

Two thought games

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SUMMARY:

What is the relation between a “truth game” and a “language game”? The former is associated with Heidegger and Foucault, interested either in the essence of truth or its historicity. The latter, with Wittgenstein, who tries to unveil the conditions of the meaning of statements. This article discusses the implications of this opposition, emphasizing the role played by the question of being.

Key words: *truth game; language game; Foucault; Wittgenstein.*

RESUMO:

Qual a relação entre “jogo de verdade” e “jogo de linguagem”? Do primeiro, aproximam-se Heidegger e Foucault, interessados seja na essência da verdade, seja na sua historicidade. Do segundo, Wittgenstein, empenhado em desvendar as condições dos enunciados. Este artigo discorre sobre as implicações desses posicionamentos, procurando enfatizar o papel que neles desempenha a questão de ser.

Palavras-chave: *jogo de verdade; jogo de linguagem; Foucault; Wittgenstein.*

It is intriguing that Michel Foucault and Ludwig Wittgenstein, in broaching the question of thought, both find their inspiration in games. But why does the former emphasize the side of truth and the latter the question of meaning? What distinguishes and intertwines the “truth game” and the “language game”?

When given the task of writing the entry for “Foucault” in Denis Huisman’s *Dictionnaire des Philosophes*, François Ewald did not hesitate in going straight to his friend and master, who came to his aid with a handful of notes, later published under the telling pseudonym of *Maurice Florance*. In the dictionary entry the philosopher describes himself as a critical historian of thought, thus explicitly assuming a place in the honourable lineage of Kant. Later, when he returned to the moral problem and brought the notion of the subject to the foreground, he began to flirt with *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, precisely the book that tends to be the French point of entry to Hegel. However, despite his struggle against phenomenology, it is Heidegger, tempered with a dose of Nietzschean pepper, who is the main source for his understanding of thought.

While studying the formation of the speaking subject, particularly in *L’Archéologie du savoir*, Foucault takes sequences like “QWE” – the first keys horizontally from left to right on a keyboard – as an example of the enunciation; a meaningful formulation, albeit void of semantic content. Quite different, therefore, from the propositions with which we generally refer to states of affairs

according to the measures of truth and falsehood. These, furthermore, articulate by pertinent differences necessary to meeting their references, tending, according to Foucault and some of his colleagues, to structure themselves into an axiomatic system. Statements, on the other hand, interweave through repetition and differences without points of articulation. Parisian philosophy tends to pit that logic which is entirely subordinated to identity, and thus leaning towards automatism, against a different thought in which the truth reveals itself prior to the opposition between the truth values - truth and falsehood – characteristic of the proposition.

Heidegger's influence in all this is obvious. Against the rationalism that approaches truth as the adequation, the coincidence between the representation and the represented, in short, the *intentionality* of the proposition and the state of things, Heidegger centres his analysis of truth, shall we say, upon the discourse of authenticity – “true gold”, for example, is that which presents that very concept. In turn, so long as we accept predication, whose form is “S is p”, as the basis of language, it seems evident that, one way or another, the nominal “S” is referring to something present before the nominal itself was pronounced. This truth that precedes the predication is thus the disclosure of something before an entity that is open to that unveiling, an entity that is there, *Dasein*; the world openness that is the mark of man's being. The unveiling of truth is therefore understood as the foundation of the judicative synthesis and connects with “behaviours”; with practices of worldly insertion.

As Heidegger himself says:

Without doubt, as long as we represent thought according to the information that logic gives us about it, as long as we refuse to take seriously the fact that all logic is based in a particular mode of thought – we will never be able to properly consider that – and to what extent – poetry (das Dichten) rests upon remembrance (Andenken)¹.

Poetry is here understood as any poetic activity, including philosophy. While this thought is ruled by a logic that is based upon a very particular way of thinking about identity, there is no way of understanding how the creative thought is connected with a memory that is, in turn, presentative and which contains an internal difference. Heidegger and many of his disciples fail to take into account the possibility of constructing a non-predicate-based logic or of formalizing everyday language in a variety of ways. They still work from the presupposition that every proposition possesses a single logical form anchored in a synthesis, whether of nominals or of nominals and concepts. From this perspective one has to assume that the foundation of thought consists in a presentation of the named object, that is, a presentation of something that can also make itself absent, a role always attributed to imagination and memory. But throughout the unfolding of this process, would the identity remain the same? It is worth remembering that the *Tractatus*, in maintaining the unicity of logical form, also finds itself obliged to radically separate *showing* from *saying*, the beautiful, the good; the very sense of life lying beyond the grasp of those who linger on the level of figurative language. Furthermore, with logic confined within the space of an undifferentiated identity, there is no way to avoid the crystal clear separation between a logic of the meanings, a grammar for what one can meaningfully say, a logic of truth, that is, of those senses that can be shown and incarnated. But what if showing and thinking while judging were reciprocally determined?

