as interpreters and of our own assumptions. This is the first step for envisaging and imagining other ways of thinking.
The life in words that concepts enjoy is precisely what allows them to intervene in reality, turning reality into a transaction. 'In a concept something is put together [zusammengegriffen], combined together [zusammengefasst]. The word says that the concept seizes [greifen], grabs [zugreifen], and puts together [zusammengreifen] and, in this way, conceives [begreifen] something. Thinking in concepts is thus an active thinking that is intrusive [eingreifend] and far-reaching [ausgreifend]. In another remarkable conceptual analysis, again following Heidegger, Gadamer explains how ousia, which means landed property, became our philosophical term 'substance'. The landed property indicates the 'worth' of a farmer and allows the farmer to have a public persona or a social worth and thus to enjoy presence. To use the term 'landed property', ousia, about a thing and say that a thing has an ousia is to say, as Plato and Aristotle did, that, like a farmer can have 'worth' and a social presence through a landed property, a thing can be individuated as the thing it is, can be present as a thing, and can dwell through what makes its worth. The abstract sense of 'substance' follows from there as what constitutes a thing as such and what remains the same underneath changes. These examples of 'subject' and 'substance' show that it is not so much the concept that organizes experience, according to common philosophical sense, as it is experience that gives rise to the concept, although not at the same time. Concepts are laden with experiences and this sedimentation in the course of time represents a dimension of history at the heart of our concepts that is our blind spot. 'Concepts are not arbitrary tools of human understanding by which it organizes or controls experiences. Rather, concepts have always already grown out of experience; they articulate our understanding of the world and predelineate thereby the course of experience. Thus, with any concept through which we think, a pre-decision has already been made, whose legitimacy we no longer verify.'

Gadamer obviously does not equate words with concepts. Concepts are indeed what remain the same, for example, through translations from Greek and English. They have their own identity in the sense that they can be repeated in their context. What he points out, however, is that this ideality has a genesis. 'What philosophical reflection discovers is that there are pre-decisions in concepts that are so fundamentally hidden that one is somehow entrapped within their interpretive horizon.' It is because of the 'pre-decisions' that have been made in the concepts we use, pre-decisions we did not make, that we need to remain mindful of the genesis of such concepts and of the danger of dogmatism in any discipline when the genesis of concepts is erased. For such an erasure of genesis is tempting for any discipline, which can then present its concepts as 'self-evident' or necessary. Such a gesture, which is all too common in disciplines that present themselves as 'science', will secure power and authority. Gadamer saw with dismay how the dominance of the sciences took hold of the whole realm of human affairs by branding as 'non-scientific' or 'inexact science' what did not follow the model of the natural sciences. By reminding us that our concepts have a genesis, Gadamer reshuffles the power game in which the conceptual order came to have the upper hand. For, when we are mindful that our concepts came from somewhere, were born at some time, and were borne by some predecessors, our blind faith in the sciences and our admiration for the so-called scientific rigour of their knowledge may appear in a different light: as an ideological bias and a tool to power.
Gadamer follows Husserl's fundamental critique of the formalization of nature, which started with Galileo, and borrows Husserl's notion of an 'oblivion of the subject'. By this Husserl means that scientists tend to forget that their theories, models, hypotheses, or experiments were 'designed' by human beings and originated from a lifeworld. They forget themselves as investigators. Gadamer, for his part, characterizes this oblivion of the subject as the subject taking itself out of the equation. 'This is ... the naivety of historical objectivism: to accept such an overlooking of oneself [Absehen von sich selbst] .... . The naivety of so-called historicism consists in the fact that ... in trusting the methodology of its own procedures it forgets its own historicity [Geschichtlichkeit].'

Against this overlooking of oneself as investigator, we can bring out the historical inscription of any investigation and interpretation, and thus of any 'subject'. This gives us the opportunity, as philosophers, to trace the path from the concept back to the fluid field of human experience. To re-open such a path from concepts back to experience allows us to examine the pre-decisions at the heart of the concept. Hermeneutics is precisely this investigation that tries to re-awaken the voice of history in our language and concepts in order to prevent concepts from solidifying and desiccating, in order, thus, to keep them alive.

