



## ARTICLE

# The *Actualité* of Philosophy and its History: Michel Foucault's Legacy on a Philosophy of the Present

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**ABSTRACT.** From the late 1970s, and particularly in the last years of his life, Michel Foucault repeatedly returned to the status of philosophical reflection as an ontology of the present, of *actualité*, or an ontology of ourselves. However, the impact of these famous theoretical syntagms around a philosophy of the present or of *actualité* – one of Foucault's most precious legacies 40 years after his death – is not fully intelligible without considering that they were already at the heart of Foucault's reflections on the status of philosophy from the mid-1960s onwards.

Today, with the recent publication of the essay *Le Discours philosophique*, we can better understand how the concept of *actualité* shaped, within an archaeological framework of analysis, the highly complex elaboration of the status of philosophy as a discourse aimed at providing a diagnosis of our *actualité*. The theoretical density of this latter term reveals a rich panorama of philosophical references (sometimes explicit, sometimes more implicit) that are essential for grasping both the historical-conceptual stakes of this term and the way in which it is, for the first time, inscribed at the heart of the status of philosophy, giving rise also to the very possibility of making it an object of historicization that at the time was still only archaeological.

The aim of this contribution is to show how *Le Discours philosophique* broadens our understanding of what Foucault would later take up in a wider horizon of analysis, in which *actualité* would mark a renewed space of historical analysis of the contingent relationship between philosophy and its present, by redefining philosophical reflection as a practico-reflexive mode that Foucault will designate as “attitude” (and “critical attitude”).

**Keywords:** *Actualité*, philosophy, discourse, diagnosis, archaeology

## INTRODUCTION

Forty years after Michel Foucault's death, we are entitled to ask ourselves what he left us, in order to determine, even partially, his legacy for “us” “today”. Inevitably, this goal is difficult

to achieve insofar as Foucault's thought was constructed with reference to issues that today we could probably neither formulate in the same way nor address with the same attention. While, on the other hand, our current situation poses new problems that could well be circumscribed thanks to Foucault's toolbox, we are nevertheless always faced with the risk of making this toolbox too flexible, too plastic, too 'ready-made', thus losing sight of the very specific circumstances and conjunctures in which Foucault's historical-conceptual tools were forged. These tools have sometimes been hastily applied to issues that would call for more caution and consequent adjustments of the hypotheses and concepts that were once created to approach this or that other object that Foucault dealt with during his life.

Foucault was someone who was committed to reflecting not only on the actuality (*actualité*) of his time, on what was raging and problematic in it, but also on the very idea of *actualité* and the way in which it constantly shapes and reshapes our thinking so that new objects of thought can finally emerge within it. For him, these objects of thought have always been the product of the impact of current events on our thinking. Therefore, this impact becomes the very thing that makes it possible to historicise what, in a given historical and political conjuncture, it has been possible to think and say; the limits of the "dicible" and the "indicible" that determined the *actualité* of a specific period.

Questioning Foucault's legacy and what is still timely in his thought undoubtedly calls for a preliminary questioning that goes beyond both the situated nature of his thought and our own. Not only did Foucault's thought have *actualité* as its object; it also – and perhaps above all – engaged with *the form of the relationship* we maintain with an *actualité* that is always in flux, that of a present that is always at a distance from itself (*à l'écart de lui-même*). Such a present is shaped by a difference that determines – as Foucault repeated right up to his last writings on the *Aufklärung* – "what we are, what we think and what we do today".<sup>1</sup> However, this also means, in a reversed sense, what is to be understood by "critique", i.e., asking what we can and must say, think and do to become other than what we are and to transform the present in which we find ourselves (a "practical critique that takes the form of a possible transgression (*franchissement*)".<sup>2</sup> And yet what Foucault called "this permanent critique of ourselves" in his later writings referred to a "mode of reflective relation to the present" that had been "at the basis of an entire form of philosophical reflection".<sup>3</sup>

Today, forty years after his death, to say that philosophy is a reflection on the present and starting from the present may seem like a truism or something that goes without saying. However, in the sentences I quoted, Foucault claims something more, namely that the fundamental relationship that philosophical reflection has with its present can take, and effectively and historically has taken, place in several ways and in different forms. Thus, when we take up a question that is as old as it is still open to us today ("what does it mean to philosophize?"), we should not only consider the relationship with a specific time. We should also and above all consider *the form of this relationship* and its historical mode of constitution – that is, the way in which philosophy has constituted itself in relation to what its *actualité* was. It is perhaps this question concerning the reflexive form that philosophy has maintained with its present at

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" [1984], in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (1984), 32.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 43-44.

each moment in its history, which in fact made it actual or real in its material and historical existence, that constitutes an open problem. It is a question that never ceases to be posed to "us" and "today", insofar as "us" and "today" are contingent and therefore changeable. This question appears as one of the legacies that Foucault's thought has left us and forces us to renew and shift the approach to our way of looking at philosophy.

As already mentioned, the writings on the *Aufklärung* of the 1980s place the reflective relationship to the present under the sign of an *attitude* and, more precisely, as *practical attitude* that defines what 'critique' means as a 'historical ontology of ourselves'. Several studies have already been devoted to the meaning of this famous philosophical syntagm, but until now it has been impossible to highlight that Foucault grappled with this question from at least the mid-1960s, as can be seen from the recent publication of the essay *Le Discours philosophique*.<sup>4</sup>

If today we wish to question the legacy of Foucault's thought in the study of the relationship that philosophy has or has had with its *actualité*, we must return to this essay, where this question is crucial and is addressed more directly than in the 1980s. The theoretical shift in thinking about philosophy as a critical attitude that Foucault proposed towards the end of his life does not seem fully intelligible without taking into account the way in which Foucault deals with this fundamental question in this essay written in 1966, a few months after the publication of *Les Mots et les choses*, which Foucault eventually decided not to publish despite the relatively well-written state of most of its fifteen chapters.

