

## The Self as Sign: Derrida on Husserl

*Introduction*

Jacques Derrida wants to show that *all* truth claims rest on the *delusion* that however complex or ambiguous a thought or a statement may be, it is meaningful in some straightforward way, at least to the one who thinks the thought or makes the statement. On the basis of this delusion, philosophers are said to offer as an explanation the very problem at hand. Assuming at the outset that one can distinguish between the intrinsic and the extrinsic, the meaningful and the meaningless, the thought and its expression, etc., philosophers go on to construct justifications for these distinctions, and call these justifications "explanations". Derrida offers an example of this in his criticism of Husserl in the collection of essays entitled *Speech and Phenomena*.<sup>1</sup> We will begin by using these essays, the title essay in particular, as our primary example of Derrida's view of language, and its relation to the problem of subjectivity as we have delineated it, for two reasons: first, the argument resembles, in many respects, the criticism of Husserl offered in the first chapter here, which may lead to misleading assumptions regarding apparent similarities between Derrida's position and the ideas being proposed here. Furthermore, since the selection of books under discussion is

---

<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, transl. David B. Allison (Evanston, 1973). *Le voix et le phénomène* (Paris, 1967). Some commentators have noted important similarities between Derrida and the later Wittgenstein. See, for example, Newton Garver's preface to the English edition of *Speech and Phenomena*. A more detailed comparison can be found in Garver and Lee Seung-Chong's *Derrida and Wittgenstein* (Philadelphia, 1994). See also Henry Staten, *Wittgenstein and Derrida* (Oxford, 1985). The accuracy of such comparisons will not be taken up as such; on the other hand, one of the purposes of this section is to distinguish between the position taken by the present study and the view of language and subjectivity propounded by Derrida.

based upon their usefulness for the investigation at hand, that book's explicit concern with the very problems described in our first chapter allows us to address those problems within the terms already discussed rather than introduce a new set of concepts serving the same purpose, but relying upon another philosophical terminology as the starting point.<sup>2</sup>

One difficulty with focussing on Derrida's position on any particular issue is that, for Derrida, any given set of philosophical problems is necessarily articulated in a language that assumes a certain formulation of the question, and a particular sense to the terms in which the problem is formulated. Any attempt to problematize a philosophical concept, such as that of the sign or of subjectivity, must be made from "within"; otherwise, one risks a naïve realism with regard to the object of the discourse. Thus for Derrida to make his point, he must situate himself "strategically", as he often says, in this play, rather than claim to be a neutral spectator, the possibility of which he calls into question (without, of course, stating so explicitly – as we shall see, for Derrida, that would be metaphysics). He writes: "The movements of deconstruction do not destroy [*solliciter*] structures from the outside. They are not possible and effective, nor can they take accurate aim, except by inhabiting those structures."<sup>3</sup>

This stylistic peculiarity may well be justifiable on conceptual grounds (that is, Derrida's premises force him to write in this manner, if he is to be consistent), but it renders a thematic discussion of any particular issue difficult, since the associations that Derrida makes bring together numerous themes simultaneously. We will therefore address his treatment of the problem of signification, a central theme for Derrida, only as much as is necessary for understanding his

<sup>2</sup> All of Derrida's deconstructive writings "take aim", as he says, from within a text or group of texts of a given thinker. A conceptual investigation of the sort that we are attempting, from Derrida's point of view, necessarily assumes a metaphysical bias at the outset, since it assumes that there is something "beyond the text", one that is more than a matter of "strategic convenience", which it purports to be addressing.

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, transl. G. Spivak (Baltimore, 1976), p. 24. *De la Grammatologie* (Paris, 1967), p. 39: "Les mouvements de déconstruction ne sollicitent pas les structures du dehors. Ils ne sont possibles et efficaces, ils n'ajustent leurs coups qu'en habitant ces structures."

critique of the traditional notion of subjectivity, even as modified and refined by Husserl.<sup>4</sup>

### 1. Expression and Representation

Derrida begins by addressing the opening moves of the first chapter of the first of Husserl's *Logical Investigations* ("Expression and Meaning"). The entire project of the *Investigations*, according to Derrida, rests on a distinction introduced in the first paragraph, namely, the distinction between *Ausdruck* (expression) and *Anzeichen* (indication), which Husserl regarded as two senses of the word *Zeichen* (sign). The purpose of the original distinction was to locate a logical grammar in the form of pure expression, in the meaning of the sign as sign, apart from any empirical content. The indicating function, on the other hand, could occur without any intentional meaning. For Husserl, signs functioning indicatively (such as marks on paper) do not *express* anything unless they happen to fulfill a meaning as well. Yet, as Derrida points out, Husserl makes clear that in real communicative speech, meaning is *always* interwoven (*verflochten*) with indication. But since Husserl's aim is to ground knowledge in what is *essential*, the indicative function of communicative speech is highly problematic. Indication, unlike pure expression (which we will discuss presently), has an irreducible aspect of contingency, since it is about facts or states of affairs and not about meaning intentions. The physical side of language, its communicative medium, must be radically separated from what is expressed. In other words,

<sup>4</sup> This section is neither intended to be a thoroughgoing account of Derrida's theory of the sign, nor to make any great exegetical claims with regard to *Speech and Phenomena*. The latter is used here as one example of poststructuralist theorizing about language and subjectivity in order to distinguish our own position from such theories. The technical discussion in this section of the chapter, especially regarding the indeterminacy of signification, owes much to the original analysis in Michael Gustavsson's *Textens gränser*, Philosophy Licentiate thesis in Comparative Literature (Uppsala, 1993). One of the most careful and comprehensive attempts to work out the consequences of Derrida's philosophy for what the author calls "the problem of reflection" is Rodolphe Gasché's *The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection* (Cambridge, MA & London, 1986). For a general exposition of *Speech and Phenomena* that does not assume prior acquaintance with continental philosophy, see Staffan Carlshamre, *Language and Time: An Attempt to Arrest the Thought of Jacques Derrida* (diss., Gothenburg, 1987), pp. 69–141.

if language is not to be understood as indicative through and through, with the contingency and ineffability implied by this, the signifier must be distinguished from the signified.

The problem with this distinction is that the conditions for the possibility of "pure expression", a meaning-intention untouched by the happenstance facts of spoken or written language, are never fulfilled. Signs are always already "entangled" or "interwoven" in the web of indicative signification. Husserl notices, of course, that all *real* meaning is entangled in a web of indicating functions, but argues that this does not prevent us from making a distinction, *in principle*, between these two functions of signs. What Derrida points out, in short, is that the *possibility* of that distinction arises from within the communicative capacity of language, that is, *in indication*. The separation between *de facto* and *de jure*, existence and essence, reality and intentional function, "is discovered only in and through the possibility of language".<sup>5</sup>

Derrida commends Husserl's critical impetus to ground truth in lived experience rather than in some posited realm of ideas or sense-data. On the other hand, Derrida's deconstruction of Husserl is intended to show that this very *vigilance* is a continuation of the metaphysical tradition, precisely because it presupposes the consciousness or thinking subject capable of relying on itself as final arbiter of the true and the false, the meaningful and the meaningless. Husserl's attempt to reduce away or bracket out the arbitrariness and contingency of mere "psychic life", the life of the empirical ego, from the life of the meaning-bestowing transcendental ego, is a conceptual distinction the possibility of which resides only in and through the spontaneity of self-producing signs functioning indicatively, that is, in and through living communicative discourse.

Derrida's argument will not be rehearsed in detail here. His main critical point, one that he has repeated in other contexts, is this: a sign *cannot* be some original event in the consciousness of the speaker if it is to signify; it is only iterable on the condition that it is iterable.<sup>6</sup> To put it more simply, if expression is founded on intentional

<sup>5</sup> SP, p. 21/VP p. 21

<sup>6</sup> See also his discussion of Saussure in OG and his reply to Searle in *Limited Inc.*, transl. Samuel Weber (Evanston, 1988).

communication, then it must be communicable. In order for it to be communicable, it must be repeatable, otherwise it could not communicate:

A sign is never an event, if by event we mean an irreplaceable and irreversible empirical particular. A sign which would take place but 'once' would not be a sign; a purely idiomatic sign would not be a sign. A signifier (in general) must be formally recognizable in spite of, and through, the diversity of empirical characteristics which may modify it. It must remain the *same*, and be able to be repeated as such, despite and across the deformations which the empirical event necessarily makes it undergo.<sup>7</sup>

This observation carries with it "formidable" consequences for phenomenology, since all that has been said thus far about the sign applies equally to the act of the speaking subject: "the primordial structure of repetition that we just evoked for signs must govern all acts of signification."<sup>8</sup> According to Derrida, the speaking subject, in speaking of itself (its thoughts, desires, etc.), necessarily reproduces itself in speech, just as the conscious subject, in thinking about itself, represents itself to itself. This means that the original thought, or the thinking "I", both of which are necessarily caught up in indication, are produced out of the indicating function of language. The "I" is *never* a source of thinking or speech, but is rather a representation of an instance of thinking or speaking, that is, of language. In the words of Alphonso Lingis: "The subject can operate in a signifier-system only by himself being formed by that system; one can enter into speech only as an element of language; the subject that issues signs is himself a sign."<sup>9</sup> *Any* attempt at getting at the thinking subject captures a thought or an articulation, that is a representation. A representation to what or whom? A representation

<sup>7</sup> SP, p. 50/VP, p. 55: "Un signe n'est jamais un événement si événement veut dire unicité empirique irremplaçable et irréversible. Un signe qui n'aurait lieu qu' «une fois» ne serait pas un signe. Un signe purement idiomatique ne serait pas un signe. Un signifiant (en général) doit être reconnaissable dans sa forme malgré et à travers la diversité des caractères empiriques qui peuvent le modifier. Il doit rester *même* et pouvoir être répété comme tel malgré et à travers les déformations que ce qu'on appelle l'événement empirique lui fait nécessairement subir."

<sup>8</sup> SP, p. 57/VP, p. 63f: "Ce que nous venons de dire du signe vaut du même coup pour l'acte du sujet parlant. [...] Or la structure de répétition originnaire que nous venons d'évoquer à propos du signe doit commander la totalité des actes de signification."

<sup>9</sup> Alphonso Lingis, *Deathbound Subjectivity* (Bloomington, Indianapolis, 1989), p. 2.

to something that cannot itself be anything but a representation (of language to itself): "Speech [le discours] represents itself; it *is* its representation. Even better, speech is *the* representation of itself."<sup>10</sup>

For Derrida, the idea of pre-linguistic meaning, what he calls a "transcendental signified" is inherently and irrevocably metaphysical; it presupposes the "mind" as a locus for pictures or impressions that can only inadequately be expelled or expressed into the outer world of the perceptible, in the form of acoustic images or visual marks. It follows from this view of the signified as something "inner" and "present" (to consciousness), that the signifier must be something perceptual, a physical medium for the communication of inner thoughts. The signifier is thereby reduced to a mere representation, and, as such, a distortion of the original. But what Derrida has attempted to demonstrate, here as elsewhere, is precisely that the inner/outer couple is an expression of language itself, that is, the opposition is one coming out of language, and represents not some ontological fact, but rather an empirical fact about what is or is not *conceivable for us* given the language that we have. Regarding the traditional dichotomies between inner and outer, sensible and intelligible, the signifier and the signified, Derrida writes: "*Of course*, it is not a question of 'rejecting' these notions; they are *necessary* and, at least at present, *nothing is conceivable* for us without them."<sup>11</sup> Against the backdrop of Derrida's critical remarks concerning Husserl's distinction between expression and indication provided above, we are now in a position to examine this positive claim about what is or is not possible for us to conceive, and the conception of subjectivity as an effect of language that attends it.

<sup>10</sup> SP, p. 57/VP, p. 64: "Le discours se représente, est sa représentation. Mieux, le discours est la représentation de soi." See also *Positions*, transl. and annotated, Alan Bass (Chicago, 1972), p. 33: "the presumed interiority of meaning is already worked upon by its own exteriority. It is always already carried outside itself. It already differs (from itself) before any act of expression. [...] Only on this condition can it 'signify.'" *Positions* (Paris, 1972), p. 46: "l'intériorité présumée du sens est déjà travaillée par son propre dehors. Elle se porte toujours déjà hors de soi. Elle est déjà différente (de soi) avant tout acte d'expression. [...] C'est à cette seule condition qu'elle peut être «signifiante»."

<sup>11</sup> OG, p. 13/G, p. 25: "*Bien entendu*, il ne s'agit pas de « rejeter » ces notions: elles sont *nécessaires* et, aujourd'hui du moins, pour nous, *plus rien n'est pensable* sans elles." (emphasis added.)

In what follows, we wish to point out two related problems. To begin with, Derrida's claim that the inner/outer distinction is built into our language and thinking generally, and not merely in certain specifically philosophical or theoretical ways of thinking, writing and speaking, is intimately bound up with the (traditional) view of language as a *system of signs*, rather than as the *use* of signs within various practices in our lives. Secondly, the view of the subject as an effect of language is a negative image of the traditional view of the subject as an *abstract unity* rather than a term the meaning of which cannot be disassociated from the contexts in which it is *actually* meaningful to speak of intentions, thoughts and beliefs.<sup>12</sup> Since it is these traditional metaphysical notions that Derrida wants to undermine, we will need to see how he can at one and the same time dismantle and preserve these notions.

Derrida coins the notion of *différance* (with *a* motivated by the present participle form of *différer*) from the verb *différer* (which means both "to differ" and "to defer") in order to call attention to the differentiating function of signs, as opposed to the passive sense of simply "being different from."<sup>13</sup> Recall that the requirement of iterability says that is necessary for signs refer to previous signs, lest they fail to signify at all. All articulations, be they oral or graphic, refer to other, previous articulations. It will also be recalled, however, that every sign must differ from previous signs; were they identical in every respect, there would not be different signs (or different articulations). No sign is meaningful unto itself; signs have meaning when and where they are in use, that is, in relation to other signs. They cannot be removed from their context and remain meaningful. Thus outside the play of signifiers in its entirety, any individual sign is meaningless, since the function of a sign is to signify, and it can only do this in relation to other signs.<sup>14</sup>

Derrida's notion of *différance* has a temporal aspect as well: a sign is always different from that which it is said to represent; an interpretation of a sign is always a new sign and the interpreted sign

<sup>12</sup> For reasons that will be worked out shortly, but for which the citation above already provides a clue, Derrida denies the possibility of rejecting the dichotomy as a false one.

<sup>13</sup> See e.g. Derrida (1972), p. 27/38f.; SP, p. 82/VP, p. 92; SP, p. 136f.

<sup>14</sup> "Différance", in SP, pp. 129–160.

is always in the past. Since the sign is a signification and articulation, it can only be said to be present when it is being articulated. As soon as the sign has been interpreted, it is no longer the sign it was, but a new sign which can in turn be articulated and interpreted, and so on. Thus *différance* can be understood as a negative relation to something that is never present. The upshot of all this is that signs cannot be treated as positive entities or identities; the identity or meaning of any sign is given only in its *differential relation* to other signs. But these cannot be in place until the previous sign's identity is established. Thus every meaning is perpetually postponed or deferred, as well as giving way to, or "deferring to" other meaning:

The play of differences supposes, in effect, syntheses and referrals which forbid at any moment, or in any sense, that a simple element be *present* in and of itself, referring only to itself. Whether in the order of spoken or written discourse, no element can function as a sign without referring to another element which itself is not simply present. [...] Nothing, neither among the elements nor within the system, is anywhere ever simply present or absent. There are only, everywhere, differences and traces of traces.<sup>15</sup>

On this account, all concepts are effects of *différance*, coming as they do from acts of signification, which themselves generate every form of discourse. No audible, visible, phonic or graphic "plenitude" or full self-presence can be the *ground* for meaning. Rather, the pure *trace*, although "it *does not exist* [...] its possibility is by rights anterior to all that one calls sign".<sup>16</sup> Signification is what makes signs possible, thus signs cannot signify meanings existing prior to the act of signification. Just as a phoneme or linguistic sound is *linguistic* because it already has *meaning*, a sign is significant, or a

<sup>15</sup> Derrida (1972), p. 26/37f: "Le jeu des différences suppose en effet des synthèses et des renvois qui interdisent qu'à aucun moment, en aucun sens, un élément simple soit *présent* en lui-même et ne renvoie qu'à lui-même. Que ce soit dans l'ordre du discours parlé ou du discours écrit, aucun élément ne peut fonctionner comme signe sans renvoyer à un autre élément qui lui-même n'est pas simplement présent. [...] Rien, ni dans les éléments ni dans le système, n'est nulle part ni jamais simplement présent ou absent. Il n'y a, de part en part, que des différences et des traces de traces."

<sup>16</sup> OG, p. 62/G, p. 92: "Bien qu'elle *n'existe pas* [...], sa possibilité est antérieure en droit à tout ce qu'on appelle signe [...]."

meaning is meaningful, because it is *signified*. For a linguistic expression to be a genuinely *linguistic* expression, it must already be meaningful in some sense; similarly, there can be no unsignified or pre-linguistic meaning (or transcendental signified). What kind of meaning could such a "meaning" have? To speak of meaning outside of the play of signifiers, i.e., outside of where meaning is produced, would be to speak of meaning apart from the meaningful: "From the moment that there is meaning, there are nothing but signs. *We think only in signs.*"<sup>17</sup>

All that we have just said about concepts in general applies to the notion of the subject. The doctrine of *différance* holds that

the subject, and first of all the conscious and speaking subject, depends upon the system of differences and the movement of *différance*, that the subject is not present, nor above all present to itself before *différance*, that the subject is constituted only in being divided from itself [...].<sup>18</sup>

The subject is never fully present, is never a "plenitude", as Derrida says, because thinking the thought "I am x" is already different from what it expresses. The ego that is conscious of itself has already bifurcated itself; similarly, the object as thought or spoken of is "re-presented" in thought or speech and, as such, is different from itself as purely "present" to thought. There is no "in itself" of anything apart from our pronouncing it as such, and thus creating something other than the "in itself" being postulated in that utterance. Thus every presentation of an entity or identity is always a "re-presentation" of something that is never the same. Every articulation is a representation of something which was itself a representation and, therefore, *every* articulation lacks an absolute ground. As Derrida says in an approving paraphrase of Peirce's view: "*the thing itself is a sign.*"<sup>19</sup>

The represented and its representation are two perspectives of the same sign; what is represented is already a representation, and every

<sup>17</sup> OG, p. 50/G, p. 73: "Il n'y a donc que des signes dès lors qu'il y a du sens. *We think only in signs.*"

<sup>18</sup> Derrida (1972), p. 29/41: "le sujet, et d'abord le sujet conscient et parlant, dépend du système des différences et du mouvement de la différence, qu'il n'est pas présent ni surtout présent à soi avant la différence, qu'il ne s'y constitue qu'en se divisant [...]."

<sup>19</sup> OG, p. 49/G, p. 72: "*La chose même est un signe.*"

representation can itself be represented. One could say that the sign as “representation” stands for an object, but that object itself is always already represented, that is, it is a sign. There are no “objects” waiting to be signified, nor are there signs where there is no signification already in place. There is rather a perpetual movement of significations, wherein one signification gives rise to the next and in which there is no first or ultimate signifier or signified. Meaning, “the signified”, is never “present”, according to Derrida, while the signifier is present in the act of articulation. If we want to get at the meaning of a given sign, we find that what is signified is “*always already in the position of the signifier*”.<sup>20</sup>

If meaning is never present in itself, language can only be an endless train of signifiers. But this is a strange claim for Derrida to make, given the thrust of his criticism of Husserl, namely, that a sign must already have meaning to be a sign. Having done away with the “pure signified”, is Derrida entitled to this infinite array of signifiers?

Let us recall Derrida’s project: to show how *all* attempts at distinguishing between arguments of reason and arguments of fact, between objective truth and subjective experience, between apodictic certainty and ungrounded belief, are necessarily circular: they rely on the possibility of making distinctions, a possibility the grounds for which are not shown. But it is the grounding or groundlessness of such distinctions which is in question in the first place. This is why Derrida himself does not, and by his own lights, cannot, do more than offer a sidelong glimpse into truth. Any positive statement necessarily falls on the very ground upon which it is said to stand, namely, the idea that meaning is something more than the signifier in all its ambiguity.

Derrida is well aware that he cannot deny the possibility of making conceptual distinctions without himself invoking some reason

<sup>20</sup> OG, p. 73/G, p. 108: “*toujours déjà en position de signifiant*”. Compare with his remark in *Positions*, p. 20/30: “from the moment that one questions the possibility of such a transcendental signified, and that one recognizes that *every signified is also in the position of a signifier*, the distinction between signified and signifier becomes problematical at its root.” (emphasis added.) “A partir du moment [...] où l’on met en question la possibilité d’un tel signifié transcendantal et où l’on reconnaît que *tout signifié est aussi en position de signifiant*, la distinction entre signifié et signifiant – le signe – devient problématique à sa racine.” (emphasis added.)

or ground for this impossibility, without falling victim to the same *naïveté* (his term) with regard to the object of his discourse. Rather, his work is intended to show, through various “deconstructions”, the inevitability of the failure of any attempt at giving a *logos*, or full account, of meaning. This is due to the insight that what we mean is always already determined by the very fluidity of the system of signifiers which makes meaning possible. But to say this outright is to propose a theory of meaning, which itself would presuppose that one has some basis for this theory outside of, or beyond, or before the occurrence of meaning in any act of signifying activity. For Derrida, there can be no pure expression because that would assume that there is something immediate that is being expressed, some internal state or perception or primary experience – in Derridean terms, “presence”.<sup>21</sup> Such a claim must cancel itself because, to be thought or said or meant (which all amounts to the same thing, for Derrida), it must be part and parcel of the ongoing process of signification; there is no pure “experience” or “raw data” or “meaning intention”, because these concepts are themselves elements in the play of language.<sup>22</sup>

The entire issue of the ostensibly metaphysical nature of language, and the impossibility of escaping it, derives from how one understands the functioning of signs. For Derrida, insofar as it implies a distinction between a signifier and a signified, the idea of a sign is irrevocably metaphysical. In his view, as we have said, the distinction lends itself to the dualisms of the sensible and the intelligible, the outer and the inner, the empirical and the conceptual.<sup>23</sup> The division between the notion of the signifier and the signified enables us to think the thought of a pure or “transcendental” signified, i.e., an immediate, non-linguistic presence. Indeed this is exactly what Derrida means by “metaphysics”: the belief in a transcendental, non-

<sup>21</sup> Derrida criticized Foucault for failing to see that, in his attempt to show how sanity and rationality are constituted, he illicitly smuggles in a non-discursive “other” to classical rationality, a pre-discursive experience to be articulated *in discourse*. Such an articulation is, on Derrida’s account, a metaphysical gesture, because its claims to knowledge rest on the impossible, namely, pre-linguistic experience. See “Cogito and the History of Madness”, in *Writing and Difference* (1967), transl. Alan Bass (Chicago, 1978), pp. 31–63.