By highlighting the Sprachlichkeit or dimension of language in our intellectual endeavours, Gadamer wants to protect thinking from falling into the methodology of a discipline and maintain it as a practice. What makes thinking a practice is dialogue as what gives traction to thought. Thinking occurs when concepts remain within the flux of language, understood in their dialogical nature and operating at the service of existence. This is how dialogue is the engine of history. Dialogue is an exchange that is a constant unsettling of the subject. Someone starts in the position of speaker but is always susceptible to be questioned and put in the position of a listener. To apply the dialogical structure to subjectivity means that the subject is in the position of someone who is addressed, whose position is subsidiary to the existence of a dialogue.

There is, however, an important corrective that Gadamer stresses in the 'dimension of language' in order to differentiate it from social constructivism and from Derridean deconstruction. The historical dimension of concepts is not itself a level of meaning or a layer of meaning that could be retrieved as such or could be used to relativize the concepts we use or the content of what someone says. It is not the basis for a generalized genetic fallacy, holding that what we say is relative to who we are, where we live, what culture or religion we belong to. Such a view would simply and naively postulate another layer of concepts behind the concepts we use. The historical dimension, for Gadamer, cannot be reified in such a way as a super-subject. Thus, history is not a voice speaking through us, but only a resource that allows us to make fluid again the path from words to concepts. The dimension of language is also not a reduction of the subject to a play of differences that would eliminate the very notion of subjectivity as a mere effect of language, as Derrida sees the subject as a 'function of language'. Rather, treading the path again between experience and concepts aims at making our concepts less rigid than they tend to become and allows us to find a small gap in them, a dehiscence through which questions can be raised so that we may
question our own concepts and make them dialogical again, disclosing the linguistic flesh out of which they are made. To emphasize the dimension of language and to consider both subject and object of investigation in their event-character does not amount to replacing the subject by a super-subject of historical or societal forces nor trivializing it as a mere effect. It only aims at making both subject and object more complex than well-delineated entities.

Let us now turn to another form of 'thinking of the event': Foucault's views on speech as drama.

**Foucault: The drama of speech**

As he explains in his last lectures at the Collège de France on what he, remarkably, calls a 'hermeneutics of the subject', Foucault revisits his former works and claims that his focus had been all along on the 'experiences' of subjects. In *The Order of Things* and *Archaeology of Knowledge* the focus was on discursive objects but, he says retrospectively, in the sense of the kinds of experiences that made the particular kinds of discourse possible in the Renaissance, the Classical Age, or the nineteenth century. In his investigations of madness or the prison the focus was also, he retrospectively claims, on the kinds of experiences that were associated with madness or criminality as well as the kinds of experiences the institutions of the psychiatric hospitals or the prison system made possible for those in the institution and outside. Finally, in his last lectures the focus was on the experiences of subjectivity or the practices through which subjects form themselves.

This focus on experience situates the objects of his investigation – whether analysis of wealth, life, language, or madness, prison, sexuality or, last, subjectivity – in their own specific historical context. This was clearly stated in *The Order of Things* and *Archaeology of Knowledge*. The different discourses or utterances that Foucault examined were treated as made of 'statements' and understood as 'events'. But in the course of his development Foucault came to realize more and more that his own approach consisted in 'turning into events' what he investigated. He saw this as a 'procedure of analysis' and created the word *événementialiser*, 'to turn into event', 27 to name this kind of analysis. In addition, besides using the notion of 'event' to name the object of his investigation and the approach he chose for investigating such an object, he also theorizes his own work as a 'pragmatics'. His own works, he says, are also 'events', for which he uses the term 'dramaturgy'.28 They set something on stage and 'dramatize' what he investigates.

We thus have three levels at which we can apply the term 'event': methodologically it is how Foucault treats the documents he examines – as events or, as he says, as 'monuments', instead of 'documents'. Second, this kind of analysis is a way of slowing down the continuity and progress of history in order to detect the 'events' that have ruptured it. As a result, this analysis 'produces events,' 'turns into an event,' or 'eventifies' what it analyses. Third, this means that, when looking at Foucault's own works, we can see their pragmatic nature as setting up the drama in which what these works investigate unfolded. Let us examine each of these three levels of 'event'.

The object of investigation as an event

In *The Order of Things* and *Archaeology of Knowledge* Foucault uses the notion of event to characterize the specific difference of a 'statement' compared to a sentence, a proposition, or a performative.

