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On Foucault's Archaeological Method

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Over fifty years after its original publication, Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things* is still widely read, and still little understood.¹ The book presents a sweeping overview of the history of thought from the Renaissance to the nineteenth century, at times hinting prophetically at an impending conceptual revolution that will topple the order of knowledge once again. The book's many complexities have spawned as many discussions. One of the central questions was expressed with beautiful clarity by Jean-Luc Godard:

Si je n'aime pas tellement Foucault, c'est parce qu'il nous dit: 'à telle époque, les gens pensaient ceci ou cela, et puis à partir de telle date, on a pensé que...' Moi je veux bien, mais est-ce qu'on peut en être aussi sûr?²

Can you really be so sure? In other words: how does Foucault know all that he claims to know? This is the question we will address in this article. In particular, we want to know on what basis Foucault can claim that 'in this epoch, people thought this or that, and then from that date on, they thought that...'. How does Foucault get from his sources to his results?

A full answer to this question might perhaps be given by a detailed study of the notes that Foucault made during his long sessions in the *Bibliothèque Nationale*.³ This article will attempt a more modest contribution to an answer, arguing that Foucault does employ some bridge between his sources and his theory: the concept of the "historical a priori," understood in a specific (and, I will argue, in the proper) sense. A proper understanding of the historical a priori shows that Foucault does have a method, and that there is some justification for his seemingly wild claims about the way in which different eras in history maintained different configurations of knowledge. This

justification has been obscured, however, by a confusion between the terms *episteme* and *historical a priori*.

The Problem

The Order of Things is an enormously ambitious book: it claims to present “the general configuration of knowledge”⁴ of different epochs, and to describe the ruptures in this configuration that took place around 1650 and, again, around 1800. Along the way, Foucault explains more specific phenomena that appear in the history of these epochs as surface effects of this depth structure. For example: in introducing the change that took place around 1800, Foucault casually mentions that “[t]he constitution of so many positive sciences, the appearance of literature, the folding back of philosophy upon its own development, the emergence of history as both knowledge and the mode of being of empiricity, are only so many signs of a deeper rupture.”⁵ Somehow or other, all these phenomena are related to a deeper rupture—one that “though it must be analysed, and minutely so, cannot be ‘explained’ or even summed up in a single word. It is a radical event that is distributed across the entire visible surface of knowledge, and whose signs, shocks, and effects it is possible to follow step by step.”⁶

This ambition raises many questions. At the level of the “signs, shocks, and effects,” many of Foucault’s claims are unclear. For instance, the claim that “the appearance of literature” is a sign of this rupture (which is supposed to start around 1775⁷) is puzzling: what about Shakespeare? What about Milton? What about Cervantes’s *Don Quixote*, of which Foucault earlier said that it “is the first modern work of literature”?⁸ The case of literature suggests a wider concern: if the aim is to establish the existence of radical breaks in European thought, then merely pointing at the event’s effects is insufficient. First, because it is not clear which of the myriad of historical phenomena that occur in a given period are legitimately related to the “event”; and second, because it is circular: it is only if we assume that there is a radical event that we will consider observable changes as its effects, and it is only if we consider observable changes as related effects that we will accept the posit of a “radical event.” Since all of the purported surface effects of the break can thus be disputed, the question arises how this “radical event” could be registered at all.

This question also applies to the period between the ruptures: how can we gain reliable information about the deep structure of knowledge, or what Foucault calls the episteme of a period? An episteme is not just there for all to see—it is itself not a phenomenon, but something more abstract and general: it is a “configuration”⁹ or an “arrangement.”¹⁰ This sounds like a structuralist claim: that the totality of statements make up a system which determines the meaning of its parts. But Foucault’s descriptions of particular epistemes are not structuralist analyses of the syntagmatic and paradigmatic relations between elements.¹¹ Rather, he identifies some key notions for each period

