

The Causal Power of Discourse

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Author biography

Dave Elder-Vass is a lecturer in sociology at Loughborough University, UK. His recent book *The Causal Power of Social Structures* develops an innovative account of structure and agency, employing a critical realist theory of emergence, which has been discussed in a number of papers in the *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*. He is now working on the issues of social constructionism, knowledge, discourse, culture, and language. For full details of his publications and interests, visit www.eldervass.com.

Abstract

This paper outlines a realist approach to the social ontology of discourse. It seeks to synthesise some elements of the approach to discourse found in the early work of Michel Foucault with a critical realist understanding of the causal power of social structures. It will argue that discursive structures can be causally significant when they are normatively endorsed and enforced by specific groups of people; that it is not discourse as such but these groups – *discursive circles* – that are causally effective; and that such an account allows us to reconcile the role of discourse with that of the subject.

The Causal Power of Discourse¹

In recent decades many social theorists, taking their lead primarily from Michel Foucault, have argued that discourse shapes our social world. Foucault's early work ascribed a substantial and in some senses autonomous role to discourse in his explanations of the development of the human sciences, and his whole *oeuvre*, if I may use a term that he himself questioned (Foucault, 2002 [1969]: 25-8), placed this development at the centre of contemporary systems of power. While his later work abandoned some of the stronger claims of this period and balanced the consideration of discourses with an examination of non-discursive disciplinary practices, discourse remained of central importance to his understanding of society (Davidson, 1986: 227; Hacking, 1986: 38).

Foucault's contribution remains the most influential and the most fully thought through analysis of the nature and role of discourse. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (Foucault, 2002 [1969]) in particular, Foucault sought to clarify both his method for examining discourse and the nature of discourse itself. However, even here Foucault left a number of crucial questions unanswered. Perhaps the most striking of these, for a realist, relate to the *ontology* of discursive formations and two connected questions: how could discourse possibly have a causal effect, and how could this be reconciled with the causal roles of individual human agents or subjects? In the absence of adequate answers to these questions, there is a suspicion that Foucault's argument depends on reifying discourse; on treating it as having power without any explanation of how this could be so. Such suspicions are amplified when it becomes clear that in his archaeological phase, he treats discourse as more or less autonomous of other social practices, while

nevertheless exercising a more or less determinative influence on those practices (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1983: xii, xxiv) and even as constituting both its subjects and its objects (Fairclough, 1992: 39-43). Later, in his genealogical phase, Foucault “backs away from” such claims (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1983: xxiv), and brings discourse into a more equal relationship with the extra-discursive world and non-discursive practices (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1983: 67; Fairclough, 1992: 49-52) – such as prison buildings and military-style disciplinings of the body (Foucault, 1991 [1975]: 200-9, 135-41). Yet he never returned to provide an alternative analysis of the ontology of discourse, perhaps because he came to think of it as inseparable from power, although he continued to employ the concept in his later work (see, for example, Foucault, 1992 [1984]: 4-6).

The purpose of this paper is not to add to the enormous critical literature on Foucault’s work, but instead to begin to construct an alternative analysis of discourse with the intention of overcoming these difficulties. Foucault’s work (and indeed that of his critics) is a valuable resource in this process, but the focus of the paper will not be on a comprehensive exegesis or critique of this work. Nor will it engage with Foucault’s work beyond *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (not because this work is unimportant, but because its focus on the knowledge/power relation tends to obscure the structure of discourse itself). This is not an excavation of his argument for the process of improving our knowledge of it, but rather a process of pillaging it for building materials. This will require a certain amount of exegesis in order to extract the building blocks I want to reuse from Foucault’s work, and a certain amount of critique in order to separate them from the material to be discarded. Once thus reclaimed, what these materials will be used to construct is a realist ontology of discourse and thus a realist explanation of how

discourse may be causally viable. Such an account offers the possibility, above all, of showing how the causal significance of discourse can be reconciled with the causal significance of subjects and that of non-discursive social practices.

This is not, of course, a rebuilding that will seek to replicate the original in every precise detail, or even in spirit; on the contrary, it is a redevelopment that will replace the foundations of the original and parts of its structure, while preserving the most valuable of the original features. It will therefore combine those blocks raided from Foucault's construction with others from quite different sources. Most significant amongst these will be an ontology and a theory of emergent causal powers drawn from the early work of Roy Bhaskar (Bhaskar, 1978; Elder-Vass, 2005), and an analysis of normativity and social structure that I have developed elsewhere (e.g. Elder-Vass, 2007a; Elder-Vass, 2008; Elder-Vass, 2010).² On the other hand, this reconstruction will also abandon some features that Foucault himself and some of his followers may have found significant. Where this is the case I will attempt to make this clear and offer some justification for thus desecrating the monument.