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, Derrida (1972), pp. 17–37/27–50.

<sup>23</sup> OG, p. 13/G, p. 24.

signified meaning.<sup>24</sup> A transcendental signified is something which, in a manner of speaking, can “take place” in the understanding, in a consciousness that is perspicuously present to itself in the form of an impression or a picture, before its inadequate expression or expulsion into the outer world of the perceptible, in the form of sounds or marks on paper. It follows from this view of the signified as something “inner” and “present” (to consciousness), that the signifier must be something perceptual, a physical medium for the communication of inner thoughts. The signifier is thereby reduced to a mere representation, and, as such, a distortion, of the original. Derrida’s critique of the notion of a transcendental ground and guarantor of signification is that it ignores something intrinsic to signs, namely, that a sign is a sign only because it already has meaning. On the other hand, Derrida seems to infer from the intrinsic meaningfulness of signs that there are *only* signifiers; but having done away with “the pure signified”, ought we not be at least a bit sceptical about “signifiers” as well?

To put the matter differently, signs must always take some form. If a mark on paper or a sound is meaningful, then it is a sign. Conversely, linguistic meaning is something that takes place when we speak and listen, read and write, that is, it occurs aurally or visually. As Derrida himself pointed out, the distinction between signifier and signified is an abstraction from the actual fact of there being signs. It is one thing to deny, as Derrida does, that there is some mental or physical fact behind language, some transcendental signified which is conveyed by the signifier in the act of signification. One understands that every attempt to get a grip on a single, univocal meaning in language results in the production of new significations, new signs with new meanings. In our response to Brinck’s argument against meaning as use, it was clear enough that each time I look up a word to find its meaning, what I actually find are new words which can also be looked up, etc. I cannot find the

<sup>24</sup> It is worth noting that followers of Derrida often equate metaphysics with claims to understanding *as such*. Thus Henry Staten, for example, can characterize Derrida’s theory of the sign by saying that its purpose is not “to set up a new metaphysics, a new explanation of how things *really are*” (p. 61). On the other hand, the assumption that all conceptual explanations are necessarily of this kind is never seriously questioned.

“meaning in itself” because there can be no non-signified, or non-linguistic, meanings, insofar as meaning must be signified in order to mean. What I do find are words which have similar uses or meanings, that is, synonyms. This critical observation is not exclusive to Derrida, and is one which has become almost a commonplace in the work of neo-pragmatists, so-called “post-analytic philosophers”, post-structuralists and Wittgensteinians. But our interest here is in Derrida’s positive claim arising out of this observation, namely, the idea that meaning is perpetually deferred. What we wish to show, quite simply, is (i) while Derrida has shown (successfully, one might think) that models of meaning are always compromised at the outset by the fact that they rely on language working as it actually does (and not as the model would have it) in order to be comprehensible, (ii) he has not thereby shown that actual meaning is compromised by its failure to meet with the criteria of some philosophical model of meaning.

## 2. Signs and Meaning

This is how the interpretation of signs works, according to Derrida: when a sign requires interpretation (which, in contrast to Derrida, we suggest, is not always the case), this interpretation is always articulated by a new sign with a new meaning that is not exactly the same as the interpreted sign (otherwise no interpretation would have taken place – the two signs would be identical). This new meaning is, in part, an “effect” of the interpreted sign (otherwise it would not be an interpretation of the interpreted sign), and, in this sense, refers to the interpreted sign. Our criticism of Derrida on this point consists in this: it is not the case that the signified is “always already in the position of the signifier”; it is not the case that what we have in language is an endless series of signifiers that never reach the ultimate signified. To the contrary, following Derrida’s own reasoning, what we have is a series of signs, and, insofar as they must signify to be signs, it cannot be an endless series, at least not in any given act of signification. The reason why signs cannot be split into a signifier and a signified is simply that signification (or meaning) does occur, we often enough do know what we mean, theoretical proofs to the contrary notwithstanding.

Now Derrida does not deny that effective communication does occur; rather, what the limitlessness of signifying activity suggests is that the structures determining truth, meaning, even intention in any given event of signification are *unstable*. Indeed the purpose of his "grammatology" is to investigate the conditions for the possibility of the fact of communication; his analysis is intended to show that these "quasi-transcendental conditions" are themselves purely relational, and, as such, unstable:

the signified concept is never present in itself, in an adequate presence that would refer only to itself. Every concept is necessarily and essentially inscribed in a chain or a system, within which it refers to another and to other concepts, by the systematic play of differences. Such a play, then – difference –, is no longer simply a concept, but the possibility of conceptuality, of the conceptual system and process in general.<sup>25</sup>

It is not that there is no such thing as truth or meaning or concepts at all; rather, the system of oppositions of philosophy which assumes a univocal content to the true as opposed to the false, the conceptual as opposed to the perceptual, the subject as opposed to the object, and the signifier as opposed to the signified, is both repressive and simplistic. It is repressive in that it is motivated, first and foremost, by an act of exclusion and/or hierarchical ordering, and it is simplistic because it excludes what is deemed "accidental" or "non-standard", thus assuming what it sets out to show. These are the characteristics which, according to Derrida, are definitive of metaphysical thinking. Derrida proposes a general procedure for philosophizing which, by paying attention to the gestures of its own expression, would include and comprehend all cases of signification, that is, it would give a full account of the conditions for the possibility of communication, signification, interpretation, conceptualization.

What Derrida is calling for is, in fact, a view of language as an independent system of *functions* that can be formalized without dependence on any notion of reference of meaning outside itself. The reason why his texts pay so little attention to "actual language use" is precisely because they are intended to be *purely formal investigations* into the system which makes possible any reading of any given

<sup>25</sup> "Differance", in SP, p. 140.

text (including Derrida's own). Thus it is not the case that Derrida endorses a hermeneutics of "undecidability". He states explicitly that we are, so to speak, stuck with the history, culture and language that we have, and that although these are complex and in a state of perpetual transformation, they necessarily and rigorously determine what it is possible to say, what can be called "true" or "false", a "good" interpretation or a "bad" interpretation. According to Derrida, these conventional structures and socio-institutional conditions are what make deconstruction possible. It is the inherent instability of language and culture that deconstruction reveals and, as a method of interpretation, enacts. Derrida writes:

the value of truth (and all those values associated with it) is never contested or destroyed in my writings, but only reinscribed in more powerful, larger, more stratified contexts. And that within interpretive contexts (that is, within relations of force that are always differential – for example, socio-political-institutional – but even beyond these determinations) that are relatively stable, sometimes apparently almost unshakeable, it should be possible to invoke rules of competence, criteria of discussion and of consensus, good faith, lucidity, rigor, criticism, and pedagogy. [...] What is at stake here is the entire debate, for instance, on the curriculum, literacy, etc.<sup>26</sup>

At first glance, this seems to be a plea for what has come to be an ideological commonplace, namely, to think in pragmatic, contextual terms. On closer examination, however, one notices the same intellectualist prejudice that we noticed at work in phenomenology. There would seem to be two natural responses to the recognition that the conceptual apparatus of traditional philosophy relies on an unquestioned and highly problematic assumption about how signs signify, or what it is to "know". One is to modify and improve the traditional theories, the course of action taken by Derrida. Another is to call into question the inherited presuppositions underlying those theories. When Derrida observes that the linguistic conception of language cannot satisfy its own demands for completeness and thus leads inevitably to the position that the meaning of a word is, in principle, indeterminate, he does not draw the conclusion that this conception must be fundamentally, irrevocably flawed and misleading

<sup>26</sup> Derrida (1988), p. 146f.

as a description of how language works. Instead, he hits upon a mystifying picture of language as perpetually postponed meaning, with only "traces" of signification, endless repetitions and referrals, and so forth. He achieves, thereby, a manner of *saving* what is essentially a traditional linguistic view of language.

We ought to note here that Derrida, far from distancing himself from the view of language as an object of theoretical discourse, calls for a broader, more inclusive theory of language, one which exhibits the purely formal systematicity of mathematics and, as a formal system, is applicable to *all* modes of discourse. No given act of communication, no discursive event, is analyzable in terms of its context because, from this theoretical perspective, the possibility of different uses, different locutions, rests on the *principle of différance*.<sup>27</sup> Even ordinary, everyday language is an "effect" of the differing, deferring activity of the play of signifiers and, therefore, it is amenable to precisely the same sort of deconstructive analysis as a philosophical text:

Now, 'everyday language' is not innocent or neutral. It is the language of Western metaphysics, and it carries with it not only a considerable number of presuppositions of all types, but also presuppositions inseparable from metaphysics, which, although little attended to, are knotted into a system.<sup>28</sup>

On the other hand, there can be no meta-language which can describe or interpret a given text or discourse from the outside. This is why deconstruction as a method must always "take aim" within a specific discourse or text which it "inhabits".<sup>29</sup> But here again we recognize a "gesture", one might say, reminiscent of the problem we noted regarding Derrida's claim that the chain of signifiers is infinite. Such an assertion suggests that there are only signifiers, which, in turn, implies an endless sequence of interpretation, at least in principle, if not in fact. This is problematic, we argued, because for a sign to be a sign it must, in fact, signify; in plain English, it must

<sup>27</sup> Derrida (1988), p. 19.

<sup>28</sup> Derrida (1972), p. 19/29: "Or la «langue usuelle» n'est pas innocente ou neutre. Elle est la langue de la métaphysique occidentale et elle transporte non seulement un nombre considérable de présuppositions de tous ordres, mais des présuppositions inséparables, et, pour peu qu'on y prête attention, nouées en système."

<sup>29</sup> OG, p. 24/G, p. 39.

have meaning. This sign need not be some abstract "concept" or refer to objects; rather, it must, quite simply, be *in use*. In a similar vein, surely one can "deconstruct" an overly simplistic, or false, or incoherent, or just plain silly philosophical or metaphysical use of a given concept, idea, or word by pointing out that it is confused from the point of view of the living language because it has been pulled out of concrete practices and has acquired a "meaning" which is not in use. Moreover, one can point all this out without taking over the terminology which caused the initial confusion. But Derrida, the reader will recall, dismisses this possibility out of hand:

Of course, it is not a question of "rejecting" these notions; they are necessary and, at least at present, nothing is conceivable for us without them. It is a question at first of demonstrating the systematic and historical solidarity of the concepts and gestures of thought that one often believes can be innocently separated.<sup>30</sup>

We do not wish to deny that there are contexts in which it is helpful to point out etymological, historical facts about certain developments in the history of linguistics and philosophy. These can be useful reminders about the social or cultural character of what constitutes good grounds for an argument, which methods are acceptable tools for conceptual analysis and which are not, and so forth; in short, the practice of deconstruction can have a therapeutic value. But Derrida imputes a *positive, normative* status to these historical linguistic observations. He treats them as evidence for the theoretical hypothesis of the arbitrariness of the sign and the idea of the thinking subject as a product of a perpetual play of significations. He writes as if his historical-conceptual critique of theories of language were a super-theory which, containing within itself the conceptual apparatus of traditional linguistics and philosophy of language, constitutes the basis for our *actual language use today*. He seems to give historical etymological discourse a kind of metaphysical status in his assumption that all of our concepts arise out of some kind of intellectual discourse.

<sup>30</sup> OG, p. 13f./G, p. 25: "Bien entendu, il ne s'agit pas de «rejeter» ces notions: elles sont nécessaires et, aujourd'hui du moins, pour nous, plus rien n'est pensable sans elles. Il s'agit d'abord de mettre en évidence la solidarité systématique et historique de concepts et de gestes de pensée qu'on croit souvent pouvoir séparer innocemment."

There are a number of observations to make about the inevitability of metaphysics and the arbitrariness of the sign. First, because the view of language as an arbitrary system of endless chains of previous significations does not allow for the possibility of non-metaphysical discourse, the very fact that we *do* engage daily in non-metaphysical discourse tells against it. For Derrida has not *shown* that everyday language *is* metaphysical, but rather that it *may be interpreted* in terms of the history of metaphysics. The possibility of seeing something from a certain point of view does not constitute a proof for the universal validity of that perspective. To argue against the possibility of clearing up conceptual confusions is tantamount to arguing that all language use *is* confused, in which case there can be no difference between confusion and clarity. But it is precisely this latter point that Derrida denies explicitly; as we noted above, he rejects the kind of thorough-going relativism which denies that there can be better and worse translations, true or false claims, and so forth, in a specific context. These are, Derrida maintains, relatively stable, insofar as the system of transformations is structured, however fluidly. Yet he clearly indicates that even everyday conversation *is problematic*, in the same way as philosophical concepts are problematic, as intellectual puzzles. After asserting that "all language and all interpretation are problematic", Derrida exclaims:

Isn't this also a stroke of luck? Otherwise, why speak, why discuss? How else would what we call "misunderstanding" be possible? That we may or may not be in agreement on this subject attests by itself to this more than problematic problematicity. I only sought to formalize its law in a more "comprehensive" manner.<sup>31</sup>

The presupposition behind the kind of project described by Derrida here is that all "problems" of communication share something in common which can be systematically uncovered by a general method. But by Derrida's own lights, the significance of a problem is always particular and, even if there is a "trace" linking, say, a problem of misunderstanding arising from a lack of fluency in Swedish, and the doctrine of arbitrary signification, it is difficult to see how one could formalize this relationship. For one thing, the problem of incompre-

<sup>31</sup> Derrida (1988), p. 120.

hension arising out of an inability to understand what is being said, at least in certain contexts, is a problem of an entirely different order. The "misunderstanding" between Searle and Derrida which allowed for the interchange between them bears little resemblance to the kind of misunderstanding experienced by people trying to get directions in foreign countries, or the problem of "interpretation" experienced by dyslexics. In the first case, there is an implicit understanding that they were debating or discussing the nature of language, Austin's view of the same, and so forth. In the case of a dyslexic, there is no such "starting point". There is no room for debate; either the words are legible to him and he can make sense of the sentence on the page, or he can not. Furthermore, one might have a thousand reasons for speaking which have nothing to do with misunderstanding. Indeed most speech, outside of the academy, would seem to be of this kind: the cashier at the supermarket says, "That'll be thirty-two dollars and seventeen cents", I give her thirty-three dollars; she hands me eighty-three cents. Confusion *may* arise, but if it does, it is not because the signifier is already in the place of the signified. The confusion may arise because the cashier miscounted; or I did not hear her correctly; or she forgot to ring up one of my purchases. Even if we were to interpret the cashier's miscounting or my failure to hear correctly according to the scheme of an endless chain of signifiers, that interpretation rests on the initial understanding of what it means to "miscount" or to "fail to hear correctly". The reverse, however, is not true. We are all perfectly capable of distinguishing between counting correctly and counting incorrectly, hearing and mishearing, etc., without the aid of theory.

We can draw together the strands of the foregoing discussion by noticing the following point: Derrida reverses the actual order of communication in a manner that is strikingly similar to what he sees as an internal contradiction in the phenomenological project. Husserl's attempt to find meaning purified of the vagaries and unsystematicity of actual language use relies precisely on the fact of the possibility of making distinctions, a possibility which resides in the language that he has at hand prior to those distinctions. Derrida's principle of *différance*, which states that definite meaning is always postponed by possible meaning, relies on the real possibility of definite meaning in actual speech and writing. The only "meaning" that

he has shown to be unstable is a philosophical doctrine of meaning. By claiming that everyday language is metaphysical, Derrida relegates the facticity of *what must be the case* for language to signify to the status of epiphenomenon of "the play of signifiers". As we have shown, models of language, such as the notion of a play of signifiers, are always *interpretations* of what happens when human beings actually do communicate. This means that there is something that we *recognize* as being described as "a play of signifiers", namely, communication. Thus we can say that Derrida has missed his own point, on two counts: (i) actual meaning, for the most part, is *not* unstable, even if philosophical attempts to explain its stability falter; and (ii), a correlate of (i), everyday language cannot be shown *definitively* to rest on *any* principle, be it a doctrine of transcendental subjectivity, or a "non-concept" such as the principle of *différance*. The only justification provided for failing to account for these consequences of his own critique of the philosophical tradition is the *theoretical* possibility of infinite interpretation. But in that case, for Derrida's point to hold, we must either assume that exceptional cases ought to guide our inquiries (as if not getting the correct change were the rule), but one is hard-pressed to see why we should, or assume that the theoretical possibility of confusion jeopardizes the *facticity* of there being no confusion in most cases. It would be unfair to make too much of this statement if it were a serd in the Derridean corpus. However, to the contrary, it seems to underlie his very conception of philosophy and deconstruction. Derrida assumes that language is infected with theory and, for this reason, can only be cured by more theory.

### 3. *The Transcendental Signified and Everyday Language*

Derrida takes every question or problem that may be described as "conceptual" to be necessarily metaphysical. Derrida assumes he cannot say anything concrete at all about *différance*, for example, without implicitly invoking a transcendental signified:

What differs? Who differs? What is *différance*? If we answered these questions even before examining them as questions, even before going back over them and questioning their form (even what seems to be most natural and necessary about

them), we would fall below the level we have now reached. For if we accepted the form of the question in its own sense and syntax ("What?", "What is?", "Who is?"), we would have to admit that *différance* is derived, supervenient, controlled, and ordered from the starting point of a being-present, one capable of being something, a force, a state, or power in the world, to which we could give all kinds of names: a *what*, or being-present as a *subject*, a *who*.<sup>32</sup>

In this section, we will be addressing the following questions: First, is it the case that every attempt to delimit meaning in a given context, especially a philosophical one, is necessarily an attempt to subordinate actual language some metaphysical or transcendental system? Second, is the notion of intention or the idea of a thinker behind the thought, in all its manifestations, a product or effect of such a system? In short, do we necessarily reveal a metaphysical craving when we ask "what is it" or "what do you mean"? We mean to show that the affirmative reply to these questions that one finds articulated above, as elsewhere, is mistaken. It is a result of transforming the critical insight that *philosophical discourse* is self-propagating into a normative teaching about how we are to understand language and ourselves. We will begin our discussion by noting one important element in this transformation: Derrida's own conceptual apparatus and the language in which it is (necessarily) articulated.

There are practices or, as Derrida would say, institutions, of questioning and answering in which I partake when I pose a question. I need not assume that the answer is absolute, in the theoretical sense, when I pose the question, any more than I assume a theory of time when I ask: "What time is it?" Similarly, with the right precautions, Derrida can say what he "means" without implicitly referring to a "mental entity" behind the response: "Well, I mean ..." And these precautions need not be so refined and abstruse as Derrida seems to think they must. In other words, there is no reason to assume that the practice of posing questions and giving answers reveals a metaphysical prejudice in language. To the contrary, many philosophers have hitherto misunderstood the practice of posing questions and giving answers, as if there were "answers" in the sense of "metaphysical truths" simply waiting for the questions to be raised. When Aristotle describes the grammatical forms in which questions were

<sup>32</sup> "Différance", in SP, p. 145.

raised in fifth-century Athens as categories of thought, and, therefore, of being, one might say (somewhat anachronistically, of course) that he conflated the practice of asking questions with the grammatical form of the questions. In a sense, Derrida assumes that this conflation of the posing of a particular question with the grammatical form of that question is legitimate. In the end, he sides with the metaphysicians.

It might be argued, in defense of Derrida, that his very style combats this conflation. He employs many strategies in order to explode the conventions in which he is writing, and thereby reveal the differential structure of language and concepts. For instance, he plays with the various meanings of the same words, introduces neographisms (as he calls them), "writes over" words which allegedly have become sedimented with abstract metaphysical content (such as "is"), and breaks with the rules of grammar and academic tradition. Derrida's play with the various associations of a given word or phrase are intended to show that, even in the context of philosophical writing, these words and phrases have effects independent of the subject under discussion. What Derrida does not show is that these possible associations are relevant to the issues at hand.

The Derridean position is, of course, that relevance and irrelevance constitute a dichotomy the grounds for which can never be laid out in advance or in full. But once again, it is assumed that the impossibility of providing philosophically complete grounds for a distinction constitutes proof of the instability of that distinction. And, once more, our response is that relevance and irrelevance are indeed complex words, and the distinction relies entirely upon criteria for which providing a full account would indeed be an infinite task. But this does not in any way jeopardize the actual usefulness of those terms. Our everyday notions of relevance and irrelevance are not part of a philosophical doctrine; the meaning of those terms are therefore not threatened by philosophical incompleteness. In order to agree or disagree about what constitutes a relevant remark, for example, we must already understand that the words "relevant" and "irrelevant" are not used to distinguish between vanilla and chocolate, or to designate toothpaste containing or not containing flouride, or as determinations for age limits for the viewing of films containing

sexually explicit scenes. This aspect of the meaning of the terms is neither relative nor fluid nor unstable, even if its appropriate application in different circumstances can be discussed. The point is that any discussion about what constitutes a relevant or irrelevant remark relies on some basic understanding of the meaning of the words (that is, knowing how and when to use them) being in place before the "interpretation" gets started.

