Foucault's Archaeology
Webb, David

Published by Edinburgh University Press

Webb, David.
Foucault's Archaeology: Science and Transformation.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/64095.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/64095

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2279146
Part V: Conclusion

The Conclusion to the book takes the form of a series of responses by Foucault to objections that he could anticipate, and no doubt some which had already been made. In the main he takes the (staged) opportunity to step back and provide a more strategic view of what he aimed to achieve, to reiterate a few key points, and to try one last time to head off misinterpretations.

Foucault makes the point that suspending the category of the subject in no way suppresses individuality beneath a universal form of discourse, not least because the forms of discourse that he introduces into the analysis are not universal. To be universal, they would have to be imposed on discourse from the outside and immune to any alteration, but this is not the case. Not only are the particular configurations into which all the elements of discursive formations fall local and provisional, but these elements themselves are descriptions of discourse as Foucault finds it. Although the scale of a historical transformation leading to the disappearance of one or more of what seem in this analysis to be fundamental categories would have to be much greater than those considered here, there is nothing to prevent it, and this point is underlined later in the Conclusion. In fact, the suspension of the category of the subject is a strategic decision made to align the analysis with the disappearance of man, and thereby with the current of thought that promises an escape from the impasse described at the end of The Order of Things. It is not, therefore, made out of a bias towards objectivity. If there are thus powerful strategic reasons for Foucault to move in this direction, it is work in the history and epistemology of mathematics and the mathematical sciences, and that of Bachelard and Serres in particular, that clears the way. At the heart of this question is the issue of history and in particular of Foucault’s rejection of ‘a uniform model of temporalization’ (AK 221, 261). Time is the key to the finitude man
that is at stake in the transformations in the structure of knowledge that Foucault has been describing. If man is to disappear, releasing knowledge from the hold exerted by the distinction between eschatology and positivism, and everything that comes with it, then the unity of time has to give way. Since the unity of time is secured by the subject, the subject must be suspended. Far from committing individuals to an anonymous formalism, or anything of the kind, this in fact makes possible the reconfiguration of experience, and even the modification of its ontological conditions. Foucault reminds the reader here of the importance of suspending ‘the general, empty category of change in order to reveal transformations at different levels’ (AK 221, 261). These are transformations in the structure of discourses (and of knowledge), and as such they also modify the position and function of the subject in relation to those discourses, leading to a more radical sense of freedom. This is not yet a fully fledged account of the freedom of the subject to engage in practices that reconfigure the conditions of its existence, but it is an important step in that direction and the ground is prepared here for the accounts of freedom that Foucault would go on to give in later works.

The next objection in the series appears to be two rolled into one. First, the imagined interlocutor refuses to accept that scientific discourses can be analysed adequately without securing their rationality in a teleological principle and the promise of eventual truth and clarity. Second, it is objected that even if one suspends any discussion of the speaking subject itself, the simple fact of speaking a given language means that one inevitably has a blind spot, since one cannot turn the analysis back on the forms of discourse that made it possible. In fact, the two objections are linked, in so far as the blind spot to which the second refers is, the objector hopes, to be brought back into view by the kind of history to which the first refers. But the argument is circular, since the existence of the blind spot in the first place assumes the sense of reason and history intended to restore unity and transparency. As Foucault explains in his response, his intention was to analyse history in a way that could resist all attempts by teleological reason to restore such unity and transparency. For this reason, the history of thought cannot stand above the forms of discourse it describes, as though it had a vantage point from which to survey the course of their development and to identify its law. Here, Foucault makes a simple and powerful point. If one is prepared to concede that a piece of empirical research can challenge ‘the transcendental dimension’ then one has accepted almost everything he proposes. For all the sophistication with which Foucault elaborates his account, his basic position is one that refuses a messy compromise: either the transcendental dimension always has
priority over the order it conditions, or it is implicated in the order it conditions; what he resists at all costs is the idea that the transcendental dimension may be historical in a sense that can still be contained by reason and thereby recover some form of patched-up unity. Once the decision is made that the transcendental dimension is implicated in the order it conditions, the difficulty is to establish the nature of their relation and of its historicity, and it is this problem that The Archaeology of Knowledge addresses. Its originality lies in its attempt to present this historicity as irreducible to either the transcendental or the empirical. The series of displacements and misunderstandings that Foucault lists on pages 224 and 225 all fail to take this into account, and thereby all reproduce in various ways the framework of knowledge in modernity that Foucault analysed in The Order of Things, and to which archaeology is intended to provide an alternative. It needs to be underlined here that in making this point Foucault shows that he does not exempt the entire apparatus that he has introduced in this book from the kind of historical transformations it describes. The concepts of associated fields, surfaces of emergence, grids of specification, fields of coexistence, and even those of statement, enunciative function, concept and object, may all eventually be caught up in the history for which, here, they have emerged as the most fitting description.