The goal of the essay is to apply the archaeological method to philosophy, understood by Foucault in a theoretical conjuncture marked by several forms of anti-humanism, including those of structuralism, then at its height, which had already called into question the human sciences of which Foucault had made his archaeology in his famous book proclaiming the death of man. It was a question of pushing philosophy into the same space of questioning opened by what Foucault had designated as *counter-sciences* (linguistics, psychoanalysis, and ethnology) in *Les mots et les choses*.

Yet, even if the references to philosophy in this book are abundant and complex, to approach philosophy directly as an object of the archaeological method, and thereby test this very method through this object, it was necessary to interrogate it through the lens of actuality (*actualité*). This relationship with the *actualité* enables the archaeological method to posit philosophy, or better still, the philosophical discourse, as its object. In *Le Discours philosophique*, this historicization is twofold, insofar as it takes place on two levels: on the one hand, the archaeological history of philosophy from the mid-seventeenth century to the present day, and, on the other hand, the archaeological historicization of the history of philosophy as it had been conceived until then.

With this dense term of *actualité*, which is conceptually charged, we identify from the outset at least three intertwined areas of questioning concerning: first, "philosophy" as an object of archaeological investigation and its status as a *discourse*; second, the archaeological method as it allows us both to construct this object and at the same time to be put to the test by it, with all the difficulties and stumbling blocks that the application of this method implies; and

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<sup>4</sup> Michel Foucault, *Le Discours philosophique*, ed. Orazio Irrera and Daniele Lorenzini (2023).

finally, the focus of problematization concerning the historicization process imposed by this object and by this method.

In an attempt to restore the full philosophic thickness of the term 'actualité', and at the same time to restore this essay on philosophical discourse to the *actualité* that is its own, it is necessary to begin by situating it within the broader project of an 'Archaeology of Thought' ("*Archéologie de la pensée*") that Foucault sketches out and outlines in one of the notes in his *Cahiers* – notes that precede and accompany the writing of *Le Discours philosophique* annexed to the edition of this volume. In one of these notes, dated 15 July 1966, Foucault presents a tripartition of what he calls an "Archaeology of Thought" (*L'archéologie de la pensée*).<sup>5</sup> This project should have set itself the task of liberating thought from that which has long organised and enclosed it: Man, whose disappearance Nietzsche had shown. Nevertheless, according to him, it was still necessary to get rid of everything "that made it possible, accompanies it and still obscurely maintains it: knowledge, writing, reflection". In this tripartition, we see that Foucault had carried out the project of the Archaeology of the human sciences already in *Les mots et les choses*, that of an archaeology of fiction and literature touched on in certain lectures and texts of the 1960s, and finally we can see an archaeology of reflection that corresponds to what Foucault was going to deal with by writing the *Discours philosophique*.

The first difference marks the object of the archaeological method: when this method addresses itself neither to *savoir* nor knowledge, as in *Les Mots et les choses*, but to philosophy. Philosophy is considered less insofar as it participates in the description of the ranges of order and coherence of positive knowledge that are *epistemes*. According to Foucault, philosophy is rather to be conceived in terms of an *activity*, which is not knowledge, but *reflection* (philosophy as reflection's activity). This reflection, then, is an activity whose historical conditions of possibility still rest obscurely on Man, and more precisely on the vertical relationship to the Truth (which is much older than he is) that he has made possible, and of which, for Foucault at the time, Man was still the latest avatar.

Nevertheless, the interest of this Archaeology of thought concerns not only the anti-humanist quarrel about the death of Man (which is known well enough) but also another aspect. When Foucault describes philosophy as an undertaking to diagnose the *actualité*, or when he shows how this relationship to the *actualité* inflects a process of the archaeological historicization of philosophy, he is not only taking up this anti-humanist instance that had already made him famous at that time with the publication of *Les mots et les choses*. Indeed, he also distances himself from other anti-humanist perspectives, equally committed to getting rid of Man, whether that of a certain structuralism (such as that of the counter-sciences), or of Heideggerian ontology, or of the history of philosophical systems of Martial Gueroult and Jules Vuillemin.<sup>6</sup> The archaeological history of philosophy sketched out in this essay on the basis of this quite crucial term, i.e., *actualité*, tells us something interesting about the way in which Foucault sought to take up a position in relation to the various attempts to consider philosophy (or philosophical reflection) from an anti-humanist and anti-existentialist prism.

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<sup>5</sup> Foucault, *Le Discours philosophique*, 252, my translation.

<sup>6</sup> See Chapter 10 "Description de la philosophie," in *Le Discours philosophique*, ed. Orazio Irrera and Daniele Lorenzini (2023), 147-167.

On the other hand, if we stay with this question of reflection and its age-old relationship to truth, we need to consider two points: first, such a relationship to truth is much older than Man. As Foucault writes in another note in his Notebooks (dated 17 July 1966), "Man as a fundamental category of Western thought and culture [appeared] in the nineteenth century".<sup>7</sup> Secondly, as it is clear in the very first chapter of *Le Discours philosophique*, entitled "The Diagnosis" (*Le diagnostic*), this vertical relationship to truth already marked "from the depths of the Greek age" the task of philosophy as diagnosis, and since then it has made the philosophy (and the philosophical diagnosis) exercised under the double injunction to "interpret and heal" an "allegory of depth". As Foucault puts it:

For Western philosophy to exist as it did, it took this contamination of the body and the word, this entanglement of the evil visible and hidden in the body with the meaning (*le sens*) hidden and manifested by the word (*par la parole*).<sup>8</sup>

In other words, in this mode of diagnosis as being an allegory of depth, philosophical reflection could only direct thought within itself, where it was supposed from the outset to rediscover its necessary and essential co-partnership, of nature if you like, with truth and being. Reflection was, therefore, an activity aimed at bringing to light the inseparable link between thought, truth and being. But there is more in this proximity of the philosopher's diagnosis to that of the prophet and the healer. Reflection as diagnosis presupposes that it is exercised on a process that is still in progress, something that is in the process of becoming, in the process of being made: it is a diagnosis of *actualité*. Diagnosis intervenes and is exercised in relation to current events, to what is happening, to what is becoming, but not without all the threats and fears that this becoming brings and that diagnosis was supposed to ward off. Hence the need to make reflection an activity which, by making thought turn in on itself, enables it both to reach a stable and original ground where it could ceaselessly renew this rightful belonging to being and, consequently, to manifest its reassuring presence in relation to the *actualité*, in relation to what is happening. This is done precisely through the truth of philosophical discourse, of the philosopher's word, as "a faceless truth which envelops space and dominates time".<sup>9</sup> In this kind of relationship with truth, the contingency of the philosopher's word is indeed deleted and disabled.