¹ Martin Heidegger. “Was heisst Denken”, II, 11. In: *Vorträge und Aufsätze*, Pfullingen: Neske, 1967.

Michel Foucault escapes this radical separation between the logic of meaning and the logic of truth precisely because he sees the latter as a game. Put briefly: the game of truth and falsehood ends up demarcating the very field in which it operates, the range of its own truth, as exercised in the techniques of power. Here we can see the influence of Georges Canguilhem, who, interested in study, especially in biology, has to confront how these concepts always refer to the game of norms and facts, to the history of truth itself, the history of “veridical discourses” that, by correcting and rectifying themselves, end up chalking out a field of knowledge in which the opposition between the true and the false comes into its own².

However, if the unveiling is connected with certain forms of behaviour, does it not irremediably imbricate one behaviour over all others, interweaving knowledge and power? Obviously, from here Foucault can lend more weight to the formative role of power and its techniques, as one cannot function without the other – it was not for nothing that Foucault was labelled a crypto-communist.

This link between knowledge and power goes on to configure types of subject and norms. In an often-neglected passage, Foucault wrote:

For Heidegger, it is with western *tekhnê* that knowledge of the object banished Being from memory. We shall revisit the question and ask by which *tekhnê* was the western subject formed and its characteristic games of truth and error, freedom and restraint, opened³.

The manifestation of truth, now understood as the process of constituting an objectivity for a subjectivity, depends on “three fundamental elements of all experience: a truth game, power relations and, finally, the forms of one’s relations with oneself and with others”⁴. As such, experience itself is shaped, in culture, by the correlation between the fields of knowledge, types of normalization and forms of subjectivity. The game of truth production configures the individual as the subject of this production: as the speaking subject on the level of language; as the rational subject and madman on the level of reason; and the moral subject on the level of care for oneself and for others. Subjects with a history, in such a way that – contrary to the view of the classical rationalists – the truth does not reveal itself to man all of a sudden, but only through practices, including the practices of the self. There can be no truth production without a form of asceticism, the training of a subject who is preparing himself in order to receive it.

The practice of self assumes responsibility as much for the formation of the subject as of the object, or rather, of their mutual framing, which occurs, it must be stressed, before any synthesis characteristic of predication. On this profound level, thought resolves itself in this framework, as it posits subjects and objects, in all their various possible relations, especially thanks to adjusting, self-verifying discourses, as if each side makes the other its theme and reference, from which it keeps its distance so as never to allow it to grow slack.

If what is meant by thought is the act that posits a subject and an object, along with their possible relations, a critical history of thought would be an analysis of the conditions under which certain relations of subject to object are formed or modified, insofar as those relations constitute a possible knowledge. (...) The problem is to determine what the subject must be, to what conditions he is subject, what status he

² Michel Foucault. *Dits et écrits*, vol II. Paris: Gallimard, 2001, p. 454.

³ Ibidem, p. 505.

⁴ Ibidem, p. 1415.

*must have, what position he must occupy in reality or in the imaginary in order to become a legitimate subject of this or that type of knowledge.*⁵

Who cannot hear echoes of *The Phenomenology of Spirit* in this?

We shall now leave this process of the formation of subjects, with its culmination in the constitution of the moral subject, and return to the concept of the truth game, which first appeared in Foucault's work in courses delivered in 1978 and 1979. The reciprocal determination of the subject and object occurs as the terrain of truth is delineated, as a kind of background, where truth and falsehood can stand in opposition and estrangement. However, given Foucault's radical nominalism, which sets about substituting concepts such as madness or sexuality with practices hastily drawn up to form enunciations that can be repeatedly judged true or false, the whole critical history of thought ceases to be the history of acquisitions and concealments of truth and becomes the history of the emergence of truth games, of what the subject can say depending on the question of true and false. What we have, then, is a critical history of thought that does not limit itself to acquisitions or concealments of truth, but which is the history of the emergence of truth games, the history of "veridictions" understood as the forms according to which discourses capable of being declared true or false are articulated concerning a domain of things. Note the anti-Heideggerian intention here: the target of the critical history of thought is not to record the disclosures and concealments of being, but to show a system of rules/techniques that forms precisely where possible speech and possible reality draw up an a priori field of experience. Also note that Foucault does not seek *the cause* responsible for constituting an organ of verification⁶, but simply to indicate how, after a certain historical moment, practices, in general dictated by a somewhat illusory universal, became the support framework for all that can be said to be true or false. An analysis, therefore, that always departs from experiences and ends up showing how they weave the field in which truth and falsehood can be spoken. The task is to study...