It follows from the freedom of association engendered by Derrida's view of the nature of language that he makes little or no reference to Husserl's project as *he* saw it, namely, to repair the damage done to our epistemic *confidence* by the failure of prior philosophical systems to deliver what they promised. Husserl, one could say, was looking for theoretical grounds for not giving up that confidence. Derrida, in contrast, uses Husserl's failure in a very different way; to ground theoretically his own feeling of epistemic *resignation*.<sup>33</sup> When Husserl makes use of Descartes or Kant, he takes himself to be concerned with the same problems that concerned them. Derrida uses Husserl's text as an illustration of his version of the method of close reading. What is important is the introduction and application of the technique of deconstruction. The author Husserl's reason for writing the text plays no role in the analysis (in part, as we have seen, because Derrida sees such "intentions" as essentially "textual" in nature, that is, as products of the preceding philosophical discourse). Derrida's "method" has in common with a great deal of traditional philosophy the view of language as *a system of forms of expression*, which can be treated as such. The claim that the thinking subject (let us say, the one named Edmund Husserl) is nothing other than the chain of significations leading up to his textual productions and following on the heels of them serves as a grammatical principle for deconstructive hermeneutics: without a ground to stand on, so to speak, philosophy is no more universal, necessary or objective than literature. The distinction between the author's intentions and the various ways that his work can be interpreted need not be heeded, indeed, it is to be explicitly rejected. Furthermore,

<sup>33</sup> This point was worked out in some detail by Sören Stenlund, in *Tankar om 'postfilosofier'*, lecture at the Department of Philosophy, Uppsala University, 28 november, 1997.

the possibility of originality being excluded at the outset, there can be no fundamental difference between philosophy and commentary, literature and philosophy, literature and commentary.

There seems to be something terribly wrong with this standpoint. Since there are, on Derrida's view, no problems and no "subjects" apart from the conglomeration of utterances which bring them into being, it becomes impossible to treat Husserl's books as an effort by a *human being* to come to grips with a problem. In daily language use, we constantly experience and describe ourselves as confused on one point, but clear on another; we understand this remark, but suspect that we have misunderstood that one. We are convinced by one argument, but not by another. Occasionally, we feel frustration about formulating ourselves badly when we "know what we really mean".

Derrida's view that language use is arbitrary requires that we observe language through the lens of the notion of the sign. Genuine communication would indeed be impossible if Derrida's description of how language works were a description of actual linguistic practice. But, as Derrida himself emphasizes, genuine communication does occur. Derrida might well show that there can be appeal to non-theoretical evidence for the distinction between philosophy and commentary, for example, but upon what basis can he draw the inference that where evidentiary grounds cannot be offered, ordinary language is speculative? To the contrary, for Derrida's point to be made at all, we must first recognize that the terms "commentary" and "philosophy" have distinct uses. Otherwise the cancellation of the distinction would be thoroughly unintelligible, and it is not. Derrida's model of language rests entirely upon the doctrine of arbitrary signification. The radical conclusions drawn, such as the incoherence of the notion of the self or the thinking subject, are the result of the conflation of certain theoretical terms with the phenomena that those terms are intended to describe. While Derrida sees his own work as a radicalization of Saussure's approach in *Cours*,<sup>34</sup> he seems to disregard one of Saussure's guiding principles: "Language is at every moment everybody's business; [...] it is something which individuals make use of all day long."<sup>35</sup>

<sup>34</sup> See OG, p. 44/G, p. 64.

<sup>35</sup> Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale*, ed. Tullio de Mauro

It is this lack of interest in, or attention to, what we might call the "everyday life of language" that leads some commentators, such as Christopher Norris, to suggest that deconstruction suspends "all that we take for granted about language, experience and the 'normal' possibilities of human communication".<sup>36</sup> This is surely a remarkable assertion to make about the professional activities of a certain academic praxis. As we remarked earlier, the "we" in question is not, and indeed could not be, "we users of language", but rather, "we intellectuals" (linguists, philosophers, literary theorists, literary critics) who have certain ideas, notions and assumptions about the nature, origin and structure of language.<sup>37</sup> Thus it is not surprising that those who are influenced by deconstruction tend to be primarily interested in texts and literary language rather than in the *vernacular*.<sup>38</sup> They treat sentences as parts of texts, that is, as grammatical objects.<sup>39</sup>

Derrida and followers of deconstruction will be quick to point out that an important reason for choosing literary works as well as theoretical treatises is to reveal the arbitrariness of that very distinc-

(Paris, 1973), p. 107: "La langue [...] est à chaque moment l'affaire de tout le monde; [...] elle est une chose dont tout les individus se servent toute la journée." For an analysis of Derrida's relation to Saussure, in particular, Derrida's association of Saussure with the phenomenological tradition, see Robert Strozier, *Saussure, Derrida and the Metaphysics of Subjectivity* (Berlin, 1988).

<sup>36</sup> Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice* (London & New York, 1982), p. xii.

<sup>37</sup> Stanley Rosen notices Richard Rorty's questionable use of "we" and "our" in this respect. Rosen, *The Ancients and the Moderns* (New Haven & London, 1989), pp. 175 and 177.

<sup>38</sup> We use the term *vernacular* here to make clear that I mean "everyday language" in the "everyday sense", as opposed to the technical notion of "ordinary language".

<sup>39</sup> This is, in a sense, what is really at issue in the debate between Searle and Derrida. What makes Derrida difficult to understand for Searle, and Searle for Derrida, for that matter, is that while Searle assumes an analytic philosopher's logical or epistemological concept of language and its attendant apparatus, Derrida assumes a concept of language derived from continental linguistics. In both cases, however, the privileging of theories of language use over actual praxis reveals a similar intellectualist bias. Derrida qua philosopher differs from Anglo-Saxon philosophers in that his writing presumes a prior acquaintance with certain literary and linguistic traditions as well as with the western philosophical tradition. His version of "the linguistic turn" is to give certain theories of language (Saussure's, Rousseau's, Condillac's, Peirce's) pride of place in intellectual discourse.

tion. After all, the argument runs, not only Derrida, but also Nietzsche, Richard Rorty, and Thomas Kuhn have shown how even the most scientific or theoretical texts rely on metaphor. But that we can *view* a certain use of language as a figurative form of expression and interpret various linguistic practices on that basis does not make all language use figurative at its roots. What constitutes metaphoric usage in either everyday or technical discourse is not determined by the general definition of metaphor stipulated by linguists or literary theorists, however subtle that may be. What determines metaphoric use in any given context is, quite simply, *how it is used*. When we use terms such as “deep” and “superficial”, for example, to describe someone’s thinking, or complain that an analysis never gets below the “surface”, we are not necessarily “employing” a rhetorical figure or trope, or even implicitly invoking the inner/outer dichotomy. In everyday use, to describe a certain manner of thinking as superficial is to say that it expresses the kinds of thoughts one has about something when one has not thought terribly long or hard about the matter. One has not *explained* the everyday usage by pointing out that these words have problematic connotations if analyzed in terms of philosophical concepts, or that these visual images of depth and surface *can* be interpreted in terms of epistemological dualism.

There is no reason to assume that the intellectual history of a given word or concept has some sort of logical priority or overriding explanatory force. Nor is there any justification for disregarding *what someone actually means* as irrelevant in the face of the theory of prior signification. Similarly, in pointing out that there exists a certain “historical solidarity” between certain ideas and concepts which may be described as metaphorical, one has indicated the fact that words and ideas differ from epoch to epoch and language to language, and that different words and images can fill similar functions. One has not, with any of these points, shown that these historical or linguistic differences or similarities explain *what language is or how it works*. What do we really learn from the claim that all language is figurative or rhetorical?

In part, such a claim reveals the implicit acceptance of the classical notion that *either* language refers to objects or states of affairs “out there” or “in our minds” *or* it does not, in which case, signification is arbitrary. The tacit assumption is that nothing intrinsic to

signs can tell us what they mean or how they are used. It is assumed that a particular use of language *is* its place in the abstract system of signifiers (which is itself conflated with actual concrete use).<sup>40</sup> This picture of language makes it seem as if every actual instance of understanding were merely a happy accident, or even a *misunderstanding* – a mistaken belief on my part that I know exactly what my interlocutor means or what he intends. After all, there is no necessary connection between the system of signs and the particular practices in which they arise. Thus *all* literal meaning must be a delusion. I can *never* refer, since it is assumed that what is meant by reference is *always* a matter of reference to empirically verifiable objects, or to sense impressions, or to ideas. Derrida takes for granted that when I ask my colleague if “this is the book to which you referred earlier”, that I have, however unconsciously, availed myself of a metaphysical doctrine. Having shown the doctrine of literal meaning to be misguided, Derrida reprimands us (users of language) for our naïveté, and reveals to us the *hidden truth*: words or signs or concepts or propositions are *always* different from what we innocently take them to designate. They are even different from themselves, in that they rely for their meaning on their relation to other signs in the system, which in turn rely on them, and, in each differential relation between signs, words, etc., a new meaning is produced. The self-evidence of my meaning “is this the book to which you referred earlier?” shows itself to be an illusion.

As was mentioned earlier, a consequence of the thesis of the arbitrariness of the sign is the notion that subjectivity is an effect of prior significations. Derrida reverses the Husserlian model, according to which thought is grounded in the self-reflective capacity of the thinking subject, and calls the resultant model an effect of the play of language. As Jean-Louis Houdebine describes the basis of Derrida’s deconstructive practice, the problematic of the sign derives from “a fundamental logocentrism, from a philosophy of consciousness or of the originary subject”.<sup>41</sup> The point of Derrida’s deconstructive exercises, as we have seen, is largely to show how the

<sup>40</sup> SP, p. 140f.

<sup>41</sup> Derrida (1972), p. 61/83: “d’un logocentrisme fondamental, d’une philosophie de la conscience ou du sujet originaire [...]”

very notion of the sign is determined by the fundamental metaphysical dualism between the sensible and the intelligible. He claims that the very distinction between thoughts and things, or the subject and the object, compels us to treat language as a kind of bridge between these two realms of "presence". Having rejected the basis for this view of language as resting on a mistake arising out of a naïve understanding of the use of the fundamental terms, one might look instead for an entirely different way of approaching philosophical problems, especially with regard to language. To the contrary, however, Derrida insists that "we cannot do without the concept of the sign", nor can we abandon our "metaphysical complicity" in continuing to work within a conceptual scheme which we have recognized as founded on a misleading metaphor. On Derrida's account, we cannot without further ado surrender the concept of the sign or the scheme of which it forms a part without therewith

also giving up the critique we are directing against this complicity, or without the risk of erasing difference in the self-identity of a signified reducing its signifier into itself or, amounting to the same thing, simply expelling its signifier outside itself.<sup>42</sup>

For Derrida, any conceptual discussion of language is bound to reduce it to an expression of thought (idealism or mentalism) or describe it in purely referential terms (realism or nominalism). This being at last understood, all that remains for philosophy to do is comment upon itself, repeat classical gestures (albeit ironically), and contribute to the ongoing self-reflection of culture. The only philosophical problems that remain are those arising in the "literary genre" called philosophy – that genre which employs the rhetorical tropes of consistency, argumentation, correctness of inference, which makes use of the abstract notions of "meaning", "concept", etc., and which refers to other texts within the canon which also utilize these forms.

Derrida explicitly considers his own work in philosophy, that is, deconstruction, to be a general method for the reading of all texts, be they literary, philosophical, or even political. Indeed, he need not take account of such disciplinary distinctions, since he takes himself

<sup>42</sup> "Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences", in Derrida (1978), p. 281.

to have shown that such distinctions are always, at bottom, arbitrary.<sup>43</sup> But the point of deconstruction is to call into question general explanations and theories, in particular insofar as these assume what they set out to explain, namely, the possibility of knowledge on the basis of a distinction which is ultimately inexplicable (because ultimately arbitrary). Thus Derrida seeks to avoid this trap by his various readings, which in and of themselves say nothing. Rather they are to be seen as enactments, one might say, of the impossibility of knowing or saying anything in any absolute sense. If one does not assume at the outset that one knows something for certain, Derrida argues, there can never be any *rational* basis for claiming that one knows:

If words and concepts receive meaning only in sequences of differences, one can justify one's language, and one's choice of terms, only within a topic and an historical strategy. The justification can therefore never be absolute and definitive.<sup>44</sup>

As we have already discussed, while "words and concepts" as they are used in philosophy do indeed "receive" their meaning from the far more complex facts of actual living speech, it is not at all clear that actual day-to-day thinking and speaking is derivative upon "words and concepts" in this sense. And there need be no question of "justification" here, nor is it always necessary to employ an historical strategy or start from an intellectual topic. At the same time, within the "space" of any given conversation or activity, my use of certain words, and even concepts, may be absolute and definitive, at least within any reasonable demands upon what shall count as "absolute and definitive". If I'm writing an exam in high school geometry, for

<sup>43</sup> Rudolf Bernet notes that, in his deconstructive analyses, Derrida has become "less and less concerned with exposing the undecidability in the relationship between the transcendently constituting and the transcendently constituted, than he is affirming this indecidability as the fate of philosophical thought". Bernet, "On Derrida's 'Introduction' to Husserl's *Origin of Geometry*", in *Derrida and Deconstruction*, ed. Hugh J. Silverman (New York & London, 1989), p. 153.

<sup>44</sup> OG, p. 70/G, p. 102: "Si les mots et les concepts ne prennent sens que dans des enchaînements de différences, on ne peut justifier son langage, et le choix des termes, qu'à l'intérieur d'une topique et d'une stratégie historique. La justification ne peut donc jamais être absolue et définitive."

example, *the* meaning of  $\pi$  is the ratio of the circumference of a circle to its diameter with an approximate value of 3.14; the fact that  $\pi$  is also the sixteenth letter of the Greek alphabet is not simply *in principle* irrelevant, but is *in fact* irrelevant. And this fact has to do with *how we do geometry*; any attempt to fix the meaning of  $\pi$  outside of the doing of geometry will indeed lead to the kind of self-referential entanglement to which Derrida alludes. But Derrida cannot stop here (as Wittgenstein does) because he suspects that what underlies the refusal to pursue the question further is the *insight* or recognition that such questions cannot be asked. This kind of insight is, for Derrida, simply a mute version of the metaphysics of “presence”; in “knowing” that meaning lay in forms of use rather than forms of expression, I am tacitly smuggling in the Cartesian *cogito* or the Husserlian transcendental ego. Derrida writes:

within philosophy there is no possible objection concerning this privilege of the present-now; it defines the very element of philosophical thought, it is *evidence* itself, conscious thought itself, it governs every possible concept of truth and sense. No sooner do we question this privilege than we begin to get at the core of consciousness itself from a region that lies elsewhere than philosophy, a procedure that would remove every possible *security* and *ground* from discourse.<sup>45</sup>

One case of the privilege of which Derrida speaks would be the moment of insight, or recognition, of the meaning or applicability of a criterion for knowledge. The problem is that that recognition can never itself be grounded, since it is necessarily prior to any postulated criterion for certainty. For Derrida, this means that knowledge and meaning are always *necessarily* ungrounded. Insofar as one claims any kind of certainty, one is suffering from metaphysical megalomania. On the other hand, philosophy is necessarily about what we know, or it is about nothing. Derrida suggests that we reconcile ourselves to the fact that, the former having shown itself

<sup>45</sup> SP, p. 62/VP, p. 70: “Et il n’y a d’ailleurs aucune objection possible, à l’intérieur de la philosophie, à l’égard de ce privilège du maintenant-présent. Ce privilège définit l’élément même de la pensée philosophique, il est l’évidence même, la pensée consciente elle-même, il commande tout concept possible de la vérité et du sens. On ne peut le suspecter sans commencer à énucléer la conscience elle-même depuis un ailleurs de la philosophie qui ôte toute *sécurité* et tout *fondement* possibles au discours.”

inevitably to chase its own tail, we are left with the latter. He concludes the aforementioned passage by offering an alternative, but denying this alternative any determinate content or form:

This conflict, necessarily unlike any other, is between philosophy, which is always a philosophy of presence, and a meditation on nonpresence – which is not perforce its contrary, or necessarily a meditation on a negative absence, or a theory of nonpresence *qua* unconsciousness.<sup>46</sup>

This “meditation on nonpresence” as the only viable option to mentalism or nominalism can be summed up thus: while we can ruminate on the ungroundedness of our concepts and ideas, those ruminations must not rely on the illusion of the univocity of meanings. There is no point at which an individual in thought can “reach bottom” in his investigations or meditations. Thinking is a bottomless pit: there is no final *destination* to our thinking, since that would require that there be some absolute “up or down”, “surface or center” that we can recognize as thinking subjects. There is and can be no criterion for the *recognition* that this is up, that is down, this is truth, that is false, this is crucial, that is irrelevant.

We have argued that this last step is unjustified, since it simply inherits the philosophical prejudice that says that theoretically ungrounded truths are lesser truths, or not truths at all. Derrida presupposes that where there are no intellectual grounds, or theoretical reasons, there can be no full-blooded sense to the notions of “truth” or “meaning”. And despite his wariness toward the metaphysical tradition in philosophical thinking, it is abundantly clear that when Derrida criticizes the notion of the subject in all its forms, he identifies the “self” with the philosophical doctrine of subjectivity. Thus he can say that we cannot do without the notion of subjectivity in philosophy for the very same reason that we are necessarily inveigled in metaphysics even in everyday speech – we necessarily assume that our immediate experience of meaningfulness is the ground of meaningfulness. But what kind of “assumption” is that?

<sup>46</sup> SP, p. 63/VP, p. 70: “ce débat, qui ne peut ressembler à aucun autre, entre la philosophie, qui est toujours philosophie de la présence, et une pensée de la non-présence, qui n’est pas forcément son contraire, ni nécessairement une méditation de l’absence négative, voire une théorie de la non-présence *comme* inconscient.”

At the risk of belaboring the point, it may be worthwhile to recapitulate the problems that arise here. It is one thing for a philosophical analysis to hide a buried theoretical assumption that has a bearing on the reasoning which follows. This kind of "assumption" is very different from the kind of assumption Derrida attributes to everyday speech.<sup>47</sup> If a general philosophical claim is shown to rest on a questionable assumption, then the usefulness of that claim is necessarily called into question with it. On the other hand, let us imagine that I hear someone say that line A is longer than line B as a piece of information to someone not within viewing distance from the blackboard, for instance. I then point out to her that her claim rests on a questionable belief in some transcendental ego capable of making judgements prior to the chain of signification. Is it her statement that is called into question, or my ability to deal with simple everyday conversation? In any case, the usefulness of the statement is not, as Derrida would have it, "unstable", or even only "relatively stable". One could say that the blackboard-reader has assumed a lot in the very phrase "I know ...", but only as a *method of reading* that phrase. The interpretation of that statement as resting on a "metaphysical assumption" *makes no difference* to our understanding of what it means. Either I recognize that segment A is longer than B, or I do not. Interpretations of the meaning of this recognition ride on the coattails of what it actually means to recognize the truth of a statement.

Secondly, *subjectivity* is a concept in exactly the sense that Derrida wishes to criticize. It is an abstraction, one which is quite obviously drawn from grammar (that is, an abstraction of an abstraction). As such it is bound to succumb to Derrida's deconstruction. But the theoretical notions of "subjectivity", "the ego", and so forth are not the same as the everyday notion of "self", as in the sentence "I hope you like the pie, I made it myself", or "I hate giving lectures ... I

<sup>47</sup> Rorty considers Derrida's later writings, which are more literary and less theoretical, superior to his early works, such as *Of Grammatology*, precisely because they are no longer concerned with some "inescapable quasi-divinity" called "the discourse of philosophy" that "will get us if we don't watch out". Richard Rorty, "Two Meanings of Logocentrism", in *Essays on Heidegger and Others: Philosophical Papers, Vol. 2* (Cambridge, New York, etc. 1989), p. 113 (footnote).

feel so self-conscious", or "I don't know what the problem is. I'm not feeling like myself these days." This is not to deny that our notions of selfhood, even in their everyday senses, are part of language. But this does not make them part of a theory of language. I do not need a general theory of selfhood at all to use the word self in the relevant situations and know what I am talking about when I do so. As Stanley Rosen points out in *Hermeneutics as Politics*: "the stability of pre-theoretical or everyday life, although they are not philosophically complete, remain intelligible in their own terms without philosophical completion."<sup>48</sup>

If, on the other hand, one assumes that everyday language is somehow incomplete, we have the following problem. *Certainty* is a conceptual impossibility if we require of it both that it be immune to the possibility of doubt, and, at the same time, that it be fully grounded, since, as we have argued earlier, the former precludes the latter. If we require this self-contradictory "certainty" for any kind of knowledge to count as knowledge, all claims to complete knowledge *will* indeed show themselves to be partial (in both senses of that word), and there will be literally nothing that can be known. But what is the basis of this epistemological extremism? It seems to be largely a consequence of *applying a certain method* of textual interpretation to all texts, including the telephone catalogue, a love letter, or a driver's education manual. In real life, however, it is not the case that concepts are continuously falling apart into a multiplicity. The simple fact of the matter is, as Rosen notes, "even deconstructors can see what they're saying".<sup>49</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Stanley Rosen, *Hermeneutics as Politics* (New York, 1987), p. 70.

<sup>49</sup> Rosen, p. 70.

## The Death of the Subject

### *Introduction*

We noted that Husserl, like Kant and Descartes before him, was engaged in a “foundationalist” project, that is, the attempt to ground knowledge on universally valid, absolute foundations. One aspect of this project was to render judgements concerning objective states of affairs as immune to doubt as first-person experience is. This entailed, as we saw, applying a third-person perspective and its demands for evidence onto expressions of first-person experiences. One of the major goals of post-structuralist thinking has been to show how claims to universality and objectivity with regard to the processes of human reason rest on evaluations, intellectual habits, and ideological assumptions belonging to a specific group. On this view, the systems that have been presented as truths about the nature of reason and human judgement are actually partial and prescriptive, rather than universal and descriptive, and serve the interests of those articulating the system and perpetuating the marginalization of others. According to Michel Foucault, the most insidious assumption of all is the notion of an *a priori* investigation into human experience, that is, the idea that it is possible to “bracket” theoretical assumptions in the manner of Husserl:

If there is one approach that I do reject [...] it is that (one might call it, broadly speaking, the phenomenological approach) which gives absolute priority to the observing subject, which attributes a constituent role to an act, which places its own point of view at the origin of all historicity – which, in short, leads to a transcendental consciousness.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Foreword to the English-language edition of *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (1966), (New York, 1970), p. xiv.