But the question is not settled yet. The next objection addresses head on this issue of the level at which archaeology is pitched. It insists that either archaeology is an empirical analysis, in which case it will fall prey to the naivety of all positivisms, or that it is more than an empirical analysis, in which case the objector claims that ‘it will enter our game, and, in turn, extend the very dimension that it is trying to free itself from’ (AK 226, 267). The challenge is summed up in the question of whether the discourses to which Foucault refers are history or philosophy. Foucault acknowledges that this question causes him some embarrassment. He writes that he would have preferred to leave the question in suspense because the discourse he has sought to develop, contrary to usual academic (and especially philosophical) practice, has not tried to determine the ground on which it is based. In fact, Foucault declares that his discourse has tried to avoid such a ground. Reading this, one might wonder whether it amounts to avoiding the question of whether his discourse could determine the ground on which it is based, should it choose to do so. However, Foucault’s comments here are a reminder of how radical a change he is proposing to the usual conceptions of the analysis of discourse. Its task, he writes, ‘is to make differences’ (AK 226, 268). This a striking suggestion in itself, but is it consistent with what he has actually described in the course of the
book? Has he not claimed to be describing the differences passed over or concealed by other forms of analysis, interpretation and history? Has the descriptive act become an intervention? Not exactly, for Foucault goes on to say here that its purpose is to diagnose, and in this respect its differentiations are still descriptive. However, the point has been made repeatedly that successive discursive events can modify the series in which they appear, which means that they can modify the regularity that determined their existence. In addition, as outlined on pp. 24–5 above, Serres describes how the epistemology of mathematics, having been assimilated by mathematics itself, performs both descriptive and normative functions (HI 46–7). The benign confusion between description and transformation implied by Foucault’s comments places him beyond the reach of the objection to which he is responding here, which assumes a more orthodox arrangement between the branches and functions of inquiry.

It all depends on the kind of history being conducted. For a history of empirical events is essentially descriptive, and at most can require a revision in the way events are understood, but the description of the rules by which discourses are formed is already an engagement in their own history. As Cavaillès insists, to analyse a history one has to follow it from within, and not survey it from above; Bachelard, Cavaillès and Serres have all described the way mathematics develops by revising its own past; and Foucault accepts that there is a feedback loop from discursive events to their conditions. There are therefore at least two reasons why Foucault can state quite freely that his discourse avoids determining its own ground. First, as he made clear much earlier, archaeology cannot fully determine its own archive. Second, to seek to determine its own ground in the way the objection urges would be to abandon its principles; and before criticising archaeology for an irresponsible lack of seriousness in its refusal to determine its own grounds, the objector should bear in mind that Foucault is following the precedent set by the mathematical sciences. Here, as Cavaillès demonstrates more fully than anyone, the ground simply is the historical movement itself, which generates its own necessity without recourse to external principles. The importance of this point for Foucault can hardly be overstated. However, at the same time, Foucault’s vision of discourse as open and complex, as a place where any pretence to necessity can always be unmasked, is far removed from anything that could by supported by Cavaillès and is much closer to Serres’ conception of different constellations of knowledge, each with their own local rules and form of organisation. At the end of his response to this objection, Foucault remarks that what he is doing cannot in any way be regarded
as either philosophy or history (AK 227, 268). This is true, as long as one accepts an orthodox picture of each. However, in a manner consistent with the principles he has described, Foucault’s account of the archaeological structure of discourse has already contributed to the transformation of both philosophy and history.