(*resemblance* and its four forms for the Renaissance, *representation* in terms of *mathesis* and *taxonomia* for the classical period, *history* for the modern period), and argues that the logic of these key notions generates many if not all of the particular inflections of knowledge in these periods. For instance, the play of resemblances is the reason why the Renaissance was so preoccupied with the relation between microcosm and macrocosm, as well as why it saw magic as part of science.¹² So an episteme is somehow prior to the individual manifestations of scientific knowledge in a period.¹³

This is one of the main reasons that *The Order of Things* is such an exciting book: it suggests the promise that it is possible to deduce a whole range of consequences from a basic matrix, that there is a relatively simple yet significant explanation for many individual forms of knowledge, and that the identification of a period's episteme will light up all kinds of deep connections between apparently distinct fields of knowledge and culture. It is also one of the most extravagant claims of the book, and Foucault would later try to emphasize that he did not mean the claim to be as radical as it appeared.¹⁴ The question of how one can gain knowledge of an episteme is a key issue if we are to understand *The Order of Things*.

What is an Episteme?

Foucault admitted that the "absence of methodological signposting"¹⁵ was one of the main problems with *The Order of Things*. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, he tried to mend the misunderstandings that this absence had caused. But far from being a royal road to Foucauldian archaeology, that book is itself a mysterious undertaking—almost a negative theology that tries to illuminate a method by extensively demonstrating everything that the method does *not* involve. Anyone coming to *The Archaeology of Knowledge* hoping that it will clarify *The Order of Things* will be in for a disappointment; and it is not clear to what extent the difficult work of understanding *The Archaeology of Knowledge* will give the interpreter a key to unlocking *The Order of Things*, especially since Foucault admits that the method presented in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* "includes a number of corrections and internal criticisms."¹⁶

Nevertheless, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* may help clarify what Foucault could have meant by episteme, and how he thinks an archaeologist can identify, (re)construct, or discover an episteme. The term enters the *Archaeology of Knowledge* towards the end of the book, in the chapter on knowledge and science. After giving the usual negative qualifications (an episteme is *not* a worldview, *not* a set of rules for knowledge), Foucault gives the following definition of episteme:

By *episteme* we mean, in fact, the total set of relations that unite, at a given period, the discursive practices that give rise to epistemological figures, sciences, and possibly formalized systems; the way in which, in each of these discursive formations, the transitions to epistemologization, scientificity, and formalization are situated and operate; the distribution of these thresholds, which may coincide, be subordinated to one another, or be separated by shifts in time; the lateral relations that may exist between epistemological figures or sciences in so far as they belong to neighbouring, but distinct, discursive practices. The episteme is [. . .] the totality of relations that can be discovered, for a given period, between the sciences when one analyses them at the level of discursive regularities.¹⁷

Like most of the book, this definition is heavy on jargon and requires a lot of unpacking to really be comprehensible; but the last sentence can point us in the right direction: if the episteme is “the totality of relations . . . between the sciences,” that means that one could reconstruct an episteme by a juxtaposition and comparison of different sciences—either by induction over a number of particular fields of science, or by some kind of structural analysis where the minimum units of comparison are sciences rather than statements. If the bold claims about the “classical period” and the “modern period” in *The Order of Things* amount to claims about the relations between sciences in those periods, the accounts of episteme could be based on a generalization of the fields of science that Foucault has studied for these periods.

If we want to take this suggestion seriously, the next question is how exactly one establishes “the totality of relations . . . between the sciences when one analyses them at the level of discursive regularities.” This formulation seems to require treating the “sciences” as discrete units that come into external contact with each other. But since modern Western science (that is, the kind of science Foucault was primarily interested in) is inherently a practice of debate, mutual criticism, and productive disagreement, it is hard to see how it would be possible to treat the different sciences as a unity: contradictory theories can and do coexist at any phase of science. The addition that this analysis takes place at the level of discursive regularities is helpful in excluding many relations that might otherwise have seemed relevant—e.g., the fact that the humanist Wilhelm von Humboldt and the naturalist Alexander von Humboldt were brothers means that there is a concrete relationship between their two disciplines, but since this relation is not situated at the level of “discursive regularities,” it does not come into consideration for someone trying to reconstruct a period’s episteme. Moreover, the phrase “discursive regularities” promises to resolve the

apparent disunity of fields of science in some way, so that we can safely treat “sciences” as unities. But how does this work?

