

The Cercle d'Épistémologie

On the Archaeology of the Sciences: Questions for Michel Foucault¹

[**Editorial note: this manuscript file will be replaced by a definitive pdf in early 2013**]

Editors' Note: *The following is an English translation of the questions the Cercle d'Épistémologie presented to Michel Foucault in preparation for volume nine of the Cahiers (CpA 9.1) as well as the 'New Questions' (CpA 9.3) the Cercle put to Foucault once they received his reply. In the context of volume nine of the journal, Foucault's 'Response to the Cercle d'Épistémologie' appears between the two sets of questions; Foucault's text would soon serve as a template for the introduction to his Archaeology of Knowledge, published in 1969. Here the Cercle's initial questions are presented in their entirety, and the 'New Questions' are presented in English translation for the first time.*²

[5] Our sole intention in posing these questions to the author of *The History of Madness*, *The Birth of the Clinic*, and *The Order of Things*³ is to ask him to set forth some of the critical propositions that ground the possibility of his theory and the implications of his method. Given the Cercle's interests, we asked him to specify his answers with regard to the status of science, its history, and its concept.

On the Episteme and the Epistemological Rupture

Since the work of Gaston Bachelard, the notion of epistemological rupture has served to name the discontinuity that the philosophy and history of the sciences believes it can identify between the birth of every science and the 'tissue of tenacious, interrelated, positive errors' that is retrospectively recognised as preceding it. The familiar examples of Galileo, Newton, and Lavoisier, but also those of Einstein and Mendeleev, serve to illustrate the horizontal perpetuation of this rupture.

The author of *The Order of Things*, by contrast, identifies a vertical discontinuity between the epistemic configuration of one epoch and the next.

We ask him: what relations obtain between this horizontality and this verticality?⁴

¹ TN: First published as Le Cercle d'Épistémologie, 'Sur l'archéologie des sciences. À Michel Foucault', CpA 9.1 (summer 1968), 5-8. Translated by Christian Kerslake, revised by Knox Peden.

² TN: In the reproductions of this 'Response' following its initial publication in the *Cahiers*, the Cercle's initial questions to Foucault have appeared in a truncated form, with the middle two pages of their four-page set of questions omitted. These reproductions include both the multi-volume *Dits et Ecrits*, first published by Gallimard in four volumes in 1994 and reproduced in a two-volume edition in 2001, as well as the English translation of the text collected in the volume *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, ed. James Faubion (New York: The New Press, 1998), 297-333, which was based on a translation that first appeared in *Theoretical Practice*, 3-4 (1971).

³ TN: Page references to the English translation of *Les Mots et les choses*, *The Order of Things* (London: Tavistock, 1970) and the English edition of *History of Madness*, ed. Jean Khalifa, trans. Jonathan Murphy (London: Routledge, 2006) are given after the French.

⁴ In this question we aim to take up the thread of the following passage from Georges Canguilhem's article on Foucault's book (*Critique* 242 [July 1967], p. 612-613): 'Where theoretical knowledge is concerned, can that knowledge be elaborated in the specificity of its concept without reference to some norm? Among the theoretical discourses produced in conformity with the epistemic system of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, certain ones, such as that of natural history, were rejected by the nineteenth-century episteme, but others were integrated. Even though it served as a model for the eighteenth century physiologists in animal economy, Newton's physics did not go down with them.'

Archaeological periodization breaks up the [historical] continuum into synchronic sets, grouping together knowledges in the shape of unitary systems. [6] By the same token, it effaces the difference that, in Bachelard's view, separates scientific discourse at each moment from other kinds of discourse, and, by assigning each a specific temporality, makes of their simultaneity and solidarity a surface effect.

We'd like to know whether the archaeologist seeks or requires [*veut*] this effacement, or if he intends here to distinguish two registers, hierarchical or not?