We must grasp the statement in the exact specificity of its occurrence; determine its conditions of existence, fix at least its limits, establish its correlations with other statements that may be connected with it, and show what other forms of statement it excludes . . . . The question proper to such an analysis might be formulated in this way: what is this specific existence that emerges from what is said and nowhere else?²⁹

Giving as an example the sentence 'Dreams fulfill desires', which has been used by Plato and Freud, among others, he argues that, although we have the same sentence (once translated) and the same proposition, which made the translation possible, we have two different statements because we have two different events.³⁰

In *The Archaeology of Knowledge* he uses four parameters to identify a statement: (1) a referential, (2) a subject, (3) an associated field, and (4) material conditions. The starting point is not a 'referent', which is assumed to exist in a self-evident status as universal and, as such, susceptible to be 'referred to'. Rather, Foucault chooses to start with discourses. He wants to examine what these discourses produce, what he calls their 'referential'. Different from a referent, a referential is a range of objects or a kind of object that a particular discourse forms and brings into existence. Even if Plato and Freud may have the same referent when speaking about dreams, the referential of their statement is different: Plato's interest in the psyche and passions, on the one hand, and Freud's interest in drives and the unconscious, on the other. What Foucault wants to emphasize is that, by describing what has been said as an event, we offer an additional layer of description to what the history of ideas or the history of a discipline can do. Once we focus on the event of the arising of sentences and discourses in time, the referent of those sentences loses its stable and self-evident aspect and comes to be seen as the object produced by those sentences.

A statement is not confronted (face to face, as it were) by a *correlate* – or the absence of a *correlate* – as a proposition has (or has not) a referent, or as a proper noun designates someone (or no one). It is linked rather to a 'referential' [*référentiel*] that is made up not of 'things', 'facts', 'realities', or 'beings', but of laws of possibility, rules of existence for the objects that are named, designated, or described within it, and for the relations that are affirmed or denied in it.³¹

This also means, then, that the subjects Plato and Freud, besides being seen as constituting subjects and authors of their own thoughts, can be envisaged within the event as placeholders, as those who have been made possible by a certain set of circumstances and a certain kind of discourse to utter the sentences they did and be understood as meaningful and relevant. This is the second parameter of a statement. The subject of the statement is not 'identical with the author of the
formulation'. For the author is considered to be 'the cause, origin, or starting-point of the phenomenon of the written or spoken articulation of a sentence' or the 'meaningful intention which, silently anticipating words, orders them like the visible body of its intuition'. By contrast, the subject of a statement is a placeholder, 'a particular, vacant place that may in fact be filled by different individuals'. For the kind of investigation that Foucault conducts, this means that the issue is no longer to find out what was meant but rather to determine 'what position can and must be occupied by any individual if he is to be the subject of it'. The subject of a statement is thus neither a psychological subject, as of a sentence, nor a transcendental subject of propositions guaranteeing their validity. Instead of being seen as the origin and guarantee of a statement the subject has in fact been prepared, has been granted its status and given voice by a certain discursive practice, of Greek thinking (Plato) or nineteenth-/twentieth-century European scientific clinical discourse (Freud).

The third parameter is an associated field. A statement does not stand in isolation but is part of a set of other statements that are linked to practices. For example, the notion of 'homicidal monomania' that appeared at the end of the nineteenth century could be talked about because there was a new field or a new discourse: psychiatry. What Foucault claims is that the proposition including the phrase 'homicidal monomania' is dated in its birth. The consequence is that, when seen in its historical situation — as a statement — it also loses its validity across time and, in this case, has indeed lost it; we no longer use this notion. The statement has a repeatability that is limited by the field with which it is associated and cannot be repeated outside such a field. Foucault can then claim that the statements that he identifies in the Classical Age are not only different from statements made in the nineteenth century, but that they could not have been made in the nineteenth century. 'One cannot speak of anything at any time.'

The fourth parameter is about material conditions. The materiality of the statement consists not only in the words said and recorded but also in the conditions that obtain at the time of the utterance, social, economic, political. It is precisely because of these material conditions that the term 'archaeology' can be used meaningfully. Although it is not a task of digging anything material, it is a task of uncovering conditions of possibility that lie behind the statement so that the event of its production can be isolated, identified, and described.