To place the reflection of which philosophy consists in a confrontation with the present and its radical contingency, which demands to be thought out to say what is happening, means not only returning to Nietzsche and his way of destroying with a hammer this thousand-year-old modality under which philosophical reflection has been exercised. The relationship between philosophy and *actualité* is also what allows Foucault to oppose Nietzsche to Heidegger, and more precisely to what the latter had to say about the "Withdrawal of Being" in *Was heißt denken?* – one of the Heideggerian texts that Foucault was undoubtedly targeting in this first

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<sup>7</sup> *Le Discours philosophique*, 253, my translation.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 15, my translation.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 94, my translation.

chapter of the *Discours philosophique*) – i.e., the acknowledgement that "What must be thought about, turns away from man. It withdraws from him".<sup>10</sup>

Although Nietzsche, by getting rid of the allegory of depth, dismissed once and for all the old cultural function of the diagnosis and even the corresponding mode of philosophical reflection, this does not imply that this *actualité* as the new object of philosophical diagnosis – the ontological difference that the present introduces in relation to what is past – can be addressed as Heidegger does, both as a "a lack of thought"<sup>11</sup> and as the destined return of philosophy to its archaic vocation, that of setting out towards its pre-Socratic origin where being inexorably gives itself in its retreat. It is not a question of targeting *actualité* as a somehow defective horizon that only poetry could intermittently restore to the fullness of being in language, in the sparkling of *Dichtung*, as we read in chapter 12, "Thinking after Nietzsche" (*Penser après Nietzsche*).<sup>12</sup> Even if Heideggerian ontology and its relation to language were indeed charged with an anti-humanist instance (as Foucault would acknowledge a while later in the course he gave at the University of Tunis), this would not be the path Foucault blazed in this essay.

The way Foucault uses Nietzsche to counter Heidegger relies on one point: by considering the philosophy of the second half of the nineteenth century exclusively in terms of a "crisis", of a "dissolution", or of the "death" of philosophy, means only to remain within the old habits acquired under a now irremediably outdated form of philosophical reflection, i.e., the "allegory of depth". The archaeological discontinuity affecting the historical conditions under which philosophical reflection is possible, as Nietzsche points out, does not simply place philosophy in a dimension of crisis, of loss, of retreat from being. On the contrary, it indicates that where philosophy may appear to be lost, no longer having the same style of reflection or the same objects or major domains as before, in fact "a whole wealth is being born" for this new mode of philosophical reflection.<sup>13</sup>

The diagnosis of Nietzsche's *actualité* is presented as a radical questioning of philosophy's inward relationship with truth, that is, the assumption from the outset that there is a universal truth, valid for all time, already constituted but not yet fully wrested from its secret that precisely philosophy would be able to bring to light by manifesting this truth in and by its discourse. However, under the hammer blows of Nietzsche's thought, philosophy ceases to be a form of reflection corresponding to the very movement of this truth; this truth which philosophy would therefore endeavour to follow and reveal in the major domains and in relation to the objects that were hitherto proper to it: those of a subject, of an original ground, of a practice aimed at transforming the world, or again of the sensible manifestation of a rationality that

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<sup>10</sup> Martin Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?* [1954], ed. J. Glenn Gray (1968), 8. See also p. 9: "Withdrawal is an event. In fact, what withdraws may even concern and claim man more essentially than anything present that strikes and touches him. Being struck by *actuality* is what we like to regard as constitutive of *the actuality of the actual*. However, in being struck by what is *actual*, man may be debarred precisely from what concerns and touches him – touches him in the surely mysterious way of escaping him by its withdrawal. The event of withdrawal could be what is most present in all our present, and so infinitely exceed *the actuality of everything actual*" (emphasis added).

<sup>11</sup> Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?*, 29.

<sup>12</sup> *Le Discours philosophique*, 199.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 181, my translation.

runs through the world and history. According to Foucault, Nietzsche applies to it (i.e., to this configuration of the philosophical discourse) a radical game of dissociations (*jeu des dissociations*)<sup>14</sup> aimed at showing that these great objects or domains, hitherto invested by philosophical reflection, can no longer restore a single, universal truth.

What Foucault calls Nietzsche's "great pluralism" (*le grand pluralisme*) indicates that beneath the unique subject to whom truth manifests itself in all its evidence, we instead find several *selves* (which constitute him, tear him apart, and put his certainties in crisis). In the same way, there are several gods or several meanings (and therefore plurality of grounds), several forces (multiple practices each targeting a different transformation of the world), several masks or faces (hence a host of discourses all stating different reasons that manifest themselves in the world and in history). This 'great pluralism' highlights that, where philosophy has believed it could manifest truth in the certainty and self-evidence it has always claimed for its discourse, this truth always turns out to be constituted and emerges through the conflicting interplay between multiplicities that are perpetually in the process of becoming and each asserting a different and historically changing truth.

In Nietzsche's wake, then, a new path is opened up for reflection – that of the *exteriority* of philosophy and truth. This entails that philosophical reflection can no longer have access to truth by right; instead, it must show, from outside all truth, its new conditions of possibility: firstly, how truth is constituted in its very claim to be a discourse of truth in the face of contingent and threatening *actualité*. Secondly, how it can be exercised after Nietzsche without the comfort of a stable, universal and eternal ground as before, and on objects that are no longer the same. Thirdly, what its own task will be once philosophical reflection has freed itself from this *de jure* common partnership with truth. At the time of this essay, according to Foucault, tackling this exteriority implies a double approach or, in other words, an approach that articulates two ways of considering it.