What precisely provoked this reversal is a question for the historian of ideas,<sup>2</sup> but for our purposes, it suffices to describe Foucault's project as a questioning of the status of the boundaries dividing the humanities (including philosophy) and the social sciences from politics and ideology. Foucault not only questions this division, but ultimately makes the positive claim that the division is an illusion, one which serves the ends of power.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, he argues that power and knowledge imply one another. This notion, together with the Nietzschean position that "everything is interpretation", are indispensable for an understanding of Foucault's most infamous claim – that "man", as author of his thoughts, speeches and actions, is nothing more than a trope in the discourses of the human sciences, or, as he says, a "surface effect" of their discourses, and has probably already outlived its usefulness for our understanding of ourselves. In this chapter, we shall take up both premises (the power-knowledge nexus, and the undecidability of interpretation) and the conclusion (Foucault's anti-humanism) as problems, although the entire discussion should be read with an eye toward the last of these.

We will concentrate on *Discipline and Punish* as our main illustration of Foucault's views for four reasons. To begin with, it was written *later* than his two major theoretical works, *The Order of Things* and *The Archeology of Knowledge*, and therefore relieves us of the task of working through the intricacies of Foucault's "archeological method" for uncovering the discursive formations of knowledge. In *The Order of Things*, it is this methodology that allows him to uncover *the emergence of 'man'* as a singular event in the

<sup>2</sup> The philosophical and cultural background to contemporary French philosophy can be understood, in part, through an acquaintance with the French educational system. See Vincent Descombes, *Modern French Philosophy 1933–1978* (1979), transl. L. Scott Fox and J.M. Harding (Cambridge, UK, 1980), pp. 1–9. Descombes' book also convincingly traces the philosophical inheritance from Hegel, phenomenology and structuralism. A more comprehensive account, together with a critique that attempts to incorporate the insights of poststructuralist thought into a hermeneutic account of subjectivity, can be found in Manfred Frank, *What is Neostructuralism?* (1984), transl. Sabine Wilke and Richard Gray (Minneapolis, 1989).

<sup>3</sup> As Manfred Frank has noted, Foucault's critique of rationality is essentially the same as Nietzsche's. Indeed the entire argument of *Discipline and Punish* can be read as a more historically detailed recapitulation of Nietzsche's discussion of the relationship between values and thinking in the *Genealogy of Morals*. See Frank, pp. 87–214.

historical development of the human sciences. His point there is as follows:

Strangely enough, man – the study of whom is supposed by the naïve to be the oldest investigation since Socrates – is probably no more than a kind of rift in the order of things, or, in any case, a configuration whose outlines are determined by the new position he has so recently taken up in the field of knowledge. Whence all the chimeras of the new humanisms, all the facile solutions of an 'anthropology' understood as a universal reflection on man, half-empirical, half-philosophical. It is comforting, however, and a source of profound relief to think that man is only a recent invention, a figure not yet two centuries old, a new wrinkle in our knowledge, and that he will disappear again as soon as that knowledge has discovered a new form.<sup>4</sup>

*The Archeology of Knowledge*, one might say, is a clarification of the theoretical underpinnings of such a project.<sup>5</sup> *Discipline and Punish*, on the other hand, as a work of historical writing, is explicitly intended to serve as a case study of Foucault's thesis, from *The Order of Things*, that "man", or as he sometimes says, "the individual", is a product of certain kinds of theoretical discourse (in *Discipline and Punish*, these being the discourses of psychiatry, medicine and jurisprudence). Although, to some extent, Foucault's work shifts focus from discourse in its interaction with social institutions to the relationship between power and knowledge (as articulated and constituted in the discourses under investigation) these can be seen as two aspects of the same project. Foucault describes his life work thus:

My objective for more than twenty-five years has been to sketch out a history of the different ways in our culture that human beings develop knowledge about themselves: economics, biology, psychiatry, medicine, and penology. The main point is not to accept this knowledge at face value, but to analyze these so-called sciences as very specific 'truth-games' related to specific techniques that human beings use to understand themselves.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Foucault (1970), p. xxiii.

<sup>5</sup> There is much discussion in the secondary literature about the differences between the "early Foucault" and the "later Foucault" with regard to the question of method. See, for example, Deborah Cook, *The Subject Finds a Voice: Foucault's Turn Toward Subjectivity* (New York, etc., 1993), pp. 67–81.

<sup>6</sup> Michel Foucault, "Truth, Power, Self: An Interview with Michel Foucault, October 25, 1982", in *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, eds. L.H. Martin Huck Gutman and P.H. Hutton (Amherst, 1988), p. 17f.

In another interview from the same period, Foucault states that his objective has been "to create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, *human beings are made subjects*".<sup>7</sup> In *Discipline and Punish* Foucault describes his work there as a "correlative history of the modern soul".<sup>8</sup> It is not so much Foucault's objective as described above, as the conclusions that he reaches and his manner of reaching them, that are under investigation here.

There are three further advantages to using this text. First, we are given the opportunity to look at what the thesis of man as construction, or a discursive fiction, means *concretely*, something which is all too rare in philosophical texts. We will not address questions of historical accuracy or methodological rigor here. We are interested rather in the conceptual claims Foucault makes about what it means to be the subject of external authority and the object of scientific study, on the one hand, and the ostensible consequences of this for *what it means* to be the author of our actions and speeches and the subject of our experiences, on the other. Secondly, due to the relative concreteness and clarity of this book, it is often relied upon in the secondary literature to explain claims made in the more abstract theoretical works. In any case, Foucault does begin *Discipline and Punish* with a theoretical discussion about the premises and methods of which he avails himself in the book, and clarifies the grounds for his methodological choices. Nothing in that discussion would suggest that he changed his mind about his position on the problems that we will be addressing. Finally, Foucault provides his most detailed analysis of the relationship between power and knowledge in *Discipline and Punish*; in this respect, it could be argued that this book, as much if not more than any other, has contributed to the pervasive perception, even among philosophers, that the distinction between truth and (political) usefulness cannot be upheld.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power", in Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago, 1983), p. 208 (emphasis added).

<sup>8</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, transl. Alan Sheridan (New York, 1979), p. 23. *Surveiller et punir; Naissance de la prison* (Paris, 1975), p. 30: "Objectif de ce livre: une histoire corrélatrice de l'âme moderne et d'un nouveau pouvoir de juger [...]" (emphasis added.)

<sup>9</sup> It may be objected that Foucault's last work, *The Care of the Self* (1984), constitutes, in some respects, a rejection of the deterministic picture of the constitution

From the very start, Foucault poses himself a difficult question: "from what point can such a history of the modern soul on trial be written?" He answers the question by suggesting that one begin with an attitude of suspicion toward our own collective sensibilities, as these make us treat as *principles* of change what are rather "*effects* of the new tactics of power". Foucault formulates four guidelines for conducting his study: (i) situate the concept of punishment in a series of possible effects, thereby regarding it as a "complex social function"; (ii) analyze punitive methods as "techniques possessing their own specificity in the more general field of other ways of exercising power. Regard punishment as a political tactic"; (iii) see whether or not there is a common matrix or single process of "'epistemologico-juridical' formation" as the root of both penal law and the human sciences, that is, "make the technology of power the very principle both of the humanization of the penal system and of the knowledge of man"; (iv) "Try to discover whether this entry of the soul on to the scene of penal justice, and with it the insertion in legal practice of a whole corpus of 'scientific' knowledge, is not the effect of a transformation of the way in which the body itself is invested by power relations. [...] Thus, by an analysis of penal leniency as a technique of power, one might understand [...] in what way a specific mode of subjection was able to give birth to man as an object of knowledge for a discourse with a 'scientific' status."<sup>10</sup>

Foucault is after what he calls a "'political economy' of the body", which requires, among other things, an investigation into the "political technology of the body". He provides a study of the ways in which political relations invest, mark, train, and torture the body, and "force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs".<sup>11</sup> One pre-requisite for such an investigation to get off the ground,

of the subject given by his work up to that point. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 3: The Care of the Self*, transl. Robert Hurley (New York, 1986). While there is certainly some truth in that, his *reasons* for modifying his view had to do with making room for the possibility of self-understanding and political and ethical action, and not with the sort of conceptual problems that we take up here.  
<sup>10</sup> DP, pp. 23f./SuP, p. 31 (emphasis added).

<sup>11</sup> DP, pp. 25f./SuP, p. 34: "le corps est aussi directement plongé dans un champ politique; les rapports de pouvoir opèrent sur lui une prise immédiate; ils l'investissent, le marquent, le dressent, le supplicient, l'astreignent à des travaux, l'obligent à des cérémonies, exigent de lui des signes."

Foucault suggests, is that we abandon the tradition of separating, at least in theory, the pursuit of knowledge from the exercise of power:

We should admit rather that power produces knowledge (and not simply by encouraging it because it serves power or by applying it because it is useful); that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, *nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations*. These 'power-knowledge relations' are to be analyzed, therefore, not on the basis of a subject of knowledge who is or is not free in relation to the power system, but, on the contrary, *the subject who knows, the objects to be known and the modalities of knowledge must be regarded as so many effects of these fundamental implications of power-knowledge and their historical transformations*. In short, it is not the activity of the subject of knowledge that produces a corpus of knowledge, useful or resistant to power, but power-knowledge, the processes and struggles that traverse it and of which it is made up, that determines the forms and possible domains of knowledge.<sup>12</sup>

Again, we will not consider the advantages or disadvantages of these rules or the conceptual apparatus of which they form a part, as methodological principles in an historical or anthropological study; rather, our interest is in the *conceptual* or philosophical conclusions that Foucault draws as a consequence of the application of these methods.<sup>13</sup> In short, one might well accept a great deal of what Foucault has to say about law, history, and the human sciences without accepting the philosophical claims to generality that Foucault

<sup>12</sup> DP, pp. 27f. (emphasis added)/SuP, p. 36: "Il faut plutôt admettre que le pouvoir produit du savoir (et pas simplement en le favorisant parce qu'il le sert ou en l'appliquant parce qu'il est utile); que pouvoir et savoir s'impliquent directement l'un l'autre; qu'il n'y a pas de relation de pouvoir sans constitution corrélatrice d'un champ de savoir, *ni de savoir qui ne suppose et ne constitue en même temps des relations de pouvoir*. Ces rapports de « pouvoir-savoir » ne sont donc pas à analyser à partir d'un sujet de connaissance qui serait libre ou non par rapport au système du pouvoir; mais il faut considérer au contraire que *le sujet qui connaît, les objets à connaître et les modalités de connaissance sont autant d'effets de ces implications fondamentales du pouvoir-savoir et de leurs transformations historiques*. En bref, ce n'est pas l'activité du sujet de connaissance qui produirait un savoir, utile ou rétif au pouvoir, mais le pouvoir-savoir, les processus et les luttes qui le traversent et dont il est constitué, qui déterminent les formes et les domaines possibles de la connaissance." (emphasis added.)

<sup>13</sup> The legitimacy of holding on to the distinction between the conceptual or "grammatical", on the one hand, and the methodological, the empirical and the ideological, on the other, will be made clear in course of the argument.

seems to think that we are forced to accept on the basis of his analyses. What may be a legitimate perspective from the point of view of political thinking or historical study can become highly problematic when posed as a philosophical thesis, for the simple reason that it is not possible, on the basis of a few (or for that matter, numerous) historical examples, however compelling these may be, to say what knowledge is in each and every case. It is this speculative aspect of Foucault's thinking that is the object of our own investigation. We pose the following problems: First, to what extent is Foucault's claim that social existence is permeated with power relations, and its correlate, the claim that the individual is herself a product of those relations, *comprehensible*? Second, what questions are such claims intended to answer, and what presuppositions lay behind the formulation of those questions?

We will begin by summarizing the thrust of Foucault's argument in *Discipline and Punish*. The summary will serve, as with our discussion of the *Cartesian Meditations*, as a starting point for the philosophical problems that we will be addressing: (i) the privileging of theoretical or intellectual discourse in discussions about knowledge, language and human practice (a prejudice which, we suggest, Foucault inherits unreflectively from the humanist tradition that he takes himself to be calling into question); (ii) as a result of (i), the tendency to accept implicitly the idealist demands on what is to count as self-evidence and certainty which we discussed in chapter one; and (iii) as a consequence of (ii), the conflation of traditional intellectualist notions of subjectivity with our everyday sense of selfhood, and therewith, the rejection of the latter along with the former.

### 1. *The Power/Knowledge Nexus*

Foucault says that his project presupposes, where the study of what is considered knowledge is concerned, that "one abandons the opposition between what is 'interested' and what is 'disinterested', the model of knowledge and the primacy of the subject".<sup>14</sup> He intro-

<sup>14</sup> DP, p. 28/SuP, p. 36: "Analyser l'investissement politique du corps et la micro-physique du pouvoir suppose [...] en ce qui concerne le savoir, qu'on renonce à l'opposition de ce qui est « intéressé » et de ce qui est « désintéressé », au modèle de la connaissance et au primat du sujet."

duces the notion of a “micro-physics of punitive power”, which is to serve as an element in a history of the development of the modern “soul”. In other words, Foucault wants to show that punishment is an important element in the gridwork of social and institutional forces that shape the modern experience of selfhood; discipline and punishment are, one could say, prime examples of the power/knowledge nexus at work in the construction of subjectivity:

It would be wrong to say that the soul is an illusion, or an ideological effect. On the contrary, it exists, it has a reality, *it is produced permanently around, on, within the body* by the functioning of a power that is exercised on those punished – and, *in a more general way, on those one supervises, trains and corrects, over madmen, children at home and at school, the colonized, over those who are stuck at a machine and supervised for the rest of their lives.* This is the historical reality of this soul, which, unlike the soul represented by Christian theology, is not born in sin and subject to punishment, but is born rather out of methods of punishment, supervision and constraint. [...] *various concepts have been constructed and domains of analysis carved out: psyche, subjectivity, personality, consciousness, etc.; on it have been built scientific techniques and discourses, and the moral claims of humanism.* But let there be no misunderstanding: it is not that a real man, the object of knowledge, philosophical reflection or technical intervention, has been substituted for the soul, the illusion of the theologians. The man described for us, whom we are invited to free, is already in himself *the effect* of a subjection much more profound than himself. *A ‘soul’ inhabits him and brings him to existence, which is itself a factor in the mastery that power exercises over the body.* The soul is the *effect and instrument* of a political anatomy; the soul is the prison of the body.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> DP, pp. 29f. (emphasis added)/SuP, p. 38: “Il ne faudrait pas dire que l’âme est une illusion, ou un effet idéologique. Mais bien qu’elle existe, qu’elle a une réalité, qu’elle est produite en permanence, autour, à la surface, à l’intérieur du corps par le fonctionnement d’un pouvoir qui s’exerce sur ceux qu’on punit – d’une façon plus générale sur ceux qu’on surveille, qu’on dresse et corrige, sur les fous, les enfants, les écoliers, les colonisés, sur ceux qu’on fixe à un appareil de production et qu’on contrôle tout au long de leur existence. Réalité historique de cette âme, qui à la différence de l’âme représentée par la théologie chrétienne, ne naît pas fautive et punissable, mais naît plutôt de procédures de punition, de surveillance, de châtement et de contrainte. [...] on a bâti des concepts divers et on a découpé des domaines d’analyse: psyché, subjectivité, personnalité, conscience, etc.; sur elle on a édifié des techniques et des discours scientifiques; à partir d’elle, on a fait valoir les revendications morales de l’humanisme. Mais il ne faut pas s’y tromper: on n’a pas substitué à l’âme, illusion des théologiens, un homme réel, objet de savoir, de réflexion philosophique ou d’intervention technique. L’homme dont on nous parle et qu’on invite à libérer est déjà en lui-même l’effet d’un assujettissement bien plus profond que lui. Une « âme » l’habite et le porte à l’existence, qui est elle-même une pièce dans la maîtrise que le pouvoir exerce sur le corps. L’âme, effet et instrument d’une anatomie politique; l’âme, prison du corps.” (emphasis added.)

Foucault begins his study with an historical account of public executions in Europe. Already here, we see the aforementioned guidelines at work. Foucault wants to show, for example, how the public execution must be seen, not only as a judicial ritual, but also as a political one. As evidence for his thesis that all crimes were seen as, in some respect, an attack upon the person of the sovereign (as represented in the laws of the land), he cites a text from the period in which it is stated that for a law to be in force, it must come directly from the king. Foucault goes on to interpret this as meaning that the intervention of the sovereign is not merely an arbitration between two adversaries or intended to enforce respect for individual rights, but is to be understood as “a direct reply to the person who has offended him”.<sup>16</sup> The only other piece of evidence offered up for this interpretation is Jousse’s *Treatise on Criminal Justice*: “the exercise of the sovereign power in the punishment of crime is one of the essential parts of the administration of justice.”<sup>17</sup>

In the discussion that follows, the execution is described as a “great ritual”, the aim of which is to bring into play “the dissymmetry between the subject who has dared to violate the law and the all-powerful sovereign”. It is depicted as “an emphatic affirmation of power and of its intrinsic superiority”, and we are told that it is a means of “reactivating power” or a “manifestation of force”. It is also analyzed as a “coded action”, which can be understood through parallels with the joust. Ultimately, we are told that it is an event that *must* be seen primarily as a “political operation”.<sup>18</sup> Notice in this example that, aside from a few gorey contemporary reports of the meticulousness in the planning and execution of torture, Foucault presents no *historical* reason to interpret the use of torture as an expression of power. This is just one *reading* of the historical background to modern punitive practices, and there is surely much to be gained by looking at the relationship between the use of the “spectacle of the scaffold” as retribution and as deterrent. Conceptually

<sup>16</sup> DP, p. 48/SuP, p. 59.

<sup>17</sup> D. Jousse, *Traité de la justice criminelle*, 1777, p. vii. Cited in DP, p. 48/SuP, p. 59: “L’exercice de la puissance souveraine dans la punition des crimes fait sans doute une des parties les plus essentielles de l’administration de la justice.”

<sup>18</sup> DP, pp. 48–53/SuP, pp. 59–65.

speaking, however, there is nothing in Foucault's account that forces us to arrive at the conclusion that "the truth-power relation remains at the heart of *all* mechanisms of punishment".<sup>19</sup>

It might be objected that Foucault's interpretation is explicitly tied to his presuppositions, and, insofar as these are spelled out at the outset, one is free to accept or reject them and, therewith, Foucault's analysis.<sup>20</sup> The problem is, as we shall see, that the power-knowledge relation is a *formal* connection that can be *read out* of particular medical, penal and related intellectual practices, institutions and materials. At the same time, the patterns gleaned from the particular cases *after the fact* are ascribed a conditioning, functional role in the actual development of the institutions in question.<sup>21</sup> This means that the fundamental assumptions of the analysis are articulated and defended within a vocabulary and conceptual scheme already informed by, and committed to, these same assumptions. The difference between what is put forward as an historical hypothesis and what is intended as a methodological or conceptual claim is often unclear.

In the case in point, for instance, the assumption of the reality of the power-knowledge function plays a dual role. At times, Foucault treats it as a methodological tool for understanding the uses and effects of public torture or its transformation by the penal reform movement. On other occasions, he seems to be saying that this function is what *lay behind* the developments in question, as if *this* were the reality that his empirical investigations uncover.<sup>22</sup> When he tells us that public execution *must* be understood as a political operation,

<sup>19</sup> DP, p. 55/SuP, p. 67: "le rapport vérité-pouvoir reste au cœur de *tous* les mécanismes punitifs [...]." (emphasis added.)

<sup>20</sup> We do not mean to suggest thereby that Foucault's results are arbitrary. We will discuss this matter in more detail in the section entitled "Indeterminacy of Interpretation".

<sup>21</sup> This is, in and of itself, fine in the case of the so-called "hard sciences", where there is often a concrete goal outside of the activity of theorizing. It becomes problematic, as it will be recalled from our discussion of Husserl, when the only purpose of the theory is as explanation, and that explanation relies on concepts and methods that serve no other purpose than justifying the theory.

<sup>22</sup> Jürgen Habermas criticizes Foucault for his "derivation of the concept of power from the concept of the will to knowledge" on similar grounds. He objects to the "systematically ambiguous use of the category of 'power' because: "On the one hand, it retains the innocence of a concept used descriptively and serves the *empirical analysis* of power technologies [...]. On the other hand, the category of power preserves from its covert historical sources the meaning of a basic concept

or that the knowing subject and what it knows *must* be understood as effects of the power-knowledge function, how are we to understand the necessity invoked? The claim seems to be more than a rhetorical tool in his polemics against phenomenology. It expresses the *importance* of certain features of this form of analysis as distinct from others (principally, the phenomenological, but also the naively empirical). Foucault writes as if the postulation of formative systems and conditioning functions takes care of problems arising out of traditional philosophical and historical attempts to give a general account of the human being. When he is at his most speculative, one gets the impression that this is more or less the point of the Foucauldian project as a whole.

In the chapter in which Foucault introduces his history of the penal reform movement, he cites historical evidence for the thesis that both crime and punishment, laws and their means of enforcement, moved toward greater subtlety, complexity, diversity and, in short, bureaucratization. Foucault notes a "whole complex mechanism, embracing the development of production, the increase of wealth, a higher juridical and moral value placed on property relations, stricter methods of surveillance, a tighter partitioning of the population, more efficient techniques of locating and obtaining information". He describes this as

*an effort* to adjust the mechanisms of power that frame *the everyday lives of individuals*; an adaptation and a refinement of the machinery that assumes responsibility for and places under surveillance *their everyday behaviour, their identity, their activity, their apparently unimportant gestures*; another policy for that multiplicity of bodies and forces that constitutes a population.<sup>23</sup>

within a *theory of constitution* as well [...]." Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures* (1985), transl. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA, 1987), p. 270.