What Is a Historical A Priori?

In this section, I will argue that the concept of “historical a priori,” when understood in a certain way, does precisely the work of enabling Foucault to treat fields of science as unities, and thus to reconstruct the level of an episteme. I will have to discuss this concept at some length because my reading is a significant departure from the standard readings of Foucault.

There appears to be an overwhelming consensus that historical a priori is more or less synonymous with episteme. A small sample: The Wikipedia lemma for “episteme” (an expression of the *vox populi* if ever there was one) states that “Michel Foucault used the term *épistème* in a highly specialized sense in his work *The Order of Things* to mean the historical a priori that grounds knowledge and its discourses and thus represents the condition of their possibility within a particular epoch.”¹⁸ Oksala writes that “episteme refers to the historical *a priori* of an epoch.”¹⁹ Han-Pile, in her exemplary study of the Kantian and critical themes in Foucault’s work, states that Foucault employs the terms episteme and historical a priori “in an interchangeable manner in *The Order of Things*,” and talks of “the concept of the historical *a priori*, which [Foucault] assimilates in [*The Order of Things*] to that of the *épistémè*.”²⁰ Hyder considers the epistemes as the “most obvious examples of [...] historical a prioris in Foucault’s work.”²¹ A special issue of the *Continental History Review* on “Historical *a Priori* in Husserl and Foucault” (March 2016) also shows that this is the dominant reading: in their introduction to the issue, Aldea and Allen say that Foucault attempted “to tell the story of the emergence of the modern historical a priori”²² (Foucault more typically speaks of the modern episteme); and some of the contributions assume that the historical a priori is something like the set of conditions of possibility for knowledge in a given epoch, more or less identical with the episteme.²³

It is not hard to see why readers of Foucault are led to equate the two terms: an episteme determines the historically changeable conditions of possibility for knowledge of a given period. There is a long tradition in philosophy of calling something’s conditions of possibility its a priori; combine that with the fact that the particular conditions of possibility singled out by the term episteme are historically changeable, and you can see that historical a priori would not have been a bad name for the episteme. But I will argue that this is a mistake: in fact, Foucault does not use the term historical a priori interchangeably with episteme.

A good indication that the terms are not interchangeable is that an attempt to actually substitute one term for the other fails in almost all cases. For one, a historical a priori is almost always indexed to a field of science,

rather than to a period. There is a “historical *a priori* of a science of living beings,”²⁴ a “historical *a priori* of the human sciences,”²⁵ and a “historical and concrete *a priori* of the modern medical gaze,”²⁶ but in Foucault’s usage there is never a historical *a priori* of, say, the classical period. The failure of substitution is even clearer the other way around: it would make no sense in Foucault’s jargon to talk about “the *episteme* of a science of living beings.” This observation alone shows that the standard reading needs to be corrected.

Both in *The Order of Things* and in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault invokes the historical *a priori* of a science to argue that, in spite of disagreements between individual scientists, there is a level of unity in every scientific field that allows for disagreements to take place within the same field. To take a (non-Foucauldian) example: a quantitative and a qualitative sociologist may disagree strongly about the appropriate way to study society, but they will usually still agree on enough to both consider the other as contributing to an enterprise called “sociology.” In *The Order of Things*, Foucault raises this issue in relation to eighteenth-century natural history:

There were doubtless, in this region we now term life, many inquiries other than attempts at classification, many kinds of analysis other than that of identities and differences. But they all rested upon a sort of historical *a priori*, which authorized them in their dispersion and in their singular and divergent projects, and rendered equally possible all the differences of opinion of which they were the source.²⁷

Below the level of differences, divergences and dispersions, the historical *a priori* is the ground of unity that ensures that all eighteenth-century attempts at describing the order of nature belong to the same field.

