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Part III: The Statement and the Archive

1. DEFINING THE STATEMENT

The chapter begins with Foucault making sure that the reader is still on board, and that the risks of so being have been accepted. Again, he recalls that his aim is to redescribe the traditional unities of historical analysis that have been treated as somehow necessary or self-evident, and to stop looking for the ground of discourse either in a priori knowledge or in experience. Discourse, then, is not the signification of what is, and its rules of formation do not follow the outline of some deeper ontological truth. Yet neither is it grounded in the speaking subject. All aspects of discourse will instead be regarded as constructions, the rules of which are the outcome of a complex historical process that is not just found in discourse, but is the very condition of discourse itself. In preparing this approach, Foucault has used the statement as the point of reference, but now he wonders aloud whether he has ‘not replaced his first quest with another’ (AK 90, 106), and whether the groups of rules that he outlined in Part II really do define statements. Although not made explicit, this appears to be a reference to the way the rules are themselves the outcome of the processes whose regularities they describe. In this sense, it is statements that define groups of statements and the rules that determine their relations to one another; not directly, but through their distribution, which either consolidates or disrupts existing regularities, and which may contribute to the emergence of new ones. Foucault also voices a second reservation: that the term ‘dis-course’ has been allowed to take on a variety of meanings, according to the specific needs of the account at the time. By way of explanation, however, Foucault writes that ‘dis- course’ was to have ‘served as a boundary around the term “statement”’, but that its meaning has been allowed to vary ‘as the statement itself faded from view’ (AK 90, 106).
So while the focus is ultimately on discourse, the idea of the statement that Foucault adopted as a means of opening up its analysis has not been made clear, and this has led to the vagueness that he now wants to resolve. To do this, the present chapter sets out to define the statement, and to assess whether the account of discourse hitherto has been consistent in taking the statement in this sense. The answer to the latter question is broadly, ‘yes’. Defining the statement leads to two different ways of thinking about it: as an atom of discourse, and as a function. Foucault is sceptical of the former and takes some time to rule it out. Yet there are good reasons to continue to think of the statement as an atom, even though there are risks associated with doing so that treating it as a function avoids. Ultimately, the two ways of thinking of the statement are not directly compatible, but both identify something important about the statement.

Foucault begins by writing that the term ‘statement’ has been used both to speak of a ‘population’ of statements and as a point of contrast to discourse considered ‘whole’. He then presents the following qualified description, which immediately raises the question of the relation between the statement and discourse, in other words, of how one statement relates to another to form larger groups:

At first sight, the statement appears as an ultimate, undecomposable element that can be isolated and introduced into a set of relations with other similar elements. A point without a surface, but a point that can be located in planes of division and in specific forms of groupings. A seed that appears on the surface of a tissue of which it is the constituent element. The atom of discourse. (AK 90, 106–7)

The phrase ‘At first sight’ implies that the idea is introduced only to ensure its elimination. Foucault immediately lists a series of problems to demonstrate that entertaining it would be a mistake, some of which he goes on to address directly in the remainder of the chapter. These concern the similarity or difference of the statement to other unities to which logicians, grammarians and philosophers of language have previously appealed: propositions, sentences, speech acts. If the statement cannot be distinguished from these, then its use in this inquiry is put in question, and with it the integrity of the inquiry itself.

However, before dealing with these questions, Foucault poses three other questions which are supposed to show that treating statements as the elementary unit of discourse will be a mistake. What does it consist of? What are its distinctive features? What boundaries must one accord to it? (AK 90). The odd thing is that these are questions one would normally pose about things, but the association of statements with things is explicitly rejected (AK 97, 114). This suggests, as mentioned
above, that the questions are intended to set up atomism as an unacceptable alternative, but as such they miss the mark somewhat. The difficulty in posing these questions about atoms in the classical sense of either Democritean or Epicurean atomism, is that while there was some speculation regarding the properties of atoms (for example their shape), it is specifically from atoms that things with phenomenal qualities are formed. In his study of atomism, Les Intuitions atomistique, Bachelard records that certain forms of atomism were compromised by a relatively simplistic ontology of the atom itself. If the fundamental principles of atomism are those of multiplicity and discontinuity, treating the atom as a very small thing is a mistake that ties atomism back to the principles of unity. Conversely, breaking this link frees atomism to disrupt the appeal to fundamental unities (physical or metaphysical) and to open up a philosophy characterised by discontinuity. This is beautifully illustrated in Serres’ study of Lucretius, where the principles of flow, multiplicity and contingency shape the whole account. However, Bachelard’s account of the particle physics of the early twentieth century appeals to the principles of atomism to describe a similar break with substantialist metaphysics. The ‘basic’ particles in physics, he notes, have no independent existence (as required of a substance), and their properties exist exclusively through the relations into which they enter. A particle cannot exist in isolation, but only in relation to a configuration of other particles, and as such, the lone particle is a condition of the phenomenal that does not itself appear (see the Introduction). From this perspective, understanding the statement as an atom is not so far wide of the mark. Moreover, the statement is not actually composed of anything. If one breaks apart the various elements that, when placed in relation, may form a statement, one is left not with its constituent parts or elements, but with nothing at all. The statement is both elementary and relational, its ‘distinctive features’ depending entirely on the combinations it forms with other statements, groups of statements, or non-discursive events. In this respect, the statement as atom successfully breaks the link that tied early forms of atomism back to principles of unity. To make this point explicit, Foucault will introduce the second designation for the statement later in this chapter, calling it a function.

Thinking of statements as atoms ties in with the recognition on Foucault’s part that one cannot simply explain why certain statements are made within a given discourse rather than others by appealing to higher order discursive regularities (rules of formation) without taking into account how these emerge from events at the level of statements (and intermediary events at levels between the two). For if statements,
like atoms, do not occur in isolation, but only in relation to other statements and groups, then there is no isolated phenomenon to explain. The ‘event’ is always already discursive in that it occurs in relation to other elements of discourse: as Foucault has said, the prediscursive is itself discursive. Depending on whether one is dealing with the formation of objects, concepts, enunciative modalities, individual statements or strategies, the perspective of the inquiry shifts, but not its object. One is in effect always explaining the same thing; namely, discourse. For the same reason, there can be no reductionism here, since the move from ‘higher level’ discursive formations (for example, strategies and rules for the formation of objects) to the occurrence of statements cannot escape discourse to reach an element beyond which analysis cannot proceed. It is worth recalling Bachelard’s astute observation that atomism is less a doctrine about things than a question about method. While it may have been prudent of Foucault to avoid associating statements with atoms because of the possible misunderstandings it could bring, it was not necessary philosophically. In fact, Foucault’s archaeology has a good deal in common with atomism.

Moving on to the analysis of the statement itself, Foucault contrasts it in turn to the proposition, the sentence and the speech act. The statement can be distinguished from the proposition easily enough by virtue of the fact that there is no direct correspondence between examples of each. Moreover, statements are not expressions of meaning or intention, as are propositions. A single proposition may be expressed in ways equivalent to two or more statements that are irreducible to one another, and conversely a statement could give rise to two or more distinct propositions. The same non-coincidence rules out an equivalence between statements and sentences. Objecting that some sentences may be no more than a single word is not enough, since many statements may themselves be as economical. But there are many examples of statements that cannot reasonably be construed as sentences (Foucault cites verb tables, a genealogical tree and the algebraic formula of the law of refraction as examples). The final alternative is the speech act, which appears at first to be a more likely candidate by virtue of the fact that, like the statement, its identity is tied to the temporal and spatial specificity of the act, whereas a proposition or a sentence can be repeated indefinitely in an endless variety of settings. However, the same problem of equivalence arises, since there are some speech acts that require several statements to be made in conjunction with one another. As Foucault observes, ‘These acts are constituted, therefore, by the series or sum of these statements, by their necessary juxtaposition; they cannot be regarded as being present whole and entire in
the least of them, and as renewing themselves with each one’ (AK 94, 111).13

It was important for the demarcation of archaeology from linguistics that the statement could be distinguished from the proposition, the sentence and the speech act, but showing where the differences lie has been little help in defining the statement, except negatively, as examples of what the statement is not. Moreover, the proposition, the sentence and the speech act each have a specific structure, and specific conditions relating to their constitution that must be met if they are to be what they are. By contrast, the statement is ‘less strongly structured, more omnipresent’, and has ‘fewer features’, all of which makes it harder to define (AK 94–5, 111–12). Finally, if one were to remove the structure and features that make propositions, sentences and speech acts respectively what they are, there appears in each case to be a kind of material base left over (matériau non pertinent). Could this be the statement, Foucault wonders? It would mean that there is a statement wherever there are signs placed together, which leads to the question of the ontology of signs, and indirectly thereby also of statements. Considering this question, Foucault observes that a series of letters he writes on a sheet of paper are the statement of randomly chosen elements from a rule-governed series, even though they do not meet the conditions required to be a proposition, a sentence or speech act. A different comparison reveals that a series of letters as they occur in a typewriting manual are the statement of how letters occur on French typewriters. But their occurrence on the typewriter itself is not a statement. In this way, Foucault underlines once again that the statement is irreducible either to words or to things. It is more than a blank material occurrence of signs, but less than their codification in language. For a statement to exist, it is not enough simply that signs occur together. The ontology of the statement must in some way involve its relational structure, and moreover its materiality must consist in more than just the physical presence of signs (this is a question that returns in Part III, Chapter 3, ‘The Description of Statements’).

