CLOSING REMARKS
The Archaeology of Knowledge begins with a review of methodologies adopted by contemporary historical writing, but it quickly becomes clear that this is part of a far bigger concern. As in much of Foucault’s writing, a meticulous attention to the detail of history is accompanied by an aspiration to change not just what is thought but the terms or conditions in which thought takes place. To appreciate the aims of this book, one therefore has to consider the currents of history in which it moves, and these are defined above all by the problem to which it responds. As I set out in the Introduction, in Foucault’s view thinking in modernity had become caught in an impasse from which it could not escape without undergoing a radical change, one to which The Archaeology of Knowledge is intended to add its own impetus.

To make sense of this book one therefore must also place oneself in the future it works to open up. Saying this might imply that one has to take sides and either fail to understand his approach or endorse it fully, surrendering a critical perspective on what it achieves and on its methods. But this is not the case; in fact, nothing would be more alien to Foucault’s own way of thinking. It simply means that what Foucault tries to do in The Archaeology of Knowledge does not make sense from the standpoint of the historical situation to which it responds. In this respect, the book has the character of an intervention and one has to be prepared for the framework of historical and philosophical thought it engages to be modified in some way.

The difficulty of exceeding a limit that defines the current possibilities of thinking has become a relatively familiar problem, and one addressed in various ways by thinkers such as Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida and Deleuze. In what can only be a rough characterisation here, the difficulty may be understood to lie in the way the limit is conceived as so deeply embedded in the subject that to contravene it is literally unthinkable. Thinking, then, tests the limits of what is possible, intimating what it cannot summon up from within itself without ceasing to make sense, without the subject disavowing itself as a subject. If this path leads ultimately to a risk of madness that comes with the separation of the subject from itself, for Foucault it is history that spares us from having to travel down it, in the sense that history absolves the subject of being uniquely responsible for initiating the changes required to carry thinking on to a new future. The changes that Foucault proposes have their own history, which lies mainly in work related to science and mathematics carried out by Bachelard, Cavaillès and others. Once this is taken into account, the displacements and innovations introduced in The Archaeology of Knowledge can be seen to have their own precedents. Without detracting from the originality of
what Foucault achieves in this text, it can thus be read as a development of work already undertaken, and in this respect less as a singular assault on orthodoxy than as a continuation of what thinking had become, or was in the course of becoming.

Reading *The Archaeology of Knowledge* in this way has the advantage of placing its innovations in the context of a pattern of responses to the end of a certain configuration of philosophy. In particular, it highlights the link between his elaboration of archaeology and his earlier engagement with anthropology in Kant, and thereby also with his recommendations for the renewal of critical philosophy. Time, in the form of temporal dispersion, takes on a pivotal role, and the strategic release of thinking from the grip of the distinction between transcendental and empirical philosophy is underlined as the leitmotiv running throughout the text.

If *The Archaeology of Knowledge* was intended to herald a new form of thought, does the fact that Foucault’s later books do not reproduce its analytical framework and terminology mean that it failed, or had only a qualified success? That it did not solve the problem once and for all is no surprise, and should be no reason for criticising it. Moreover, its success should not be measured in terms of its longevity. While it is true that the precise terminology of *The Archaeology of Knowledge* is not reproduced in later analyses, if one looks beyond the letter, one finds the spirit – the aspiration – of the text very much alive. It is as though the intense focus on terms, distinctions, thresholds, limits, and patterns of discourse in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* opened up a dimension and form of analysis that subsequent studies could then occupy, and even transform, without having to begin each time from first principles. In other words, modes of thought from mathematics and the natural sciences are shown in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* to have responded, deliberately or otherwise, to the fundamental crisis in knowledge in modernity that Foucault had identified in *The Order of Things*. Moreover, Foucault demonstrates that such modes of thought not only had something important to say about the construction of knowledge in their own domains, but that the innovations they evolved could be extended to fields of inquiry that more traditional configurations of knowledge have generally held apart from science. In fact, the reasons for demarcating the humanities from the natural sciences lie primarily in the framework that had, in Foucault’s view, become the source of the problem; namely, the distinction between transcendental and empirical forms of inquiry and their placement around the figure of man. In so far as Foucault, following precedents in the mathematical sciences, breaks down this framework, he opens up a stratified
dimension for thinking in which traditional boundaries between disciplines break down into more complex patterns of both continuity and discontinuity – a theme that has also been central to Serres’ work.