In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, the chapter on “The Historical *a priori* and the Archive” opens with a discussion of the issue of unity and dispersal of science: “The positivity of a discourse—like that of Natural History, political economy, or clinical medicine—characterizes its unity throughout time, and well beyond individual *oeuvres*, books, and texts.”²⁸ This positivity reveals “the extent to which Buffon and Linnaeus (or Turgot and Quesnay, Broussais and Bichat) were talking about ‘the same thing,’ by placing themselves ‘at the same level’ or at ‘the same distance,’ by deploying ‘the same conceptual field,’ by opposing one another on ‘the same field of battle.’”²⁹ Again, the function of the technical term “historical *a priori*” is to serve as the principle of unity underlying a field of knowledge, even when there is disagreement and battle within this field.

My contention is that this is the core meaning of historical *a priori* everywhere that Foucault uses it, from the *Birth of the Clinic* to *The Archaeology of Knowledge*: we can tentatively define Foucault’s historical *a priori* as “the principle of unity of a field of science.”³⁰

This is also more or less what Edmund Husserl means by historical a priori in the short text *The Origin of Geometry*, which commentators have pointed out is the first use of the phrase historical a priori in the philosophical tradition.³¹ I claim that Foucault did not just use Husserl's phrase, but took over the specialized concept of historical a priori from Husserl more or less wholesale. This is not to say that Foucault's historical a priori is simply the same as Husserl's. For one, unlike Husserl's historical a priori, which is the unchangeable invariant undercurrent of a scientific tradition, Foucault's historical a priori is, paradoxically, both invariant (within a given period) and historically changeable (in breaks between periods). Moreover, while Husserl's notion of a historical a priori is embedded in a phenomenological approach to the history of scientific pursuits, Foucault's is more formalistic. I will have more to say on these differences later. The key point that I want to make here, though, is that the basic idea behind the historical a priori is the same in Husserl as in Foucault: a historical a priori is the set of conditions under which divergent theories, observations and concepts can nevertheless be said to belong to the same scientific pursuit.

From Husserl to Foucault

The connection between Foucault's and Husserl's historical a priori is historically plausible: it is certain that Foucault knew and read Husserl's paper at least as early as 1963, the year after Derrida's translation of and commentary to Husserl's *Origin of Geometry* was published.³² In January of 1963, Foucault wrote Derrida a letter to thank him for the translation and commentary, stating that he "read it—and re-read it."³³ In April of that year, Foucault's *Birth of the Clinic* was published;³⁴ towards the end of that book, he sums up the transformation he has described as the establishment of "the historical and concrete a priori of the modern medical gaze,"³⁵ which is a striking echo of Husserl's phrase "concrete, historical a priori."³⁶ Although in the *Birth of the Clinic*, unlike in the *Order of Things*, the concept of a historical a priori does not do any theoretical heavy lifting, the link with Husserl already seems to be present there.

A short discussion of Husserl's *Origin of Geometry*, and more particularly of the role of a historical a priori in it, is in place here. Like the *Crisis of the European Sciences* for which it was a sketch, *The Origin of Geometry* is concerned with the relation between the meaningful reality of everyday life (*Lebenswelt*) and the formalizations of modern science. In the essay, Husserl introduces a schematic overview of the derivation of geometry from the life world via the notions of historicity and tradition.

In a pretheoretical state, the subject is confronted with certain self-evidences: intuitions about the nature of lines, surfaces, and solids that form the first primitive geometry. The scientific tradition is born at the moment

people start writing down these self-evidences so as to be able to share them with others. This means that a more advanced elaboration of self-evidences becomes possible, and that the “ideal objects” of geometry, such as Pythagoras’s theorem, acquire an objectivity that is independent of the minds of individual geometers. Pythagoras’s theorem exists only once, but is re-activated when it is spoken, thought or written down: it exists through its “sensibly embodying repetitions.”³⁷ Once it has been written down, the theorem remains in existence even if there is nobody around to think it. This is the origin of the reality of ideal objects, and the origin of science.