Nor does this paper seek to develop a comprehensive account of the operation of discourse in practice. It is focussed on identifying the *mechanism* that confers causal power on discursive structures. A fuller account of discourse would examine the ways in which the causal powers of discourse *interact* with other causal powers in the production of social phenomena. It is of course in just such a direction that Foucault takes his own thinking in his genealogical work, most strikingly in *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault, 1991 [1975]). But such further developments can only be strengthened by a clearer conception of discourse's own causal significance.

The ontological analysis of discourse, I believe, is worthwhile in its own right but it is also significant as part of a larger project: the development of an approach to social theory that combines elements of realism and social constructionism to provide a coherent version of both. If we can explain the causal power of discourse in realist terms, we will be well placed to examine whether, and in what ways, discourse may contribute to the construction of social reality.

The first major section of the paper will outline what I understand by discourse through examining Foucault's discussion of *statements* in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. The second will move on to Foucault's concept of *discursive formations* and consider those problems that critics have identified that are pertinent to the development of a realist alternative. The third section will then develop an alternative ontology of discourse, engaging in the process with related debates on social ontology that have appeared recently in this journal, and the final section will discuss how this moves us forward, both in solving some of the problems facing Foucault's account and as part of a wider realist social ontology.

What is discourse?

For Foucault, we can say that discourse consists of *statements*, which may be related to each other to form *discursive formations*. To put things as simply as possible: discursive formations are sets of rules about what can be said and what should not be said (what statements can be made or should not be made) in a particular social space. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge* Foucault distinguishes statements from several other concepts and we can clarify what he means by discourse by examining these distinctions.

First, Foucault distinguishes statements from propositions. One obvious reason for doing this is that not all statements are propositions. They may, for example, be commands, greetings, questions, or exclamations, and there may be discursive rules concerning all of these (Fairclough, 1992: 40). Foucault, however, stresses a different reason: he argues that two identical propositions may be different statements, because a statement, unlike a proposition, depends upon its context, and in particular on its context in an associated domain (Foucault, 2002 [1969]: 108) or enunciative field (Foucault, 2002 [1969]: 111) of discourse.³ The affirmation ‘species evolve’, for example,

does not constitute the same statement ... before and after Darwin; it is not, for such simple formulations, that the meaning of the words has changed; what changed was the relations of these affirmations to other propositions, their conditions of use and reinvestment, the field of experience, of possible verifications, of problems to be resolved, to which they can be referred (Foucault, 2002 [1969]: 116)

For reasons that are discussed below, Foucault avoids formulating the argument in terms of meaning, but it is difficult to make sense of it in any other terms: what has changed, it seems, is the *meaning* of the affirmation, because that meaning is contextual and not just a product of the words that make it up. If we were to take the concept *proposition* in its everyday sense, one might be tempted to argue that the meaning of the proposition ‘species evolve’ is also contextual. But it is not the everyday sense of the proposition that Foucault is seeking to distinguish from the statement; it is the *logician’s*. And it is not so much the difference in meaning that concerns him, I suggest, as the difference in *use*. The logician uses the proposition in formal logic. *If* ‘species evolve’, for example, *and* ‘human beings are a species’, *then* ‘human beings evolve’. As Gutting puts it, propositions are ‘the units of logical analysis’ (Gutting, 1989: 239) – but

Foucault is not concerned with logical analysis; he is concerned with the discursive rules that influence whether and when we can say 'species evolve' at all.

Second, in addition to distinguishing statements from propositions, he distinguishes them from sentences. On the one hand, sentences can express statements: 'Wherever there is a grammatically isolable sentence, one can recognize the existence of an independent statement; but... one cannot speak of a statement when, beneath the sentence itself, one reaches the level of its constituents' (Foucault, 2002 [1969]: 92).

However, there can also be statements that are not sentences, such as a table conjugating a verb, a genealogical tree, or an equation (Foucault, 2002 [1969]: 92-3). The natural way to interpret this is to see statements as the meaning or idea that is transmitted using a complex of signs. Foucault resists such explanations, since he wishes to defuse the hermeneutic concern with meaning, but in my first desecration I will suggest that this is nevertheless the most useful way of making sense of the concept of the statement, and indeed that despite his resistance Foucault's argument depends on such an interpretation.⁴ Consider for example the following:

there are cases in which one may consider that there is only one statement, even though the words, the syntax, and the language (*langue*) itself are not identical. Such cases are a speech and its simultaneous translation; a scientific text in English and its French version; a notice printed in three columns in three different languages: there are not, in such cases, the same number of statements as there are languages used, but a single group of statements in different linguistic forms... if the information content and the uses to which it could be put are the same, one can say that it is the same statement in each case (Foucault, 2002 [1969]: 116-7).

It is hard to see what a speech and its simultaneous translation have in common, that makes them both the same statement, if it is not their meaning. Of course, there are many ways to understand the concept of *meaning*, but there is at least one common

sense of *meaning* that is indistinguishable from ‘the information content and the uses to which it could be put’.