The first way of approaching philosophy's relationship of exteriority to truth has to do precisely with philosophy's discursive status, that is, with philosophy as *discourse*. If philosophy no longer has this direct and privileged right of access to the truth, its claim to get to the bottom of things can only be considered retrospectively and from the outside. This entails putting the philosophical reflection in relation to the linguistic medium that conveyed it, namely as a discourse with its own internal functioning and regularities. By looking at itself from its own exteriority through this new style of reflection, philosophy will then be seen as 'simply a way of speaking', that is, as a discourse whose functioning can only be grasped in correlation with other types of discourse, as suggested by 'Nietzsche the philologist',<sup>15</sup> to use a formulation used in *Les Mots et les choses*.

It is then a question of placing the old modality of philosophical reflection within the set of discourses that were produced within a culture at a historically given time and that have come down to us in their enunciative materiality, according to the regularities (nevertheless also historically changeable), that presided over the selection, circulation and conservation of the statements (*énoncés*) and discourses that are proper to the "archive" of a culture. What Foucault calls here the "discourse-archive" is indeed a new archaeological order of philosophy's

<sup>14</sup> *Le Discours philosophique*, 182, my translation.

<sup>15</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things. An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* [1966] (1971), 304.

historical conditions of possibility, where two types of regularities and constraints (regularities internal to each discourse and regularities that emerge from their overall comparison) fit together. And this new archaeological order is also lodged in the wake of Nietzsche's thought because of its exteriority to truth and of its linguistic material and historical consistence (*les choses dites*). For Foucault, this is one of the points of connection between Nietzsche and a certain structuralism of this period, at a historical conjuncture when several theorists – as Lacan, Barthes, Althusser, and a little later the *Cahiers pour l'Analyse* group – were cementing their own theory of discourse, without however inscribing it in a Nietzschean horizon as Foucault does.

However, to assert only that, after Nietzsche, philosophy is a discourse among other discourses is not enough since, according to Foucault, philosophical discourse still retains an element of singularity that he once again draws from Nietzsche, thus engaging with the most recent achievements of structural linguistics and the philosophy of language of his time (notably Jakobson, Benveniste, Prieto, and Austin). This element relates to the second way of considering exteriority, and it is an exteriority that is, so to speak, external to the discursive exteriority of philosophy itself. What is at stake here is an "extralinguistic" element, namely the idea that all philosophical discourse is actualised by the exigence to take up the very present of its discourse, its situation of enunciation; indeed, its *actualité* or what Foucault in this essay calls its "now" (*maintenant*).

This "*maintenant*", that is, the reference to the subject who speaks as well as to the space and moment in which he speaks – the famous triad "I-here-now" (*je-ici-à présent*) – is something that is always external to the structure of language. Yet, without referring to this exteriority, language cannot function and actualise in effective and concrete discourses the virtuality of its system, its structures or its functions. With this analogy with the theories of enunciation, Foucault aims to show that while, for ordinary language, this exteriority is in fact always pointed to by its everyday functioning, it nevertheless remains mute or unreflected. On the contrary, for philosophy the internal regularities that preside over its discursive functioning are defined, in their historical singularity, on the basis of the way in which this *maintenant* is reflexively taken up by and within its discourse.

The new modality of philosophical reflection inaugurated by Nietzsche, at least according to Foucault, redefines the task of philosophy as that of diagnosing the *actualité* – this *actualité* that philosophical reflection must take up, in one way or another, in and through its discourse, by putting it into words. Nonetheless, having lost its right of access to truth, this enterprise of diagnosing the *actualité* can no longer be restored under the sign of a truth that reveals itself teleologically and cumulatively in a movement that brings thought ever closer to truth.

On the contrary, after Nietzsche, this diagnosis of what philosophy entails can only be limited to the task of establishing "what there is" or "what is happening" in the present, what is being done in it, and what makes philosophy *real*. Consequently, this diagnosis of the *actualité* aims to grasp the functioning or actualisation of the internal regularities of philosophical discourse (the production of philosophical *énoncés*) as a function of the relationship it maintains with its present at a given moment, and in relation to a whole multiplicity of objects that were previously classified in the domain of non-philosophy.



*Actualité*, then, is the moment when philosophy is made, becomes real or becomes effective. In this regard, it is noteworthy to recall that one of Foucault's mentors, Jean Hyppolite, in his famous French translation of *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, rendered the German adjective '*wirklich*' as '*actuel*' (actual). However, the *actualité* cannot be read with Hegel but rather in the ever-renewed form and dispersion of multiple beginnings (which reject both teleology and cumulative totalisation under an abstract universality), with reference to Nietzsche.

To make this framework more complete, we must also consider that if philosophy after Nietzsche is no longer a discourse of truth but a discourse among other discourses, then its reflection will be exercised rather at the edges, in the interstices between one discourse and another, and in the space that ensures their correlation within a culture. Once the diagnosis has freed itself from its old cultural function, which Foucault sums up as 'interpreting and healing', that is to say, uncovering the hidden meaning of things and/or healing bodies of the ills that afflict them – such diagnosis will be an activity that crosses and distinguishes between one discourse and another in order to say what is being done, what becomes effective, and what becomes real and problematic in the overall functioning of a culture, with all its multiplicity of discourses, practices and institutions, where it relates to the *contingency* of its *actualité*.