<sup>23</sup> DP, pp. 77f./SuP, pp. 92f.: "un mécanisme complexe, où figurent le développement de la production, l'augmentation des richesses, une valorisation juridique et morale plus intense des rapports de propriété, des méthodes de surveillance plus rigoureuses, un quadrillage plus serré de la population, des techniques mieux ajustées de repérage, de capture, d'information [...] un *effort* pour ajuster les mécanismes de pouvoir qui encadrent *l'existence des individus*; une adaptation et un affinement des appareils qui prennent en charge et mettent sous surveillance leur conduite quotidienne, *leur identité, leur activité, leurs gestes apparemment sans importance*; une autre politique à propos de cette multiplicité de corps et de forces que constitue une population." (emphasis added.)

The claim that the mechanisms of power that he cites “frame” the “everyday lives of individuals”, including their “apparently unimportant gestures”, is of particular interest to the present discussion.

Foucault offers illustrations of a complex mechanism for constraining behavior (an increase in the use of informants, or in the sheer number of punishable offences, for instance), but he does not give any evidence that these constitute the “frame” of everyday life. This is not an oversight: it is difficult to imagine what would constitute evidence of the “frame” of everyday life that is not *obviously* an interpretation based upon the principles articulated by Foucault at the outset: regard the modern soul as a “complex social function”; regard punishment as a political tactic; look for a common principle behind developments in penal law and in the social sciences; see “man” as a result of the application of modern scientific methods and practices onto legal and social practice. But if this is the case, the historical evidence offered as justification is hardly necessary, since one has decided, in advance of any inquiry, a method of reading that secures the intended result. While it might be illuminating and even beneficial to be wary of the picture of the penal reform movement as a well-meaning effort to establish more equitable principles for the prosecution and punishment of crimes, no amount of historical evidence or methodological complexity puts us in the position of ascertaining “the true objective” of every reformer’s contribution. By what faculty can Foucault see into the heart of a reformer (such as Lacretelle) expressing horror at the inhumanity of the public spectacle of torture, and dryly affirm that “humanity” is nothing more than a euphemism for an economic rationality and its “meticulous calculations”?<sup>24</sup>

The claim that “[t]he reform of criminal law *must be read* as a strategy for the rearrangement of the power to punish, according to modalities that render it more regular, more effective, more constant and more detailed in its effects” seems to be nothing more than a recapitulation of Foucault’s earlier description of his hermeneutic guidelines.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, Foucault does not say, in conjunction with

<sup>24</sup> DP, p. 92/SuP, p. 109: “« Humanité » est le nom respectueux donné à cette économie et à ses calculs minutieux.”

<sup>25</sup> DP, p. 80/SuP, p. 96: “La réforme du droit criminel *doit être lue* comme une stratégie pour le réaménagement du pouvoir de punir, selon des modalités qui le

the humanization of penalties, that one finds uses of the demand for “leniency” which have more to do with effectiveness than with empathy. Rather, he claims that the requirements of efficient administration *are* what *underlie* the pleas for humane treatment.<sup>26</sup> And while there may have been an interest in effectiveness in the eighteenth-century jurist Brissot’s argument that beggars are better reformed by being put to work than by being locked up in “filthy prisons that are more like cesspools”,<sup>27</sup> one might just as easily read the argument for effectiveness as a rhetorical trope serving his humanist goal of helping beggars. Nothing in the quote itself supports one reading over another. It is rather the theoretical stance that Foucault takes that leads him to his interpretation; since Foucault has stated in advance that he is looking for a common source of knowledge and power, any reference to effectiveness will be seen as an example of a “technology of power”.<sup>28</sup>

One of Foucault’s prime examples of the power-knowledge nexus at work is the development of the reformatory. The goal of the reformatory was the ultimate re-introduction of the convict into civil society. The replacement of arbitrary, indiscriminate and indefinite detention in dank dungeons for agitators, beggars, debtors, murderers, petty thieves and transients with correctional facilities suited to the requirements and dispositions of the incarcerated, carried with it a re-organization of the judicial and penitentiary systems. In the new system, “good behavior” was rewarded with reduced sentences, and work was obligatory and remunerated. Behind these adjustments was an increased faith in the superiority of the carrot

rendent plus régulier, plus efficace, plus constant et mieux détaillé dans ses effets [...]” (emphasis added.)

<sup>26</sup> DP, p. 101/SuP, p. 120: “Sous l’humanisation des peines, ce qu’on trouve, ce sont toutes ces règles qui autorisent, mieux, qui exigent la « douceur », comme une économie calculée du pouvoir de punir.”

<sup>27</sup> J.P. Brissot, *Théorie des lois criminelles*, I, 1781. Quoted in DP, p. 106/SuP, p. 126.

<sup>28</sup> This observation is not, in itself, original. Both Habermas (1987) and Frank (1985) point to this problem. Our primary object is not, however, this methodological difficulty. Rather, we wish to show that the very *terms* of the discussion are conceptually problematic. As will become clear, Foucault’s use of the notions of knowledge, language, and the person do not differ all that radically from Husserl’s in certain crucial respects. It is this inheritance from the humanist tradition that drives Foucault to unnecessarily drastic conclusions.

over the stick: it was thought that the majority of criminals could be reformed, if given the chance to re-enter society having learned a trade. Thereby, a soul could be saved, and society spared the expense and dangers of recidivism.<sup>29</sup> In order to achieve the goal of "correction", the prisoner's day was strictly supervised and organized into "spiritually uplifting" activities such as work, prayer and exercise, and the care of daily needs such as bathing and taking meals. Furthermore, in order to judge the merits of individual cases, that is, in order to determine who may be deserving of a reduced sentence or pardon, the guards who received the prisoners were informed of the incoming convict's crime(s) and sentence, and were provided with relevant information about his behavior before and after sentencing. Foucault concludes that these supervising, corrective, assessing functions turned the prison into a sort of "permanent observatory"; functions as "an apparatus of knowledge".<sup>30</sup>

Such was the *method* of the reformers, as described by Foucault. But to what was this method applied? According to Foucault, it was applied to the individual's *representations*: "the representations of his interests, the representation of his advantages and disadvantages, pleasure and displeasure [...]." With what instrument did one act on representations? "Other representations, or rather couplings of ideas (crime-punishment, the imagined advantage of crime-disadvantage perceived in the punishments)[...]." Ultimately, as Foucault interprets the new penal system, the role of the condemned criminal was "to reintroduce, in the face of crime and the criminal code, the real presence of the signified [...]. By producing this signified abundantly and visibly, and therefore reactivating the signifying system of the code, the idea of crime functioning as a sign of punishment", the criminal repays his debt to society. The point of criminal correction, then, is the redefinition of the individual as subject of law, "through the reinforcement of the systems of signs and representations that they circulate".<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup> DP, pp. 120–124/SuP, pp. 142–147.

<sup>30</sup> DP, p. 126/SuP, p. 149.

<sup>31</sup> DP, pp. 127f./SuP, pp. 151f.: "Soit la méthode des réformateurs. Le point sur lequel porte la peine, ce par quoi elle a prise sur l'individu? Les représentations: représentation de ses intérêts, représentation de ses avantages, des désavantages, de son plaisir, et de son déplaisir [...]. L'instrument par lequel on agit sur les

It must be noted the description of the advent of the modern prison in terms of *signs*, *codes*, and *functions*, here as elsewhere in the book, assumes a certain meaningfulness that may not be obvious to the uninitiated. Intentionally or not, these terms are highly theory-laden, and presuppose a structuralist reading of human thought and action for their meaning.<sup>32</sup> There can be no appeal to evidence, historical or otherwise, to support the thesis that penal reform was *an effort to modify the individual's representations by means of other representations*, nor the thesis that the point of penal reform in the classical era was *to enforce or reinforce a system of signs*.<sup>33</sup> Or rather, almost anything can serve as evidence, since that general description of what is at stake in penal reform is, and must be, itself a *product of theory*. The semiotic interpretation, whatever its merits, relies on the fact that the reader and Foucault both understand, among other things, what a *prison* is, what *crime* is, what *punishment* is, and what *law* is, at least enough for the text to make sense.

---

représentations? D'autres représentations, ou plutôt des couplages d'idées (crime-punition, avantage imaginé du crime-désavantage perçu des châtiments) [...]. Le rôle du criminel dans la punition, c'est de réintroduire, en face du code et des crimes, la présence réelle du signifié [...]. Produire en abondance et à l'évidence ce signifié, réactiver par là le système signifiant du code, faire fonctionner l'idée de crime comme un signe de punition [...]. La correction individuelle doit donc assurer le processus de requalification de l'individu comme sujet de droit, par le renforcement des systèmes de signes et des représentations qu'ils font circuler."

<sup>32</sup> Foucault protested vehemently against the label "structuralist" as applied to himself. See Foucault (1970), p. xiv (Forward to the English edition); *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York, 1972) pp. 199–204/*L'archéologie du savoir* (Paris, 1969), pp. 259–266; and *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed. C. Gordon (Brighton, 1980), p. 114. See also Didier Eribon, *Michel Foucault et ses contemporains* (Paris, 1994), pp. 236–248. Foucault's protestations to the contrary notwithstanding, his reliance on structuralist terminology and themes is in evidence in his corpus as a whole, and not least of all in DP. To take but a few examples, notice the idea of public torture as establishing a "series of decipherable relations" (p. 44); the description of execution as a "coded action" (p. 51); the atrocity of torture as a "figure", and the public, "the main character" (pp. 56f.); the new politics and its legal systems as a "network of relations" (p. 88); punishment as a "generalized function" (p. 90); the prison as the "figure [...] of the power to punish" (p. 116), and so forth. Other structuralist notions, such as "elements" and "fields", abound, assuming an explanatory function that cannot be justified without recourse to the theory, however implicit, of which they form a part.

<sup>33</sup> Unless, of course, we had an extant letter of Lacretelle or Brissot in which they described their objectives in such terms.

These are all, in some sense, cultural products; one might want to call these phenomena elements in a system of relations. But if I have no idea what crime and punishment are, describing them as something more abstract is certainly not going to tell me anything about them. We will return to this point in more detail in the following section in our discussion of interpretation. For the moment, it is enough to note that the movement toward seeing penal justice as an exemplary form of the unity of power and knowledge, relies on our acceptance of the redescription of the methods of the reformatory as “signs, coded sets of representations”, and of its instruments (later to replace this method and become an end in itself, according to Foucault), as a “technique for the coercion of individuals [...] by the traces it leaves, in the form of habits, in behaviour”.<sup>34</sup> This interpretation, whatever its merits, is parasitic on everyday notions of crime, punishment, work, and daily activities, in order to make any sense. This last observation, however, does not harmonize with Foucault’s view of the way in which knowledge (even of ourselves) and power work.

Part Three of *Discipline and Punish* is an account of how modern institutions such as schools and hospitals developed in accordance with the theoretical, political and juridical interests and mandates of the increasingly mechanized, economized, compartmentalized society of eighteenth-century Europe and North America. Foucault argues that there is an almost imperceptible shift from regulation to normalization; from the power to supervise and control by deeming actions either permissible or punishable, to the power to assess and evaluate on the basis of the knowledge gleaned from that supervision. This change is exemplified, for instance, by the rating and ranking of pupils, the emphasis on timetables in schools and factories, and the attempt to formalize and rationalize the slightest movements of students and soldiers. Foucault claims that social institutions such as schools and hospitals, in controlling the movements of, and relations between, individuals, actually create objects of study. The individual student or patient, as individual, is created or constructed out of the regime imposed by the classroom and the clinic: “Discipline ‘makes’

<sup>34</sup> DP, pp. 130f./SuP, pp. 154f.

individuals; it is the specific technique of a power that regards individuals both as objects and as instruments of its exercise.”<sup>35</sup> According to Foucault, the move from merely forbidding or allowing to “assessing acts with precision” (and calculating penalties and rewards accordingly) is most insidious in the case of rank, which both serves to organize and order information about individuals, on the one hand, and in itself can constitute a privilege or punishment. In the case of rank, the judgement of fact and the exercise of power (to promote and demote) are one.<sup>36</sup> The art of disciplinary punishment introduces, according to Foucault, “the constraint of a conformity that must be achieved”; it defines the limit of acceptable difference; it “compares, differentiates, hierarchizes, homogenizes, excludes. In short, it *normalizes*.”<sup>37</sup>

Normalization and surveillance, then, are instruments of power. The power/knowledge nexus as expressed in normalization and surveillance can be seen in all its “visible brilliance” by a look at the rituals, methods, and classificatory schemes involved in the examination: “For in this slender technique are to be found a whole domain of knowledge, a whole type of power.”<sup>38</sup> Foucault argues for the need to ask ourselves if the technique of examination as such, whether psychiatric, scholastic, medical or vocational, implements power relations that render it possible to extract and constitute knowledge. The introduction of a more regulated, administrated and “disciplined” hospital, in which the patient was placed under perpetual observation and examination, gave rise to the university hospital: the treatment of patients became itself a source of study and information for further developments in the treatment of disease. Similarly, the scholastic examination allowed a teacher to transmit his knowledge at the same time as he “transformed” his pupils into objects of study, ultimately giving rise to the science of pedagogy. And the inspection and regulation of tactics in the army contributed to the knowledge of military tactics. In sum, the examination constituted a

<sup>35</sup> DP, p. 170/SuP, p. 200: “La discipline « fabrique » des individus; elle est la technique spécifique d’un pouvoir qui se donne les individus à la fois pour objets et pour instruments de son exercice.”

<sup>36</sup> DP, p. 181/SuP, p. 213.

<sup>37</sup> DP, p. 183/SuP, p. 215.

<sup>38</sup> DP, p. 185/SuP, p. 217.

mechanism by which the exercise of power and the formation of knowledge became inextricably linked.<sup>39</sup>

The documentation and accountancy accompanying the examination constituted the individual as a describable, analyzable object under the gaze of a corpus of knowledge; it also constituted a comparative system for the collection of facts about individuals, and the ranking and ordering of these. This marks, for Foucault, the entry of the individual (and no longer the species) onto the field of knowledge. He further suggests that the mechanisms of discipline and power described here, "the modern play of coercion over bodies, gestures and behaviour", is inextricably linked with the birth of the human sciences.<sup>40</sup> The examination, with its attendant procedures and documentation, transform the individual, "the ordinary individuality of everybody", into a 'case'. The individual (child, patient, madman, prisoner, etc.) is constituted thereby as "an effect and object of power", and as "an effect and object of knowledge".<sup>41</sup> Foucault concludes the section by admitting the ideological aspect of the modern juridico-political notion of individuality, describing the individual as a "fictitious atom" of societal representation. But, he adds, the individual "is also a reality fabricated by this specific technology of power" that Foucault calls discipline. Power "produces reality": "The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production."<sup>42</sup>

Acknowledging the radical implications of such a thesis, Foucault himself asks if his conclusions are not excessive. The negative answer to that question is provided in the chapter entitled "Panopticism". Foucault begins with an account of the procedures for quarantine and confinement in times of plague. He describes the incessant inspections, inquiries, and registrations of deaths, illnesses, complaints

<sup>39</sup> DP, pp. 186f./SuP, pp. 218f.

<sup>40</sup> DP, p. 191/SuP, p. 224.

<sup>41</sup> DP, pp. 191f./SuP, pp. 224f.

<sup>42</sup> DP, p. 194/SuP, p. 227: "L'individu, c'est sans doute l'atome fictif d'une représentation « idéologique » de la société; mais il est aussi une réalité fabriquée par cette technologie spécifique de pouvoir qu'on appelle la « discipline » [...]. En fait le pouvoir produit; il produit du réel; il produit des domaines d'objets et des rituels de vérité. L'individu et la connaissance qu'on peut en prendre relèvent de cette production."

and irregularities, and shows how these constitute a "continuous hierarchical figure" in which the individual is located:

It lays down for each individual his place, his body, his disease and his death, his well-being, by means of an omnipresent and omniscient power that subdivides itself in a regular, uninterrupted way *even to the ultimate determination of the individual, of what characterizes him*, of what belongs to him, of what happens to him.<sup>43</sup>

Foucault ties the mechanisms of disease confinement to the "political dream" of thoroughgoing regulatory penetration into the minutiae of everyday life. In this respect, he says, the plague gave rise to disciplinary projects as a whole: "Underlying disciplinary projects the image of the plague stands for all forms of confusion and disorder [...]."<sup>44</sup> The act of exclusion, through the division between the abnormal and the normal, the mad and the sane, dangerous and harmless, is the characteristic trait of institutionalization from the nineteenth century forward, whether in schools, hospitals, or prisons. And the ubiquity of these institutions ensures that we are all subjected to it the attendant exclusions. The definitive symbol of the interpenetration of power and knowledge is to be found in Bentham's architectural figure of the *Panopticon* which, as Foucault puts it, "reverses the principle of the dungeon". Panopticism places the prisoner, patient, worker, schoolboy or lunatic under perpetual surveillance. Because he is always seen but can never see his surveillant, he is always an object of information, but never a subject in communication.<sup>45</sup> This assures the surveillant autonomous supervising power, because it induces in the prisoner (or patient, schoolgirl, or worker) a consciousness of permanent visibility. Without use of force, one is guaranteed calm from the lunatic, application from the pupil, diligence from the worker.

<sup>43</sup> DP, p. 197/SuP, p. 230: "Il [l'ordre] prescrit à chacun sa place, à chacun son corps, à chacun sa maladie et sa mort, à chacun son bien, par l'effet d'un pouvoir omniprésent et omniscient qui se subdivise lui-même de façon régulière et ininterrompue *jusqu'à la détermination finale de l'individu, de ce qui le caractérise*, de ce qui lui appartient, de ce qui lui arrive." (emphasis added.)

<sup>44</sup> DP, p. 199/SuP, p. 232: "Au fond des schémas disciplinaires l'image de la peste vaut pour toutes les confusions, et les désordres [...]."

<sup>45</sup> DP, p. 200/SuP, p. 233.

The Panopticon also serves as a *laboratory* of power. The director may spy on everyone under his orders (the teacher, the warder, the foreman, the doctor), assess their work, alter their behaviour, and impose methods upon them. And the director himself may be observed; an inspector may arrive unexpectedly and judge the functioning of the establishment as a whole. Jeremy Bentham's own unbridled enthusiasm for the Panopticon seemed to rest largely on his idea that schools, hospitals, prisons and factories should always be open to inspection by any member of the public, thereby subjecting them to democratic control and eliminating any risk that the increase of power resulting from his panoptic machine might degenerate into tyranny.<sup>46</sup> The difference between the procedures and principles of quarantine in times of plague and the mechanism of panopticism, in Foucault's view, is simply this: the former was an abrupt arresting of the status quo, a break with the conventions and rituals of everyday life for the purposes of combatting a sudden intrusive evil. Panopticism, by contrast, came to permeate every aspect of human life as a "general function" of disciplinary society. The function, instruments, techniques, procedures and targets can be taken over by specialized institutions such as reformatories and prisons or by institutions that use it as a means to a particular end (such as hospitals and schools). It may also be adopted by "pre-existing authorities that find in it a means of reinforcing or reorganizing their internal mechanisms of power" (as in families), or by state institutions whose prime, if not exclusive, purpose, is "to assure that discipline reigns over society as a whole".<sup>47</sup>

Foucault's point is not that the individual is repressed or altered by the mechanisms of power in disciplinary society, but that he is *fabricated* in and by them. The disciplines, the scientific face of techniques of control and supervision, are the political counterpart to juridical systems and their power to define juridical subjects according to universal norms and laws. Through the techniques described here, the formation of knowledge and the increase of power came to reinforce one another. Foucault traces the rise of clinical medicine, psychiatry, child psychology, educational psychology, penology and

<sup>46</sup> DP, p. 207/SuP, p. 241.

<sup>47</sup> DP, pp. 215f./SuP, p. 251.

labour studies from a double process: "an epistemological 'thaw' through a refinement of power relations; a multiplication of the effects of power through the formation and accumulation of new forms of knowledge."<sup>48</sup> The Panopticon is, for Foucault, the abstract formula for a concrete technology, that of the formation of individuals. It is the unifying principle behind all social institutions: "Is it surprising that prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons?"<sup>49</sup> The prison is, in a sense, the peak of a myriad of techniques of behavioural control which "the whole of society pursues on each individual through innumerable mechanisms of discipline [...] in its function, the power to punish is not essentially different from that of curing or educating".<sup>50</sup> According to Foucault, judging has become one of the major functions of our society. Everywhere and always, every individual is under the scrutinizing gaze of the judging and assessing social worker, doctor, teacher, supervisor. Our every movement, word and gesture is under the "universal reign" of the normative.<sup>51</sup> This power to punish constitutes one of the armatures of the power-knowledge network that made possible the development of the human sciences: "Knowable man (soul, individuality, consciousness, conduct, whatever it is called) is the object-effect of this analytical investment, of this domination-observation."<sup>52</sup> But there is no universal necessity to this investment and its structures; Foucault remarks elsewhere that these

<sup>48</sup> DP, p. 224/SuP, p. 261: "Double processus, donc: déblocage épistémologique à partir d'un affinement des relations de pouvoir; multiplication des effets de pouvoir grâce à la formation et au cumul de connaissances nouvelles."

<sup>49</sup> DP, p. 228/SuP, p. 264: "Quoi d'étonnant si la prison ressemble aux usines, aux écoles, aux casernes, aux hôpitaux, qui tous ressemblent aux prisons?"

<sup>50</sup> DP, p. 302f./SuP, p. 354: "La prison continue, sur ceux qu'on lui confie, un travail commencé ailleurs et que toute la société poursuit sur chacun par d'innombrables mécanismes de discipline [...] dans sa fonction, ce pouvoir de punir n'est pas essentiellement différent de celui de guérir ou d'éduquer."