The advantage of treating statements as events is that both the thing and the word are 'bracketed' and the trap of the reference is avoided: we are not dealing with a word referring to a thing or a concept having an extension, regardless of time and history. As Foucault says, 'From the kind of analysis I have undertaken, words are deliberately absent as are things.' Or more forcefully:

What, in short, we wish to do is to dispense with 'things'. To 'depresentify' them [de-présentifier] .... To substitute for the enigmatic 'treasure' of things anterior to discourse, the regular formation of objects that emerge only in discourse. To define these objects without reference to their ground in things [sans référence au fond des choses], but by relating them to the body of rules that enable them to form as objects of a discourse and thus constitute the conditions of their historical appearance.
The analysis of statements, then, is a historical analysis, but one that avoids all interpretation: 'It does not question things said as to what they are hiding, what they were "really" saying, in spite of themselves, the unspoken element that they contain ... but, on the contrary, it questions them as to their mode of existence ... what it means for them to have appeared when and where they did — they and no others.' In our example above, Plato could not mean what Freud meant and vice versa.

This focus on statements instead of sentences or propositions allows Foucault to speak of a 'historical a priori', which he borrows with a significant transformation from the Husserl of the *Crisis*. This paradoxical formulation aims at identifying a condition of possibility for discourse, but one that is not formal. It is not 'a condition of validity for judgments' but 'a condition of reality for statements'. By this he means 'the conditions of emergence of statements, the laws of their coexistence with others, the specific form of their mode of being, the principles according to which they survive, become transformed, and disappear'. When investigating these conditions of emergence, we in fact investigate the 'archive' of a certain discursive era, and this investigation is properly called an 'archaeology of knowledge'. The 'archive' is supposed to name 'that which, at the very root of the statement-event, and in that which embodies it, defines at the outset the system of its enunciability .... It is that which defines the mode of occurrence of the statement-things; it is the system of its functioning'.

The methodological difficulty pointed out by critics is that this archaeology as an analysis does not account for the ground on which it stands. Even worse, it cannot apply its method to the present. Regarding the latter point, Foucault wholeheartedly acknowledges it. 'It is not possible for us to describe our own archive, since it is from within these rules that we speak, since it is that which gives to what we can say — and to itself, the object of our discourse — its modes of appearance, its forms of existence and coexistence, its system of accumulation, historicity, and disappearance.' Regarding the former point — the position from where he speaks — Foucault's position has shifted quite significantly. At the time of *The Archaeology of Knowledge* he responded that it was not his task to determine the standpoint from which he speaks. This is a task for his interpreters and critics. 'For the moment, and as far ahead as I can see, my discourse, far from determining the locus in which it speaks, is avoiding the ground on which it could find support .... Its task is to make differences: to constitute them as objects, to analyse them, and to define their concept.' He simply claimed for his own discoveries a certain positivity that can serve as a 'diagnosis'. As a correlate of this diagnosis he also accepts the fact that his own discourse is not anchored, but remains free-floating, even with regard to its relevance. 'I accept that my discourse may disappear with the figure that has borne it so far.'

Later on, he came to theorize his own situation and specify the kind of diagnosis he was doing. He did this in two steps: in presenting his analysis as a way of treating objects as 'events' — this is the second sense in which he uses the notion of event — and in arguing that his own works are a 'pragmatics', dramatizing some phenomena and thereby contributing to 'the history of the present'. This is the third sense in which he uses the notion of event. Let us examine the second sense of 'event' that Foucault uses, which is part of a method to turn the objects of his investigation into events, what he calls *événementialisation*. 
Analysis as a ‘Production of Events’ (événementialisation)

Foucault characterizes his overall enterprise as an effort 'to treat the instances of discourse that articulate what we think, say, and do as so many historical events'. The word *événementialisation* that he creates to name this process is easily understandable as 'making of something an event', 'turning into an event', 'eventifying'. He calls this a 'procedure of analysis'. It is thus a methodological principle consisting in injecting ruptures in what may appear as the continuity and linearity of historical development. I consider history as a succession of fragments, a succession of chance occurrences [hasards], of violences, of ruptures. This strategy of ruptures has different components. I see four. First, it consists in 'causing a singularity to irrupt: to show that it was not necessary after all, it was not so self-evident after all that mad people were recognized as mental patients; it was not so self-evident after all that the only thing to do with delinquents was to incarcerate them'. Instead of having a linear causal explanation, we can now see many connections, what Foucault calls a 'multiplication of finer causes' (*démultiplication causale*). For example, the practice of incarceration as an event can be analysed through the process of penalization, of internment, of imprisonment proper to criminal justice.