Still, this is only one way of understanding *meaning*; and perhaps this is not the one that Foucault is resisting. What he *is* resisting is a hermeneutical conception of meaning that is indelibly linked to the processes in which *subjects* create and (with difficulty) interpret texts. Foucault, I think, resists this account at three levels. First, he rejects the central role that is ascribed to subjects; for Foucault, by contrast, the rules shaping discourse are in some sense independent of subjects. This will be a central concern of the later part of this paper. Second, he rejects the tendency of some hermeneutic thinkers to suggest that the difficulty of interpreting texts always casts doubt on our understanding of them, not least because every interpretation is itself a text requiring its own interpretation. For Foucault, by contrast, the content of statements seems to be unproblematic: ‘We do not seek below what is manifest the half silent murmur of another discourse’ (Foucault, 2002 [1969]: 31). Third, and this is an argument that will be developed later in the paper, it seems to me that his argument requires a rejection of the role of the reader of today in ascribing meaning to the texts of yesterday. One implication is that Foucault is not denying that hermeneutics has its place; perhaps he is only saying that the place of hermeneutics is to establish the meaning of a text whereas Foucault’s method – *archaeology* – occupies an analytically distinct space in which the question at issue is not what a statement means but whether it may be said. This would seem to be a viable position, but it is one that in practice still rests on the archaeologist knowing the meaning of the statements at issue. As a minimum, it therefore rests on a rejection of the view that meaning forever recedes from

us, and thus on a more pragmatic understanding of hermeneutics as a process that can often help us achieve a ‘good enough’ understanding of the meaning of a text.

In distinguishing the statement from the sentence, though, Foucault also points more directly to an important negative feature of the statement: the statement, and thus discourse in general, *is not a linguistic phenomenon*. In saying so, I do not mean to suggest that statements are not conveyed using language – clearly they are, in most cases at least. What I mean is first, that the statement is analytically distinct from the linguistic form in which it is expressed, and second that it is shaped by a different system of rules than the rules that shape our use of language. The first of these is clear from the case of translation: the choice of words and syntactical forms used to express the statement is a linguistic matter, but the statement itself is independent of those choices and the purely linguistic rules that govern them. As regards the second: linguistic rules are concerned with the words and syntax (*inter alia*) that may be used to express a given statement; discursive rules are concerned with what statements may be made.

This sense of discourse is therefore different than that employed by many of today’s discourse analysts, who focus on texts and how they produce the effects that they do, often by analysis of the *language* that they use (e.g. Fairclough, 2001; Wodak and Krzyzanowski, 2008). Such analysts are concerned, for example, with how it is that specific linguistic choices produce particular effects of meaning, perhaps by subtle ideological and emotional manipulations of which we may not immediately be aware. This form of analysis may be extremely valuable, but as Fairclough, at least, is clearly aware, it reflects a different sense of the concept of discourse (Fairclough, 1992: 37-38).

In Foucault's sense, discourse is a matter of what statements are made, and not a matter of *how* they are made.

Third, in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault distinguishes statements from speech acts, as defined by Austin and Searle (Foucault, 2002 [1969]: 93-4). In a later letter to Searle, however, he appears to accept that statements are speech acts, while stressing that he made the distinction because he sees them from a different angle than Searle (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1983: 46). Although Dreyfus and Rabinow argue that this is because Foucault is not concerned with everyday speech acts but only what they call *serious* speech acts (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1983: 48), it seems more plausible to argue, as Gutting does, that the real difference is in the focus of interest: unlike Foucault, the speech act theorists are concerned with how *language* produces certain effects (Gutting, 1989: 241).

I would want to add that speech act theory tends to conflate not just language and discourse but also social practice: in it not just statements but also social actions, such as making promises or passing sentence in court, are attributed to the effects of language. But the heart of Foucault's concept of discourse is the distinctions he draws between all three of these. Not only are there analytical distinctions between language and discourse, but also between discourse and non-discursive social practice; not only are there different sets of rules influencing language and discourse, but also a further set shaping non-discursive social practice. Even during his archaeological phase, Foucault continued to insist on distinguishing discourse from non-discursive practice (see, for example, Foucault, 2002 [1969]: 174, 179).

Discursive formations

A discursive formation is ‘a group of rules proper to discursive practice’ (Foucault, 2002 [1969]: 54).⁵ These rules are the conditions of existence of ‘systems of dispersion’ of statements in the archive: ‘an order in their successive appearance, correlations in their simultaneity, assignable positions in a common space, a reciprocal functioning, linked and hierarchized transformations’ (Foucault, 2002 [1969]: 41). These rules, however, do not enforce compatibility or logical coherence on a system of statements – this is ‘A dispersion that characterizes a type of discourse, and which defines, between concepts, forms of deduction, derivation, and coherence, but also of incompatibility, intersection, substitution, exclusion, mutual alteration, displacement, etc.’ (Foucault, 2002 [1969]: 67).