<sup>51</sup> DP, p. 304/SuP, p. 356: "Les juges de normalité y sont partout. Nous sommes dans la société du professeur-juge, du médecin-juge, de l'éducateur-juge, du « travailleur-social »-juge; tous font régner l'universalité du normatif; et chacun au point où il se trouve y soumet le corps, les gestes, les comportements, les conduites, les aptitudes, les performances."

<sup>52</sup> DP, p. 305/SuP, p. 357: "L'homme connaissable (âme, individualité, conscience, conduite, peu importe ici) est l'effet-objet de cet investissement analytique, de cette domination-observation."

structures turn and shift like the tides, and as they do, "man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea".<sup>53</sup>

We suggested earlier that there is a conceptual difficulty at the core of Foucault's argument, namely, that his methodology overdetermines the results of his investigation. The difference between the conceptual claims arising out of his study (in particular, regarding the power-knowledge nexus and its ostensible effects) and the historical hypotheses which are evoked as evidence, is almost non-existent. Furthermore, there is no justification provided for this lack of clarity that is not itself part and parcel of Foucault's method. In what follows, we will show that this is no accident, but a direct consequence of certain assumptions regarding the relation between theoretical discourse and everyday language, and the consequences of these assumptions for Foucault's anti-humanism.

## 2. *The Production of Consciousness, or the Inversion of Phenomenology*

According to Foucault, when we talk about the soul, or the individual, or consciousness, or the subject, whether in medicine, law or the social sciences, we are discussing something that is already a product of the discourse in which it is being articulated. There are two philosophical problems with this thesis which we will address. The first is, one might say, the grammatical unclarity of this suggestion. Does Foucault mean that the very use of a term such as "delinquency" naturally carries with it a host of theoretical assumptions concerning behaviour and normality as well as specific methods and techniques for determining these? Or does he mean that the "delinquent", the one who has already been determined, juridically, socially, perhaps even psychologically as such, necessarily internalizes that determination and, therewith, becomes a "delinquent" *to himself*? It would seem, from the passages cited above, that he means *both*. As an empirical matter, there is probably a great deal of truth in both claims, but that is not a problem for philosophy.

<sup>53</sup> Foucault (1970), p. 387. *Les mots et les choses; une archéologie des sciences humaines* (Paris, 1966), p. 398.

The conceptual problem is that Foucault argues as if these two matters were inextricably bound up with one another. In his fervour to demonstrate the impossibility of an individual consciousness immune to the onslaught of impressions, opinions and practices of the *loci communes* (such as Husserl's transcendental ego), Foucault attempts to demonstrate the opposite. The individual is nothing more than a surface effect of the training and constraining, confining and defining, social, political and discursive forces around him. Foucault nowhere distinguishes between the individual as defined by various social, political and theoretical discourses and the individual "as he is in himself". It seems reasonable, therefore, to infer that Foucault does not accept such a distinction. Foucault's claims about the institutional constitution of the individual rest on his identifying every use of the notion of the individual, or the self, or consciousness, with the definition given it by the social sciences. *But these definitions themselves rest on our all knowing what it means to be an individual in much more common-sense usages.*<sup>54</sup> The failure to notice the logical priority of our everyday understanding relative to the subsequent interpretations of that understanding (which we will be discussing in greater detail shortly), leads to the second problem: what Foucault describes as the "discourses of the human sciences" seems to bear more on discourses *about* the human sciences than on the *practices* about which the human sciences are discourses. However much influence the science of pedagogy, for example, has on the practice of teaching, there is a real difference between what goes on in the classroom and what the social science of pedagogics has to say about it. It is difficult to see how Foucault can justify the claim that, aside from our "institutionalized selves", ourselves as student (or teacher), worker (or supervisor), patient (or doctor), and so forth, we are nothing, except as an *inversion* of the idealist notion of subjectivity which Foucault rejects at the outset. Where Husserl sought a common core to the diversity of contingent empirical experiences that characterize the individual's life as this individual here and now, and arrived at an hypostatized

<sup>54</sup> In this respect, if one disregards the epistemological apparatus attached to it, Kant's definition of the individual as one who can take responsibility for his actions comes closer to the pre-theoretical understanding than Foucault's quasi-sociological use of that term.

transcendental ego, Foucault hypostazes the "conditioning forces" of culture and its institutions, and lets these serve as the ultimate explanation for what we know and how we come to know it.

In view of the difficulties described above, one might first of all pose the question of how to understand Foucault's theory in practice: if all intellectual and social activities are everywhere and always effects of power, then there can be no appeal to theory to comprehend power. If the thinking/acting/speaking subject is a product of prior existing power relations, then I really cannot say or think anything with regard to those relations which is not already "inscribed", as Foucault might say, by those relations. If everything that we say, think and do is rife with power relations, from the most pedestrian act of, well, crossing the street, to performing elaborate experiments in biochemistry, to falling in love, at least one of the two following consequences *would seem* unavoidable. When I cross the street at a green light, I am not merely participating in the practice of street-crossing, in which the green light indicates that it is my turn to cross, and that drivers must wait for me. Ultimately, this act is a result of domination, the disciplining of my body's natural reactions, and the regulating of my behaviour to fit the ends of power – all of which seems to be rather high drama for such a simple, quotidian affair. Or, perhaps worse, the distinction between ideology and intellectual honesty,<sup>55</sup> as well as that between oppression and freedom, gets emptied of content. These distinction are matters of *grammatical fact* (in the sense in which we have been working with that term); it is simply the case that we *use* these words (ideology and honesty, oppression and freedom) differently. It is an odd kind of reasoning that demands that we act *as if* there can be no such distinction, when we do seem to have some idea of what we are saying when we use these words as we do. How can we be so grossly mistaken about the fact that we mean certain by these words? What kind of a mistake is that? One might well hold the view that these distinctions are genuinely devoid of any real content, but what possible justification could there be for the suggestion that our pre-theoretical experiences of the meaning of freedom and repression,

<sup>55</sup> Note that we refrain from referring to the philosophically infected notion of reason.

ideology and fact, personal life and social norms, crumble to pieces under the weight of Foucault's doctrine of the power/knowledge nexus? Is it even thinkable that someone would stop crossing the street in protest of the domination and constraint implied by the symbol of the red light?

To be fair, there are *concrete* societal issues which may be illuminated by a Foucauldian account. We may agree that there are important aspects of everyday life that are formed by the professional discourses of medicine, politics and jurisprudence. In such cases, the distinctions between ideology and fact, personal life and social norms, are indeed blurred. Certainly, the formation and transformation of the use of certain terms can have ideological overtones and political and social consequences. Let us take a look at what such an argument might look like, applied to, for example, intelligence-testing.

The popularization of the technical notion of intelligence, which is produced according to the methods and norms of experimental psychology, is taken for granted in popular books such as *The Bell Curve*,<sup>56</sup> and gives the general public the impression that what is being tested is all those things that we mean by intelligence when we use that term in everyday, non-technical conversation.<sup>57</sup> It is no accident that the authors of the book conclude that social programs to aid the poor are misguided, and even counter-productive, since it has been "shown" that there is a direct statistical correlation between racial affiliation and "intelligence", and between "intelligence" and socio-economic status. One of the authors was a noted conservative ideologue long before the publication of *The Bell Curve*. It would not serve the authors' purposes to pose the following questions: is it not the case that the tests are constructed by the very sorts of people who exhibit high degrees of that quality which the test is purported to measure, namely, "intelligence"? Are there not sorts of intelligent behavior ("street smarts", for instance) that are not measured, and perhaps cannot be measured, by this sort of standardized test? What interests are these tests intended to serve,

<sup>56</sup> Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray, *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* (New York, 1994).

<sup>57</sup> This problem, as well as related issues, is taken up by Andrew Hacker in "Caste, Crime and Precocity", in *The Bell Curve Wars: Race Intelligence, and the Future of America*, ed. Steven Fraser (New York, 1995).

and do these interests affect in some way, perhaps even steer, the formulation and choice of problems? Could one not interpret the fact that women and blacks, in general, perform poorly relative to their white male counterparts as a proof that, if women and blacks are deemed less "intelligent", it is because they are judged by standards dictated by white men? Is it not possible that the women and blacks who perform well on these tests do so by emulating the manner of thinking that is accorded legitimacy and recognition in our society by those in power, namely, educated white (and Asian) males? And what is the justification for that perceived legitimacy, that is, how is it legitimated?

However one might wish to respond to these questions, Foucault would argue, to dismiss them out of hand as ideological or fuzzy-headed, is to assume the very position that is being called into question. Whatever else one might say about the sort of reasoning expressed in the posing of such questions, it is clearly comprehensible. It raises the question of whether or not there can be a justification for a white, middle-class, male criterion of rationality that does not have recourse to precisely that conception of rationality?<sup>58</sup> To write about issues such as intelligence-testing without addressing these problems concerning the status of "he who knows", one could say, amounts to a kind of epistemological somnambulism. Thus even if someone presents a critique of white middle-class male criteria of intelligence and rationality from, say, the standpoint of working-class black women and, therewith, presents a version that is no more and no less dubious than the first (since there is no objective fact of intelligence *as such* about which these two versions are interpretations, Foucault might argue), the latter has the virtue of distancing the one holding it from the privileged discourse of "correct thinking" as dictated by others, and serving their purposes.

Once more, the point here is not to weigh the possible advantages or disadvantages of this method *as* a method for historiography, ethnology, sociology, or political thinking. It seems to me that, as one method among others for analyzing texts, for example, it can

<sup>58</sup> For a Foucauldian critique of psychometrics along similar lines, see Wendy Holloway, *Subjectivity and Method in Psychology: Gender, Meaning and Science* (London, 1989), pp. 124f.

be very useful and enlightening. Moreover, while Foucault's own account of the development of the penitentiary is by no means the only reasonable one (nor would he claim that it is), it has certainly been widely accepted as a major contribution to the study of such institutions.<sup>59</sup> As methodology, one might worry that the conflation of epistemological claims and methodological practice could lead to strange results, but that issue is not relevant to our purposes here. Rather, the point is that whatever merits there might be in using Foucault's method to investigate the "carceral mechanisms" that can be gleaned out of a study of the workings of many social institutions, one thing that is never entirely clear in Foucault's texts is the status of "the power of normalization and the formation of knowledge in modern society" that he enjoins us to investigate.<sup>60</sup>

At times, as we have said, it seems as if Foucault is making a general statement about how it is that human beings come to experience themselves and the world as they do, regardless of context. Our objection is simply this: while it makes almost immediate sense to apply the power-knowledge nexus, as described by Foucault, to intelligence testing (where there is a clear connection between the two), it is substantially more difficult to see the sense in it in the case of crossing the street at a green light – or turning on the light, using a fork, asking for change at the supermarket, or changing diapers. In short, while one is certainly free to apply whatever theoretical apparatus one likes to the various and sundry activities that make up our lives, in many cases, one is hard put to see the *point* in so doing. Whatever method of interpretation one applies to the practice of diaper-changing, for example, it must begin with a recognition of what it means to change a diaper that is not itself a product of that interpretative scheme, but which the latter, in fact, presupposes. We must all recognize and agree upon what counts as an instance of diaper-changing before any discussion of its wider implications for gender roles, or the sexual development of young children, or what

<sup>59</sup> As we have already noticed, while Foucault claims no epistemological priority for his own theoretical model, in practice, he writes as if we are forced to draw certain conclusions on the basis of that model. The ambiguity, then, is Foucault's own.

<sup>60</sup> DP, p. 308/SuP, p. 360 (note).

have you, is possible. Of course, there are contexts in which it makes sense to describe diaper-changing in terms of normalization. For instance, our perpetual subjection to advertisements in which clinically bluish water replaces the untidy fact of what we actually see when we change diapers, and may engender the feeling that real life must be made tidier, shinier and more orderly, but we can only find such contexts if we know more or less what it means to change a diaper. And while Foucault reminds us from time to time that he is not attempting to provide an account of suppressed "truths", indeed that his accounts are as much "stories" as "histories", his constant insistence upon the *generality* of the structures and forces he sees at work belies this modest stance.

Someone might want to question whether or not Foucault really does mean that everything that we say and do is permeated with power-relations in this all-encompassing sense. Although he writes about people on the margins, in extreme situations – prisoners on the gallows, madmen in asylums – Foucault argues for the generality of his analysis. In his discussion of the reformation of the French penal system in the early 18th century, for instance, he says this:

it was an effort to adjust the mechanisms of power that frame the everyday lives of individuals; an adaptation and a refinement of the machinery that assumes responsibility for and places under surveillance their everyday behaviour, their identity, their activity, their apparently unimportant gestures; another policy for that multiplicity of bodies and forces that constitutes a population.<sup>61</sup>

When Foucault criticizes the notion of the soul, or personality, or thinking subject, he is quite explicit that he also means the secretary at his typewriter, the infant in her playpen, and even, one may assume, the pedestrian crossing the street. Recall Foucault's elegant plea for the generality of his claims at the beginning of the chapter:

It would be wrong to say that the soul is an illusion, or an ideological effect. On the contrary, it exists, it has a reality, it is produced permanently around, on, within the body by the functioning of a power that is exercised on those punished – and, in a more general way, on those one supervises, trains and corrects, over

<sup>61</sup> DP, pp. 77f./SuP, p. 93.

madmen, children at home and at school, the colonized, over those who are stuck at a machine and supervised for the rest of their lives.<sup>62</sup>

Foucault tells us here not to be fooled by the humanist legerdemain of replacing the theological abstraction of the soul with the philosophical or psychological abstraction of the human being. "Personality" or "consciousness" have as dubious pedigree as their predecessor, and are as much a product of a certain intellectual discourse, one equally rife with power relations, as that of medieval theology. And certainly Foucault gives ample evidence, in *Discipline and Punish* and elsewhere, for the claim that much of what psychiatry, medicine and penology have "discovered" or "revealed" about human nature are actually products of their own conceptual schemes. But Foucault seems to be saying here that *since* the products of such discourses show themselves to be just that and not descriptions of man as he is in himself, then there is no man there at all. But is it not possible to point out that a certain theoretical apparatus creates its object without assuming that there can be nothing that is not a product of some theoretical apparatus? Foucault writes about humanity generally as if the secretary at his desk and the child at her father's knee *really were* products of socialization in the same sense that the concept of personality is, at least in part, a product of the discourse of psychology. Just because the *intellectual discussions* surrounding our ideas about ourselves cannot be disentangled from the ends which such discussions serve, we are not forced to believe that there is nothing outside of that discussion. In fact, the reverse must be the case if we are to understand the discussion at all. To repeat a point that has been made several times already, we must recognize what it means to be a secretary, what it means to be a child, what it means to be a father, etc. before any discussion, as to how these things came to mean what they in fact do mean, can get started.

To return to the traffic example again, one might pose the problem thus. When I cross the street at a highly-trafficked corner in New York, it normally does not occur to me to question the meaning of a red light. On the other hand, one could imagine a totalitarian society so intent upon the full subjection of its citizens that red

<sup>62</sup> DP, p. 29/SuP, p. 38.

lights were placed even in the middle of empty streets, seemingly indiscriminately scattered around the city, with the sole purpose of training and constraining the population so that they literally never made a move without explicit permission, here signified by the green light. In such a society, crossing the street at red would be an obvious act of defiance, an explicit questioning of the authority of those who were responsible for the placing of the traffic lights, an act which, one may suppose, might lead to terrible consequences for the traffic dissident. Could one perform such an act of defiance in *our society* with a straight face? No, because we all know what red and green signify in traffic, and the political dimension, if it exists at all, plays no role in our daily lives. Even if there is something compelling in Foucault's description of how we are perpetually formed and reformed in every aspect of our daily lives, when we take a close look at something which undeniably plays a part in all our lives, such as crossing the street, we see that his analysis, even if we accept it intellectually, plays absolutely no role whatsoever in *what we do*. This observation applies equally well to most of the things that we do most of the time: turning on the lights when we enter a room, changing a baby's diaper when it is soiled, taking out the trash when the basket is full, turning a key to lock the door, pouring milk into a glass, and so forth.

One obvious objection to my examples is that they are taken from the everyday life of contemporary European culture and, as such, have limited applicability. Such an objection misses one of the central points of this book, namely, that while we might contemplate what life is like for those whose culture is at a great remove from our own (the ancient Greeks, for example, or some remote tribe in New Guinea), we can only take such a *third-person perspective* on the simple truths of our own lives as a thought experiment. Foucault himself states that the inspiration for *The Order of Things* came from a passage in Borges describing the table of contents of a Chinese encyclopedia that elicited laughter from him. This laughter, he says, is the natural response, given our epoch and geographical location, to "the stark impossibility of thinking *that*".<sup>63</sup> But equally

<sup>63</sup> Foucault (1970), p. xv; Foucault (1966), p. 7.

impossible, it is argued here, is the possibility of accurately describing the most basic practices of *our own lives*, such as crossing the street at green and stopping at red, as if they were exotic rituals having nothing to do with us. That attempt results *necessarily* in a falsification of those practices.

Here it would serve us well to remind ourselves that while almost any meaningful sign or expression (such as a red light or the "don't walk" that it signifies) is amenable to almost infinite interpretation, there is a difference between that instantaneous meaning which we all comprehend at once, and the intellectual interpretation which we impose upon or derive from it. If one doubts that red means stop and green means go, one has not mastered the "art" of street-crossing. On the other hand, one can full well doubt (or believe, for that matter) that our actions are formed by the constraints imposed upon us by urban planners and politicians, and still be fully capable of either crossing the street or not when the light is green. The latter presupposes the former. If I don't know that green means go, my interpretation of its wider socio-political significance can never get off the ground. Without the immediate sense of "stop" in place, there can be no question of constraint and discipline.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>64</sup> Another modern French writer, Michel de Certeau, coined the notion of "économie scripturaire" of which Stefan Jonsson makes use in his Foucauldian analysis of urban planning. We cite the passage primarily in support of our otherwise seemingly prosaic example of street-crossing: "Den skriftliga ekonomin är samhällets sätt att förvandla människor och resurser till manipulerbara element, vilkas värden, arbeten, livsöden, framtidsdrömmar och rörelser kan planeras och dirigeras rationellt. När vi vandrar längs gatan bekräftar och fullbordar vi med våra rörelser de rörelser stadsplaneraren en gång utförde när han ritade ut gatans sträckning mellan koordinaterna på sitt vita ark. Arbetarna som byggde gatan var länge inskrivna i samma system. Tusentals människor som rör sig i olika riktningar längs gatan, i bilar eller på trottoarer, följer utan att veta om det regianvisningar ur ett manus författat av en vittförgrenad, anonym makt. Varje rörelse, från det vi lyfter telefonluren till att vi joggar runt motionsslingan, är planerad, förberedd och uttänkt av andra."

(Scriptural economy is society's way of transforming human beings and resources into manipulable elements, the value, labour, fate, dreams for the future and movements of whom can be rationally planned and directed. When we wander along the street, we affirm and consummate with our movements the movements once executed by the city planner when he drafted the length of the street between the coordinates on his white sheet. The workers who built the street had long been inscribed in the system. Thousands of people who move in different directions along the street, in cars or on sidewalks, follow unwittingly the stage directions from a script written by a widely dispersed, anonymous power. Every movement,

The main philosophical point of the example is this: whether one accepts or rejects a Foucauldian explanation of why we cross the street at green and refrain from doing so at red, we all must recognize an instance of “crossing the street at green” in order to begin our ruminations upon how we came to accept that, for example, “green means go”. While no one would question that the meaning of a green light in traffic is, in a very obvious sense, a “cultural product”, or a “social construction”, it is important that we take care not to be mesmerized by the picture that such a description might evoke. The fact that we can question the motives behind the rules of traffic, as well as their structural constitution and effects, presupposes that we all understand what traffic is, what a green light is, and what it means to stop and to go. Whatever explanations that we provide for the existence of these phenomena are necessarily dependent upon what we have described earlier as the grammatical *facts of the matter*. And once again, by “facts”, we do not mean something like “sense-data”, nor “physiological states”, nor reports about behavior. These notions, like any other explanatory model of, say, traffic, rest upon a state of affairs in which we all know how these words are used, and what it means to do the things that are involved in and described by the use of these words. Were this not the case, there would be no univocally meaningful phenomena to be explained. Wherever we lay the source of meaning, we must already know what it is that we are discussing; in short, if we did not already know what a traffic light is, we could not begin to argue about what it means *really*. And this is true, not only of the rules of traffic, but of what it means *to know* at all. It is in light of this neglect of the horizons of our understanding, or less portentously, of the facts of life, that Foucault’s reproduction of the error of phenomenology comes into stark relief.

Let us recall what we said about Husserl’s problem. Husserl wanted to find an absolute criterion for certain knowledge which would be immune to doubt. Husserl came up against the same problem one finds in any attempt to found knowledge in something other than

---

from our lifting of the telephone-receiver to our jogging around the exercise loop, is planned, prepared and thought out by others.) Stefan Jonsson, *De Andra. Amerikanska kulturkrig och europeisk rasism* (Stockholm, 1993), p. 41.

the facticity of what we actually do and say. Any criterion provided must be conceptually distinct from the recognition that this or that case adheres to the criterion, otherwise it could not serve as a criterion, but would be identical with the fact that it grounds. As we saw in our discussion of Husserl, the *recognition* that such and such a case adheres to the criterion cannot itself be a case of adherence to a criterion, because if it were, that too would have to be recognized as such a case, and we are led into an infinite regress that would seem to make certainty impossible. Yet what Husserl wants to explain and ground is the very fact that we do have certain knowledge in some fundamental matters. The problem with any criterion or rule for determining a case of genuine knowledge is that it can never serve as a ground for recognizing its meaning and its application. The meaning must be understood before a criterion can serve as a criterion. And that meaning is something that occurs in and with the practices in which sentences have meaning, or as Foucault would say, in which they *function*.