It is precisely by crossing this historical space of correlation between one discourse and another that diagnosis distinguishes what is happening in its *actualité*, precisely by identifying new objects, which are no longer those through which philosophy before Nietzsche sought an original truth (God, the Soul, the World) but rather those which show how philosophical reflection has been able to establish itself within our culture as a discourse of truth. In this interstitial space, philosophy will be committed to answering two major questions. Firstly, how a set of discourses communicate; discourses that were previously foreign to it and that were part of non-philosophy.<sup>16</sup> Secondly, how philosophy will be expected to account for these new objects (madness, illness, criminality, sexuality etc.) that its *actualité* now imposes on philosophical reflection. From a Nietzschean point of view, according to Foucault, this entails questioning the historical appearance (*émergence*) of these new objects of reflection by detecting their multiple beginnings, so that their historical appearance will be intelligible only from the tangle of multiple temporalities – or, said in the manner of Nietzsche, of multiple origins. It is by identifying, or perhaps also by fabricating, these new objects that reflection, consisting of a diagnostic of *actualité*, assigns philosophy its object, i.e., what it must think about in the

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<sup>16</sup> Foucault takes up the Hegelian question of the "non-philosophy" again from Hyppolite but to approach it in a completely different way, a Nietzschean way. See "Jean Hyppolite. 1907-1968" [1969], in *Dits et écrits, tome I, 1954-1975*, ed. Daniel Defert and François Ewald (2001), 807-813, in part. 811-812: "With Hegel, philosophy which, since Descartes at least, had been in an inefaceable relationship, with non-philosophy, became not only aware of this relationship, but the actual discourse of this relationship: the serious implementation of the interplay of philosophy and non-philosophy. While others saw in Hegelian thought the withdrawal of philosophy into itself, and the moment when it moves on to the narrative of its own history, Mr. Hyppolite recognised in it the moment when it crosses its own limits to become the philosophy of non-philosophy, or perhaps the non-philosophy of philosophy itself" (my translation). About the relationship between philosophy and non-philosophy in Jasper's interpretation of Nietzsche's philosophy, see also *La question anthropologique. Cours, 1954-1955*, ed. Arianna Sforzini (2022), 205.

immanence of its own present, which is always in difference – in an historical and ontological difference from itself.

The diagnosis of the *actualité* makes the new Nietzschean modality of philosophical reflection almost coincide with the archaeological method, insofar as the aim is now to describe the regularities around which everything that is thought and stated is ordered in relation to its *actualité*. Finally, the task of an archaeology of philosophy will be to question, while there is still only mobility and emptiness, "the space in which thought unfolds, as well as the conditions of this thought, its mode of constitution", as Foucault put it in an interview from the same period, in order to "say what we are today and what it means, today, to say what we say".<sup>17</sup>

According to Foucault, if we can still speak of philosophy as a "discourse of discourses", it is only by grasping in it a shift from the subjective genitive to the objective genitive. Philosophy is no longer a discourse overhanging and encompassing the other discourses under the sign of truth, but it is the discourse that situates itself in the multiple interstices between one discourse and another. So, it is this shift that allows one to grasp the difference that constitutes us in relation to our *actualité*, to our present reality, within the ordered historical space of the correlation of a culture.

The thickness of the term *actualité*, as well as the historical-philosophical background of the debates that it discreetly and somewhat subtly evokes, be it Heidegger or Hyppolite, cannot be erased when we confront the way in which Foucault himself, between the end of the 1970s and the 1980s, took up the question of philosophy and its *actualité* in a more complex framework, speaking for example of the "ontology of actuality" or the "historical ontology of ourselves".

Firstly, we have seen that in the project of an archaeology of thought, Foucault refers to the activity of reflection that produces philosophical statements (*énoncés*). Secondly, the object on which this reflection is exercised is the *actualité*; philosophy is therefore an activity of reflection on the *actualité*, on what is happening, on what is in the process of being made, of becoming within a culture. The conceptual depth of the notion of *actualité* is derived from an analogy with the theories of enunciation, which explain that an *énoncé* makes sense and actualises the system of virtuality of a language only insofar as it points to an extralinguistic that takes up within itself its *situation* of enunciation, which is made up of a subject who speaks and a place and a moment in which he or she speaks – the famous "I-here-now" triad that defines what Foucault refers to as the *maintenant* of everyday discourse. Yet, in relation to this analogy with the *maintenant*, which is nevertheless resorbed by everyday discourse in an unreflective or mute manner, philosophical discourse shows its singularity and its constitutive difference, which is that of putting into words, in a reflexive and explicit mode, the relationship to its now. And we have seen that the *maintenant* of philosophical discourse is nothing other than the very *actualité* in relation to which philosophical discourse itself is formulated and that actualises its statements in a way that makes them philosophical.

Thirdly, through the new mutation of philosophical discourse inaugurated by Nietzsche's thought, which becomes a diagnosis of culture, we have understood that it is associated with

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<sup>17</sup> Michel Foucault, "Qu'est-ce qu'un philosophe?" [1966], in *Dits et écrits*, vol 1, 580-582, here p. 581.

a deep rupture in the way in which philosophical discourse points to and takes back into itself its present, its *actualité*. This rupture turns reflection no longer towards its *de jure* partnership with being and truth but towards its *outside*, as being an exteriority that corresponds to the historical space of correlation between several types of discourse that before this rupture were foreign to philosophy (non-philosophy) but which, after Nietzsche, have become indispensable in enabling the new modality of philosophical reflection to operate its diagnosis of *actualité*. Looking at Nietzsche, we also noticed that the interpretation of his thought and the relationship between being and language, between being and discourse, which Foucault's diagnosis puts forward plays a twofold (at least) role. On the one hand, it works against the anti-humanism of Heideggerian ontology, and on the other, it allows us to return to the issue of the *actualité* that requires us to reflect on a new philosophy's domain. This domain is a space where the boundaries between philosophy and non-philosophy are blurred in a way that is different from what Hyppolite showed in relation to Hegel and its gap between logic and existence.<sup>18</sup>