*...the history of truth, [to] analyse neither the behaviours nor the ideas, not the societies nor their "ideologies", but the problematizations through which being presences itself as what can and must be thought, and the practices by which they [the abovementioned] are formed.*⁷

We shall quickly examine what Foucault calls the "place of truth": the market. The market, as it functioned prior to the 18th Century, was, let us say, a place of justice, where the central powers ensured that prices were fair and well distributed among the population, albeit while obviously respecting class differences. In short, the market was the place of jurisdiction. However, in the following century it appears endowed with "natural" mechanisms whereby, let's put it this way, "true prices" take hold and lose their character of fairness. By revealing this "truth", economic policy arms itself with a discourse whereby governmental practices are obliged to take these prices as a standard against which they can be said to be correct or not. Moreover:

*The market, insofar as it enables – through exchange – the linking of production, necessity, supply, demand, value, price, etc. thus constitutes a place of veridiction; that is, a place of veridiction/falsification for governmental practices.*⁸

⁵ Ibidem, p.1415

⁶ Michel Foucault. *Naissance de la biopolitique*. Paris: Gallimard, 2004, p.35.

⁷ Idem. *Dits et écrits*, vol II. Paris: Gallimard, 2001, p.1364.

⁸ Idem. *Naissance de la biopolitique*. Paris: Gallimard, 2004, p.33-34.

Note that it is the governmental practices that find their place of veridiction in the market. But for these practices to become rational they must take into account how the new subject, *homo oeconomicus*, considers himself a being entirely moved by interests and therefore rejects the presence of the State as a regulator of general interests. But there are certain phenomena this State cannot lose sight of, such as the “population”, which gives rise to specific problems that a strictly liberal economic theory can hardly account for. Hence the unfolding of another point of view, that of the physiocrats, who, though likewise departing from the basis of individual interests, manage to arrive at general problems the more they come to view the production process as a whole.

Thus the political policies move between these two regulatory poles, progressively verified by the progress of the market itself. Taking other examples into account, one can see that Foucault is trying to show how an intelligibility process of the real is configured, how it comes to be possible. As there are various veridictory regimes, the task is to analyse the

*constitution of a certain Law of truth based upon a situation of Law, the Law/truth relation finding its privileged manifestation in discourse, the discourse which formulates the Law and all that can be true or false; the veridiction regime is not a letter of truth law, but the conjunct of rules that make it possible, by way of a given discourse, to fix which enunciations are to be characterised as true and which false.*⁹

In summary, to think is to problematize the forms by which being can be thought. Taking into consideration certain practices, such as the problematization of madness or illness through social and medical practices, will define a certain “normalization” profile for human beings. The problematization of life, of language, of work and so on so forth, results in discursive practices that obey specific “epistemic” rules.¹⁰

While language also becomes a problem, I see no way of denying that it is language that designs the framework for all problematizations. After all, problems are spoken, even if only tacitly. In the Heideggerian tradition, Foucault continues to take thought to be something armed by practices that, though articulating the field of given experience, end up presenting the base upon which the game of truth and falsehood is played out. The explanation is circular, as the problem is formulated in a language that will also find its foundations in its own game of truth and falsehood in constituting an experience of language itself as a problem. In the end, the rules of Law declared true or false by the movements of the market already possess senses that go beyond commercial Law. Written in Latin or in English, a text of Law has its own rules that go beyond the rules of the languages in which it is written. Rules that form a system, a framework of senses defined one in relation to another and which refer to a specific type of event. Now, the events of the rules of Law do not mix with those of the rules of the market. In short, Law and the market have their own separate grammars. From this point of view, the exercise of problematizing implies dealing with different grammars. So what is left of Foucault’s radical nominalism, if in order to show how a field of experience is generated you have to recur to other systems of rules endowed with their own grammars? Though deeply entangled, the conditions of sense do not blend with the conditions of truth and I do not see how an experience of truth could structure the horizon of the experience of meanings. Would we not have to return to the question of the bipolarity of the propositions?