Second, and negatively, the strategy of rupture undermines our position in time as a reference point from which we can look back at history as what preceded us and prepared us. The shortcoming of such a view is that past epochs are viewed as preparing us through what look like tentative and misguided preparatory steps. This is often how disciplines tend to see their prehistory: they have evolved by discarding previous views and theories as pseudosciences, and are progressing towards a telos of better scientificity. In addition, the privilege of hindsight confines the past to be a variation of what we know so that the past is rendered tamed and innocuous, as what can be safely discarded for a better present. Third, and positively, the strategy of ruptures unmasks our own contingency by taking away any self-evidence our science, theories, and unassailable concepts - truth, madness, subject of rights - may have. This takes the form of neutralizing 'referents' or what Foucault calls a 'rupture of self-evidence' against a 'historical constant' or 'anthropological universals'. In Foucault's methodology it meant 'to reject “madness”, “deliquency” or “sexuality” as universals'.

Fourth, the strategy of *événementialisation* also aims at bracketing the subject as author of statements or discourses so that the works Foucault investigates are manifestations of practices within which a subject is constituted. Thus, the *événementialisation* shifts the focus away from what subjects represent in their mind towards practices: what people do, for example, what did people do with the mad, the delinquents, or the sick. 'What matters is to take as a homogeneous domain of reference not the representations that human beings have of themselves, not the conditions that determine them without them knowing it, but what they do and the manner in which they do it.'

This method of analysis by turning objects of investigation into events is not historicism, but, Foucault argues, the opposite. Historicism presupposes a universal whereas his 'problem' is, he says, 'totally the opposite. My starting point is the decision, which is both theoretical and methodological, that says: let us suppose that universals do not exist, and then I ask history and historians: how can you write history if you
do not accept a priori that something like the state, society, the sovereign power, the subjects exist?" There is a third sense in which Foucault uses the notion of 'event', besides the characterization of the object of investigation and his method of analysis.

**Philosophy as a dramaturgy of events**

Because he rejects hermeneutics, which, he claims, tries to recover another speech hidden behind the text investigated, he also rejects - without mentioning it - any 'fusion of horizons' between the object to be interpreted and the interpreter, which is how Gadamer understands the 'hermeneutic experience'. What Foucault gives us - the result of his analysis - is, he says, itself part of an event, what he calls 'an event in thought' [un événement dans la pensée]. At the beginning of his lectures on the *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, examining the care of the self in antiquity, he writes:

> What I would like to show you, what I would like to speak about this year, is this history that made this general cultural phenomenon (this exhortation, this general acceptance of the principle that one should take care of oneself) both a general cultural phenomenon peculiar to Hellenistic and Roman society (anyway, to its elite), and at the same time an event in thought [un événement dans la pensée].

This notion of an 'event in thought' comes from Heidegger's 'history of the present' and, before him, from Nietzsche who, in his *Untimely Considerations*, talks about the use of history for the present. Foucault recognized that his genealogy is Nietzschean in its inspiration and design. He appropriates Nietzsche's view of history as being for the sake of the present and understands this standpoint as a recognition of one's own contingency when speaking and thinking. Instead of being a critique or a critical investigation, the question Foucault asks is rather, in reference to Kant's question about the Enlightenment, 'What is our present? [actualité]? What is the present field of possible experiences?' Foucault calls it 'an ontology of the present, an ontology of ourselves.'

In this third sense of event, Foucault can now respond more convincingly to his readers who wondered from the beginning about Foucault's own situation and standpoint. In *The Archaeology*, as we saw, he said that it was not his question or problem. But in his last lectures he accepts to answer this question by characterizing his own discourse in *L'usage des plaisirs* as a 'pragmatics'. His studies are, he says, a 'philosophical exercise' whose stakes are 'to learn to what extent the effort to think one's own history can free thought from what it silently thinks, and so enable it to think differently'. Let us ponder this a bit. He already said in *The Archaeology* that his works are a 'diagnosis'. Now he makes this characterization more specific: it is a diagnosis of our present and he performs this diagnosis as a 'pragmatics'. He writes,

> I am not interested in the eternal, I am not interested in what does not change, I am not interested in what remains stable under the shimmering of appearances. I am interested in the event ... . It is here again Nietzsche who was the first. I think, to define philosophy as the activity that helps us know what is going on and
what is going on now. In other words, we are permeated by processes, movements, forces. We do not know those processes and forces and the role of the philosopher is probably to be the diagnostician of those forces, of diagnosing the present time [l'actualité].