What the rules do, instead, is to restrict what can be said. They tend to exclude many possible statements while tending to encourage only specific subsets of the whole possible range of statements:

Foucault wants to argue that the islands of density in which serious speech acts proliferate are the result of principles which operate from within or from behind discourse to constrain what can count as objects, what sorts of things can seriously be said about them, who can say them, and what concepts can be used in the saying (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1983: 71).

What is much less clear is *how* these principles can have this effect. There is a moment in which Foucault recognises that they must somehow operate through individual people, but he insists there is more to it than this:

In the analysis proposed here, the rules of formation operate not only in the mind or consciousness of individuals, but in discourse itself; they operate therefore, according to a sort of uniform anonymity, on all individuals who undertake to speak in this discursive field (Foucault, 2002 [1969]: 69-70).

Foucault is faced here with the classic question of structure and agency. On the one hand, there seems to be something supra-individual about these discursive rules, but what is it? On the other, they seem to depend on individuals to implement them, but how is this to be reconciled with the supra-individual element? The central thrust of this paper will be to offer answers to these problems. Before that, however, this section will examine how they are manifested in Foucault's understanding of discursive formations.

The question at issue is a question of causality, another term that Foucault tends to ignore in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, but also another term that must be brought into his argument if it is to be made coherent. How can the rules that make up discursive formations *cause* specific discourses to occur, or have the causal effects on non-discursive practices that Foucault seems to attribute to them? In a further desecration of the monument, I claim that we can only make sense of his argument by connecting it up to a causal powers theory of cause. According to this, causation is always a product of the causal powers of things or entities (widely defined, so that it may, for example, include social entities such as organisations as well as more obviously material entities such as bicycles or rivers or human individuals). Each causal power depends upon the internal composition and structure of the thing possessing it, and any particular event is produced by the interaction of multiple causal powers.⁶ Given a causal powers theory, we can address the question of how the rules that make up discursive formations can have causal power, if indeed they do, by asking what kind of things they are, how their composition and structure can produce causal power, and how such a causal power could have the claimed effects (Elder-Vass, 2007b; Elder-Vass, 2010: chapters 2 & 3).

The causal powers approach is radically different from the positivist 'covering law' model of cause, which equates causation to exceptionless empirical regularities.

Two differences are particularly pertinent. First, the positivist model tends to encourage the view that one type of event offers a complete deterministic cause of another, whereas the causal powers model insists that any given event is multiply determined by a number of interacting factors, none of which alone constitutes a complete deterministic cause of the event concerned. Second, the positivist model ignores the mechanisms that underlie causation, whereas the causal powers model insists that evidence of empirical regularities does not constitute a causal explanation; we only have a causal explanation when we can identify the mechanism *responsible* for a regularity.

Foucault, on the other hand, is approaching the thorny question of the causal efficacy of discourse without a theory of causality on which to base an answer, and tends to downplay the causal nature of his arguments. This is perhaps due to a (widespread) tendency to associate the concept of causality with the positivist version of it and thus to dismiss it as too crude and mechanistic to provide viable explanations in the social context. The consequence, however, is that he struggles to explain how discourse can have the effects that he claims.

Consider the arguments that he does offer with respect to the causal efficacy of discourse. As we have seen, he briefly acknowledges that the rules of formation operate ‘in the mind or consciousness of individuals’ (Foucault, 2002 [1969]: 69), but elsewhere he tends to deny that subjects are the sources of discourse. As Gutting puts it,

Of course, all statements are made by individual speakers, but in making a statement a speaker takes up a position that has already been defined – quite apart from his mental activity – by the rules of the relevant discursive formation. (Gutting, 1989: 241)

Any operation of the rules within the minds of individuals, then, would seem to be merely part of the implementation process of rules that have some other source for their causal significance:

The analysis of statements operates therefore without reference to a cogito. It does not pose the question of the speaking subject, who reveals or who conceals himself in what he says, who, in speaking, exercises his sovereign freedom, or who, without realizing it, subjects himself to constraints of which he is only dimly aware. In fact, it is situated at the level of the 'it is said' – and we must not understand by this a sort of communal opinion, a collective representation that is imposed on every individual; we must not understand by it a great, anonymous voice that must, of necessity, speak through the discourses of everyone; but we must understand by it the totality of things said, the relations, the regularities, and the transformations that may be observed in them (Foucault, 2002 [1969]: 138)