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⁹ Ibidem, p.37

¹⁰ Michel Foucault. *Dits et écrits*, vol II. Paris: Gallimard, 2001, pp. 1364-1365

From the 1930s, Wittgenstein abandoned his figurative theory of language; which is no longer thought of in terms of elementary propositions constituted by figurations (Bilden) that refer to states of affairs and comes to be seen as the integration of multiple and varied language games. A language game is composed of signs connected to the practices of their respective uses, to which they show how the signs themselves serve as criteria in assessing whether or not the application of these symbolic rules is adequate. In a game, the same rule applies indefinitely, but with unpredictable results, such that its adequate use requires the creation of a halo of differences. These, in turn, are largely manifested in the slight changes of aspect in the denoted “object”. In the game between the builder and his apprentice, the words/propositions vary on the one hand, the moved objects on the other, but equally so do the aspects of one or the other. To what point do the differences in pronunciation and the materials interfere in the course of the game? It follows that applying a rule always brings certain regularities to bear that show themselves when the game itself is described. Must this not happen when they start to jam? There are therefore two sides to every rule: the first, the intentional, the empirical; the second, that which describes its grammar, in which its functioning is presupposed. In relation to the first aspect, the rule functions in a bipolar manner, as for the second, the descriptive enunciations are monopolar. Put briefly, that difference between predicative and antepredicative resides in the statement as a game.

In the game of truth, as Foucault understands it, practices mould the space of “veridictions”, but say nothing of the alterations made to this space through the repetition of these practices, nor of the conditions necessary to its use. Indeed, nothing beyond the conditions sufficient for its formation. A dialectical logic, Foucault tells us, plays with contradictory terms within the homogeneous element, while the logic of strategy, which he proposes, “has the function of establishing what the possible connections are between nonsensical terms and those which remain nonsensical”¹¹. By showing that the “same” proposition is capable of being empirical when referring to the world and logical when describing the language game into which it is woven, is Wittgenstein not marrying the two logics?

In a language game there are no clear boundaries between the nominal, at whose root there will always be some mode of showing by pointing, and the sentence and the proposition, formed by signs to which adequate reactions either correspond or not. We must remember that, if a language game is thought from the very start, this is so because its relatively simple significant elements, verbal or otherwise, are connected with identification practices. A rule that does not regulate an event is not a rule.

We have arrived at a point of summary importance. There are no rules without events, as the relationship between them is internal. But of what does the difference between the rule and the events and between the events themselves actually consist? Since the time of the Greeks, the rule has been considered as the idea, the visible *par excellence*, the form that leaves its seal-like mark upon the wax of matter. It is not our task here to examine how form represents matter and how matter presents form, but I believe that I can, on this level, touch upon the neuralgic point of the concept of the truth game and of Foucault’s entire philosophy. As we continue to think of the event as the mark of form, all difference can only appear as numeric difference between events or as the scraps left over from the minting of matter. Now, the discovery of an ante-propositional and pre-representative knowledge allows us to consider difference and repetition off the functional plane of the identity of the concept, the opposition in the predicate, analogy in the judgement and similarity in perception, in short, beyond the four dimensions that demark the classical world of representation and which correspond to the four roots of the principle of sufficient reason. But does thinking of propositions as configuring a language game not deny this radical difference between propositional

¹¹ Idem. *Naissance de la biopolitique*. Paris: Gallimard, 2004, p.44.

knowledge and the knowledge of truth, as the bipolarity or monopolarity of the propositions depends on their use?

It would take far too long to examine how these questions were dealt with by Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze – in fact, in a rare moment of syntony, exceptional when one considers the kind of dispute that normally prevails between philosophers, always looking to accentuate originality above any agreements in reflection. I can, however, identify one further point. While the rule is always thought of as being connected with possible events, difference as difference only appears when escaping this combination, as the event that escapes the rule, that imposes itself as absolute singularity, i.e. as the affirmation of the extraordinary. As such, it can only present itself on the plane of truth, outside the limits of the game of true and false. Nevertheless, could there not be other forms of its presentation?