If it's true that an epistemic configuration is obtained by articulating the relevant selected traits in a set of statements, then we ask:

- what governs the selection, and justifies, for example, the following phrase: 'Only those who cannot read will be surprised that I have learned such a thing more clearly from Cuvier, Bopp, and Ricardo, than from Kant and Hegel' (*The Order of Things*, 318/307).
- What validates the configuration obtained in this way?
- Does it make sense to ask what defines an *episteme* in general?

Further, we ask: does archaeology recognise a concept of science in the singular? A concept of science that is not exhausted by the diversity of its historical figures?

On Reading

What use of *the letter* does archaeology presuppose? This is to say: what *operations* does it apply to a statement in order to decipher, throughout what it says, its conditions of possibility, and to guarantee that we reach the non-thought which – outside it, in it – incites it and systematises it?

Does leading a discourse back to its unthought render fruitless any attempt to identify its internal structures, and to reconstruct their autonomous functioning? What relation can be constructed between these two concurrent systematisations? Is there an 'archaeology of philosophical doctrines' to be set against the technology of philosophical systems, such as that practiced by Martial Gueroult?

The example provided by your reading of Descartes might help make this distinction (*History of Madness*, 54-57/44-47).

On Doxology

How do we specify the relation that connects the epistemic configuration with the conflicting matters of opinion that play out across its surface?

Does the level of opinion only have negative properties: disorder, separation, dependence?

Might not the system of opinions that characterizes an author obey its own law, such that one could establish the rules in an [7] *episteme* that govern the range of doxological systems, with the presence of one opinion implying or excluding another from within the same system?

Buffon is refuted by Darwin, if not by Etienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire. But Newton is no more refuted by Einstein than by Maxwell. Darwin is not refuted by Mendel or Morgan. The succession from Galileo to Newton to Einstein does not present ruptures similar to those that can be identified in the succession from Tournefort to Linnaeus to Engler in systematic botany' [Canguilhem, 'The Death of Man, or the Exhaustion of the Cogito', trans. C. Porter in *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press Press, 2003), 87-88].

Why should the relation among the systems of opinions *always* take a conflictual form?

On the Forms of Transition

With regard to the forms of transition that assure the passage from one large configuration to another, Chapter 6, part III of *The Order of Things* explains that if, in the case of natural history and general grammar, 'the mutation came about abruptly ... the mode of being for money and wealth, on the other hand, because it was linked to an entire *praxis*, to a whole institutional complex, had a much higher degree of historic viscosity' (192/180; cf. also 218/205).

The question is: what is the theory for which the general possibility of such a viscosity can be the object?

In what way, and according to what relations (causality, correspondence, etc.) can a form of transition be determined by such a viscosity?

In principle, are the discontinuities established between the configurations that succeed one another all of the same type?

What is the *motor* that transforms one configuration into another? Is it the principle of archaeology to attempt the reduction of this question?

Of Historicity and Finitude

We ask the author of *History of Madness*, *The Birth of the Clinic*, and *The Order of Things* how he would define the point [of leverage] from which he might raise the epistemic earth. When he declares that in order to speak of madness a 'language without support was necessary' (*Madness*, x/xxxv) that in the clinic something is beginning to change *today*, or simply that 'the end of man draws near', what status would he confer on this declaration itself?

Today, can he bring his own configuration to light?

If one were to call an author's historicity his belonging to the episteme of his epoch and 'finitude' the name that an epoch – notably our own – might give to its own limits, what relations or non-relations, according to Foucault, might obtain between this historicity and this finitude? [8]

Would he be willing to consider an alternative between a radical historicism (whereby archaeology would be able to predict its own reinscription into a new discourse) and a sort of absolute knowledge (of which some authors might have had a presentiment, independently of epistemic constraints)?

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New Questions⁵

[41] It is not up to us to determine what, after Michel Foucault's 'Response', remains unresolved in the questions that we posed. For the movement whereby it exceeds the epistemological dimension to which we had confined ourselves is so forceful [*impérieux*] that it enables us now to forget the elisions that allow it.