The statement, then, belongs neither with language, nor with the things of which language speaks. Yet statements are, writes Foucault, essential to deciding whether a proposition is well formed, a sentence is correct, or a speech act has been carried out. Rather than consider statements as another linguistic category to be determined alongside propositions, sentences and speech acts, they are treated as a kind of ‘vertical’ relation between them and the signs they contain. It is by virtue of statements that one can tell whether a proposition, sentence or speech act contains a series of signs or not. The name Foucault
Foucault’s Archaeology gives to this vertical relation is ‘function’ (AK 97, 115), and it is the second fundamental designation of the statement in The Archaeology of Knowledge. In general, the term ‘function’ has a very wide usage, but its sense here is quite specific and is closely adapted from mathematics, where a function defines a relation between two or more variables: for example the function $2a = b + 1$ defines the relation between the two variables $a$ and $b$: individually, each may be given any value one likes, as long as the other then takes the value specified by this relation (the function relating two variables can be mapped as a line on a graph with two axes). Thinking of the statement not as an isolated element from which discourse is composed but as itself already composite, the idea of a function shows how it opens and structures the relation between words and things, and the various relations that form the object, the concept and the enunciative modalities that Foucault described in Part I. This will be explored in the next chapter.

The idea of the function captures the way the statement is a site of integration from the very beginning, rather than a simple element from which relations are subsequently composed. It reinforces the fact that the statement is itself relational, and as such is already discursive. By contrast, thinking of the statement as an atom helps one to see how relations between statements form discursive regularities that act as rules for the formation of objects, concepts, enunciative modalities, and other aspects of discourse. It is tempting to say that the idea of the function describes the ‘internal’ character of the statement, and atomism provides a way to describe its ‘external’ relations, but in fact the distinction between the ‘internal’ and ‘external’ cannot be drawn. The statement can only map a word onto a thing by virtue of relations that run right the way through discourse into the structure of the statement in question. There is therefore no clear boundary between the ‘inside’ of the statement and its relations with other statements, groups of statements and non-discursive events.

2. THE ENUNCIATIVE FUNCTION

This chapter repeats the pattern of moving towards a definition of its theme through a meticulous process of exclusion. The theme is still the ‘statement’, and the possibilities excluded are those which tie the statement back into established elements in language and linguistic theory. The aim is once again to situate the statement between words and things. There are four stages to this process, each of which in turn moves through several steps, and as it unfolds, the profile of the statement as a function becomes much clearer. There is, however, a consid-
erable amount of detail to work through and I shall try to do this as economically as possible.

The chapter opens with a brief and rather allusive anticipation of what it is setting out to achieve. Two points are worth noting. Foucault writes that the statement is not a syntagma, a rule of construction, a canonical form of construction and permutation, but that it ‘enables such groups of signs to exist, and enables these rules or forms to become manifest’ (AK 99, 116). It therefore acts as a condition that makes it possible for groups of signs to exist in a specific way, and with a specific structure; and it allows the rule that coordinates this structure itself to appear. As such, its association with a notion of the a priori is beginning to emerge, and this theme is taken up later. In addition, Foucault declares that the present chapter will have to examine the ‘mode of existence’ of signs in so far as they are ‘stated’ (AK 99, 116). It is tempting to assume that this means that the mode of existence of statements will be examined, but this is not exactly what Foucault writes. There is indeed an ontological question here, but whether it is the ontology of the statement, or of signs in so far as they enter into statements, is unclear.

In section (a) Foucault looks at the statement and its correlate, a term chosen as sufficiently neutral not to prejudice the inquiry. Returning to the example discussed near the end of the previous chapter, Foucault asks what it is that makes a series of letters written on a sheet of paper a statement, when the appearance of the same letters on the keyboard of a typewriter is not. It will turn out, he writes, that a statement has a specific relation that ‘concerns itself (qui la concerne elle même)’, rather than its cause or its elements. Although the meaning of this is not immediately clear, it does allow Foucault to set up a series of contrasts intended to clear the stage for the statement to appear. As one follows the account, it is worth recalling that the statement is not an additional category of language to place alongside the sentence, the proposition, the speech act, or anything else of the kind. Unlike such examples, it does not identify a further possible relation between elements pitched at the same level, but rather acts as a condition of the composition of elements by which such examples acquire their form and identity. It is the scene of the synthesis constitutive of discourse.

The first contrast is with the relation between a noun (proper or common) and what it designates. What is designated by a noun is defined by rules of use (relating to objects it can validly designate and syntactic structures of which it can form a part), and these make possible the recurrence of the noun; indeed, the raison d’être of a noun is that it can recur in such a way that different appearances or cases are
treated as the same (different cars, different appearances of ‘Paris’). But even when the same series of words are used according to the same rule of construction, it is not necessarily the same statement. Although this is not explained further, the key lies in the form of recurrence associated with a noun, and made possible by the rules governing its use. Leaving aside the determination of the syntactic forms into which it can enter, a noun is related to an object through rules of use, but these rules express a relation that may already have been decided, often in a way that leaves open considerable room for variation in the nature of the relation. For example, ‘car’ picks out a class of motorised vehicles, but the way it is mapped onto an object (or class of objects) will not be the same when I point to a car passing in the street, when a spare part is allocated to the correct store, or when it is used in an artwork (and this is not just because they are different speech acts, as Foucault makes clear in the last chapter). The utility of the rules governing the use of a noun are supposed to lie in their allowing one to repeat the relation in an identical way, but a great deal must already have been settled before the rules can do this, or else they will have to be supplemented by many new ones. In fact, the use of a noun such as ‘car’ relies on a series of supplementary rules, conditions and tacit conventions to plug gaps and create maximal continuity between different contexts, specific referents, and usages. By contrast, the statement is partly responsible for the specificity of these differences, and will therefore itself differ, introducing discontinuity and tending away from the ideality of meaning. The statement allows words to be mapped onto things, not by setting a formal condition, but by taking its place alongside other statements that perform a similar function, and thereby building a ‘genre’ of language use that determines how nouns can be linked to objects in specific ways: for example, the visual identification of passing vehicles; the allocation of a part according to the vehicle to which it belongs; the provocation of various associations in the viewer (this point is taken up again shortly in relation to what Foucault calls ‘fields of association’ in contrast to ‘contexts’). Introducing statements into the account reveals a dimension that conditions the occurrence of specific forms of linguistic production, that is irreducible to the actual appearance of such forms, yet which cannot exist without them. Because statements provide neither a transcendental condition for the possibility of discourse nor an external determining condition of any kind, it may be tempting to think that the conditions shaping the relation between a word and a thing might arise solely by convention, and could therefore be treated by an empirical history of linguistic usage, but this would be to ignore the ontological dimension of discourse. It would be compara-
ble to saying that Heidegger’s *Being and Time* can be read as a treatise on pragmatism, the idea of Being-in-the-world indicating no more than an assembly of conventional practices and attitudes, whereas it should be understood as a way of existing that has a temporal structure invisible to an empirical description.

The relation between a statement and what it states can also be distinguished from the relation between a proposition and its referent. Foucault asks whether a proposition that has no referent is somehow underpinned by a statement that has no correlate. In fact, he writes, it is the correlate of the statement that allows one to decide whether or not the proposition has a referent at all. To say that the proposition ‘The present King of France is bald’ has no referent, one must already have assumed that the statement refers to ‘contemporary historical information’ (AK 101, 118), as opposed, say, to the actors in a play. The same principle distinguishes a statement from a sentence. One can only decide that the sentence ‘Colourless green ideas sleep furiously’ is meaningless once ‘certain possibilities have been excluded’; for example, that it describes a dream, or is presented as evidence of mental confusion. To treat this phrase as a statement is not to attribute meaning to it in another way, but to say that it has what Foucault calls possible correlates, some of which determine the resulting sentence as meaningless. The correlate of a statement, Foucault writes, is neither an object (or meaning), nor a relation capable of verifying a proposition (since this would place the statement as an element of language directly in relation with objects and close the dimension of discourse). Instead, he cautiously proposes that the correlate of a statement ‘might be defined as . . . a group of domains in which such objects may appear and to which such relations may be assigned’ (AK 102, 120), giving a series of examples, such as geographical locations with coordinates and distances. In this way, the meaning of the sentence ‘The estate is too small’ will change depending on whether the correlate of the statement is a group of locations and distances, or sums of money and their proportions. The same words will make up different statements in each case, and the different statements determine different possibilities of reference and meaning. The correlate of a statement can therefore be described as a kind of vacant placeholder that defines the kind of relations into which a proposition or sentence can enter, and by virtue of which they are taken to refer to something or to have meaning: different objects may occupy that space, but it is nonetheless unique in its embodiment of a specific relation to the proposition or sentence.