We shall now return to the concept of the language game. This too has a genealogy, as the problem of meaning - to which it purports to respond - imposes itself when everyday language begins to sputter. Only when faced with a mal-understood utterance do we ask: “What does this mean?” No one pays any heed to the meaning when an enunciation is made in a natural manner, unless the individual wishes to study the grammar of the language in which it is spoken. In the scope of those much reduced language games like that at play between the builder and his apprentice, neither of the agents doubts that “sand” means sand, that an order must be carried out, that the builder bids and the apprentice obeys, and so on. The game plays itself out on a plane in which countless certainties are never called into question, they are neither *problematized*, nor evinced – they are just there, ready to show what they are when questioned. But what if the builder, instead of receiving sand, should be given sandy earth? Aren’t these glitches in the exercise of a proposition and in the boundless certainties that enable it to function valid for any language game, including for language itself as a tangled complex of games simpler than language? It is not possible for us to enter into a detailed analysis of the book *On Certainty*¹², in which Wittgenstein thoroughly examines these questions, but we can highlight some points related to our subject - and I do so in full knowledge that I will thus be distancing myself from the dominant interpretation of his philosophy. Firstly, conversation can only develop if the interlocutors have no major doubts as to, for example, the language’s phonetic structure. The determinant rules of this structure, as meaningful enunciations, can only be examined when the investigator turns his focus upon the meanings and sets aside, for example, the state of affairs to which one of these refers. In order to know that in French there is a distinctive difference between “u” and “ü” one does not have to identify a certain example of its functioning, it is quite enough to know if people are understanding each other or not. Now this understanding is never complete and there is nothing to prevent us from abandoning the presupposition, Platonic in origin, according to which understanding comes down to the precise apprehension of its template. The first postulate to be dispensed with is, therefore, the principle of complete determination as being responsible for determining individualities, as an element remains relatively simple even without us being able to affirm or deny all of its predicates. However, that does not mean to say that difference presents itself as irreducible, always in opposition to the presupposed identity. The ‘different’ forms a kind of halo around the events of the rule, those that confirm it, without difference interfering with the intentionality of the game. On the strength of this intentionality, the results of each play need a certain precision determined within an acceptable margin of error. But taking the different for the different, without a port of anchorage, what emerges is the flipside of the Platonic presupposition: there is no game with the different.

Abandoning these two bedrock limits – the principle of complete precision and that of absolute difference – in no way impedes communication, so long as one takes into consideration the process

¹² Ludwig Wittgenstein. *Über Gewissheit – On Certainty*. New York: Harper, 1969.

whereby identity and difference are constituted at the level of practice. Insofar as identity results from a *practical process of identification* – and language does not escape from this conditioning – the various senses of identity and the various senses of difference are engaged in a reciprocal determination, with one only valid in the presence of the other on the practical plane where both are constituted. Yet we still need to put another presupposition in check: when we say that, in French, “u” and “ü” are phonologically different, we affirm a proposition whose truth, if refuted, would reveal an alteration in the language game of French. The game changes and the players have to find some way to understand each other if they are to distinguish “under” (au dessous) from “over” (au dessus). A game of football in which the forward, on certain occasions, is allowed to punch the ball toward goal with his hands would be similar to our football of today, but also different. Thus is it possible to say that the enunciations that *describe* the functioning of language games, that *describe* their rules, are essential propositions obviously exempt from the game of bipolarity. In short, everything that describes a language game as pertaining to logic does so through propositions of its essence.

In order to be described, the truth game needs to be seen from another perspective to that in which it presents itself under normal functioning. *It changes in aspect above all for whoever says the description.* This *change of aspect* with each enunciation, such that it *shows* its essential laws, brackets out its whole history and genealogy. There can be no doubt that the history of the enunciation, for example, how it became a technical or moral rule, could be what motivates the statement, but the motive does not become confused with the criteria to which the rule is reduced when it refers to its events. And even when the rule transforms depending on the result of its applications, this temporality between the enunciation of the rule and the assessment of how well events fit within it disappears when it shows itself once again as a rule. In summary, between the presupposed rule and the rule repositioned so as to account for the undesirable differences within events, that is, in the exercise of the rule judgement, a time is opened that is nonetheless bracketed out as soon as any rule is positioned as a rule in force. The change of aspect of the enunciated rule when it is subjected to examination with a view to being described in terms of its essential propositions annuls the temporality of its origin as a criterion for saying whether or not the rule has been followed.

We can therefore establish three aspects of the functioning of a rule. First, how it serves as criteria for distinguishing between adequate or inadequate states or behaviours. Second, what it presupposes as indubitable to its potential description. Third, its own history; how it was formed and generated a type of communication. If this third aspect certainly elucidates variations in its sense, that does not mean to say that it brings an immediate historic dimension for its proper compliance. And so, considering a truth game as a language game reveals aspects of it that elude genealogical explanation. In short, the entire history of truth is suspended when you describe how a rule is applied, how the judgement proceeds.

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