If the causal power of rules does not come from the individual, then where does it come from? Here, Foucault rejects at least one possible alternative – the idealist conception that rules might exist as some sort of abstract collective representation or 'anonymous voice' that may be 'imposed' 'of necessity'. This is causal language, but he slides away from causal language when he returns here to his more positive proposal: that what is significant is 'the totality of things said, the relations, the regularities, and the transformations that may be observed in them'. He is a little clearer when he tells us that 'systems of formation' of discourse are 'complex group[s] of relations that function as a rule' which 'reside in discourse itself' (Foucault, 2002 [1969]: 82). The source of the causal power of discursive formations, it appears, is nothing other than the archive of past discourse, which is somehow able to constrain or influence the production of further discourse. But Foucault offers no explanation of the mechanism by which the historically existing statements and the relations between them are able to influence the production of further discourse. In the end, as Dreyfus and Rabinow argue, 'It is hard to

resist the growing suspicion that Foucault is much clearer about the traditional humanistic methods he rejects than about the status of the principles of formation he is trying to introduce' (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1983: 70). The result is that 'the causal power attributed to the rules governing discursive systems is unintelligible' (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1983: xxiv). It is, for example, unclear whether these rules are simply descriptive of actual discursive behaviour, or prescriptive, so that speakers are compelled to follow them (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1983: 81). Dreyfus and Rabinow conclude that

Foucault's unclearness concerning the question of causal efficacy surely shows that the archaeologist should never have raised this question in the first place. The very claim that discourse is *governed* by rules contradicts the project of the archaeologist. As a fully consistent phenomenologist, bracketing reference and sense, he need only describe the changing discursive practices (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1983: 83)

And yet this response is also unsatisfactory. Foucault's purpose is much more than to document changing discursive practices; he wants to show that these changing practices *matter*, that they are not just some epiphenomenal reflection of some other social force, that they have an impact on our world that can't be reduced to the impact of subjects, of the 'economic base', of language, or of other social structures. His project *requires* that discourse and discursive formations have causal power; yet he has failed to show how this could be.

In his later work Foucault connects discourse/knowledge to power, he starts to develop an account of the relationship of power to the subject, and he offers myriad illustrations of the micro-practices in which knowledge produces power; but he never, I suggest, offers an ontology of discourse that resolves these fundamental problems. I will

argue below that they can be addressed, though at the cost perhaps of some desecration, by seeing the causal efficacy of rules as anchored in *groups* of people.

Norm circles and discourse

What is perhaps clearest in Foucault's account of discursive formations is that they consist of *rules* that regulate the production of discourse. If this is so, we may compare the ontology of discourse with that of other systems of social norms.

Elsewhere I have developed an emergentist ontology of social norms that explains their causal influence as the causal power of social groups called *norm circles* (Elder-Vass, 2008; Elder-Vass, 2010: chapter 6). Here I shall summarise that argument and seek to apply it to the case of discourse.

Social norms may be thought of as rules for social practice.⁷ My argument is that such norms are sustained by the endorsing and enforcing practices of those groups of people that I call *norm circles*. For example, there is a norm in some social contexts that if one is blocking a person's route one should move aside to allow them to pass.

Consider the case in which person *A* finds him or herself blocking person *B*'s path in a relevant context. Now, if *A* stands aside, and *B* is committed to endorsing and enforcing this norm, *B* may indicate approval of *A*'s action by a smile and a nod of the head, or by thanking them verbally. On the other hand, if *A* does not, then *B* may encourage conformance to the norm, for example by a glare, a push, or a loud assertive 'Excuse me!' in an affronted tone of voice. If *A* is repeatedly exposed to such behaviour by a succession of different *B*'s, and possesses a modicum of social awareness, they will soon realise that they are expected to stand aside in such situations and develop a tendency to do so – and may even start to endorse and enforce the norm too.

In such a case, I argue, *A*'s new tendency has been produced as a causal effect of the norm circle for the 'stand aside' norm. For *A*, those *B*'s who have actually endorsed and enforced the norm in their relations with *A* constitute *A*'s *proximal* norm circle for the norm. But typically the conclusion that *A* draws from such an experience is not simply that they should conform to the norm in the presence of those particular *B*'s who have enforced it in their past experience. Rather, the conclusion we tend to draw is that these *B*'s are part of a wider social group who all support the norm concerned; otherwise it would be inexplicable that *A* starts to stand aside for individuals who have not previously endorsed/enforced the norm in *A*'s experience. *A*, in other words, recognises that there is an *actual* norm circle of which their *proximal* norm circle is merely a part. *A* may be mistaken about the *extent* of this norm circle, but not usually about its *existence*, since he or she has been exposed to its influence. What has happened, here, I argue, is that the actual norm circle has produced a disposition in *A* to conform to, and perhaps to endorse and enforce, the 'stand aside' norm, through the influence of the particular members of the circle who happen to have endorsed and enforced it in *A*'s presence.