If a transcendental subject that can ground our empirical knowledge in self-reflection is Husserl’s dream, his nightmare would be Foucault’s view of the thinking subject as an accidental mixing and shaping of gelatinous discourses and conditioning forces in the institutions to which they give rise and in which they mold human consciousness. Essentially, Foucault has rather successfully shown the impossibility of a project such as Husserl’s, and replaced it with its negative image. This image retains, however, an assumption that leads inevitably to the problem described above. This assumption, that meaning and human knowledge are co-extensive with theoretical discourses about these, leaves us with the same conceptual impossibility, whether we say that the subject is grounded in transcendental consciousness or that it is a social construction with no existence apart from its semiotic role in cultural institutions and intellectual practices. True, my recognition of the relative lengths of the lines A and B can be said to depend upon our practices of comparing lengths, upon how we, in twentieth-century European society use and understand the term “line”, or upon our methods of education and categorization of correct statements and incorrect statements. This interpretation, however, requires that we all know what it means “to compare two lines”. Similarly, taking one of Foucault’s own examples, any

explanation of the historical development of the modern prison, if it is to make use of discussions about change in design and function, presumes that we all know what a *building* is. This is the fact of the matter, however one might be tempted to explain that fact. Indeed any further explanation offered for that recognition, for example, that it too is a product of “discursive practices”, simply begs the question. It cannot serve as an explanation, because one may then ask how we recognize a case of recognition, and so forth, *ad tedium*. The only undeniable *fact* at hand, in the first example, is the comparative lengths of the two line-segments, and in the second, the constructions that we in fact call buildings.

One might be able to imagine a circumstance in which someone with unencumbered vision and conversant in the languages and thought forms of modern Europe could *see* B as longer than A, but this would require that we posit Martians training rays on her, or some such philosophical invention. And one could probably work out some intricate thought experiment in which someone follows the whole of Foucault’s reasoning about the transition from incarceration to observation despite having a rather odd understanding of what is normally intended by the word “building”. Such imaginings have little explanatory force, however, since they too rely on language working for those involved in the thought experiments more or less as it always does: we have to have some idea of the point of evoking a Martian, we have to know what it means for someone to follow a discussion, and so forth. Ultimately, explanation comes to an end, not because we are not clever enough to find “the right one”, nor because all knowledge is discourse in the service of power, but simply because of the *conceptual impossibility* of providing an explanation for how we come to recognize a satisfactory explanation as satisfactory and explanatory. While it may be fruitful and interesting to show how certain kinds of theoretical apparatus create their objects, theorizing about how and why this is the case will not get us any closer to the truth about what it is to know something, or to know it for certain. In a sense, to see clearly, one must *stop* philosophizing. As we shall see in the next section, however, Foucault rejects the idea that *there is* anything to see clearly outside of the discourses in which we discuss “truth”, “knowledge”, or “meaning”.

### 3. Contingency and the Inescapability of Discourse

One of the reasons for choosing *Discipline and Punish* as our primary example of the poststructuralist approach to the problem of the subject was its concreteness. On the other hand, it is clear that Foucault’s ideas about the nature of discourse, though not explicitly addressed in that work, are essential to his understanding of the formation of the modern soul. Something will have to be said, therefore, about what Foucault means by the term “discourse”, and what consequences this may have for his view of subjectivity.

Foucault uses the term “discourse” to mean, alternatively, “the general domain of all statements”, “an individualizable group of statements”, and “a regulated practice that accounts for a certain number of statements”.<sup>65</sup> Statements are not to be understood as propositions, sentences or speech acts, which are what they are by virtue of their place in a given theoretical system (logic, grammar, or theory of language).<sup>66</sup> Statements, in Foucault’s sense, are elements of discourse, rather than elements of a taxonomical system.<sup>67</sup> The statement is not a unity, according to Foucault, but a *function*, and, as such, it “cuts across a domain of structures and possible unities”.<sup>68</sup> Nor can it be reduced to some singular unrepeatable event, what Foucault calls the “enunciation”, that is, the temporally situated statement as individual statement rather than type.<sup>69</sup> The same statement can be expressed in different enunciations, but also, in any given instance of a repeated, grammatically well-formed sentence,

<sup>65</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York, 1972), p. 80. *L’archéologie du savoir* (Paris, 1969), p. 106: “au lieu de resserrer peu à peu la signification si flottante du mot « discours », je crois bien en avoir multiplié les sens: tantôt domaine général de tous les énoncés, tantôt groupe individualisable d’énoncés, tantôt pratique réglée rendant compte d’un certain nombre d’énoncés [...]”

<sup>66</sup> For a comparison between Foucault’s notion of the statement and speech act theory, see Dreyfus and Rabinow, pp. 45f.

<sup>67</sup> AK, pp. 80–87/AS, pp. 106–115.

<sup>68</sup> AK, p. 87/AS, p. 115. Foucault’s abstract account of the four types of function is not directly relevant for our purposes and is far too abstruse to be helpful here. Frank explains Foucault’s idea of a statement as a function by way of the following example: “the failure to greet somebody I know functions as an insult only within an institutional frame of forms of interaction and rules of courtesy. Without such a frame no action could be recognized as such a function, and thus associated with another action (or another state of affairs).” (p. 178.)

<sup>69</sup> AK, p. 101/AS, p. 133.

a different statement can be expressed. In sum, the statement is meaningful as a statement only by reference to the discursive practice in which it functions. This is problematic as an explanation, of course, since discourse is defined as the practice(s) in which the statement functions.<sup>70</sup>

Foucault's view of language may be described thus: all attempts at locating some univocal, objective fact, mental or empirical, must themselves take place within a discourse. This discourse is itself inextricable from the ends to which it is put. But since there is no controlling center or origin of discourse(s) and the institutions in which they function, the meaning of the terms of that discourse are contingent. In considering a given state of affairs, we have no recourse to pure facts, objective rules, universally valid truths, or clear and distinct ideas outside of the discourse whose terms formulate the object under investigation. Furthermore, the temporal and spatial locatedness of the discourse forms a frame or horizon for what is conceivable. It would be wrong to say that Foucault believes that we are prisoners of language, since that would suggest that there is something beyond the walls of the prison. For Foucault, human consciousness is formed like a drop of mercury in a mold: the shape it takes is determined by what surrounds it. The forms of human thought are themselves fluid, are in themselves nothing but a surface effect of that which surrounds and constrains them. Thus Foucault would admit that his own discourse is not and cannot remain aloof from the discourses which precede and give rise to it. The idea of "history" and its methods, for example, are the product of two hundred years of discussion in which statements about history have their meaning and their life. What distinguishes Foucault's own discourse from the prevailing discourses of philosophy, psychology, or the history of ideas, is his hyperactive attendance to the Enlightenment

<sup>70</sup> Foucault is ambiguous regarding what sort of language use falls under the heading of "discourse" as articulated here. But even in a generous reading, that is, one which interprets him as referring only to the statements of "experts" when they are speaking as experts, he writes in such a way as to suggest that these discourses actually function as foundations for more mundane linguistic practices. Whether or not this gliding is intentional, it has serious repercussions for poststructuralist discussions about the human subject which take their cue from Foucault, as the urban planning example above would indicate.

ideal of self-critical reflection. It is as if his entire theoretical discussion of the discursive formation of knowledge were a prophylactic measure to guard him against the possible accusation of naïveté with respect to his own claims to understanding.<sup>71</sup>

At the very outset of his discussion of discursive formations in *Archaeology of Knowledge*, for example, Foucault writes that his initial attempt to delimit a given discourse, say, the "discourse" of medicine, grammar or political economy, led him to the commonsensical notion that "statements different in form, and dispersed in time, form a group if they refer to one and the same object".<sup>72</sup> He then rejects this notion for two reasons. Taking the example of the history of mental illness, he says that it is simply a mistake to try to understand what "madness" is in itself:

mental illness was *constituted* by all that was said in all the statements that named it, divided it up, described it, explained it, traced its developments, indicated its various correlations, judged it, and possibly gave it speech by articulating, in its name, discourses that were to be taken as its own.<sup>73</sup>

Secondly, this group of statements does not refer to the same object. Medical statements from the same period do not have the same object as legal statements or police reports concerning madmen. Furthermore, different discourses even within medicine classify and differentiate differently. It is not the same illnesses that are at issue, nor the same madmen.

At least two difficulties arise. To begin with, the notion of *constitution* is ambiguous. It is not clear from this formulation whether Foucault means that what is called "madness" within a given professional vocabulary of an epoch is a product of the theoretical assumptions of that vocabulary, or whether there is nothing outside that vocabulary's object that might be called madness. The first statement is both conceptually and historically plausible. No woman in Sweden today is hospitalized for her "hysteria" for the simple

<sup>71</sup> In this respect, Foucault's analysis of the "discursive formations" of the social sciences has much in common with Jacques Derrida's vigilant attention to the metaphysical assumptions he sees at the heart philosophical discourse.

<sup>72</sup> AK, p. 32/AS, p. 45.

<sup>73</sup> AK, p. 32 (emphasis added)/AS, p. 45.

reason that we no longer have a *medical* use for that term. Similarly, it is doubtful that any woman in Sweden today would describe herself as “hysterical” in the nineteenth-century medical sense of the word. Once again, as an example of how certain theoretical discourses can lose sight of the assumptions and vocabulary that determine and categorize their objects of study, the contention that “madness” is largely what theoreticians (and, therewith, practitioners) of law, medicine and psychiatry say it is, is worth consideration. As a positive claim about the ontological status of madness, however, it is highly speculative. Foucault writes as if the insight that madness or delinquency are not theory- and value-neutral “things” or “qualities” leads inexorably to the realization that there is nothing outside of the discourses in which madness or delinquency “function” or have meaning. But there is no necessity to this inference.

Foucault does entertain the idea that perhaps there is something that is not simply a product of the discourses under investigation, “the rich uncertainty of disorder”. He equates the idea of something that is not a product of the intellectual discourses under study with a posited “prediscursive”.<sup>74</sup> Foucault argues that the very attempt at getting down to the prediscursive level of truth must take place within the order of discourse. Thus there is no passage from text to thought, or from the spoken word to inner representation: “One remains within the dimension of discourse.”<sup>75</sup> In this respect, the spectacular formulation of Foucault’s problem from the back cover of the English edition of *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972) is not too far off the mark: “Madness, sexuality, power, knowledge – are these facts of life or simply parts of speech?” For Foucault,

<sup>74</sup> AK, p. 76/AS, pp. 100f.: “En cela, l’analyse des formations discursives s’oppose à beaucoup de descriptions habituelles. [...] Derrière le système achevé, ce que découvre l’analyse des formations, ce n’est pas, bouillonnante, la vie elle-même, la vie non encore capturée; c’est une épaisseur immense de systématicités, un ensemble serré de relations multiples. Et de plus, ces relations ont beau n’être pas la trame même du texte, elles ne sont pas par nature étrangères au discours. On peut bien les qualifier de « prédiscursives », mais à condition d’admettre que ce prédiscursif est encore du discursif, c’est-à-dire qu’elles ne spécifient pas une pensée, ou une conscience ou un ensemble de représentations qui seraient, après coup et d’une façon jamais tout à fait nécessaire, transcrits dans un discours, mais qu’elles caractérisent certains niveaux du discours, qu’elles définissent des règles qu’il actualise en tant que pratique singulière.”

<sup>75</sup> AK, p. 76/AS, p. 101: “On demeure dans la dimension du discours.”

there is no knowledge that is not bound up with intellectual discourses and the uses to which they are put. We cannot conceive of anything without concepts as they are formed in discourse. The reason he ends up here is that he sees everyday life in terms of theory, but never looks at theory in terms of everyday life.<sup>76</sup>

Foucault wants to show that any answer to the question of how knowledge is possible must collapse into a state of perpetual displacement of the ostensible center of the discourse, because it is born out of something which cannot itself be an object of knowledge as such. The possibility of standing outside of the conditioning, disciplining discourse of which an object of knowledge forms a part is an illusion. On the other hand, he also wants to show us how different patterns of behaviour and discursive practices are given

<sup>76</sup> Dreyfus and Rabinow are quick to point out that “Foucault presupposes, but is not interested in” the everyday, straightforward understanding of language “as it is used in a local context against a background of practices which are not merely other statements”. (pp. 46f.). Rather, Foucault is interested in the discourse of “experts speaking as experts”, with all the validation procedures, shared values and practices that constitute the system in which the truth claims (as well as the meaningfulness of these) arise. What we wish to suggest is that had Foucault been more “interested” in everyday language use, he might have noticed the consequences of the fact that experts cannot speak solely as experts, and that their use of technical, official, or theoretical language rests on everyday language functioning as it does. It is precisely the importance of this relationship that we wish to investigate. Furthermore, the “ordinary language” that Foucault presupposes seems to come closer to the technical notion of “ordinary language” in philosophy than the facts of living language seen from the perspective of its users that we take as our starting-point. Rabinow and Dreyfus note that Foucault’s attempt at studying the discursive formation of concepts requires a “double reduction”. Not only must the investigator bracket the *truth claims* of the statement under investigation (*pace* Husserl), he must also bracket the *meaning claims* of the statement: “he must not only remain neutral as to whether what a statement asserts as true is in fact true, *he must remain neutral as to whether each specific truth claim even makes sense*, and more generally, whether the notion of a context-free truth claim is coherent.” (p. 49, emphasis added.) This proposed neutrality towards the meaningfulness of statements, we argue, is fundamentally misguided. It is this spectator perspective on language that leads Foucault to claim that “the different forms of the speaking subjectivity [are] effects proper to the enunciative field” (AK, p. 122/AS, p. 160), as if the fact that we all “take ourselves”, even when speaking as experts, to speak as an individual who wants to say something specific, were merely a datum to be analyzed according to the matrix of his system. And this seems to be the very point of his project. The rules of formation under analysis are said to operate “according to a sort of uniform anonymity, on all individuals who undertake to speak in this discursive field”. (AK, p. 63/AS, pp. 83f.).

voice in the very theories which consider the reflective ego unconditioned. In order to avoid charges of self-contradiction ("how can you, Foucault, know that what you know is not itself merely a surface phenomenon?"), Foucault denies that his narratives are in any sense definitive. He must admit that his "knowledge" is as much an interpretation as the reason and understanding that he criticizes:

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 [...] it does not set out to be a recollection of the original or a memory of the truth. On the contrary, its task is to *make* differences: to constitute them as objects, to analyse them, and to define their concept.<sup>77</sup>

The problem with the Foucault's project as described in the *Archaeology of Knowledge* is neatly summarized by Dreyfus and Rabinow:

Like phenomenology, the whole enterprise rests on the notion of a pure description. But this raises [...] an insurmountable series of problems for anyone wishing to assess the claims of *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Is a pure description possible? Is there no interpretation involved in the choice of descriptive categories? Must we not be able to ask: Are these descriptions accurate or distorted? But doesn't this reintroduce truth?<sup>78</sup>

Our interest here is not in these problems as specific to the *Archaeology of Knowledge*, but as an indication of a deeper philosophical issue. Foucault's view of language remained constant, we would say, in at least the following respect. The "mere" facts of communication to which we have been alluding throughout are not given their due as fundamental facts, but are always seen by Foucault as products of something prior (discursive formations, the power-knowledge nexus, or, *tout court*, interpretation):

If interpretation can never end, it is simply because there is absolutely nothing primary to interpret, because fundamentally, everything is already interpretation;

<sup>77</sup> AK, p. 205/AS, pp. 267f.: "pour l'instant, et sans que je puisse encore prévoir un terme, mon discours, loin de déterminer le lieu d'où il parle, esquivé le sol où il pourrait prendre appui [...] il n'entreprind pas d'être recollection de l'originnaire ou souvenir de la vérité. Il a, au contraire, à *faire* les différences: à les constituer comme objets, à les analyser et à définir leur concept."

<sup>78</sup> Dreyfus and Rabinow, p. 85.

each sign is in itself not the thing which is offered to interpretation, but the interpretation of other signs.<sup>79</sup>

Rabinow and Dreyfus clarify this remark by stating: "In this discovery of groundlessness the inherent arbitrariness of interpretation is revealed."<sup>80</sup> Notice the unquestioned dichotomy: *either* the meaningfulness of signs can be grounded in something else, *or* signification and interpretation are *arbitrary*. What we have been suggesting throughout is that certain kinds of facts about actual linguistic practice are not amenable to philosophical justification and its demands for evidence, but neither are they arbitrary, simply because they fail to meet those demands. Foucault's Nietzschean picture of human experience makes it seem as if *every* instance of mutual comprehension were an illusion, a mistaken belief on my part that I mean something absolutely determinate or that my interlocutor means something determinate, and that we have actually understood each other fully. After all, meaning is interpretation based upon a system of which the experience of truth or understanding is merely so much accumulated vapor.

In the account provided in *Discipline and Punish*, it would seem that *all* literal meaning is actually interpretation, which means, in effect, that the experience of literal meaning is *always* a delusion, smoke and mirrors serving the ends of power. Thus even when *I take myself* to be referring (to something), this too is merely a surface effect: I can *never* refer, since there is nothing to which to refer. And since Foucault explicitly admits that there are no "facts", he has implicitly *accepted* as legitimate the traditional philosophical definition of a fact (regardless of whether this is conceived of as a mental state, a sense-datum, or raw data; these are all theoretical redescriptions). Moreover, since he assumes that what is meant by "truth" is always a matter of reference to facts (about objects, sense impressions, or ideas), and there is no referential foundation for meaning, there is and can be no foundation for truth, especially

<sup>79</sup> Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Freud, Marx", in *Cahiers du Royamont 6: Nietzsche* (Paris, 1967), p. 189: "Si l'interprétation ne peut jamais s'achever, c'est tout simplement qu'il n'y a rien à interpréter. Il n'y a rien d'absolument premier à interpréter, car, au fond, tout est déjà interprétation, chaque signe est en lui même non pas la chose qui s'offre à l'interprétation, mais l'interprétation d'autres signes."

<sup>80</sup> Dreyfus and Rabinow, p. 107.

conceptual or philosophical truth. Thoughts and statements are always *something other* than what we naively take them to be, in the respect that their meaning *is* their relation to other signs in the knowledge/power matrix of which we too are products, whose understandings in turn derive their meaning from their place in the system in relation to other signs, *ad infinitum*. But is it not a *fact* that a green light at a crossing *means* right of way for the pedestrian? To call my understanding of that sign an "interpretation" seems to empty the latter term of all content.

Imagine the following scenario: Someone is listening through a wall to what seems to be two people in conversation. The voices are coming from outside her room, and she presses her ear against the wall, attempting to visualize the bodies of the speakers. She imagines the words coming from their mouths, but the voices are difficult to comprehend, seemingly a jumble of words without context, self-contained and unrelated to anything outside the conversation, as though the grammatical constructions were randomly conceived structures that, once used, were not repeated. Just when it seems that she has understood a phrase or reference, the other speaker says something totally unrelated to the previous sentence, so that she is forced to assume that she had misunderstood the original words. She ascribes a pair of firm lips, the lower lip tucked under the upper one, and the habit of pressing them together when there is disagreement, to the higher voice, but it is as if she were trying to contain a circle of reddish smoke; when the higher voice falls silent, the assigned mouth trembles and disintegrates, changing color and shape until it no longer resembles a mouth at all. She thinks that he has heard the word "film" spoken several times. She wonders if they are discussing a particular film, or is it perhaps the genre of film? Is the word being used as a verb, was something to be, or had it already, been filmed? It occurs to her then that it is entirely possible that the word has been exclamatory, that she is listening in on two actors reading from a script. She judges, at last, that it was most likely that the usage is as a noun, but the speakers seem to move across the room, and it is impossible to hear anything distinctly. The voices become an interchange of murmurings of identical pitch, so that it is impossible to ascertain from the tone of the conversation where one voice pauses and the other commences.

This is something like the situation that we *would* be in *if* it were actually the case that, at each and every given instant, the meaning of language and the activities of which it is a part were contingent, that is, open to interpretation or further formation. But it is *obviously not* a description of an ordinary case of listening in on someone else's conversation. Its very strangeness suggests rather something like an allegorical depiction of what it might be like to suffer from a neurological problem such as auditory agnosia, the inability to understand spoken words. For the most part, it simply is not the case that possible interpretations of what a certain word or expression might mean play any role in our understanding of what they actually *do mean* in the context in which they are uttered. To the contrary, in those rare cases in which someone is in a persistent state of uncertainty as to the meaning of words used in context, it is associated with lesions on the brain, or severe psychological trauma, that is to say, it is the exception rather than the rule. Now, of course, it is precisely this division between sanity and insanity that Foucault cites as the birth of rationalism.<sup>81</sup> According to Foucault, Descartes' will to keep his reason vigilant at all times amounts to an ethical decision to dismiss all experiences that do not meet with the demands of rational doubt from the realm of the true. The insane come to be constituted then, in the Classical age, as the "other" of the properly human (that is to say, rational). This critique of rationalism, whatever its merits, seems to accept the idea that our everyday notions of sanity and insanity are seeped in philosophical and psychiatric doctrines.<sup>82</sup> In a sense, these notions become "other" to us, in much the same way that the non-rational becomes "other" within the Cartesian scheme. Again, it may be quite helpful to see that the notion of clinical insanity that we may take as self-evident cannot without further ado be applied to epochs and cultures to which it does not

<sup>81</sup> See *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* (Paris, 1972), pp. 156f.

<sup>82</sup> It is worth noting here that Descartes' argument for rejecting the possibility that his clear and distinct impressions of sitting by the fire are the result of madness is that he can only speculate or *imagine* that he is mad for the purposes of his meditation. His immediate impressions, however, require no effort of speculation, and are thus more vivid to him than his feigned madness. The doubt that is introduced to call into question the criterion of clarity and distinctness is answered by an appeal to that very criterion. See Hiram Caton, *The Origin of Subjectivity: An Essay on Descartes* (New Haven & London, 1973), p. 110.

belong. Similarly, we can have critical distance to the definitions, symptomatologies, and medical treatments offered by psychiatric medicine. These observations do not carry with them, however, the necessary conclusion that our contemporary everyday ideas about madness and mental health are *merely* the product of the history of psychiatric discourse. Conversely, the insight that these observations need not lead to Foucault's conclusion does not itself require some biologicistic or essentialist view of the mind. To the contrary, the point here is that our everyday understanding of what it means to be sane is not reducible to some theory about what that understanding is grounded upon.