As a diagnosis of the present Foucault directly links the object of investigation to the investigator or, more accurately, the event of some discursive practices to the event of the analysis. By taking into consideration the position of the speaker – for example, Foucault's position – when analysing a phenomenon, Foucault performatively, as it were, shows what is involved in any investigation. We mentioned Husserl's concern about an 'oblivion of the subject' and Gadamer's analogous concern of taking ourselves outside of the picture. Foucault explains his 'remedy' to this oblivion (to use Nietzsche's terms of a 'remedy' to the 'poison' of history).

In my books I try to grasp an event that seemed to me, that seems to me important for our present times [actualité] while being an event of the past. For example about madness, it seems to me that, at one point, there was in the Western world a separation between madness and non-madness. At another moment in time, there was a certain manner of grasping the intensity of the crime and the human problem caused by the crime. It seems to me that we repeat all those events. We repeat those events in our present time and I try to grasp what the event is under the sign of which we were born and what the event is that continues to permeate us.

This remedy to the oblivion of the subject goes farther than a fusion of horizons. Foucault connects the truth of what is said with the historical situation of utterance or emergence, as we saw in his first two senses of event, and, now he adds a third term: the ethos of the speaker or investigator. This is how his 'pragmatics' works, by acknowledging in the investigation the three forces of aletheia, politeia, and ethos. This means, remarkably, that Foucault as an author is also part and parcel of what he is doing and saying. As was the case for the 'statement' in The Archaeology, the subject of discourse is a placeholder that is made possible by rules of discourse in a specific set of material conditions. This applies to Foucault as a subject as well.

My book is a fiction, pure and simple: it is a novel, but I am not the one who invented it. It is the relationship of our present time and its epistemological configuration to all this mass of statements. As a result, the subject [Foucault] is indeed present in the totality of the book, but it is the anonymous 'one' who speaks today in all that is said.

However, he further grants an efficacy to this pragmatics so that it is not just a pragmatic way of analysing, but the analysis itself has pragmatic effects in the world. His analyses, he says, 'will separate out, from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think.' Let us see how this pragmatics functions.
His books, he says, are part of a 'dramaturgy': they stage dramas. We saw that in fragmenting history he turned some discourses into events. Now he presents these events as a 'drama' of thought. It is a drama because what he does is a 'dramatization of events' or an 'intensification' of phenomena. It is not that his works re-enact the drama of people in the past caught in the discourses and practices of medicine or psychiatry, but rather that his works dramatize some events – the arising of natural history or the emergence of the discourse of psychiatry. By so doing, he intensifies the objects he investigates in the sense of making them salient, branding them as noticeable, taking them out of the tranquil continuity of a discipline. The efficacy of his works is thus in turn 'eventful'. He writes, 'I would like to write bomb books [des livres bombes], that is to say, books that would be useful precisely at the moment when someone writes them or reads them. Afterward, they would disappear .... Books should be kinds of bombs and nothing else.'

The efficacy of his works consists in a liberation of the objects and the subjects. In the case of objects, when seen within such a pragmatics, as staged and dramatized, they are protected from being assessed and judged according to present standards given present interests. In the case of subjects, once we acknowledge that the event as a singularity cannot be separated from the thinking of the event, and thus that our own thinking has an 'event-character', we have a chance to think as if we were outside our present or, rather, as if we saw our present from another, for example, Greek, perspective. We see our present within history and this gives us, as already quoted, 'the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think'.

This has significant consequences for what we call the 'truth'. While in phenomenology the fact that consciousness is always 'consciousness of' already forced some rearrangement of epistemology and ontology, Foucault goes much farther. The truth is in fact produced so that the analysis has to attend to this process of 'making true', which is historically situated. If the truth is of statements, which are themselves 'produced' by a certain methodological attitude that turns its objects into events, the truth has an ontological link to history. Truth itself is of the order of the event.