This is a causal effect of the group, and not just of those individuals to whom *A* has been exposed, because the behaviour of the members of the norm circle depends upon them assuming a collective intention to enforce the norm concerned.⁸ When they act to enforce the norm, they feel they are acting on behalf of a wider group, they are taken by others to be acting on behalf of one, and they expect support from other members of the group. This sense of collective intention increases their tendency to endorse and enforce the norm beyond the level that would prevail if they simply felt a commitment to the norm as an independent individual. And it is the sense that is created

in *A* that the norm is endorsed and enforced by a wider social group that makes such behaviour more effective than it would be if simply perceived as the behaviour of certain specific individuals. Hence the power to generate a tendency in individuals to observe a norm is an (emergent) causal power of the norm circle as a whole, although this power of the norm circle always operates *through* the actions of the individuals that compose it and are influenced by it.⁹

This is an argument that has grown in part through the debates in this journal on the nature and location of causal efficacy in the social world. A key moment in these debates was Varela and Harré's challenge to Roy Bhaskar that if social structures are causally efficacious, then it must be possible to show that they are *powerful particulars*: entities with causal powers (Varela and Harre, 1996: 314). In a subsequent exchange, I argued that social structures are indeed such entities: that there are various kinds of social entities, including (but not limited to) organisations and norm circles (which at the time were referred to as *norm groups*), and that each of these kinds has a characteristic structure which endows it with characteristic mechanisms that underpin specific causal powers (Elder-Vass, 2007a; Elder-Vass, 2007d; King, 2007; Porpora, 2007; Varela, 2007). The present paper seeks to apply this argument to a more specific class of cases: those in which norm circles regulate specifically discursive practices.

If we are to claim that in such cases the norm circle has exercised a causal influence, then we will need to do two things. First, at the level of abstract theory, we will need to show that it is possible that the norm circle has exercised such an influence because there is a mechanism through which this could be achieved. I have offered a summary of such an argument earlier in this section, and a much fuller version of it elsewhere (Elder-Vass, 2010: ch. 6). Second, at the empirical level, we will also need to

offer evidence that in the particular case concerned such a mechanism was actually operating. This would involve demonstrating that in the individual's social environment there was pressure to act in accordance with the norm concerned and that those exercising that pressure thought of themselves as advocating a socially endorsed view. Part of the value of Foucault's empirical studies is that he marshals substantial evidence to support just this sort of argument, to show, for example, that certain perspectives on madness were not just the views of a few individuals but rather were accepted as the 'right' way to think within an entire social milieu. To anticipate the argument below, it seems reasonable to conclude that, if Foucault's evidence is sound, it demonstrates the existence of norm circles supporting certain discursive restrictions. Those acting in pursuit of these views of madness, I argue, were causally influenced by these norm circles.

What is produced, however, by a norm circle is only ever a *tendency* to observe the norm concerned, a *disposition* to do so. But individuals have many dispositions, both normative and otherwise, and what they do in any given situation depends on how these many different dispositions interact in the particular context. I may acquire a tendency to stand aside, for example, but if I also happen, due to some other disposition, to feel particularly hostile to someone whose path I am blocking this may override my tendency to stand aside.¹⁰ Thus we have a model in which a social norm can causally *influence* individuals without directly and completely *determining* their behaviour, and this is a particular case of the general phenomenon of events being caused by the interaction of multiple causal powers, discussed above (and illustrated in Elder-Vass, 2007d: 472-4).

An important feature of the norm circles model is that there may be quite different norm circles for different norms. Any given individuals may acquire a disposition to observe a number of norms, but the norm circles endorsing these norms need not be congruent with each other. I may acquire norms about caring from my family, for example, and norms about business practice from my colleagues at work, and there may be people who observe and endorse the same business practice norms that I do who do not observe and endorse the same caring norms as me. Some of these norm circles may be clustered – a particular religious organisation, for example, may endorse a variety of norms that are not observed outside this group – but there is no necessity for norms to fall into such clusters. One consequence is that the influence of normativity on us is not the influence of some monolithic overbearing ‘society’, but rather the influence of a complex and dynamic patchwork of social circles as in something like Simmel’s model of the social world (Simmel, 1955).

Now, so far I have tended to apply this argument to what we might call norms for social action; however, this paper argues that we can also explain the causal effectiveness of discursive norms in similar terms. There are, I suggest, norm circles that are specifically concerned with endorsing and enforcing discursive norms. Consider, for example, the contemporary form of discourse in which I am currently engaged: journal articles in the humanities and social sciences. There are norms about what sorts of things may be said, must be said, and must not be said in such articles. There is a norm, for example, that those who have commented usefully on a paper should be acknowledged in print, and there used to be a norm that such acknowledgements should explicitly absolve the people concerned from any responsibility for errors that remained (I presume that this is now taken as implicit!) For

another example, there is a norm that such articles should avoid discussions of the author's personal life and circumstances except perhaps for brief comments that illustrate their intellectual argument. Those who submit articles to journals acquire these norms from the corresponding norm circle through a variety of channels – from speaking to academic advisers, from reading 'how to' books for new researchers, from reading the submission guidelines published by particular journals, and from the feedback they receive from journals' reviewers, for example. Alongside these norms there are of course much more intellectually substantial norms regarding the kind of content that is considered acceptable in journals of various types, though in these cases many of the norm circles are narrower and more specific to particular disciplines or intellectual traditions. But there may also be much more general norms regarding intellectual content too – what Foucault calls 'a discursive constellation at a higher level and in a broader space' (Foucault, 2002 [1969]: 75).