Here it is useful to consider more carefully the difference between ideology and the conceptual grammar (in the sense discussed earlier) of everyday life. For us to be able to understand the very term *ideology*, there must be something that is not ideology, lest the term be rendered vacuous. On the other hand, it is difficult to define the term neutrally. Nonetheless, it seems fair to say this much: the concept of ideology presupposes the possibility of seeing things as being this way or that. With respect to ideological statements, there is room for interpretation and, therewith, for disagreement. But is there room for disagreement about what a green light means? How am I to understand, for example, my friend who seriously insists that he has been living in Borneo for the last fifteen years when I know for a fact that he has not left Brooklyn? Here there is neither room for interpretation nor for disagreement since, in a fundamental sense, my friend is not *mistaken* about a *belief* that might be corrected by reference to some fact of which he may be unaware, or by clearing up some conceptual confusion. To the contrary, this is a clear-cut case of some mental disturbance, and one that, whatever its causes, however it was produced, cannot be reduced to the explanatory scheme of constituting discourses.<sup>83</sup> The latter can be nothing more than a model applied to mental illness as a theoretical object. While I could apply this model, it would not change the fact that my friend is suffering from some mental disturbance. If we were to eschew the quasi-technical language of "mental disturbances" and

<sup>83</sup> This example is a paraphrase of Wittgenstein's discussion in *On Certainty*. See Wittgenstein (1969), pp. 70–75.

replace it with the vernacular "weird", it would be eminently obvious that this judgement is by no means a product of some intellectual discourse. Only by looking at our everyday notions as something *not* belonging to us as part of our lives can we see sanity or insanity as a *contingent construction*. But this ontologizing of a kind of *Verfremdungseffekt* is precisely what so many of Foucault's admirers, such as Deborah Cook, think to be his great achievement:

Foucault estranges us from our own history. He makes the eternal temporal, the self-evident questionable, and the obvious strange. [...] Our reason, our individuality, our bodies, our sexuality all become, in his work, the creations of *chance* historical events.<sup>84</sup>

Thus there are followers of Foucault who do want to say "well yes, everything *is* interpretation", since it seems to follow from the claim that everything is contingent and therefore amenable to further conceptual determination and interpretation. Yet, often enough, they seem unprepared to illustrate exactly what that means. It is a seductive picture, but as with abstract pictures generally, it is not so much a representation of how things are as an illustration of a certain way of looking at them. One *could*, for example, portray crossing the street as an inordinately complex procedure in which juridical, social, political and technological forces constrain me to become the form "pedestrian" as dictated by the system. But am I really "the pedestrian" in this abstract philosophical sense when I cross the street at green? It is one thing to notice that different cultures, epochs and religions are characterized by thought forms which include certain possibilities and exclude others (Foucault's "epistemes"); but what does it mean to formulate a general positive doctrine about this "fact"? What can such a general statement say about reality? To suggest, with Foucault, that there is no difference between "truth" and "what a discourse creates as truth" is simply to argue for a position within the philosophical debate, unreflectively accepting the terms of that debate. It is an intellectual or theoretical standpoint, rather than an insight gained by a thoughtful consideration of the

<sup>84</sup> Deborah Cook, *The Subject Finds a Voice: Foucault's Turn Toward Subjectivity* (New York, etc., 1993), p. 1. However great an achievement this may be in its own right, it is questionable if it is Foucault's greatest *philosophical* contribution.

simple facts of life (which it claims to be explaining). In this respect, Foucault has not distanced himself enough from the privileged standpoint of phenomenology that he takes himself to be undermining. Without this emphasis on the contingency of knowledge, however, Foucault's notion of the discursive constitution of the subject would be unintelligible. It is therefore worthwhile to investigate its implications more carefully.

One sympathetic reader of Foucault, Todd May, summarizes the relationship between subjectivity and the contingency of human practices by noting that subjectivity,

since it is a historical phenomenon dependent upon the practices from which it emerged and which sustain it, can be altered or abolished by new practices. These practices cannot emanate from a subject – as an act of subjective will – but they can come from people inserting their actions into the contingent web of historical events and institutions. The constitution of the subject is not the exhaustive determination of behavior, although inasmuch as it is appropriated as a mode of self-knowledge, and thus as a mode of living, subjectivity will define the parameters of our options, our powers, and the normal and acceptable range of behavior.<sup>85</sup>

There are two related problems involved with this picture. One is the status of this “contingent web of historical events and institutions” that are said to make up our lives. The second is the status of the “subjectivity” that is said to be constituted out of these practices. Let us begin with the first. One need not be a philosopher to notice that, for example, outside of the institutions of traffic, there is no necessary correlation between the color red and the rule that the driver must stop at certain lights. The association between a red light and the act of stopping is not transcendently grounded or guaranteed. Technically speaking, then, we might say that it is *contingent*. But that observation can only be made as a reflection upon the rules of traffic from the *outside*. While driving, there is nothing contingent or accidental about the fact that red means stop and green means go. If it were the case that the meaning could, in principle, change overnight, driving would be impossible (or at least, far more dangerous).

<sup>85</sup> Todd May, *The Political Philosophy of Poststructuralist Anarchism* (University Park, 1996), p. 79.

While Foucault and his followers would surely grant this point, they seem oblivious to the implications for the notion of subjectivity. Observing how the convict came to be understood and described not merely as a “wrong doer”, but as a “criminal type”, with the development of criminology, psychology and sociology as sciences, one might be tempted to say that the “subject” of these disciplines is, at least in part, a product of the theorizing which constitutes these. Moreover, it would seem reasonable to say that the individual subjected to the defining and judging authorities naturally internalizes the rank, status or position attributed to him by these same authorities – it becomes part of his self-understanding. But there is nonetheless an important conceptual difference between the representation of the subject within the discourse of, say, psychiatry, and the actual, living, breathing human being. Indeed, we could not even understand Foucault's argument that the one implies the other if we did not all immediately recognize the very difference that he denies. Foucault might respond by saying that that very recognition is a product of the discourses in question. The difficulty with that position is that it can never be shown, one way or the other, since we would have to imagine a world in which language and human life were radically different from anything hitherto experienced. More importantly, there are innumerable instances of self-experience in everyday life that are not reducible to Foucault's scheme, although they may be interpreted in light of it.

Let us imagine a man in his early thirties. While he enjoys the company of women, he also feels a strong need to be alone, and has never contemplated marriage or children. Perhaps he is involved in a relationship with a woman whom he likes very much; he is quite satisfied with their friendship, and feels no particular urge to meet other women. He feels free to speak openly and truthfully to her about most matters of any importance, and he prefers her company to that of his siblings, colleagues and acquaintances. As a matter of course, the man perhaps gives her a gold watch, an old family heirloom that he inherited from his grandmother, for her birthday. He does not reflect much upon how she might interpret this gesture; he had come across the watch while cleaning through his cupboards, and it occurred to him that his friend would appreciate the delicacy of the craftsmanship. It dawns upon him after a while that his friend

has misunderstood the meaning of his gesture; she takes it to be a token of "commitment", of a hitherto unexpressed seriousness about her importance in his life. Within a couple of weeks, he finds himself in discussions with her about an eventual wedding, buying a house and planning a family, accompanying her on expeditions to find the right wedding dress. On one such excursion, she asks for his opinion. Somehow that seemingly innocuous question shatters the illusion of self-evidence in all their preparations. To the question: "Do you like this one?", he discovers himself thinking: "I couldn't care less." Perhaps this insight leads to a determination to extricate himself from these and all other attempts to make him conform to a way of life that simply does not suit him. This same fellow, two years later, might find himself spending time with a woman whose every movement, whose barely perceptible gestures and alterations in tone of voice take on almost metaphysical significance for him. Observing the way she thrusts her head back as she climbs the stairs toward the landing where he is waiting for her, he might think to himself: "I love this woman."

Of course, it would be entirely possible that a friend immersed in contemporary cultural theory, or his psychotherapist, or the local gossip might *speculate* about what elements of his personal history, social context, or intellectual development have led up to the fact that he walks around saying and doing the things that we often ascribe to "being in love". Asked to explain how he knows that he is in love, he might say that it lay in "the way she climbs the stairs". But any interpretation concerning the *fabrication* of the experience of love in modern literature, psychology, or social science would rest upon a recognition of what it is to feel that concatenation of impulses and sentiments (sexual attraction, the often insatiable desire to be in the company of the other, delight at the most trivial aspects of the beloved, such as how she climbs the stairs, concern for her well-being, and so forth) that is prior to the discursive practices in which the interpretations are formed. This fellow can offer no convincing evidence for accepting or rejecting the various interpretations on the basis of what he knows, anymore than our geometry student can prove his stomach ache, for the simple reason that the statement, "I love this woman", is not a description of a state of affairs in the context described above. It is rather an *expression* of

that fact, on a par with weak knees and bedroom eyes. It is hardly conceivable that this man could, in the same breath that he utters his declaration of love, experience and express that love *as* a social construction, even if he might accept such an interpretation as plausible, while in conversation with his theoretically-minded friend over a beer two weeks later. In that instance, he is discussing his feelings as an *object of reflection*, and not *expressing what he feels*.

The scenario described above is hardly extraordinary, but is so commonplace, so easily recognizable, that some might see it as rather banal. The point of such an example is precisely to describe the mundane. Exceptional cases reveal less about the everyday, it seems fair to say, than do examples of ordinary people doing ordinary things such as crossing the street, changing diapers, and falling in love. In real life, it is crucial that we pay attention to what is actually the case, since it can be decisive for what becomes of our lives. Whether a Foucault-inspired thesis about the discursive formation of a notion such as love is correct or not hardly matters for what happens to the people in the example above. In contrast, this fellow's self-understanding ("I do not love this woman", "I do love that woman") will determine the course of life for everyone involved. Here it is vitally important for everyone concerned that the man "knows his mind", that is, that he knows whether or not he loves. The consequences of simply falling into a marriage not of his own design can ruin his life, the life of his "intended", and certainly the lives of the unwanted children that may presumably ensue. In this respect, there is a very real, palpable difference between theories of subjectivity and the facts of life for any given "subject" or "self". Even if Foucault is correct in his analysis of the invention of modern theories of subjectivity, he cannot draw the conclusion from that analysis that the difference between representations of selfhood and the experience of selfhood is itself a product of those theories.

Let us take another example, one that is perhaps more in the spirit of *Discipline and Punish*. It has become common in certain countries to allow minor felons to live under house arrest and continue their lives more or less as usual. Instead of being incarcerated, they live at home, continue to go to work or school, are free to go by themselves to the market, and so forth. There is one hitch: they are under constant surveillance by means of an electronic shackle

around the ankle. This shackle is linked up with a central computer, allowing the police to monitor the prisoner's every move, without the need for a prison or a guardian. In its present form, of course, what is being monitored is the felon's proximity to his home and place of work. We can imagine a political situation in certain countries, however, where it would be politically expedient to refine the use of the shackle. There may arise a consensus that house arrest, however economical and efficient as a replacement for incarceration, lacks the element of stigmatization associated with imprisonment or the chain gang. It may then be proposed that the discrete shackle now in use, one that is easily hidden by a pant leg, be replaced with a larger, more eye-catching attribute, one that signifies the convict as a convict, and not only to the police who are monitoring the convict. Now the prisoner would be perpetually on display to his colleagues, his teachers, the check-out girl at the supermarket. Everyone could see that he is wearing a shackle, and he would always be aware of the fact that he is or may be under observation. There is no need for a building such as the Panopticon. Technology has transformed every corner of the convict's world into an observatory.

Whatever this means for our notions of the public and the private, or for the balancing of effectiveness against setting dangerous political precedents, some of us might prefer this punishment. We might consider it more humane *to ourselves* than going to prison. One could respond to such a remark by pointing out that such a preference is testimony to how our values and personal decisions are formed by the technologies and discourses of power in which we cannot help but partake. Our reply is, once more, that however fruitful such a perspective may be, that perspective would presumably play little role in my hoping to receive the punishment of my choice. The *historical or theoretical meaning* of having the option of a computerized shackle is something distinct from my life, for the meaning of that shackle (over and against a prison term) for *my life*. Whatever one may think of this invention and its introduction into the penal system, whatever knowledge there is to be gleaned from the use of the electronic shackle, the extent to which such knowledge may be bound up with the exercise of power, the prisoner who chooses or does not choose this option looks at it as a question

concerning *how he is to live his life*. That dimension is missing from the historical or judicial account.

In both *The Order of Things* and *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault explicitly denies that he is offering a theory of human knowledge. He takes himself to be modestly proposing a model of the discourse of knowledge which functions in the same way as discourse itself functions, with contradictions, mistakes and other "defects" intact.<sup>86</sup> Yet it is difficult to see how his project of determining how human beings order themselves and get ordered into historical entities called "subjects" or "man" could be anything but theoretical. He argues that *the subject is, at its very origin, a historical and social entity*, and denies that there can be such a thing as a human subject prior to history or relations with other subjects. In other words, Foucault rejects the Cartesian-Kantian idea of the subject. He also rejects the structuralist view of the subject as an effect of *fixed* objective structural relations (be these structures social, political, cultural, economic, or cognitive). In contrast, Foucault proposes to understand the construction of the human subject or "field of experience" as the intersection of three fundamental axes: truth, power and individual conduct. He thinks one can examine historically how human beings are constituted as subjects who know, who work and speak, and who act as moral agents.<sup>87</sup> Indeed he repeats in various ways on numerous occasions his conviction that the task of philosophy ought not to be the reinforcement or creation of systems of belief, but rather to understand the workings and limits of such systems. As Todd May puts it: "What is of interest to the poststructuralists is neither the constituting interiority of the subject nor the constituting exteriority of structures, but the interlocking network of contingent practices that produces both 'subject' and 'structures'."<sup>88</sup> We have raised two related questions concerning this claim. First, is it the case that the most fundamental facts of our own lives are "contingent" *to us*, except when we reflect upon them from the outside, as alien phenomena to be studied, but having no

<sup>86</sup> See especially AK, pp. 150f./ AS, pp. 196f.

<sup>87</sup> See Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité 2: L'Usage de Plaisir* (Paris, 1984), p. 10.

<sup>88</sup> May, p. 78.

immediate meaning to us? Second, is it the case that, by examining the prevalence of sociological notions of Romantic love and its rituals in twentieth-century Swedish social life, for instance, one has really understood what it *means* to be in love with this woman, Ingrid, here and now? Finally, regardless of how we respond to these questions, we ought to ask ourselves a third one: even if we were to answer in the affirmative to the first two by recourse to exceptional case(s), what difference would that make for the innumerable *usual* cases that make up our lives?

The answer to these questions, we have suggested, must be something like the following. The experience of being in love, for example, is mitigated by reflections upon its discursive constitution; in the act of reflecting upon the development of contemporary notions of romantic love as a product of the discourses of the human sciences, whether or not I am in love is irrelevant. The "discourse" of the lover in love is not the same as the discourse of the theoretician describing its "conditioning forces". Observations about the "economization" of sexuality are as out of place in the act of love-making as are declarations of undying loyalty to one's beloved in a doctoral dissertation. Similarly, there is nothing *contingent* about the meaningfulness of words *in use*. The contingency described above is one produced by studying those uses from the outside, by treating them *as* objects of study. However accurate an historical, philosophical or ethnological analysis may be in its uncovering of hitherto unnoticed factors in what has come to be called "the production of knowledge", it is not at all clear that all human experience is *merely* the sum of those factors.

The fact that we describe and perhaps experience love, for instance, in twentieth-century northern Europe differently than men did in fifth-century Athens does not carry with it the necessary consequence that love *is* simply a construction of our intellectual and political life. That what is *left over* after sifting through the layers of cultural and ideological accretion cannot be captured by linguistic or social analysis is more an argument for its irreducible meaningfulness than for its intrinsic vacuity. This observation need not be construed as an argument *for* some kind of essence in human nature, either biological or spiritual, but ought to be understood as an observation about the various kinds of meaningfulness that we can,

and indeed do, experience *without the aid of theory*. The point is that there is an important difference between "love" as an object of study for the methods of history, ethnology, psychology, biology and so forth, and what it means to be in love for the individual in love.<sup>89</sup> Were this not the case, how would the disciplines be able to communicate the subject of their respective discourses? How would we know *what* we are talking about? To say that "I know what it means to love someone" does not carry with it some covert "existential commitment" to a unique, univocal objective *empirical* fact. The idea that it does assumes that everyday language and the practices and institutions with which it is bound up are permeated with theory down to the roots. What we are suggesting, in contrast, is that theories about human experience, that is, third-person scientific or quasi-scientific accounts of the nature and meaning of human life, are entirely parasitic upon *facts of life* about which there can be no room for doubt, and therewith, no obvious utility to the theorizing. Save for exceptional cases, these theories make little difference for what we *do*, since theorizing is usually out of place in non-theoretical contexts (what we have hitherto referred to as "real life").

Throughout his life and work, Foucault reiterated his unflinching opposition to a "certain mode of subjectivation" going back to Descartes and Kant which, starting from the rational subject of knowledge, asks what it means to be human for all men at all times. The assumption that there is such a subject is, for Foucault, a belief on a par with a belief in God: a function of a particular system of belief. The human subject, he wants to show, is formed by the practices in which people participate, and these are spatially and temporally located. For Foucault human beings are *essentially* historical beings. If we strip away the social, historical, psychological and linguistic determinations which comprise the human being, there is, quite simply, nothing left. The way we see ourselves, perceive and construct experience, organize and work on ourselves, are all part of provisional processes that human beings have developed over

<sup>89</sup> The reader should bear in mind that this observation need in no way entail a romantic picture of the mystery of love or something of that sort; indeed the point is not to sketch a picture at all, but rather to bring to bear a *statement of fact*, by which we mean, a "grammatical fact", in the sense discussed earlier.

time. But while it must surely be correct to notice that "no man is an island", Foucault wants to show the underlying patterns and structures of the human experience of selfhood. He proposes, for instance, that instead of seeking an essential kernel of rationality in historical events, we should undertake to examine the functioning of a plurality of "rationalities" and consider what is or is not today indispensable for the constitution of ourselves as autonomous subjects.<sup>90</sup> But one can ask whether we have escaped the obsession with rationality, or the "blackmail of the Enlightenment" as Foucault calls it, by multiplying its forms from one to many.

Even if one can offer a multiplicity of explanations of how the individual forms himself and is formed as a thinking, acting, feeling subject, those explanations are necessarily imposed from the outside. Why is it so glaringly obvious that the individual's own experience of selfhood is irrelevant in the face of the theory of conditioning historical and social structures?<sup>91</sup> Why should history be the essential factor in the individual's experience of himself? Foucault seems to think that in adopting the historical point of view, we are forced not only to abandon the philosophical doctrine of certainty, not merely to reject its ideological expression in certain intellectual discourses, but to call into question everything we know to be the case, even with regard to the meaning of a green light. There is no sense that there may be kinds of knowledge or understanding that are simply not amenable to philosophical explication or rectification, that is, non-theoretical kinds of knowledge. It may be reasonable for, say, a cultural geographer to see the institutions and practices of urban planning and traffic as provisional and contingent; for the man on the street, or rather, for the man crossing the street, there is

<sup>90</sup> "What is Enlightenment", in *The Foucault Reader: An Introduction to his Thought*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York, 1984), p. 249.

<sup>91</sup> There are, of course, stronger and weaker readings of Foucault, and it might appear that the present discussion depends upon a strong reading. On a weaker reading, Foucault is taking the Enlightenment project one step further, and inviting us to be sceptical of the "facts" of our own culture and time. See Farrel, pp. 269-278. Even on this more "generous" reading, however, our primary objection remains the same: why are intellectual discourses given such pride of place in Foucault's analyses, when those very discourses derive their meaningfulness from languages, practices, and ways of life which must, both temporally and logically, precede them? And why are these latter all but ignored (or relegated to secondary status)?

nothing *provisional* about the meaning of a red light (even if he is a philosopher). There is nothing contingent or provisional about the absolute, unconditional necessity which characterizes the love that a mother feels for her only child. There is nothing provisional or contingent in the fact that we dress warmly when it is cold, and lightly when it is warm. Yes, there are exceptions; yes, it could, theoretically, be otherwise; yes, there have been cultures, in which it is not the case. But why should distant cultures, historical anomalies, and theoretical fantasies (such as philosophical thought experiments) be normative for how we think about ourselves? More to the point, is it even possible for us, in our non-theoretical modes, to act as if they were? What would it mean, for example, to act as if everything you know to be the case were thoroughly contingent? The answer is not that it is psychologically impossible, but rather that it is *grammatically* impossible. If everything that I know to be the case might well be otherwise, and if there are always infinite interpretations of a state of affairs which always already determine my behavior, than I cannot even understand the meaning of the description, since there is no straightforward meaning to be understood. The idea that everything is contingent only makes sense in the discourse in which it is articulated. Foucault's depiction of the human subject as a discursive production, like the medical and penological discourses that he criticizes in *Discipline in Punish*, actually describes a reality of its own making, rather than the reality it purports to explain.

#### 4. *Life in the Suburbs of Language*

Wittgenstein once referred to technical language use as "the suburbs of language".<sup>92</sup> We might elaborate on that image and say this: just as the suburbs are parasitic upon the city to which they form a satellite for their existence, technical language use depends upon non-technical language in order for its refinements to be refinements of something. To speak allegorically, the craft of key-making presupposes a world of keys, doors and locks for its very existence, but this fact in no way undermines the reality or importance of the

<sup>92</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, transl. G.E.M. Anscombe (New York, 1958), I, p. 18.