The mutability of discourse is also the theme of the next objection, which casts a rather weary eye over the theoretical innovation of its day and wonders how many of the youthful pretenders will stay the course. Unsurprisingly, given Foucault’s well-known fondness for change and uncertainty, and again demonstrating consistency with the principles of discourse he has set out, the prospect that archaeology might prove to be a short-lived stage on the way to something else does not concern him.

The final question Foucault poses to himself is more interesting: if every discursive event is rule governed, and if the adoption of archaeology has led to a proliferation of such rules, then does archaeology not take away the freedom of individuals to act and speak in the way they choose? The objection assumes that freedom is essentially spontaneous and unregulated, and that the subject is fundamentally free before being caught up in situations that impose constraints. From this perspective, the more rules are present in any given situation, the less freedom one has to act and to think for oneself: ironically, given Foucault’s comment at the end of the Introduction to *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, his analysis is painted here as a kind of bureaucratic nightmare in which individuals are frustrated by a tangle of incomprehensible regulations. The objection is, however, misconceived, or at least Foucault does not share its basic premise about the subject and freedom. He explains that the positivities, the complex networks of discursive relations, he has described are not imposed from outside as constraints on a subject endowed with an innate freedom. Rather, they are to be thought of as constituting the field in which the freedom of the subject is articulated, as rules it puts into operation, and relations which provide it with support (AK 230, 272). In each case, the initiative of the subject plays a part without being the origin or the focus of the relations and rules in which it participates. Reading this now, one can see it through the lens of Foucault’s later writing on freedom, the subject and power. But this idea of action within a ‘field’ of relations that serve as rules is also prefigured in mathematics. For Cavaillès, concepts are operations that act on objects which have themselves been constructed and there is no such thing as a mental act for which the subject then finds a suitable form of expression, and therefore no inner freedom to experience the rules of discourse as a constraint. In some respects, this is the familiar
scenario that there can be no thinking without language. More specifically, in 1967 Derrida published *La Voix et la phénomène*, in which he deconstructs the distinction between an inner intention and its outward expression, thereby demonstrating that a pure intention is impossible. There is, then, nothing unique in this claim. However, linking Foucault’s position here to mathematics, and to Cavaillès in particular, does add something distinctive. First, it is not the case that the act of thinking necessarily depends on an external medium, and therefore has to conform to the rules belonging to it. This would leave open the possibility that the subject thinks using ‘ready-made’ materials, which nonetheless organise an intention that is already there. Instead, the act of thought constructs an object according to rules, but in doing so it responds to a problem that arises in a specific setting. To think is to take part in a pattern of conceptual development, and to carry out the steps by which a demonstration unfolds or new concepts and objects are produced. As such, the act is itself conditioned by the history of the operation it performs, without being determined by it. Because the rules of discursive formations are temporal, to engage with discourses beyond those that are closest and most familiar will be to expose one’s own temporal configurations – what Bachelard would call the rhythms of one’s own duration – to disruption and interference from outside. Enlivened, hopefully they will be recomposed in a pleasing way. Going back to Foucault’s Introduction, this is at least a part of what it means ‘to conceive of the Other in the time of our own thought’ (AK 13, 21).

In the final three or four paragraphs of the book, Foucault turns the tables and challenges his imagined interlocutor to clarify the motivation behind the various objections that he raises, and the issues are very much those just outlined. Is there not asks Foucault, a kind of fear that speaks in many of the criticisms levelled at what he is doing? Do the objections not express a desire for the calm of an order that, if not eternal, is at least continuous, whole and predictable? One thinks of Lucretius here, urging his readers not to fear the vision of contingency and multiplicity that he presents, and instead to understand that ataraxy can be achieved through an understanding of its principles. Epicurus declared that we should not fear death because it lies beyond the limits of our experience, and Foucault seems almost to play on this idea here in accepting that in discourse he does not banish his death, but may on the contrary establish it, allowing interiority to be dissolved in an exteriority that is indifferent to his life. His description of this exteriority as neutral invokes Blanchot again, and the confluence of literature and death. The message is: I should not expect my engagement
in discourse to bring comfort and a tenuous immortality, but neither should I fear the dissolution it threatens. Discourse is not life, Foucault writes, but actually it only really brings about the death of man as the central figure in the constitution of knowledge in modernity. It is our part in this drama that is ending. Beyond their inscription in this role, however, the lives of individuals go on as freely and as passionately as before.