A productive synthesis?

It is the argument of this paper that what Foucault sees as the influence of discursive rules is in fact a causal power of discursive norm circles (or *discourse circles* for short). With this understanding, we can preserve and indeed increase the force of many of Foucault's insights into the nature of discourse, though we must abandon some other elements of his ontology of discourse. This section will examine how the discourse circles model complements, clarifies, and occasionally conflicts with Foucault's.

One of the most striking difficulties in Foucault's account of discourse noted above is the difficulty he has in accounting for the causal significance of discursive

rules. This is taken to be produced in some way by the historical archive of discourse, but as we have seen Foucault fails to identify a mechanism through which this could occur. With discourse circles we have such a mechanism; though now we must accept that it is not the archive as such, or even the rules considered in some disembodied fashion, that is the source of the causal shaping of discourse. We can no longer agree with Foucault that these systems of formation ‘reside in discourse itself’ (Foucault, 2002 [1969]: 82), though they do operate *through* the discourse that members of discourse circles produce. Now, instead, it is groups of people with the collective commitment to enforce those norms that are the source of their causal influence. But this *does* arguably fit with some of Foucault’s other concerns. These norms are still ‘not constraints whose *origin* is to be found in the thoughts of men... but nor are they determinations which, formed at the level of institutions, or social or economic relations, transcribe themselves *by force* on the surface of discourses’ (Foucault, 2002 [1969]: 82, emphasis added). Here Foucault appears to be rejecting both a methodologically individualist account of discursive rules, as purely a product of individual subjects, and also a methodologically collectivist or objectivist account in which social structures directly control discourse without significant human involvement. The discourse circles model steers a path between these two extremes. On the one hand these constraints do operate *through* the thoughts of people, but they do so as a consequence of the causal power of wider social groups. On the other, they *are* a product of normative institutions, but they are not ‘determinations which... transcribe themselves by force’, since their effect is always mediated through individual human actions which are also affected by many other factors and indeed on occasion by

individual human choices. Discursive formations thus have an element of exteriority while still depending on an interiority to make them effective.

The discourse circles model also helps to resolve Foucault's ambivalence over whether discursive rules are descriptive or prescriptive. Sometimes, for example, he says that 'the system of discursivity [lays down] ... enunciative possibilities and impossibilities' (Foucault, 2002 [1969]: 145), and this sense of enunciative impossibilities suggests that discursive rules impose some hard determinations on discursive practice. But at others he argues that discursive rules do not determine the thought of individuals and always leave room for innovation and modifications to prevailing discursive practices (Foucault, 2002 [1969]: 230). This is a tension that cannot be resolved without making sense of the mechanism through which discursive norms operate. The mechanism outlined above means that discourse circles can influence (sometimes very strongly indeed) what individuals regard as acceptable discursive behaviour, and thus generate discursive regularities, but because this mechanism depends upon interaction between many (sometimes conflicting) discursive dispositions as well as upon the operation of human reflexivity, there is always the possibility of innovation and indeed of breaking the norms: there are no *impossibilities* imposed by discursive norms.

This in turn makes clear how discursive norms are compatible with discursive change. The moment of interiority in the process of the reproduction and transformation of discourse allows for incremental innovation and change.¹¹ To illustrate this point, consider just one of the ways in which such changes could come about. As Foucault argues, discursive formations are systems of dispersion that may include not only compatible but also conflicting statements and norms (Foucault, 2002 [1969]: 67, 195).

In the discourse circles model, there may be circles endorsing many different discursive norms, including those that are in conflict with each other (cf. his ‘discursive sub-groups’: Foucault, 2002 [1969]: 73). When individuals are exposed to the influence of multiple discourse circles endorsing conflicting norms they are likely either to choose one over the other, or to innovate to find a way out of the conflict. Where the first reaction is common, one discourse circle may grow at the expense of another, and the discursive norm endorsed by the first will tend to become more prevalent. The second reaction provides new or modified norms that then enter into this selection process.¹²

Finally, I suggest, this argument offers a coherent way to make sense of the role of meaning in discourse and archaeology, and in particular of Foucault’s rejection of hermeneutics as a method for archaeological inquiry. Foucault’s argument seems to imply, for example, that the question of whether two statements are the same is not a question to be answered by hermeneutics. For hermeneuticists, such a question would depend on the meaning of the statements concerned, but for at least some hermeneutic thinkers meaning is always produced or at least completed by the reader or interpreter of an utterance. And so for them, if we are examining two utterances from, say, the eighteenth century today in the twenty-first, and seeking to ascribe meanings to them and compare these, we will need to recognise that these meanings are a product of the twenty-first century *readers* and their hermeneutic work. But these twenty-first century meanings are of no consequence to the question of interest to Foucault: the regulation of discourse within the period when it was uttered.