Truth does not belong to the order of what is, but of what happens, of the event. Truth is not discovered [constatée] but elicited [suscitée]: production instead of apophantics. Truth is not given through the mediation of instruments. It is provoked by rituals: it is drawn by ruses, it is caught on occasions: strategy and not method. Of this event thus produced upon the individual who is lying in wait for it and who is struck by it, the relationship is not of the object to the subject of knowledge. It is an ambiguous relationship, reversible, bellicose of mastery, of domination, of victory: it is a relationship of power.

In short, to the dramaturgy of the analysis there corresponds an 'alethurgy' on the side of the statements. 'Alethurgy would be etymologically the production of truth, the act through which truth manifests itself.' Linked to the disappearance of rigid referents characterized by universality, truth is, before being a property of judgements and propositions, what 'emerges' from practices. For example, the truth of 'homicidal monomania' emerged from within the new discipline of psychiatry and has since then
disappeared. History, Foucault says, is 'the history of the emergence of the games of truth (jeux de vérité). It is the history of "veridiction" understood as the forms according to which the discourses that are susceptible to be true or false find their articulation on a domain of things."

'Veridiction' is the name that Foucault gives to truth in its practice or to truth in the event of its emergence. Veridiction is linked to an 'alethurgy'. Before what is said can be assessed as true - the dictum as verum - there needs to be a true saying - a dicere that is verum. When we attend to the event of truth and focus on the production of truth or alethurgy, the goal is to convey on any phenomenon under investigation its meaning, but one that is of a specific kind: it is a meaning that is, Foucault tells us, 'variable, historical, and never universal'. This is due to the focus on the singularity of what is investigated and the recognition of the singularity of the investigation itself. We thus have a hermeneutics of singularity within a thinking of the present. In other words, we attend to what is historically unique - it is thus 'historical' - but viewed from our present - it is thus 'variable'. The combination of the singularity of the subject with the singularity of the object can dispense with universality - it is thus 'never universal' - because this is not what the analysis aims at bringing to the fore.

The modality of the truth-telling proper to the thinking of the event will be 'polemic', as Foucault says in Le courage de la vérité. It is polemic because the meaning to be given to a phenomenon will locate this phenomenon in its unique historical place and such a meaning, of necessity, will be 'variable'. However, 'variable' and 'never universal' are not to be understood negatively, but positively as what we see as 'unique' in the past from our perspective that is also seen as contingent. 'Polemic' is thus also to be understood positively as what questions existing descriptions of phenomena by adding new descriptions of these phenomena. We multiply the descriptions, but do not create competing accounts of the 'same' phenomena. We rather carve out things and facts in different 'discursive objects' or as different matrices of experience.

The polemic aspect that is at the heart of Foucault's views on interpretation could not be more at odds with Gadamer's whole enterprise of hermeneutics as centred on reaching an understanding. Gadamer too wants to do justice to the singularity of the object of investigation. However, he maintains a claim to universality for the hermeneutic experience itself. The truth is reached in a dialogue. In addition, no matter how different interpretations may be, the fusion of horizons guarantees a compatibility even among radically different interpretations. Dissent is thus always local, for Gadamer, confined to the broad mutual understanding of the existing dialogue. We can certainly disagree in a dialogue and may well engage in a polemic, but the very existence of dialogue prevents the polemic from undermining the possibility of reaching an understanding. Even when he has to acknowledge that his dialogues with Derrida could not get traction, Gadamer continues to see this as an accidental problem, not as a fundamental issue. His fusion of horizons is the bearer of hermeneutic optimism, free from drama.

Yet despite their multiple differences, what both Gadamer and Foucault offer are not merely two options on the same phenomenon of speech or interpretation, but rather two alternate accounts of how interpretation works. The originality of their approaches is, first, to explain how interpretation and the object of interpretation
are intrinsically linked by focusing on the role of language in both the interpretation process and the formation of the object. It is, second, to articulate the place of the interpreter within the process of interpretation, thereby proposing a notion of truth that is a historical process and a transformation of the subjects. For both, the truth is not only about the interpretation itself, but more originally and fundamentally about how the interpretation can transform the interpreter.