Fourth, the specific relationship that philosophical discourse has with its present, with its *actualité*, becomes a criterion for the archaeological historicisation of this discourse and of its very history. If, according to Foucault, philosophy has always been a discourse that is made and becomes real in relation to its *actualité*, this can be done, and historically has been done, in several ways. And it is precisely the *form* or *mode* of this relationship to the *actualité* that makes it possible to identify internal mutations or ruptures in the history of the philosophical discourse. In *Le Discours philosophique*, this produces a historicisation of the modes of philosophical discourse from the seventeenth century onwards, which in some way recalls or adds to the succession of epistemes in *Les Mots et les choses*. Before the great mutation of philosophical discourse embodied by Nietzsche, after Descartes, in the classical age, we have a "metaphysics of representation" that assumes an ontological power of language capable of reaching through the order of representation to ascertain the order of reality. Then, with Kant, through a kind of "internal mutation" which, for Foucault, marks the "gravitational point" in the history of philosophical discourse, the order of the real depends on the establishment of the dimension of subject and object, in which the representation of the classical age becomes a phenomenon internal to Man. From this point onwards, philosophical discourse takes the form of an "anthropology", and – as Foucault puts it – begins to yield "to the psychological temptation", introducing at the same time "the necessity of the transcendental".<sup>19</sup>

This archaeological historicisation of philosophical discourse, of its coherent regularities, its orders and its internal functions through which it takes up this *actualité* that haunts it from the outside, becomes twofold insofar as it is not limited to proposing this succession of modes of philosophical discourse just mentioned very schematically but also includes an

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<sup>18</sup> See "Jean Hyppolite. 1907-1968," 810-811: "Mr. Hyppolite's work has always consisted of, from the outset, naming and revealing – in a discourse that is both philosophical and historical – the point at which the tragedy of life takes on meaning in a Logos, where the genesis of a thought becomes the structure of a system, where the existence itself is articulated in a Logic. Between a phenomenology of prediscursive experience – in the manner of Merleau-Ponty – and an epistemology of philosophical systems – as it appears in Mr Gueroult – the work of Mr. Hyppolite can be read as a phenomenology of philosophical rigour, or as an epistemology of philosophically reflected existence" (my translation).

<sup>19</sup> *Le Discours philosophique*, 253, my translation.

archaeological historicisation of the different ways of practising the history of philosophy. So, in a sense, the archaeological historicisation of philosophical discourse is doubled or rather resorbs in itself even the history of philosophy by becoming an archaeological historicisation of the history of philosophy.

Therefore, this idea of *actualité* will ultimately be the operator of the inscription of this archaeology of thought (which Foucault then set out to achieve) in what, a few years later, will constitute the still Nietzschean hypothesis of the will to know (*la volonté de savoir*). Within this framework, philosophical discourse can best be brought back to its *actualité* – to that *actualité* in relation to which this discourse becomes real, actual, *wirklich*, showing what role and what functions it has concretely played in what, more precisely, in the 1970s Foucault would designate as a political history of truth, and likewise how this history restores philosophy to an *actualité* that is our own.

This is why the *form* of the relation with the *actualité* is a key notion around which the archaeological description of philosophy and its history is structured, as well as being a crucial philosophical core of reflection that Foucault subsequently takes up and develops. Such is the case with the functioning of philosophical discourse and its "anthropological-humanist structure" in nineteenth-century Western culture, which is at the heart of Foucault's public lecture at the University of Tunis.<sup>20</sup> It is also in the light of the form of the relationship with the *actualité* that we can grasp the importance of the methodological-logical distance that makes it possible to describe, in all its complexity, the regime of discontinuities at work in the historical transformations of thought as it manifests itself within the discursive materiality of the "things said" (*les choses dites*). This methodological distance opens the way, different from that of the history of mentalities and the history of ideas, that Foucault will explore, particularly in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*.

By analysing the "internal functions" of discourse as so many "discursive practices", Foucault placed *Le Discours philosophique* on a horizon that would soon be the scene of a confrontation with Althusser and his students.<sup>21</sup> We can also read his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France in 1970 as an extension of this effort to lodge discourse in its *actualité*: Foucault then

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<sup>20</sup> See unpublished manuscript on the Tunis Lectures (1966-68), entitled "La place de l'homme dans la pensée occidentale moderne" (The Place of Man in the Western Modern Thought), Bibliothèque nationale de France, NAF 28730, boîte 58, dossier 2.

<sup>21</sup> In October 1966, after the publication of "*Lire Le Capital*", Louis Althusser sent his disciples three notes "relating to the theory of discourse, the occasion for which is provided by a reflection on the status of unconscious discourse, and its articulation with ideological discourse" ("Trois notes sur la théorie des discours," in *Écrits sur la psychanalyse. Freud et Lacan*, ed. Olivier Corpet and François Matheron (1993), 111-170). Étienne Balibar reacts to these notes a few months later ("Note sur la théorie du discours," *Décalages* 2:1 (2016), 1-37). The lively debates between Althusser and his followers on these issues, particularly in the conjuncture of May 1968, would accompany Foucault's reflections around the relationship between the discursive and the non-discursive in the years to come. Another significant moment of confrontation with Althusser's disciples occurred when Foucault was invited to contribute to an issue of *Cahiers pour l'analyse* – the journal of the *Cercle d'épistémologie* founded in January 1966 by Jacques-Alain Miller and François Régnauld – devoted to the "Genealogy of Science" and published in the summer of 1968. See also D. Defert, "Chronologie," in *Dits et écrits*, vol. I, 36 and 41; Michel Foucault, "Sur l'archéologie des sciences. Réponse au Cercle d'épistémologie" [1968], in *Dits et écrits* I, 724-759.

examined the "internal" and "external" procedures by which "in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed".<sup>22</sup>

Finally, in the lecture on Nietzsche given in 1969-1970 at the *Centre universitaire expérimental de Vincennes*, the diagnosis of ourselves and our *actualité* was extended from a description of the cultural constraints of the archive to an analysis of the "forces [that] have played and are still playing a part in our being here": this was one of the crucial ways in which archaeology became part of genealogy. For Nietzsche, as for Foucault, the point now is to grasp in our physiology the "multiple origins" that unfold there as instincts, valuations and contradictory elements struggle with one another.<sup>23</sup> Thus, in 1971, the diagnosis indicates the genealogist's "need for history" starting from his present, where philosophy itself is supposed to take up residence if it wants to "diagnose the illnesses of the body, its conditions of weakness and strength, its breakdown and resistances, to be in a position to judge philosophical discourse. History is the concrete body of a development, with its moments of intensity, its lapses, its extended periods of feverish agitation, its fainting spells...".<sup>24</sup>