Section (b) outlines a similar role for the statement in relation to the subject. As in the case of the object, the subject of a statement is not
equivalent to the subject of the same series of signs taken as a proposition or a sentence. This is to say that the subject of a statement is not simply the one who speaks, since an actor reciting a part does not appear to be the subject of the statement as it is made. Yet neither is the author a viable candidate, as the kinds of description, dialogue and narrative voice used within a novel mean that a single person cannot be the subject in all cases. Foucault concludes that the statements one finds in such an example do not imply the same relation between the enunciating subject and what is being stated (AK 105, 123). One might object that literature is a special case from which one cannot generalise, but Foucault denies that this is the case. The subject of a statement is essentially ‘an empty function’ that can in most cases be filled by different individuals (AK 105, 123). The example of mathematics provides a clear demonstration of this. As Foucault notes, any individual whatsoever can be the subject of the proposition: ‘Two quantities equal to a third quantity are equal to each other’ (AK 106, 124). Other cases exhibit a more complex set of possibilities. So where a sentence that begins ‘We have already shown that...’ occurs, the statement is placed in a well-defined series of events that it must follow, and which the subject of the statement must have performed in turn. However, the individual reading the treatise need not have actually have performed each statement. While the series of statements that ‘rightfully belong’ to the enunciating subject are at the disposal of the reader, the reader is at liberty to choose the degree to which he follows in those footsteps: he may think through each stage of the proof, or he may dip in and out, making himself the subject only of selected statements (or he may place himself in the position of subject for each of the statements, but without conviction and without understanding).

The subject of a mathematical statement of this kind is not necessarily someone who has actually carried out these operations, who has interiorised them, retaining them in ‘the living present of his thought’ (AK 106, 124). This is essentially the Seventh Rule in Descartes’ Rules for the Direction of the Mind, but the use of the phrase ‘living present’ is clearly a reference to Husserl, and Foucault distances himself from the phenomenological view. The key issue is the relation of the subject of a statement to time. For Husserl, the necessity of a mathematical demonstration depends on evidence revealed in an experience of certainty belonging to the subject, and it is therefore essential that at some point the potential for an individual to become the subject of each of the statements forming the demonstration is actualised. But when Foucault writes that ‘The subject of such a statement . . . will not be described as an individual who has really carried out certain operations, who lives
in an unbroken, never forgotten time...’ (AK 106, 124), it is clear that one does not become the subject of such statements by grounding them in a temporal unity. In contrast to Husserl, Foucault is closer here to Cavaillès, for whom the necessity of mathematics was founded on the rules for mathematical thought operative in a given domain at a given time, which in their turn depend on the history to which they belong. Mathematical thought is not rooted in a fulfilled intuition, but rather in demonstration, and the individual subject can move in and out of the position that defines her as the subject of a given mathematical demonstration without compromising the integrity of the demonstration itself. Although the subject plays an important role here too, it does not hold the steps of a demonstration together in a ‘living present’, but rather enters into a history that can be followed, and ‘lived through’ precisely because it is temporally dispersed.

Having set out analogues of the object and the subject of the statement, in section (c) Foucault deals with what he calls its ‘associated domain’. Again, the contrast is with propositions and sentences. It is generally accepted that in order to be well formed, they need only to follow certain rules of construction, which are thus presupposed by the proposition and the sentence, and on the basis of which one can tell whether the series of words in question amount to a sentence or not. As such, these ‘axioms’ are already distinct from what is intended by an ‘associated domain’. This becomes clear if one considers that on the basis of these rules (or axioms), a proposition or sentence can be recognised as such without any requirement for a context of propositions and sentences around it. A context may be indispensable for telling whether the proposition or sentence is true, or what it means, but that is a different issue. By contrast, the enunciative function ‘cannot operate on a sentence or proposition in isolation’, which means that statements cannot exist in isolation (AK 109, 128). For a statement to link a sentence or proposition to a particular object or kind of object, and to a particular subject position, ‘it must be related to a whole adjacent field’ of other statements (AK 109, 128). This is the ‘associated domain’. Having distinguished the associated domain from the context, Foucault then considers the relation between them. Where ‘context’ establishes truth and meaning at the level of propositions and sentences, the associated domain makes a context possible and determines it. As he notes, the difference between a conversation and a laboratory report can be explained in terms of context, but context itself cannot be explained simply in terms of the experience of the speaker, and the precedents of which they are conscious. Its conditions extend further than that, since the way that statements present themselves to the subject and are
arranged, remembered or forgotten will itself depend on pre-existing demarcations between contexts (for example, conversation, science, literature), which are themselves determined discursively; that is, on the basis of rules of formation arising from the relations between statements. It is the associated field that ‘turns a sentence or a series of signs into a statement, and which provides them with a particular context, a specific representative content’ (AK 110, 129).

There is, arguably, a degree of ambiguity here, and although it may be easy to resolve, it is worth highlighting because it draws attention to an important issue. An associated field makes a context possible by providing a background on the basis of which formal rules can be established (for example, to determine what counts as a sentence or a proposition). The background is one in which regularities are already evident that demarcate the sum of all statements into fields. One might therefore say that a context is the formalisation of an associated field. But to put it this way assumes the existence of a process within which an enunciative field, defined by regularities, is merely an intermediary stage on the way towards the complete formalisation of conditions that defines the context. This would place the whole archaeological account back into the framework of a teleological theory. Alternatively, we can regard definition by regularity and definition by formal rules as two distinct and even competing models. In this way, the determination of formal rules on the basis of regularities in the associated field is a temporary, and local, specification which will give way to modifications in the associated field as and when they occur. The crucial difference here lies in the kind of condition that is an associated field. Foucault writes that ‘there is no statement that is not surrounded by a field of coexistences, effects of series and succession, a distribution of functions and roles’, and that this allows statements ‘to follow one another, order one another, and play roles with respect to one another’ (AK 112, 131). It is, then, the relations a statement bears to other statements in an associated field that condition the relations it can bear to other statements in the field. These relations are not fixed, as they would be in a context determined by formal rules of construction and use. Instead, the statement ties a sentence or proposition back into ‘a space in which they breed and multiply’ (AK 112, 131). The associated field is a condition of transformation, not identity, and this is its most decisive difference from the notion of a context.17

The same concern with transformation runs through the final section in this chapter, which addresses the materiality of the statement, once again through a contrast with propositions and sentences. There is a sense of materiality that arises from the simple fact of a form of words
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appearing at given time and place. That such an event is necessarily located in this way by virtue of sound, ink on paper, or the illumination of a screen means that it is unrepeatable. Each time a sentence is uttered, a book printed, or a line or scene from a film screened, the inevitable difference in its materiality appears to entail a difference in the event itself. While acknowledging that the ‘coordinates and material status of a statement are part of its intrinsic characteristics’ (AK 113, 132), Foucault nonetheless sets about distinguishing the materiality of the statement from this way of thinking about it. First, such a conception treats materiality as accidental, a principle of individualisation that nonetheless does not contribute to what something actually is. In this respect, it follows classical philosophy in binding essence to form, and treating materiality as extrinsic to both. By contrast, materiality is said here to be ‘constitutive of the statement itself’ (AK 113, 133). Moreover, the consideration of a series of examples suggests that the statement is in fact repeatable in ways that the simple enunciation of a sentence cannot be, for the reasons outlined. But if the statement is contrasted to the simple enunciation of a sentence by virtue of its repeatability, this does not mean that it can be lined up alongside the formal characteristics that give to the sentence an ‘underlying’ or essential sameness to which one can always revert, once the accident of its enunciation has been taken into account. The materiality of the statement, then, cuts across the categories of form and matter as traditionally understood. Instead, the materiality of the statement is defined by its status as a thing (AK 115, 135).

Foucault’s example (helpfully returning our thoughts to the unities discussed in Part I, Chapter 1) is that of a book, such as Baudelaire’s Les Fleurs du mal. Different copies do not count as different statements, since the contingencies of ink and paper are ‘neutralized in the general element’ of the book, which is ‘material, of course, but also institutional and economic’ (AK 115, 135). Even new editions that reproduce previous editions without any alteration can be treated as equivalent. However, when the line ‘Le sommeil est plein de miracles!’ appears in the 1868 edition of Les Fleurs du mal, it is a new statement when compared to the same line in the 1861 edition, since Baudelaire died in 1867, making the later edition posthumous and placing it in a different institutional and economic set of relations. It is these relations that define the materiality of the statement, not its spatio-temporal location. But whereas the spatio-temporal location of a statement would mark it as unique and unrepeatable, the institutional relations in which it is embedded define its possible reinscription and transcription (AK 116, 136). The variability of these relations bears on the materiality of the
statement, which is thereby the condition both for the individualisation of the statement and for its transformation.

As Foucault’s book progresses, the same themes recur over and over again, receiving further elaboration each time. Having been rethought through the discussion of materiality, the statement is now described as irreducible to an empirical reality (fact or event), yet not an ideal. It is, writes Foucault, ‘Too repeatable to be entirely identifiable with the spatio-temporal coordinates of its birth . . . too bound up with what surrounds it to be as free as a pure form’ (AK 117, 138). Neither one nor the other, the statement forges a third alternative that empiricism and idealism both exclude, existing as a material figure with its own history.

