Introduction

*The Archaeology of Knowledge* by Michel Foucault is a book that presents a number of challenges. Most obviously, it introduces a lot of new terminology and makes many methodological distinctions, and for this reason presents a certain technical difficulty. However, there are other reasons. First and foremost, it addresses a specific problem that is not really explained in the book itself, concerning how thought in late modernity has responded to the impasse that Foucault describes in the final chapters of *The Order of Things*, and which hinges on the finitude of man. My first aim in this book is to show that *The Archaeology of Knowledge* is a deliberate attempt to accelerate a response that was in his view already underway. In addition, Foucault’s text does little to make it clear where the most important precedents lie for the conceptual and methodological steps that he takes. For many readers, this is made worse by the fact that some of these precedents may be relatively unfamiliar today. Without some appreciation of them, however, I believe one’s understanding of what Foucault is doing in this book will be incomplete. The precedents lie primarily in the philosophy of mathematics, the philosophy of science and the epistemology of the first half of the twentieth century, and in particular in the work of Gaston Bachelard and Jean Cavaillès. Michel Serres’ early work on the history and epistemology of mathematics is also very significant, as are other elements of his thinking, such as his readings of atomism and of Leibniz.

It is on the basis of this work, I maintain, that Foucault elaborates the central ideas of *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, and in particular his attempt to respond to the challenge that he set near the end of *The Order of Things*; namely, to repeat Kant’s critique of pure reason on the basis of the mathematical a priori (OT 383, 394). In different ways, for Bachelard, Cavaillès and Serres, mathematics is fundamentally
historical in its practice, and even in its formal basis. As a result, the conception of the mathematical a priori to which Foucault refers feeds directly into an understanding of the historical a priori, which remains one of the most contested ideas in Foucault’s work as a whole, and certainly in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. The understanding of history that emerges also involves an engagement with the question of time, and here again the work of Bachelard, Cavaillès and Serres is crucial. In thinking about the question of time in relation to the conditions for knowledge and experience, one comes up against Foucault’s conception of the historical a priori. This has been read as the key element in Foucault’s attempt to rethink the transcendental conditions for knowledge and experience without recourse to the category of the subject. However, it may be that Foucault goes further still, and that the idea of the historical a priori, and the whole apparatus of which it is a part, is developed with the intention of avoiding the category of the transcendental as well. Taking such a view, the reading I put forward proposes that the mathematical background to archaeology allows Foucault to introduce the idea of historical a priori conditions for discourse without repeating the distinction between the transcendental and empirical that would tie archaeology back into the situation from which it aims to break free.

The first part of this book comprises a short series of introductory pieces that have two functions. First, they put Foucault’s study in the context of his diagnosis of the situation of knowledge and thinking at the end of modernity. Second, they outline the themes and ideas in the work of Bachelard, Cavaillès and Serres that I think are important for understanding Foucault’s text. These pieces are not intended to be comprehensive and I encourage anyone interested in the ideas they introduce to read further for themselves. The main body of this book is then simply a commentary, chapter by chapter, on *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, written with the material and the problematic I have described in mind.

While it is my view that a reading based on this material is important for an appreciation of what happens in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, I do not claim that the reading presented here is the final word. There are too many precedents, problematics and textual connections not covered here for that to be the case. In particular, I do not discuss the work of Georges Canguilhem or of Louis Althusser, but this is only for reasons of simplicity and clarity, and because their connection with Foucault is already well documented. Finally, this book focuses solely on the account of archaeology presented in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, without reference to other works by Foucault where
this idea also appears. Again, this is simply to try to make the reading here as clear as possible, and to avoid having to take into account the changes that took place in Foucault’s own work over the period in question.