In the inscription of this idea of *actualité* (implied in the archaeological method) in a horizon that is henceforth that of the genealogy of the *actualité*, and more precisely the *actualité* of philosophy and its history, Foucault makes explicit that under this term we must find a singular and constitutive redoubling. And maybe it is more an intertwining that constitutes one of the most precious legacies that Foucault has left us. This is the *actualité* with which the genealogist such as Foucault, with his limitations and the means at his disposal, situates himself, with the problems and urgencies he finds in 'what is happening' in his present day, in replacing the discourse of philosophy in the history of its functioning within a culture and of what was the *actualité* of this culture when philosophical statements were formulated. In the latter case, it is a question of a 'past' *actualité* (to be historicised), but one that can only appear in our present, and by allowing for the politically and strategically established distance between this past *actualité* and the 'present' and problematic 'actuality' of the genealogist. It is in this *décalage* that the genealogist can thus strategically traverse this distance according to the demands and conflicts of his *actualité* and his present, in which, in one way or another, he decides to engage against what a social, political and normative order excludes or marginalises.

This explains how, within this genealogical framework, the *actualité* in relation to which Hobbes's or Rousseau's philosophy of the social pact and civil war has made some of their discourses function within a broader and more complex *dispositif* of power. Such a *dispositif* makes intelligible the division whereby the philosophical idea of the political subject and the norm-compliant citizen has been inseparable from the establishment of a juridico-political functioning supposed to identify internal enemies.<sup>25</sup> In this context, philosophical discourse

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<sup>22</sup> Michel Foucault, "The discourse on Language" ("L'ordre du discours") [1970], in *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, ed. A. M. Sheridan Smith (1972), 216.

<sup>23</sup> See unpublished manuscript on Lectures on Nietzsche at the *Centre universitaire expérimental de Vincennes* (1969-1970), Bibliothèque nationale de France, NAF 28730, boîte 65, forthcoming in Michel Foucault, *Nietzsche. Cours, conférences, travaux*, ed. Bernard E. Harcourt (2024).

<sup>24</sup> Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" [1971], in *Language, Counter-Memory and Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. D. F. Bouchard (1977), 145.

<sup>25</sup> See 10 January 1973 Lesson in Michel Foucault, *Punitive Society. Lectures at the Collège de France, 1972-1973*, ed. Bernard E. Harcourt (2015), 21-36.

has been involved in establishing a process of criminalisation and imprisonment of 'delinquents' linked to the needs of the expansion of industrial capitalism since the end of the eighteenth century, when the bourgeoisie was taking hold. Yet, philosophical discourse is not seen as an ideology at the service of a class but as part of a power mechanism designed to produce effects that are not only repressive but above all productive for society.

In the same period, Foucault proposes to study the history of morality by relating the Kantian perspective of the *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* to the invention of a morality linked to the creation of the police. The latter, with its strategies of surveillance, was invented to protect bourgeois wealth in the London docks from the 'illegal acts of depredation' to which the impoverished working classes of the major industrial and commercial cities resorted;<sup>26</sup> or the way in which, in eighteenth-century political and moral philosophy, the formulation and corresponding transformations of the concept of 'habit' were articulated in a political rationality aimed at moralizing the proletariat to fix the body and life of workers to the apparatus of capitalist production;<sup>27</sup> or, finally, how the constitution of a transcendental subject and its empirical doublet played a fundamental role in the way scientific and medical discourse ensured a medico-legal grasp to target and treat what had to be objectified as pathologies of the instincts threatening the degeneration of capitalist and bourgeois society.<sup>28</sup> There are many other examples.

Nonetheless, if the *actualité* in relation to which philosophical statements were formulated appears in a historicising genealogical approach, it is because objects of reflection such as madness, illness, delinquency and sexuality (and the normative order threatened by them) continue to pose a problem for and in Foucault's *actualité* and are at the heart of the conflicts and exclusions still raging in his present. The articulation between these two actualities (that of the genealogist and that in relation to which philosophical statements have been historically retained in the archive of our culture) henceforth constitute the two fires around which the space of philosophical reflection is delimited, as well as its 'need for history', of which the former is henceforth indissociable.

And yet, as the reflection on the *actualité* and the genealogical approaches it commands continue to unfold around a political history of the truth that supports (grounding and legitimising) knowledge and norms as well as their procedures of subjugation, a new object of reflection appears for Foucault: the practical-reflexive relationship of the subject who constitutes himself as a subject of will and moral conduct in relation to the knowledge and norms that play in his *actualité* to subjugate and govern him by fixing his identity. This constitutive experience (but always historically rooted in the present) that the subject has of norms (as well as of the knowledge that justifies them and the conflicts that result in their imposition by establishing the set of practices and institutions that ensure them) become a new domain of philosophical reflection. Such a domain opens up the space of culture as a space shared with other

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<sup>26</sup> See 7 February 1973 Lesson in *Punitive Society*, p. 99-116.

<sup>27</sup> See 28 March 1973 Lesson in *Punitive Society*, p. 237-241.

<sup>28</sup> See 23 January 1974 Lesson in Michel Foucault, *Psychiatric Power. Lectures at the Collège de France, 1973-1974*, ed. Jacques Lagrange (2006), 233-254. See also "La vérité et les formes juridiques" [1974], in *Dits et écrits I*, in part. 1406-1421.

subjects who are submitted, in different forms and modalities, to the same norms and by the same obedience that they require.