3. THE DESCRIPTION OF STATEMENTS

This chapter might be viewed as another pause during which Foucault takes stock of what he has done so far and where it has brought the inquiry, above all in view of the fact that the account of the statement has undergone a certain semantic drift, allowing a vagueness or ambiguity to enter that he now intends to resolve. Yet it turns out that this drift is for good reason, and indicates a movement drawing the account towards the point where it can best accomplish its aim. Several questions need to be addressed, however. First, the definition of the statement itself has to be reviewed. Foucault concedes that he initially expected the statement to be a kind of unity for which he need only ‘describe its possibilities and laws of combination’ (although in fact it is difficult to see that he ever actually proposed such a view in this book) (AK 119, 139). The subsequent account revealed an enunciative function that involved ‘various units’ (sentences, propositions, series, signs, fragments), and related them to objects, subject positions and domains of coexistence in which they could be used and repeated. As Foucault remarks here, ‘what has been discovered is not the atomic statement’ (AK 119, 139). Certainly not; at least, not if one takes ‘atomic statement’ to refer to a single, isolated unit that subsequently combines with others. As I outlined earlier, however, this is not how the atom is best understood, it was not how Foucault defined the statement in Part III, Chapter 1, and it does not appear to have been the idea of the statement at play even before that. This needs to be borne in mind as one follows Foucault’s appraisal of the shift from the statement as ‘unit’ (or atom) to the statement as ‘function’.

The first task Foucault sets himself is simply to give precision to the terms he has used; above all, that of ‘discourse’. So far, he notes, it
has been used as ‘what is produced by a group of signs’, as ‘a group of sentences or propositions’, and as ‘a group of statements’ (AK 120–1, 141). Each successive usage has more precision than the last, reflecting Foucault’s increasing awareness of what is required to deal with the question he has chosen to address. The definition of discourse presented here is that it is constituted by a group of statements that allow ‘modalities of existence’ to be given to sequences of signs (AK 121, 141). Discourse, then, concerns the ontology of language, as long as what is meant by ‘language’ is kept open, and assumptions regarding propositions, meaning and expression are suspended. In fact, there is a parallel between the sense of ontology intended here and Heidegger’s approach to ontological questions in the light of the ontological difference. What is sought is not literally what something is, but the way that it – in this case language – exists. In Being and Time, discourse (Rede) is the ontological foundation of language and its structure is modelled on the Being-in-the-world of Dasein.18 Heidegger’s interpretation of Being-in-the-world in terms of ecstatic temporality then provides the fundamental ontological structure for the disclosure of Being. Later, in the ‘Letter on Humanism’ and the essays on poetry, Dasein plays a less central role and language comes to the fore. What is common to Heidegger’s approach throughout, however, is that language is studied as a structured event of disclosure. It is easy enough to see that archaeology opens up the field of discourse as language in act, in itself, and not as something to be understood in terms of that which produced it (the subject), or which it produces (meaning). Discourse is the sum of statements, and archaeology addresses ‘the fact of language’; which is to say that it analyses language ‘itself’ and the conditions on the basis of which meaning can be embodied in language, thereby becoming a theme for interpretation, with all the scope for ambiguity, concealment and its reversal that this involves. For archaeology, there is nothing behind discourse. Perhaps the most decisive difference between archaeology and Heidegger’s hermeneutic ontology follows from this, namely that Foucault treats language in terms of construction, not disclosure. Therefore the question concerns not what speaks through language, but what language itself says. And what it says is constructed from the rules of discursive formations that emerge from discourse itself. There is nothing anterior to discourse, because discourse itself is the making, unmaking and re-making of worlds (like Penelope, a favourite of Serres’, weaving by day and unweaving by night).19 So while Foucault can describe discourse, as did Heidegger, as the ontological condition of language, this is because it is the site not of the disclosure of Being, but of the construction of what is. As Foucault intimated in the first
two chapters of the book – and as will become increasingly clear as it proceeds, above all in the chapter ‘Change and Transformation’ – an understanding of discourse in terms of construction will involve time in the form of temporal dispersion.

The following paragraphs continue to invite comparisons with Heidegger. There is something paradoxical, Foucault notes, in the way the description of statements does not try to discover what lies beneath the surface of language, even though the statement itself is ‘not immediately visible’ (AK 122, 143). In fact, it is not that the statement is hidden, so much as that it requires a change of perspective to be seen. What Foucault means by this is that it is not separable from the linguistic act it constitutes as a proposition or a sentence, and therefore cannot be concealed by it. Rather, as ‘invested in unities of this kind’ the statement characterises ‘the very fact that they are given, and the way in which they are given’ (AK 124, 145). As speakers, listeners, writers and readers, our attention is drawn to what is being said, to meaning, and perhaps to the style of presentation. But as our attention is drawn, the simple fact that language exists is passed over. The parallel with the way, for Heidegger, the ontological difference is concealed by one’s involvement with things is striking, and the impression is strengthened when Foucault writes that the statement shares the ‘quasi-invisibility’ of the ‘there is’ (il y a) in the expression ‘there is this or that thing’ (AK 124, 145). What is missed is the structure of the presentation of the thing; precisely what phenomenology sought to elucidate, and what structural linguistics examined in a wholly different way. Also missed is the role played by language in the fact that a thing is; that is, the ontological role of language. And if attention is shifted one step further from the presentation of the thing in language to the event of presentation itself, then the ontological focus falls squarely on language, on the fact that ‘there is language’ (AK 125, 146). However, this does not reflect the practice of archaeology, and is at best something that comes along with the analysis of discourse without becoming its focus. The attention to language itself was an important part of French literary modernism, and of the work of Maurice Blanchot in particular. Arguably, Blanchot took the analysis further still, exposing language in its materiality, separated from its signifying function altogether. In its blank infinity, this is language ‘prior’ to its taking on the form by which meaning, reference and expression are articulated. The aspiration to let language ‘itself’ appear, apart from the use to which it is put, is very close to what Foucault is proposing with the idea of discourse and the statement, but actually goes further still. Further, because for Foucault discourse carries out the ordering of word and thing, and situates the subject...
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in relation to what is said about them, and as such discourse cannot escape its function. Language apart from this ordering would not be discourse. It is in modern literature, Foucault writes (in ‘The Thought of the Outside’), that language ‘escapes the mode of Being of discourse’.21 There, in the work of Stephane Mallarmé, Georges Bataille, Georges Klossowski, and above all Blanchot, language achieves what, in view of the account developed in The Archaeology of Knowledge, is a remarkable state: it develops to form ‘a network in which each point is distinct, distant from even its closest neighbours, and has a position in relation to every other point in a space that simultaneously holds and separates them all’.22 This, Foucault adds, is language in its ‘pure dispersion’; as if statements really were atoms in the void, and had been pressed back to a point before their discursive function of mapping the elements of language on to one another in the order of signification. Yet the term ‘before’ is perhaps inappropriate here, implying a real possibility of tracing back from discourse to such a state. However, such a move is impossible, since the antecedent stage to every configuration of discourse, every constellation of statements, is another configuration, another constellation. As Foucault has observed several times, a statement cannot exist in isolation from all others. The infinity of language beyond discourse in its pure dispersion is therefore something that, for Foucault, remains permanently within language, without ever being possible (that is, conditioned by discourse). In the language of atomism, the ‘first model’, in which atoms rain down in parallel lines through the infinite universe before any collisions, is not a state that can ever return, or which somehow persists beneath the order and the chaos that came after it. Because the laws governing the combination of atoms only emerge later (and moreover are spatially and temporally local), to account for a given condition one has to trace its antecedents. Similarly, the analysis of discourse accounts for a discursive formation by finding the rules that define it, which are themselves formed historically. The historical analysis of discourse therefore traces both series of events and the way such series are formed. This means that what for phenomenology is the ontological task of determining the structure of the event of disclosure has its archaeological analogue in the historical analysis of construction. One could say that the event of presentation, and the ontological character of discourse, have to be addressed in and through the history of discourse itself.