But this origin engenders the risk that the writings take on a life of their own: they can be considered as evidence independently of the intuitive self-evidence they were supposed to communicate. This is the situation in which one learns every definition and proposition of Euclid’s *Elements* by heart, without working one’s way through them to reactivate their self-evidence in consciousness. Once this possibility is realized, science starts drifting away from the *Lebenswelt* towards the sterility typical of modern mathematics and physics. Husserl interprets the situation in the science of his time as precisely this detaching and drifting off of the sciences. As he puts it, we have lost the “capacity for reactivating the original activities contained within [geometry’s] fundamental concepts,” and “without the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ of its prescientific materials, geometry [is] a tradition empty of meaning.”³⁸

Once the drifting off has started, how can one get back to the pre-theoretical origins of geometry? This is where Husserl’s concept of historical a priori enters the scene. For any tradition to be possible, there must be some invariants that tie all successive stages of the tradition together, uniting it into a single tradition. The set of these invariants is what Husserl calls “the universal a priori of history.”³⁹ We can methodically study the historical a priori by starting from the structure of our present, which is disclosed to us, and then perform a “free variation” in the imagination, allowing us to discover what is necessarily common to each stage of history, past or present.⁴⁰ In the case of geometry, this variation leads to the discovery of just those primary prescientific self-evidences that gave birth to geometry, and that came to be forgotten in modern science. The examples Husserl gives of these historical a priori structures are of the following type: “that it was a world of ‘things’ . . . that all things necessarily had to have a bodily character . . . that these pure bodies had spatio-temporal shapes and ‘material’ qualities . . . related to them,” and that “we can always suppose some measuring technique, whether of a lower or higher type.”⁴¹ These are some of the invariant presuppositions underlying the complete tradition of geometry from Thales to Euclid through Galileo up to the present, by virtue of which we can reactivate the original sense-constructions of the first geometers.

Although Husserl sees the historical a priori primarily as the invariant structures of historicity in general (the structures that underlie every historical series of variations), the *Origin of Geometry* zeroes in on those structures that

guarantee the unity of the tradition of a particular field of science. And while Husserl happens to focus on the field of geometry, he repeatedly makes it clear that the same could hold for any other scientific discipline.⁴²

The historical *a priori* in the Husserlian sense (which I claim is also the Foucauldian sense) is thus very close to Kuhn's notion of a "paradigm." It is the common set of assumptions by virtue of which a group of scientists can be said to work in the same field, talk about the same things and be concerned with the same problems. The comparison to Kuhn has its limits, of course. For Husserl (though not for Foucault), a historical *a priori* is absolutely invariant, while the whole point of paradigms is that they change. Moreover, Kuhn primarily conceived of paradigms as examples rather than rules:⁴³ people working in the "Newtonian paradigm" are people for whom Newton's work is the prime example of good science, and whose interests therefore gravitate towards Newton-like problems, Newton-like methods, and Newton-like solutions. Paradigms are thus sociological facts, rather than epistemological configurations. The historical *a priori* of Husserl and Foucault, on the other hand, is transcendental rather than sociological. But the comparison is enlightening nevertheless: it suggests that the historical *a priori* can be conceived of as a vital tool in understanding the history of knowledge, rather than just an abstruse piece of phenomenological jargon.

It is worth mentioning here that the "historical" in historical *a priori* does not mean "historically changeable" (as the standard reading of Foucault would have it), but indicates that this is the *a priori* that grounds history. For Husserl, it is important that this *a priori* be stable throughout the centuries so as to guarantee the unity of a tradition—it is the set of invariants that unite the tradition throughout its history; but there is nothing in principle that prevents a tradition from breaking down and a new one from taking its place. In that case, both these traditions would have their separate historical *a priori* that underpin their internal unity as long as the tradition lasts, but they do not persist throughout all of time. This is just how Foucault takes the concept: not a trans- or suprahistorical set of conditions that persist throughout history, but a set of conditions that unify a single field for as long as it lasts.