What *is* of consequence is how the discursive community of which the *speakers* were a part understood the meaning of these statements; since it is on this basis that they will have regulated their utterance; it is this that will have determined what sort of

endorsing/enforcing behaviour the speakers encountered and that influenced their discursive choices. And it is this regulation of utterances that Foucault is seeking to analyse. We should therefore say that in the context of archaeology two statements are the same if they are taken to have the same meaning by the discursive community within which they are made. And we do not establish whether or not this is the case by hermeneutic inquiry; on the contrary, we can only establish whether or not this is the case by further research in the archive itself. Such research always requires a certain level of understanding by the researcher of the meanings of the discourse under study; but Foucault wants to avoid problematising this understanding because the real issue is how the original speaker's contemporaries understood their utterances, not how we understand them today, and the most useful evidence here is not painstaking reconstructions of complexly situated arguments from the past, but rather the discovery of evidence that indicates what relations of similarity, difference, and indeed acceptability the speakers' contemporaries saw between their utterances.

Conclusion

This paper has developed a realist social ontology of discursive norms and reconfigured Foucault's analysis of discourse around it. The resulting synthesis is, I argue, a coherent whole that resolves some of the absences and failures of clarity in Foucault's account of discourse in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. It thus offers a plausible ontological basis for at least some of the applications of the concept of discourse made by Foucault and his followers. No doubt some of those followers might be concerned by some features of this reconstruction. I certainly would not represent it

as, for example, somehow implicit in Foucault's position or theirs. This is not a Foucauldian but a post-Foucauldian theory of discourse.

But it is also a realist theory of discourse, and I hope that it offers something that is equally essential to the project of realist social theory: a way of theorising the impact of discourse on the social world that is moderately social constructionist without denying the significance of material reality, the human individual, or social structures.

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² I have been encouraged in this enterprise by a number of previous papers in which realists have argued that despite appearances to the contrary, Foucault's work is potentially compatible with a realist ontology (Al-Amoudi, 2007; Joseph, 2004; Pearce and Woodiwiss, 2001) (and papers by Woodiwiss, Day, and Frauley in Frauley and Pearce, 2007). Nick Hardy also offers such an argument (Hardy, forthcoming).

³ There is a strong parallel here with the Volosinov's work on thematic meaning and Halliday's work on the significance of context in determining both speech acts and their meaning (Halliday, 1978; Halliday, 2007; Volosinov, 1996).

⁴ This is not a novel argument – Dreyfus and Rabinow write ‘If all discourse was, for the archaeologist, mere meaningless noise he could not even catalogue statements’ and say that Foucault himself concluded in his later work ‘that we are condemned to meaning’ (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1983: 88).

⁵ Foucault does not offer this as a definition of discursive formations, but it is clear from the context that this is what he is describing.

⁶ Space considerations prevent me from offering a full justification of this approach to cause here. For such justifications, see (Bhaskar, 1978; Elder-Vass, 2005; Elder-Vass, 2010).

⁷ Although, as Bourdieu points out, the term *rule* implies a verbal formulation of a principle for action, sometimes by an outsider, whereas the actors themselves may be socialized in dispositions without ever hearing or using such a formulation (Bourdieu, 1990: 39-40). For the purposes of this paper, I assume that the concept of rule includes such cases. It may therefore include rules of which the participants are not consciously aware, as Foucault seems to intend (Davidson, 1986: 222).

⁸ There is a wide literature on collective intentionality, which is elegantly explained in (Gilbert, 1990).

⁹ The concept of emergence used here is explained in (Elder-Vass, 2005). The argument that the causal power of groups like norm circles is an emergent causal power is justified in (Elder-Vass, 2010).

¹⁰ For a more detailed discussion of how dispositions affect human action, see (Elder-Vass, 2007c).

¹¹ The model offered here therefore also entails and draws on Bhaskar’s Transformational Model of Social Activity and Archer’s morphogenetic cycle (Archer, 1995; Bhaskar, [1979] 1998).

¹² For reasons of space, I omit consideration of another major source of discursive change: discursive rules may come into conflict with our non-discursive experience, including both our experience of the natural world and our experiences regarding what may be *done* rather than *said* in the social world.