A further reason for the invisibility of the statement is that it is implied by every other analysis of language without being made explicit (AK 125, 146). What a series of brief examples shows is that, in Foucault’s view, other forms of analysis take their point of departure
from their identification of language as finite, without delving further into how that finitude arises. For such analyses, the ‘enunciative field’ has already been determined, but it is just this event that the analysis of discourse aims to bring to light. The comparisons with Heidegger are therefore still relevant, since his analyses are always concerned not just with the finitude of Dasein and of Being, but with tracing the very mark of finitude in the disclosure of Being, whether this be in terms of the finite temporality of Dasein, the strife between world and earth, or in the event of Ereignis and the history of Being. The difference, again, is that the condition of the finitude of a linguistic production is, for Foucault, itself a local and temporary configuration in the history of the relations between statements. To account for the finitude of disclosure, archaeology simply continues to analyse discourse, searching out points of divergence and discontinuity, and the patterns of regularity that produced them. This is how archaeology is intended to repeat, differently (and more successfully), the analytic of finitude that Foucault describes in The Order of Things, which failed to secure the foundation it sought for knowledge in the figure of man as a finite being. From a Heideggerian perspective, the objection to what Foucault is proposing here is simply that by insisting that the fact of discourse can be analysed historically, without engaging the question of the possibility of discourse as such, he fails to address the question of the ontological condition of his own inquiry, because he has not engaged with the question of Being. The criticism assumes that any inquiry that limits itself to determining the Being of a given kind of thing will be regional, and as such in the grip of ontological assumptions that close off the true ontological ground of its own practice. To an extent, Foucault can deflect this criticism simply by insisting that archaeology addresses the discursive conditions for the practice of ontology, since without a certain precise history of relations between statements, involving objects, concepts, enunciative functions, and all the elements of discourse, the question of ontology could not be posed. Archaeology, then, has its own priority over ontology. Foucault’s confidence in this approach is clear when he writes that the analysis of the enunciative field will remove ‘the transcendental obstacle that a certain form of philosophical discourse opposes to all analyses of language in the name of the being of that language and of the ground from which it should derive its origin’ (AK 127, 148). Although Heidegger is not mentioned by name, the allusion is unmistakable. However, the issue is not settled so easily. One could object that archaeology addresses the ‘regional’ question of what makes the elements within a given discursive formation what they are (objects, concepts, enunciative modalities), but neglects the ‘fundamental’ question of what it is to be
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an element of discourse in general. The question is a stubborn one that can nag away at Foucault’s analysis, in part because it is not addressed head on. Yet this is not really an oversight on Foucault’s part, as he has a reason for not dealing with the problem directly. A full response will involve the status of archaeology itself, and the impossibility of conducting an analysis of the conditions of one’s own time, considered in the round; an issue Foucault will discuss in terms of the archive later, in the chapter ‘The Historical A Priori and the Archive’. Briefly, to be an element of discourse is to be defined according to rules that emerge as regularities within the history of discourse. Because of the recursive mechanism by virtue of which what is conditioned bears on the conditions that preceded it, there is no ‘final’ answer to the question of what it is to be an element of discourse; that is, no answer that escapes the historical process and is immune to transformation. This is why ontological questions are transformed into historical questions, and why there is no place for a distinct ‘fundamental’ analysis to underpin the ‘regional’ analyses that Foucault presents. The shift from ontology to history hinges on the introduction of temporal dispersion, which opens up the possibility of reconfiguring the temporal conditions of disclosure as the historical conditions of construction. However, it is not that ontology gives way to history entirely. If anything, ontology has to take history into itself, just as mathematics did before it.

In Section II of this chapter, Foucault considers whether the description of statements he has given is compatible with the earlier account of discursive formations. As he often does, Foucault catalogues the approaches that he is not taking. He is not presenting a theory or model applicable to empirical descriptions (as this would enter the account too late, once discourse had already worked to assign possible objects to signs, and in addition it would insulate each locality of discourse from the feedback coming from the actual relations it maps). He is neither inferring a description of discursive formations on the basis of a definition of statements, nor vice versa (as this would mean either one or the other aspect was simply ‘given’, but this can only be the case once discourse has assigned objects to signs). And he is not proceeding by linear deduction. Rather, he intends to ‘reveal . . . a regularity’ that made it possible to say what he said. This brings sharply into focus the question of whether Foucault risks reproducing the doubling between condition and conditioned that he identified as a problem in the configuration of thought in modernity (a question that has been circulating in the shadows for some time). But the key lies in the relation between the condition and what it conditions. In classical metaphysics, Kantian philosophy and phenomenology (to mention just three of many possi-
ble examples) there is a separation between conditions and conditioned that is most usually presented as parallel to the transcendental-empirical divide (or a meta-level to the level it orders). In this case, whether it be Platonic forms, the transcendental a priori, or the formal basis of nomological science, the condition precedes the conditioned and remains insulated from it. This is not the case with regularity, since it involves a coincidence of condition and conditioned. But whereas traditional metaphysics finds the coming together of condition and conditioned only in a necessary being that is *causa sui*, in archaeology the ‘conditioning’ regularity falls together with the ‘conditioned’ regularity because a regularity as formulated in a law or rule is merely descriptive of the regularity that has emerged. As Foucault explains, ‘the discursive formation is characterized not by principles of construction but by a dispersion of fact, since for statements it is not a condition of possibility but a law of co-existence’ (AK 131, 153). For this reason, any discontinuity or deviation in the regularity as it occurs will have an immediate impact on the law (or the principle of construction): there is no separation between them, or no separation that is not bridged by events. The step from empirical to transcendental, or from the physical world to its metaphysical ground, is transformed into a step within a historical process, and with that step philosophy becomes essentially historical.24 This can only happen because there is a two-way communication between conditions and conditioned. Discursive formations are groups of statements linked at the level of statements themselves, and by virtue of these links it becomes possible to define rules for the formation of their objects, their modes of enunciation and subject positions, their associated domains, forms of succession and simultaneity, the way they are institutionalised, used and combined together, and finally the way that they become instruments for desire or interest, and elements for a strategy. From one perspective, the possibility of defining each area and level of regularity arises first of all at the level of statements. Yet each statement already coordinates all of these elements, and it can only do so effectively when grouped with others to form a coherent discursive formation marked by clear patterns of regularity. From a second perspective, therefore, discursive formations reveal the level of the statement: ‘The two approaches are equally justifiable and reversible’ (AK 130, 152). The two approaches are in fact only methodologically distinct, and can be seen as abstractions from a single process.

Because the conditions of any discourse are caught up in the structures and transformations they describe, Foucault can draw the conclusion (repeated here) that discourse is ‘not an ideal, timeless form that also possesses a history’ (AK 131, 153), a view that could be attrib-
uted to phenomenology (above all in its Husserlian form). Discourse is intrinsically historical, with its own specific limits, transformations and modes of temporality. This is a point to which he will return later.

4. RARITY, EXTERIORITY, ACCUMULATION

At the close of the last chapter, Foucault wrote that he would move on next to consider what is involved in the analysis of the enunciative field, what it requires and what it excludes. Various themes are presented and discussed in this chapter, including a kind of economy of statements, and the question of power in relation to discourse. It unfolds via another series of contrasts between the analysis of discourse and other forms of inquiry and interpretation organised around the spatial categories of interiority and exteriority, but it is not an accident that the theme of time moves increasingly to the fore as Foucault considers how discourse acquires its structure, its movement, and even the direction of that movement.

Foucault describes an orthodox approach to the analysis of discourse as one that searches out the meaning of texts (and sub-textual groupings, institutions and practices extending beyond texts and between them) and charts the relation between these meanings, with a view to building up larger configurations. Ultimately, such an approach aims at a determination of the totality of possible meanings to which a given text or proposition belongs. However, this is achieved by setting the conditions within which the interpretation of the text can legitimately unfold. The space for interpretation is therefore bounded, but it is also continuous, and as such it can always be divided in such a way as to reveal ‘new’ meanings within the limits set. Still from this point of view, to choose one meaning is to deny existence to a second, or even to many others, which remain hidden as the unsaid – propositions defined as possible by the boundary conditions of the discourse, but never actualised, like the possibilities for the world passed over by a Leibnizian God. In contrast to this view, Foucault’s conception of discourse does not define a totality of possibilities, but rather a certain number of actually existing statements, each in turn coordinating propositions and sentences. With no internal dimension, discourse is ‘identical with its own surface’ (AK 135, 157), and the surface itself is anything but a seamless web in which each position is, or could be, occupied. Rather than a continuous space of potentially infinite interpretation, discourse is said to be ‘a distribution of gaps, voids, absences, limits, divisions’ (AK 134, 157). This is a discontinuous, atomistic, space. Keeping the contrast with a continuous space in mind, one can see that what is not
stated in such an arrangement is not suppressed, simply because its not being stated is not the frustration of a potentiality in its drive towards actualisation, or the denial of a possibility that exists waiting to be realised. In the space of discourse, what actually occurs is bordered not by unactualised possibilities, but by a distribution of actual statements, broken up by the discursive void.

If there are no unactualised possibilities, it might be asked how discourse can change at all. However, variation comes not from a rounding out of what is made actual within existing bounds, but rather by a change in the prevailing rule or regularity produced either through its disruption by another rule, or by its imperfect reproduction. Summing up, one can describe the difference between discursive formations in Foucault’s analysis and their more orthodox counterparts in terms of the structure of the space characteristic of each. In the ‘continuous’ space of interpretation there is always room for variations and alternatives alongside what already exists, whereas in the discontinuous space of the analysis of discourse what actually occurs is all that the conditions at the time permit. This is why the relations between statements, especially when looking at large-scale discursive formations, have to be established not just by finding a rule that unites them, but by tracing the relations between the rules or regularities by virtue of which they exist.