⁵ TN: First published as *Le Cercle d'Épistémologie*, 'Nouvelles questions', CpA 9.3 (summer 1968), 41-44.

Let there be no mistake: the text that one has just read [i.e. CpA 9.2], thanks to the systematic way its author articulates for the first time the necessary relations that obtain between *History of Madness*, *The Birth of the Clinic*, and *The Order of Things*, provides a renewed foundation to the archaeology of the sciences, and re-centres the theory of discourse that supports it, to the point of undoing its method of reading, as established in the introduction to *The Birth of the Clinic*.

This is why there are better things to do than repeat ourselves. The task presents itself of taking a new departure from this new text, and inserting ourselves, as Michel Foucault authorises us to do, into the proceedings [*procès*] of a work whose greatest merit is that it is once again, and truly, *in progress*.

On the Circle of Method

Our first words must concern the circle of method.

In fact, the critique of continuity, which is so corrosive that it can accuse both Martial Gueroult and Heidegger of 'anthropologism', insofar as they both study totalities assembled under *proper names*, inevitably leads Foucault into a circle once he attempts to circumscribe his own objects. At the fundamental level he distinguishes as 'the referential', the set of statements to be studied has no other unity than that of the very law that regulates the dispersion of the 'different objects or referents' that this set 'puts in play', which means: the law defines what defines it.

We should acknowledge that this circle is in all likelihood [42] taken on board [*assumé*], since *discontinuity entails it*, in that it is both the 'object and instrument of research', and delimits 'the field of an analysis of which it is the effect'.

But a theory of this effect is surely necessary.

If, by virtue of its circularity, the method is obliged to set out from a provisional demarcation [*découpage*], how does this differ from the 'spontaneous syntheses' that Foucault's text puts on trial? This is what sets in motion a process of interminable, progressive-regressive correction. Will the circle of the archaeology of the sciences amount to the hermeneutic circle?

If, on the contrary, the first demarcation is definitive, then it is arbitrary.

What is there room for, between the interminable and the arbitrary?

On the Rule of Formation

In order to resolve the problem of the unity of objects, the 'Response' proposes a novel concept, the 'rule of formation'.

This concept is put into play at the four levels which exhaust the aspects of discourses, and its effects are stated four times in identical terms. However, is the rule anything other than the name given to the relation (which is unspecifiable) of a variety to a unity, since its own singularity is opposed *without mediation* to the dispersion of objects that it's supposed to *form*?

If, for Michel Foucault, this rule is from the outset already capable of being articulated, we must then ask him, what are the properties that set it apart from other types of rules, and which distinguish it in particular from *structuralist rules*?

The 'Response' tells us that the system of a set of statements must be capable of forming solely the statements that are actually produced, and no others in addition, or in their stead. But isn't it necessary to reconstitute a system of formation capable of indefinite productivity, *before* imposing upon it the limitation of only producing the finite number of statements that have taken place? Is Gueroult wrong, when he answers *in Descartes' place* to questions that the latter did not encounter, to consolidate in this way the power of the Cartesian system?

Of Discourse, the Statement, and the Event

We must return now to the concept of discourse, whose value we note is not determined in the 'Response'. It seems that three senses of the term can be distinguished, which we might order in terms of the following process [*processus*].

1. In a first sense, discourse is a given grouping of given statements, where the statement figures as nothing more than the indeterminate entity of the *type* that is immediately subordinate to or beneath [*inférieur à*] discourse; it is in this sense that one speaks of the 'surface of discourses'. [43]
2. In another sense, discourse is the concept of that which draws its unity from the four criteria; it is in this sense that one speaks of the 'aspects of discourse'.
3. Finally, discourse as discursive formation is what results from the processing [*traitement*] of (1) by (2), that is, from among the possible groupings, the grouping that actually falls under the concept defined in (2). It is from this point of view that one can say that the discursive formation 'groups together a whole population of enunciative events'.