To say that *The Archaeology of Knowledge* opens up a dimension that later analyses occupy is not to affirm a continuity running through Foucault’s work from early to late. The idea that the principles of such analyses, once set, should be left intact is both at odds with Foucault’s own restless revision of his own methods and inconsistent with the recognition, repeated many times in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, that conditions may be transformed by the conditioned to which they give rise. To claim that *The Archaeology of Knowledge* has a lasting importance for Foucault’s later work is simply to point out that, as Foucault himself argues, what appear to be sharp displacements between disciplines, periods, or methodologies are less straightforward than they may seem at first and generally involve threads of continuity, or incremental change as well as sharp breaks and divergences. To identify a motif that appears to remain consistent across such transformations is inevitably to invite its exposure as fractured and mobile, but one might point to the way Foucault traces the conditions of knowledge and existence in a conception of actuality that is always a work in progress. While there is no appeal to transcendental conditions beyond the level of events analysed, such events are not taken as simply given. The entities in question, what counts as an event, the kind of relations between events that are considered significant, and more besides, are all subject to continual revision. However, because Foucault’s method is developed specifically to allow analysis to operate across different levels without losing its footing, it is also capable of adapting to the challenges presented by historical change, and by new fields of enquiry.

Beyond its methodological significance, the recognition of change across different levels of analysis is also important for the formation of subjects – an issue that was always one of Foucault’s central concerns. While it is true that *The Archaeology of Knowledge* restricts its consideration of the subject in the main to the construction of enunciative functions, Foucault’s analyses avoid the traditional dichotomy between a commitment to a sense of human freedom that transcends the material world on the one hand and the inevitability of empirical determinism on the other. As a result, they put in place resources for later analyses of the conditions of actual existence, action and speech that extend what is presented in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. Without claiming that the later work is simply prefigured in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, which is too simplistic to the case, one theme nonetheless stands out as especially significant. Foucault’s engagement with
ethics in his later writing contrasts with an earlier emphatic diagnosis of the inability of thinking in modernity to address the question. In *The Order of Things*, Foucault describes how thought in modernity inevitably transformed that which it sought to grasp, setting it in movement (OT 327). As a function of the idealism that remained an inescapable condition of knowledge, this reflected both the fact that the object was revealed as familiar to the subject by virtue of its conditions of possibility, and yet that it was at the same time made more remote. This distancing arose, Foucault explained, because man’s own being was made to change as a result of its being deployed in the distance between thought and its object (OT 327). There is, he adds, something about this which is tied in directly with the repertoire of ethical thought in the West. Leaving religious moralities to one side (assuming that they can be easily separated out), he identifies fundamentally two ethical forms. In pre-modern thought, ethics was premised on an understanding of the order of the world, the discovery of which served as a basis for a code of wisdom, and even for a conception of political organisation. Such a view is exemplified in the stoics, Foucault writes, though one could easily trace the same motif in Aristotle and even Plato. But in modernity, ‘any imperative is lodged within thought and its movement towards the apprehension of the unthought’ (OT 328). It is committed to giving speech to what is silent, to illuminating what has remained in darkness. Its aim is to articulate the finite being of man that grounds the relation between the subject of knowledge and what it knows. In practical terms, Foucault proposes that the imperatives of ethics attest to the search for a ground that cannot be attained because of the very framework of thought from which such imperatives arise. Structurally unable to grasp its own being, the subject in modernity cannot provide the ground for knowledge that it desires, and in so far as ethics is construed as a form of knowledge it is not exempt. Foucault’s conclusion is that ‘For modern thought, no morality is possible’ (OT 328).

Archaeology does not promise a direct response to this problem, but it does describe a change to the framework in which the problem arises. History takes on an important role by providing what might be called a late modern analogue of the order of the world that served as a basis for ethics prior to modernity. The codes of knowledge that underpin a modern, or perhaps late modern, counterpart to wisdom and ethics are historical. In the context of Foucault’s archaeology, this means that they are local and not universal, since historical change does not conform to a single law or principle. The knowledge that may provide a basis for ethics is therefore a knowledge not of the natural world, but of the historical world. Most important of all, it is not a knowledge of
events but of the regularities that shape events, of the limits of the discourses that define them, and thereby what can be known and spoken about at a given time, and the position that the subject can take up within and with respect to such discourses.

In so far as this is not a traditional form of history one is brought back to the opening of *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, where Foucault reviews modifications to historical method that have begun to emerge. But now one can see that the form of history he proposes has a larger part to play in contemporary thought than it might at first seem. The unachievable pursuit of the unthought in modernity is replaced by the analysis of the historical conditions of the construction of knowledge and experience. Yet these, too, are impossible to grasp definitively. Has thinking therefore exchanged one abyss for another? No, since archaeology can always press its analyses further, taking in more detail, revising as it goes. By breaking the historical a priori conditions down into different strata and patterns of regularity, the subject of archaeology reveals the contingent provenance of what may seem initially to be binding rules and conditions. Gaps and disjunctions appear. Where the subject in modernity was faced with the impossible task of taking hold of itself as a knowing subject, Foucault describes a situation in which the subject can re-shape the regularities that define what it can know, say and do. It is, then, by hastening the disappearance of man, by displacing the subject from its central role in the enterprise of knowledge, and by adapting conceptions of historical form and analysis that had emerged in the mathematical sciences that Foucault reveals scope for a renewal of ethical practice.