Because the statements that occur are not taken from a lake of possibilities, any number of which may be actualised, they are said by Foucault to be rare. This rarity gives them a certain value and leads to their collection, as the meanings in them are repeated, multiplied and ultimately transformed. As Foucault puts it, ‘To interpret is a way of reacting against enunciative poverty’ (AK 135, 158). In a kind of ironic twist, then, discourse as archaeology understands it promotes an interpretive practice that does not even recognise its existence. Moreover, as Foucault explains, in failing to recognise discourse for what it is, interpretation also misses a significant consequence of the rarity of statements. For this makes them desirable assets in a discursive economy, and as such they can become the focus for struggle and conflict. In this way, Foucault’s conception of discourse ‘poses the question of power’ in a way that a theory of interpretation could not (AK 136, 158).

It is perhaps no coincidence that having raised, albeit almost in passing, the question of power, Foucault moves towards a consideration of the practice of analysis in the absence of an authority that sets the bounds of its legitimacy. Historical description, writes Foucault, has usually been motivated by a desire to leave behind exteriority, characterised by ‘contingency or mere material necessity’, in favour of a more essential domain of interiority, thereby reversing the work of
expression to rediscover the deeper intentions behind it. The move is reflected in the division between history and philosophy, as it is usually drawn, where philosophy may take the form of the recollection of the Logos, the teleology of reason, or the problematic of the trace; apparently thinking of Heidegger, perhaps of Derrida, Foucault refers here to the pursuit of ‘a point prior to all speech . . . the gap of deferred time’. Ultimately, it almost doesn’t matter to Foucault which form prevails, as ‘it is always the historico-transcendental theme that is reinvested’ (AK 137, 159). Avoiding this move is therefore crucial to Foucault’s response to the closure of the history of thought brought about by the division between transcendental philosophy and the human sciences as he describes it in *The Order of Things*. The task of analysis is not therefore to explain the field of statements by ‘translating’ operations or processes that have already taken place ‘in men’s thought, in their consciousness or unconscious, in the sphere of transcendental constitutions’ (AK 137, 160). Foucault’s point here is not simply that the material elements of signification are impossible to eliminate, and that a pure interiority is a dream. Such a view, which could be attributed to Derrida, willingly or otherwise concedes too much to the ‘historico-transcendental theme’ Foucault criticises. Instead, Foucault chooses to situate thinking entirely in the realm of exteriority, in the discursive practices that are shaped by the history of their own construction. This in no way means that the subject is excluded. If to think is to engage in discursive practices, in order to think, the subject has to leave the space of interiority and engage in what lies outside. In fact, that the identification of thinking with rule-governed discursive practices (and of course their analysis) is not at all as dry and dusty as it sounds, and above all that it is not a foreign territory for the subject, can be seen in what appears to be an allusion Foucault makes here to Blanchot. Mentioning a term closely associated with Blanchot, he wonders aloud whether it would have been right to speak of ‘neutrality’ rather than ‘exteriority’ (AK 137, 159–60), but decides that it would not. In view of Foucault’s admiration for Blanchot’s work, the fact that he elects not to use the term may be taken to say more about his own aspirations than to imply any criticism of Blanchot. The word, he writes, too easily implies a ‘suspension of belief’ and an ‘effacement . . . of all position of existence’, actions that both lie too close to the phenomenological theme of the *époque*, and that promote a practice of thinking whose first move, indeed whose condition, is to disengage from the world with which it deals. Refusing this, Foucault throws his vision of thinking into relief as a practice utterly embedded in the world, not by virtue of a decision to be *engagé*, but simply because there is nowhere else, and no other way,
for thinking to take place at all. Once again, Cavaillès is relevant here because of the way he displaced the subject from its sovereign position in mathematical thought, which he understood purely as demonstration: the unfolding of a train of thought according to certain rules, but also the transformation of the space, and the terms, in which that thought is carried out. Without assuming that they work in precisely the same way, the description of thinking as an operation carried out in a concrete situation determined by rules which are themselves historical could easily be applied both to mathematics and to discourse as Foucault understands it.

Three points are then made in quick succession, which are almost reminders of what should by now have already become clear about the relation between discourse and the subject. First, Foucault recalls that discourse is autonomous, though dependent (because it requires speakers, and the material reality of language, but also institutional forms); second, that the various forms adopted by the speaking subject are ‘effects’ of discourse; finally, if discourse is not the expression of events in consciousness, then the time of discourse is not modelled on the time of consciousness. This last point is very important, and should be read for what it means for the subject as well as for what it means for discourse: turning the declaration around shows that to think is to engage with temporal structures in discourse that are different to the settled rhythms one takes for one’s own. This appears to be what Foucault meant by welcoming the Other into the time of our own thought (AK 13, 21).²⁵

The theme of time also runs through the following three paragraphs, which appear to fill in the gaps in a picture that has already become fairly clear. It is no surprise that the analysis of statements operates ‘without reference to a cogito’ (AK 138, 161), and Foucault has already stated that it is not concerned with language as expression or representation from the position of a subject. Rather, the analysis of statements looks not only for relations and regularities within what is said, but also for the transformations to be found there. This doesn’t explain the mechanism of transformation, but it is a reminder that revealing transformation is an important part of archaeology. It is worth noting here that explanation itself deploys a form of continuity, as reason fills in gaps to establish, if it can, a seamless progression from cause to effect, from origin to end. Foucault’s rejection of this sense of continuity undermines the prejudice against archaeology for not being able to explain the transformations it describes. Discourses are frequently attributed a kind of inertia, as though they were a dead weight that had to be animated by the interest we take in them: perhaps
they will be read, and the now distant events to which they refer will be brought back momentarily; maybe their signs will be interpreted to reveal a life now forgotten (AK 139, 161–2). Yet such a view assumes that discourse itself has no life, no time or history, of its own. As long as such a view prevails, it is hard to see how the analysis of discourse can effectively reveal change and transformation, for which the cause must always lie elsewhere. In this way, the criticism that archaeology has nothing to say about change and transformation looks circular, as it assumes in advance that discourse has to be animated by memory, intention and the life of the subject. By contrast, the existence Foucault envisages for discourse is dynamic and capable of generating transformations without appeal to an external cause.

Following a few brief remarks on the institutional conditions for the existence of statements across time, and the need to consider the specific ways in which statements are grouped and accumulate, Foucault reflects on the ‘recurrence’ of discourse. This term is used in mathematics to describe the recursive definition of a sequence by a function. However, it is also a term that Bachelard and Serres use to describe a form of history in which the present reconfigures its own past, and it is to this usage that Foucault refers here. 26 Statements, Serres writes, redistribute antecedent fields of elements to which they are related. In this way, a statement ‘constitutes its own past, defines, in what precedes it, its own filiation, redefines what makes it possible or necessary, excludes what cannot be compatible with it’ (AK 140, 163). This repeats Serres’ description of recurrence in the history of mathematics as ‘a movement belonging to the temporality of mathematics as such, by virtue of which it presents itself as a continual systematic restructuration’. As Serres goes on to say, it is as if ‘what is constituted last puts back in question the whole of constitution’ (HI 99). This view of the history of mathematics was shared by Cavaillès, for whom the future of mathematics was literally impossible on the basis of the conditions defining its present. As a consequence, each new stage reconfigured its own past in such a way that it took on the appearance of a necessary step. Mathematics progressed not by an accumulation of results, but by what he described as ‘erasure and deepening’ (OC 560).

With this emerges a theme central to Serres’ work, namely temporal pluralism. The flow of time is not linear, but complex, disordered and sometimes chaotic. We have, says Serres, too often confused time with the measure of time, assuming that it conforms to the single scale we apply to it. 28 This, he writes, reflects the mathematical knowledge of its day; namely geometry. But there is no reason for this still to determine our thinking of time now that mathematics provides other means
for doing so, such as topology. In fact, events that are remote from one another on one scale may be close on another, depending on the pattern of regularities in which they occur and to which they contribute. Relations between conditions and conditioned can fold and take on unexpected forms, and in this way the past may be reconfigured by the present. This is also the case in Foucault’s account of discourse, which incorporates a form of feedback, as what is produced becomes in turn a condition, modifying, disturbing or even destroying the patterns of statements in which they occur (AK 141, 164). For as a statement occurs following a regularity established by other antecedent statements, it is most likely to reinforce the regularity. But with the appearance of each new statement, the field of statements to which it is related will be configured a little differently, and at some point this difference may be decisive enough to destabilise the old regularity and give rise to a new one. The field of statements to which the new statement belongs will then exhibit different aetiological pathways, different conditions of coexistence and exclusion.

Foucault takes up this theme again in Part IV, Chapter 6, in a discussion of different forms of history. The first of these, called recurrential analysis, is said to be characteristic of a discipline such as mathematics that is continually reviewing ‘the process of its own development’, which it transcribes into ‘the vocabulary of vicinities, dependencies, subordinations, progressive formalisations, and self-enveloping generalities’. This is a history ‘that is constituted by mathematics itself and which mathematics recounts about itself’ (AK 209, 247). In this later chapter, however, Foucault goes on to identify two further forms of history, the last of which, archaeological history, appears to be that closest to the analysis of statements and discursive formations. This seems to be at odds with the chapter ‘Rarity, Exteriority, Accumulation’ where recurrence is presented as a general feature of discourse, and the capacity of statements to revise their own past appears to characterise all of discourse. There may be an ambiguity here, or it may simply be that the three forms of history Foucault identifies later overlap, at least sometimes, or to some extent.