This whole process hangs upon the missing definition of the statement [*l'énoncé*], which enters into the concept of discourse in sense (1), and which discourse in senses (2) and (3) presupposes.

With regard to the statement, we might ask whether its definition as simply the smallest unit endowed with meaning is enough to specify it. And what are the criteria of individualisation [*individualisation*] for such a statement, once the latter is deemed unanalysable? Do these criteria include that of *place*? And are they not all reducible to place alone? In that case, what would it mean to say that a statement *is repeated*?

There's more: place is a double determination, since the statement is conceived as an *element* in a system and as an *event* of enunciation. In fact, the 'Response' explicates the principle of reading the statement as element (grasped from laws of non-coincidence, splitting and dispersion, referring back to the rules of formation) all the while leaving us to understand that a principle of the statement as event also exists (grasped from the conditions governing the appearance of statements as events, across their articulation upon other events of a non-discursive nature).

However, are there actually *two* principles of reading? And what would be the second's articulation upon the first? In fact, the event, since it is always inscribed in a configuration, and related to the system of its conditions, seems to be nothing but an element.

But, here again, are not all the characterisations that one can possibly give to the *singularity* of the event reducible to the singularity of a *presence*? And does this latter have any aim other than to allow for the *dissolution* of units of all kinds secreted, so to speak, by this something that has no more precise a name than 'culture'?

Nevertheless, Michel Foucault can recognise, in the dispersion of events, 'a play of relations', 'a set of rules', which are themselves presented as founded in the *unicity* of a system defining the set of historical conditions of possibility for these events.

It appears to us that this sequence, (1) Units or Unities, (2) Singularity, (3) Unicity, (or terms that are equivalent), now forms a system, carries out a procedure (2 processes 1 in order to produce 3), and allows the following postulates to be presented as theses: [44]

1. Event and statement belong together, with every event appearing as a statement in 'the space of discourse'.
2. In the set of statements, which is finite in principle, every statement is irreplaceable.

If these postulates were made explicit, the question would still remain of knowing what permits the four 'rules of formation' to belong together, or to correspond to 'discursive formations' and to 'positivities'. Isn't it the case that a principle of coherence is presupposed here, one that reduces the event in its pure emergence to the status of an element in the 'unconscious of the thing said'? Must we use the term '*Epoch*' to designate the system that allows us to make diverse events relevant, whether or not they are recorded?

Taking this one step further, would the abandonment of the principle of coherence entail as a consequence the genuine independence of the 'non-discursive event'? And do we not have to suppose that each time an event is taken up again as a statement and serves as an element in the set of knowledge, there is an irreducible remainder that limits the claims of a 'pure description of the facts of discourse', and which necessarily implies an articulation of knowledge upon that which it cannot integrate?

On the Unthought

Finally, we will conclude with what seems to us to be the major discrepancy [*écart*] in the 'Response' with regard to what we had understood of Foucault's thought.

Since his axiom here is that *there is no unthought except that of rules*, he bars himself from speaking of the unthought of a statement or of a discourse: such an unthought will only ever be *another* statement, *another* discourse.

Must then the critique of continuity (of the book, of the work, of history as a whole, or of a formation that covers it, as metaphysics does for Heidegger) henceforth exclude the possibility that a statement might be produced *in order* to take the place of another? That is to say: in order to prevent it from appearing, in order to *repress it*?

And yet, recognition that a discourse can come to the surface in order to repress another one beneath it strikes us as the definitive achievement of psychoanalysis.

After the 'Response to the *Cercle d'Épistémologie*', the question arises: *where* does Foucault stand now, in relation to Freud, and to Nietzsche?

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Michel Foucault has once again agreed to give a response to these questions. It will appear in a subsequent issue of the *Cahiers pour l'Analyse*.⁶

⁶ TN: The following issue of the *Cahiers*, no. 10, 'On Formalization', was the final issue of the journal and Foucault's response did not number among its contents.