It is this experience of common obedience to these norms that circumscribes a "we", and the relationship to the present in which this experience is rooted, and constitutes what philosophical reflection is henceforth called upon to focus on. Foucault's later writings on Kant's text on the *Aufklärung*, and notably the lecture on 5 January 1983 in his lecture *The Government of Self and Others*, show how the form of the relationship to the *actualité* constitutes the constitutive stake of the philosophical discourse of a modernity to which, from this angle, we continue in some way to belong:

[...] if we wish to consider philosophy as a form of discursive practice with its own history [...], it seems to me that we see philosophy — [maybe] for the first time — becoming the surface of emergence of its own present discursive reality; a present reality (*actualité*) which it questions as an event whose philosophical meaning, value, and singularity it has to express, and as an event in which it has to find both its own *raison d'être* and the foundation of what it says. And for this reason, we see that philosophical practice, or rather the philosopher presenting his philosophical discourse cannot avoid the question of him being part of this present. That is to say, the question will [be] a question about [...] his membership of a particular "we" if you like, which is linked [...] to a cultural ensemble characteristic of his contemporary reality. This "we" has to become, or is in the process of becoming, the object of the philosopher's own reflection [...]. It seems to me that philosophy as the surface of emergence of a present reality, as a questioning of the philosophical meaning of the present reality of which it is a part, and philosophy as the philosopher's questioning of this "we" to which he belongs and in relation to which he has to situate himself, is a distinctive feature of philosophy as a discourse of modernity and on modernity.<sup>29</sup>

This "philosophical discourse of modernity" is clearly referred (and opposed) to what Habermas had argued in his Parisian lessons in 1983 about the so called "Enlightenment project",<sup>30</sup> which we cannot deal with here. But what is more noteworthy is that this passage seems to echo one of the notes in the 1966 *Cahiers* on the diagnosis of the *actualité* that accompanied the writing of the *Discours philosophique*, and makes us understand that the reflections of the later Foucault benefited from a longer breathing space for elaboration than has hitherto been supposed:

Since Kant, philosophical discourse has had a relationship with its present discourse that did not exist for Descartes or Leibniz [...]. From Kant onwards,

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<sup>29</sup> See 5 January 1983 Lesson in Michel Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others. Lectures at the Collège de France, 1982-1983* (2010), 12-13. See also Michel Foucault "What is Enlightenment?" [1984] cit; and the slightly different French version "Qu'est-ce que Les Lumières?" [1984], in *Dits et écrits II*, 1498-1507.

<sup>30</sup> Jurgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures* [1985] (1987).

philosophy is linked to a certain *actualité* that compels it to denounce illusions, to state the present, to make a future possible.<sup>31</sup>

Nonetheless, what is different about Foucault's latest work and his reading of Kant's text on the *Aufklärung* is the way in which he conceives of this relationship to *actualité*, which is constitutive for philosophy. He defines belonging to the present as a normative horizon that binds us to others and opens up the need, essential for philosophical discourse, to think of a space of freedom, that is, a space of possible transformation of these relationships to the norms that constitute us as subjects – both subjects of moral conduct and political subjects. This is the question of the *critical* attitude as a mode of prático-reflexive relationship to ourselves and to others. Thus, the genealogy of the critical attitude and of the Western subject poses a new object for philosophy and invokes another process of historicisation (to be articulated with the previous ones) that leads Foucault to re-examine the ethical-political relationship to a truth that requires us to transform ourselves in order to become a subject of moral conduct and to take a position in the normative horizon that links us to others.

The problem of obedience to norms and the possibility of not adhering to them by adopting a critical attitude will need to be studied, starting from Greco-Roman antiquity, in order to grasp the transformations that have led us to be, think and do what we are, think and say today. It is for this reason that the text on Kant's Enlightenment, which appears in the first lesson of the 1983 Lectures at the Collège de France, even if it is presented as an 'excursus', retains an essential link with what Foucault will be dealing with in the other lessons: the relationship between the government of the self and the government of others, its transformations, and its ethical-political stakes. The Kantian "*sapere aude*" urges the *courage* to use one's own intellect by positing oneself in relation to the present and the *actualité*, where the normative order is constantly being enacted and re-enacted, and can therefore also be challenged (for example, through the complex relationship with the revolutionary event established by Kant). The mode of relation that links the governing of ourselves to that of the governing of others becomes what must be subjected to critique because its ethico-political constitution and its transformations become an indispensable element in thinking about how we situate ourselves in our *actualité* and in the present to which "we" belong and exist: "an ontology of the present, of present reality, an ontology of modernity, an ontology of ourselves".<sup>32</sup>

Indeed, the genealogical historicisation of this relationship has configured the way in which the self is ethico-politically related to others as an object of government so that we can restore to our present all its contingency and inevitability and open it up to all its possible transformations – to the invention of new relationships that challenge our belonging to our present and to our *actualité*. The way we relate to the (past) *actualité* of Antiquity, to what threatened its existence and haunted its salvation, is still a matter of diagnosing the *actualité* with which we are confronted today. It is once again in this intertwining of a (past) *actualité* and a (present) *actualité* that philosophy must find its object and renew its critical claim to diagnose its *actualité* as well as its irreducibly open need for historicisation.

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<sup>31</sup> *Le Discours philosophique*, 252, my translation.

<sup>32</sup> *The Government of Self and Others*, 21.



Nevertheless, this does not mean closing this "us"; on the contrary, it means challenging (by subjecting it to criticism) this bond of belonging in relation to an *actualité* whose situated and contingent reality always needs to be grasped to make it an ethico-political site of transformation and experimentation in relation to our own *actualité*, which may, in some important points, differ from Foucault's own. The open nature of this ever-changing and different *actualité*, and the critical and transformative relationship with it, constitute the unfinished task that Foucault left as a legacy and what, for us and today, philosophy should be as an exercise in diagnosing but also transforming ourselves in the light of what is going on today in our *actualité*. It is this task, which from *Le Discours philosophique* to his final research kept Foucault constantly engaged, that constitutes perhaps one of the most precious legacies of a thought that has not ceased to produce its effects even forty years after his death.

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