The closing lines of the chapter reiterate that archaeology has no impulse to return to a condition prior to history, to escape its materiality, or to place itself in the ‘non-determined dimension of the opening’ (surely a reference to Heidegger) (AK 141, 164). Not for the first time, the option of securing the transcendental conditions of the phenomena archaeology analyses is explicitly refused. However, as Foucault has made clear on several occasions, this does not mean that the analysis falls by default into empiricism. It is important to bear this in mind
when Foucault acknowledges that the analysis of statements exhibits a form of positivity, in view of which he is happy to be called a positivist (AK 141, 164–5).

5. THE HISTORICAL A PRIORI AND THE ARCHIVE

This is one of the best-known chapters in The Archaeology of Knowledge, and certainly one of the most discussed. Everything significant in the idea of archaeological analysis passes through it. But if the chapter encapsulates the originality of Foucault’s approach, it is also the point where its problematic and sometimes puzzling character is most on view. There is some repetition of themes from earlier chapters, but the dense concentration of issues raised, and its central position in the book, mean that it is useful to work carefully through what is presented here.

Picking up where the last chapter left off, Foucault states that the unity of a discourse is characterised by its positivity. This unity ‘defines a limited space of communication’ in which it becomes possible to say whether or not different texts or authors have addressed the same object, occupied the same subject position, and used the same concepts (AK 142, 166). The relations defining that space are discursive and can be traced regardless of who knew what about whom and when. In this way, authors engage with one another in and through discourses they can neither master nor survey as a whole. As they do so, the ‘influence’ of argument, logic and the exchange of ideas is supplemented by the form of the positivity that defines the thematic continuities, the translation of concepts, and even the space within which such disputes and engagements can take place. This, writes Foucault, is ‘what might be called a historical a priori’ (AK 143, 167).

Of all Foucault’s many terminological innovations in The Archaeology of Knowledge, the idea of the historical a priori is the most unusual and the most contentious. The designation ‘a priori’ implies ‘transcendental’, and as such stands opposed to history understood as a train of empirical events. So all encompassing has this opposition been in philosophical thought that the idea of a priori conditions that are themselves historical sounds like the worst form of confusion. Yet Foucault’s diagnosis in The Order of Things of the impasse into which thinking entered in modernity foresaw the need to break down this opposition.29 The coherence of the idea of the historical a priori is therefore crucial to the effectiveness of his response to this situation. As Foucault described it in The Order of Things, the impasse arose as a consequence of the
doubling of the figure of man such that he became at once the condition of knowledge and conditioned by it. This doubling was raised as a concern in the commentary to Part III, Chapter 3, ‘The Description of Statements’, and was at least provisionally settled by the description of rules as regularities, and by the two-way relation this made possible between the conditions and the conditioned. Now the question is whether the explanation continues to stand up when Foucault introduces the historical a priori. In short, does the idea of the historical a priori do enough to avoid repeating the doubling in a different form.

First, Foucault reminds the reader that the historical a priori serves as a condition of the existence of statements, and more specifically of their coexistence, but does not underpin the legitimacy of any particular assertion. Moreover, while the historical a priori accounts for the simultaneity of statements, it cannot account for their unity, and when describing the pattern in a series of statements, it does not provide a law that makes the future deducible (AK 143, 167). The reason for this is primarily that, as has already become clear, the rules in the historical a priori do not stand above the processes they describe as though in what Foucault calls here an ‘unmoving heaven’ (AK 144, 168). Neither transcendental nor purely formal, they are not even formal rules ‘endowed with a history’, which would simply make them like a series of conjectures each of which asserts a universality at odds with its claim to be historical. Instead, the rules reflect regularities that emerge from the processes to which they apply, and as such they are ‘caught up in the very things that they connect’ (AK 144, 167). The rules embedded in the historical a priori are therefore modified by the very processes to which they apply, making both their own future and that of discourse fundamentally unpredictable. It is for this reason that they are historical. But if they have their own historicity, what is it that distinguishes this from an empirical history? The rules cannot be determined empirically because they do not themselves have the status of things, or of phenomena, and they cannot be abstracted from experience because they are responsible for the construction of that experience. Where patterns of knowledge and forms of speech and conduct build into traditions, or are formalised as a science, the empirical history that unfolds in this way begins with experience, and with the elements of that experience. As such, it neglects the formation of that experience, and the formation even of its elements: enunciative modalities, objects and concepts, but also the further conditions that Foucault describes which lend these a consistent pattern and make meaning possible, such as associated fields. An empirical history has to presuppose the configuration of these things in order to begin the account it gives of events, yet it is in the changes
to this configuration that the historical a priori lies. One might object that there is nothing to prevent old habits of thought and analysis from being shaken up to form new perspectives, with new objects in view, and that what Foucault presents as an invisible condition of experience might become visible (for example, patterns of regularity that only appear when one looks across several disciplines at once). In this way, what at one stage occupied a position in the a priori could fall back into the empirical. In fact, there may not be any reason to deny this from an archaeological perspective. If conditions that currently elude experience because of their role in constructing that experience (that is, their role in the production of statements) were themselves to become objects within experience, then this shift in the discursive formation can be made into a theme of archaeological analysis in its turn. The important point is that not all things can be objects of experience at all times, with the same being true of enunciative modalities (subject positions), concepts and the other elements of discourse; this is why archaeology deals with the conditions of the actual existence of statements.

To say that the conditions presented by Foucault as a priori were in fact simply empirical conditions that had not been brought to light by the appropriate analysis would therefore be to assume that the elements of discourse lay in some neglected spot until such time as they were noticed, spoken about, adopted as concepts, or donned as a new guise for the subject. In turn, this would be to treat discourse as a unified field of possible experience that contains within it what are for archaeology the historical a priori conditions of discursive formations. This would clearly reproduce a conception of experience to which Foucault is deliberately providing at least the promise of an alternative. Of course, wanting to get out of jail does not mean that one has, or that one can, and so the alternative that Foucault provides to the notion of empirical experience has to be convincing.

One aspect of such an alternative would be an account of experience that was not grounded in the unity of a subject; or, to put it another way, an account of the subject that is not itself anchored in a profound psychological or transcendental unity. In fact, Cavaillès, having denied the subject a foundational role in mathematical thought, went on to consider the experience of mathematics in light of the subject’s involvement in demonstration and the intuition of new objects using multiple schemas, where the objects and concepts of one stage in its history were excluded as possibilities by the conditions defining earlier stages. This goes part of the way towards showing that experience is not necessarily a unified field, but can undergo radical transformations in the form of what can be seen, done, thought and spoken. Foucault’s notion of
enunciative modalities provides a similar account of the subject as belonging within discourse, where it is defined by the specificity of its relations to a discursive formation in all its aspects, including its institutional form. Disrupting the assumed unity of experience lends support to the idea that historical a priori conditions are not simply empirical conditions to which analysis has yet to turn its attention.

As noted earlier, it is important that the relation within discourse between conditions and what is conditioned does not reproduce the figure of man as both the condition and the object of knowledge that in Foucault’s view has characterised modernity. In a sense, this can be settled easily, since the relation as Foucault described it in *The Order of Things* spanned the distinction between transcendental and empirical. With the transcendental level out of consideration, a direct reproduction of the problematic structure is already impossible. But the difficulty may prove to be a more stubborn obstacle and on closer examination it resolves into a new problem concerning the relation between conditions and conditioned. This brings time back to centre stage, in the form of the temporal relation between conditions and conditioned as Foucault presents them in the idea of the historical a priori. To establish the nature of this relation, one can begin by considering both the relation between the empirical and the transcendental, and the alternative case of simple empirical determination. The latter is more straightforward and can be explained without too much difficulty: the relation between condition and conditioned within a train of empirical events presupposes, as a minimum, that in any given process the condition come before the conditioned according to a temporal scale established in advance. It assumes, that is, both the temporal priority of condition over conditioned, and the irreversibility of their relation. Turning to the relation between the transcendental and the empirical, the problem with the structure of thought in modernity is that man appears on both sides of the divide. Since the transcendental and the empirical have fundamentally different temporal characteristics, this is either impossible, or else leaves man irreparably divided. However, the factors of priority and irreversibility found in the case of simple empirical conditions can be seen here too, albeit in a different sense by virtue of the absence of a single common temporal dimension: a transcendental condition will always precede the empirical reality it conditions, and it will remain unaffected by empirical events.

One view of the analytic of finitude that Foucault saw as a response to the division of man is that it confronts just this problem. If Heidegger’s existential analytic plays a part here, it is precisely in so far as it develops an account of the temporal finitude of existence without taking the
distinction between time and the eternal (or timelessness) as a point of departure. As such, it promises a determination of human finitude on which the account of knowledge could be based without lapsing into the difficulties described. In order for this to be possible, the structure of transcendental philosophy had to be called into question, and a way of understanding the conditions of concrete existence set out that did not repeat the separation of the transcendental. Heidegger’s notion of the ontological difference between Being and beings appears to offer just this possibility. According to the ontological difference, Being cannot be treated as a thing, and as a consequence the ontological foundation that philosophy has traditionally sought cannot be defined in terms drawn from the interpretation of things. Rather, Heidegger argues, the Being of a thing lies in the manner in which it is disclosed. Similarly, Being as such cannot be treated as if it existed somehow independently, either literally in a realm apart, or in the sense that its meaning could be determined independently of the relations into which it enters. Being is nothing apart from beings, and nothing apart from their disclosure in and through our engagement with them. As a consequence, the ontological difference does not refer to a new level of existence so much as propose a new perspective on what exists.

There is a case to be made that Foucault takes up the idea of the ontological difference from Heidegger as a way of making sense of the way discourse and its analysis operate in a dimension that is neither transcendental nor empirical. Statements map words onto things, and as such are the conditions for being able to say that an object exists. But in what sense do statements themselves exist? If they were to exist as objects, then archaeology would be reduced to an empirical science, and the question of the ontological conditions of statements would remain in the air (this is essentially the impasse that Foucault described in OT). Yet statements do exist, as Foucault made clear much earlier in The Archaeology of Knowledge. Faced with the difficulty of accounting for the existence of statements without treating them as empirical objects, one option is to consider the existence of mathematical objects that are constructed from the operations of mathematics itself. However, the ontological difference also seems to offer an alternative. The relation between discursive objects (or subjects) and discourse itself can be thought of as analogous to the difference between beings and Being. On this basis, discourse exists in a similar sense to the way Being exists (cf. The Description of Statements). The task of archaeology is then to describe the manner of its occurrence, how it presents itself. One does not experience discourse or the statement ‘as such’, but only as the mapping of word onto thing, the allocation of a subject position,
and the appearance of an associated field. Just as the statement does not exist alongside the proposition and the sentence, so, for Heidegger, Being is disclosed in and through beings, without itself being like them. But to think ontologically requires maintaining the separation of Being and beings, the ontological difference, as well as their relation. Making the translation to the analysis of discourse, critics have argued that Foucault fails to do this, allowing his terms to slide from one side to another: first regulating discourse, then part of it. There may indeed be some terminological inconsistency in this respect, in fact the sheer quantity of terms Foucault introduces makes this hard to avoid, but this is not the point here.

Although Heidegger has opened up a possibility for Foucault, it is also the case that Foucault is adopting a mode of thought quite different to Heidegger’s and that there is a limit to his appropriation of the ontological difference. A brief outline of a criticism that Foucault appears to direct against Heidegger will show why, and lead back to the problem of the doubling between the transcendental and the empirical that Foucault identified.

Because Being cannot be treated as a being, Heidegger had to cultivate a new idiom, since ontological language could no longer be representational. This might be considered enough in itself to avoid the doubling between condition and conditioning in question here. However, there is some ambiguity over the extent to which Heidegger’s account does in fact manage this. Many of his analyses rely on an ontological appropriation of terms familiar from ontic, or empirical, description; for example, conscience, guilt and resoluteness all feature prominently in the analysis of Dasein, though Heidegger insists that they must be separated from their usual everyday meaning. Above all, the ontological structure of Dasein as a whole is named ‘care’ and given a temporal interpretation. In this way, not only is care ‘rediscovered’ as a fundamental determination of Dasein’s finitude, but time itself appears twice, in two distinct guises: as everyday ‘clock’ time and as the original temporality constitutive of Dasein’s Being. Their very clear demarcation from one another excludes any simple translation from the empirical, but there is some scope for the kind of suspicion that Foucault raises. What is certain is that for Heidegger the ontological has priority over the ontic and that, as with formal or transcendental grounds, this priority insulates the ontological from any effects leaking back from the ontic level of beings; that is, what it means to be cannot be altered by beings themselves and the events that occur to them. So while the specific question of whether the ontological difference in Heidegger gives rise to a problematic doubling or not may remain open,
the priority and the irreversibility associated with the doubling clearly are present, and it is these which are the chief sources of concern for Foucault.

The issue of priority and irreversibility is far less clear-cut in the case of discourse. Although there is a priority in so far as what appear to be ‘higher order’ regularities in discourse condition the actual coexistence of individual statements, such conditions are not prior in the sense either of existing in advance or of being situated at another level than that of statements and the relations between them. This is reflected in the fact that they are not conditions for the possibility of what is regulated. Moreover, as Foucault writes, the discursive rules are ‘caught up in the very things that they connect . . . and are transformed with them’ (AK 144, 168). Discourse thereby avoids both the priority of conditions over conditioned and the irreversibility of their relation; the two factors primarily responsible for the problems that Foucault identified for thinking in modernity as a consequence of the distinction between the transcendental and the empirical having such complete dominance. To sum up, the risks associated with the doubling of conditions and conditioned stem from their separation across different levels (e.g., transcendental and empirical), but Foucault’s account of discourse avoids this separation while also blocking the reduction of discursive conditions to the level of empirical events. The reading given in Part III, Chapter 3 still holds good, and history, understood in the terms Foucault sets out here, takes over the role previously played by the analysis of experience; that is, it serves as a quasi-analytic based on the mathematical a priori, which is revealed here as fundamentally historical.

Foucault now introduces another key term in the book. The domain of statements, he writes, no longer appears to be a surface, but has become a ‘complex volume’ occupied by different regions with incompatible rules and practices. All the systems of statements at a given time taken together form what Foucault calls the ‘archive’ (AK 145, 169). Contrasted, as usual, to anything empirical, such as the sum of all the texts and documents of a culture, the archive is situated between language (the system for constructing possible sentences) and the corpus (the collection of all words spoken), acting as ‘the general system of the formation and transformation of statements’ (AK 146, 170). It is ‘the first law of what can be said’, and governs ‘the appearance of statements as unique events’ (AK 145, 169). As it does so, it gives discourse structure, differentiating discursive formations from one another. If the historical a priori is the formal designation of the conditions of discourse, the archive is the specific set of conditions for a given discourse, and as such it is what an archaeological analysis actually aims
to describe. However, Foucault concedes that such a description cannot be exhaustive, for reasons that are, he writes, ‘obvious’ (AK 146, 171). Unlike formal or transcendental conditions of possibility, an archive cannot impose boundaries at which a conditioned discourse must break off. The space and time defined by an archive is open, in the sense that its borders are thresholds of communication with other discourses. Across the discontinuities that separate discourses from one another, the regularities defining the rules of one may be disrupted by events formed elsewhere, giving rise to transformation. Such is the complexity of the space and time in which regularities form that its description cannot be a once and for all affair.

The impossibility of describing the archive as a totality leads to a reflection on the impossibility of describing our own particular archive. Foucault is quite clear that this cannot be done, since ‘it is from within these rules that we speak’ and they determine the modes of appearance and of accumulation of what we can say, its forms of existence and its historicity (AK 146–7, 171). In a quite traditional way, Foucault initially concedes that these rules can only become clear to us as we acquire a distance from them, but then raises the question of whether or not it should be possible for analysis to ‘map out the place where it speaks’ and to set out its own conditions (AK 147, 172). This suggestion, and the doubt that follows immediately after it, appear to rehearse two recognisable positions within philosophy. The first, that one can only understand one’s own time as it recedes into the past; the second, that a rational inquiry can successfully trace its own limits and the condition of its own finitude. It is tempting to associate these positions with Hegel and Kant respectively. Yet the second position cannot be directly attributed to Kant, since the possibilities for which it seeks conditions can be defined ‘only in the moment of their realization’. They are conditions of actual existence, not of possibility. This prompts the question: if it is conditions of actual existence that are sought, then should not the analysis ‘approach as close as possible to the positivity that governs it and the archive that governs it today to speak of the archive in general?’ (AK 147, 172). If the analysis cannot illuminate what makes it possible to speak of the conditions of the time it is analysing, then it has a blind spot and remains planted in a finitude it cannot describe. However, Foucault turns what could have been seen as a weakness into a positive feature of archaeological analysis. What such analysis can illuminate lies close to us, he writes, but it cannot bring to light ‘the enunciative field of which it is itself a part’. This region, close to us, but not ours, acquires a certain privilege in so far as it borders, and thereby delimits, our own archive. As such, ‘its threshold of existence is established by
the discontinuity of what separates us from what we can no longer say, and from that which lies outside our own discursive practice’ (AK 147, 172). It seems that we can learn something of our own archive after all, by attending to the borders marked by what lies around it. But there is only so much that we can learn from this, since these borders can tell us little about what lies within them, except that it is different to what lies further afield. If there are limits to what we can know about the content of our archive by demonstrating what has now become other to us, the analysis of the archive also ‘dissipates that temporal identity in which we are pleased to look at ourselves when we wish to exorcise the discontinuities of history’ (AK 147, 172). In this way, we are thrown into a present that is fractured, complex, and about which we can know something, but not everything. In the end we can be certain only that it is not determined by the rules of discourse that shaped even its near past (or the various forms that its past may take according to the discursive formations in question); and if this means our identity is dispersed, it also encourages an analysis of the archive that contributes to the transformation of the discursive formations in which we exist. In this, one can see the outline of a practice of freedom that Foucault would elaborate some years later.