Foucault's innovation with respect to Husserl is not that Foucault first made the *a priori* historical.⁴⁴ Instead, the innovation is that Foucault made the historical *a priori* into something contingent that can break down and start anew (though as we shall see, Foucault was not the first to propose this). The historical *a priori* is thus "historical" in two senses. In the primary Husserlian sense, it is "the *a priori* of history": a set of invariant conditions that bring together dispersed theories into a single tradition. But for Foucault, these sets of conditions are historical in a second sense: they can be observed to change, topple, and mutate, to the point where people in different periods of time can ostensibly be talking about the same objects (like animals or words), but in fact be engaged in a completely different tradition. Foucault's historical *a priori* is one step closer to Kuhn's paradigm, in being both the condition of

unity within a period, as well as the locus of dramatic change between periods.

Consciousness or Concept?

So far, I have argued that the *function* of the historical a priori is the same in Husserl as in Foucault: to guarantee the unity of a field of science. But it has been argued that one of the key differences between Husserl and Foucault is what the historical a priori consists in—the epistemological and ontological status of the conditions that guarantee the unity of a tradition. Hyder gives the following account of the difference:

Foucault's historical a priori differs from Husserl's in that it does not describe the framework of past intentional acts. It is instead supposed to be the framework that made possible the formation of past *énoncés*, or statements, which are to be identified and analyzed without any reference to the conscious intentions of individual speakers.⁴⁵

This reading stems from a line of inquiry that sees Foucault's appropriation of Husserl as mediated by the French school of historical epistemology, and in particular, by the work of Jean Cavaillès.⁴⁶ Cavaillès's criticism and reworking of Husserl prefigures Foucault's archaeology in important ways. Cavaillès criticizes Husserl for the latter's inability to conceptualize scientific developments; as Thompson puts it, Cavaillès modifies phenomenology "precisely so as to be able to get at the profoundly eruptive historicity of science itself."⁴⁷ This historicity, for Cavaillès, is a historicity not just of different theories built on an invariant framework, but rather, a historicity of the transcendental itself. In other words, it is not a tradition constantly underpinned by the same a priori foundations, but a process where the conceptual framework itself changes.

This injection of the historical into the transcendental implies a fundamental change in outlook: while Husserl's historical a priori consisted of intentional acts of consciousness that can be reactivated and retraced, Cavaillès suggests that at different stages of science, "it is not the same consciousness" that is at work.⁴⁸ This means that for Cavaillès, it is not consciousness that is the bedrock of scientific history, but rather a dialectic at the level of concepts. As he puts it, "it is not a philosophy of consciousness but a philosophy of the concept that can provide a theory of science."⁴⁹

This rejection of a philosophy of consciousness will of course become part of Foucault's project later on. And in the account from *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault goes a long way towards eliminating consciousness from his methodology. Thompson and Hyder both base their accounts of Foucault's inheritance Cavaillès on readings of *The Archaeology of Knowledge*

for this reason. But it is much less clear that this holds for *The Order of Things*, where, I argue, Foucault vacillates between a Husserl-style philosophy of consciousness and a Cavallès-style philosophy of the concept.⁵⁰

Consider this passage, the most explicit account of the inner workings of the historical a priori that Foucault gives in *The Order of Things*:

This *a priori* is what, in a given period, delimits in the totality of experience a field of knowledge, defines the mode of being of the objects that appear in that field, provides man's everyday perception with theoretical powers, and defines the conditions in which he can sustain a discourse about things that is recognized to be true. In the eighteenth century, the historical *a priori* that provided the basis for inquiry into or controversy about the existence of genera, the stability of species, and the transmission of characters from generation to generation, was the existence of a natural history: the organization of a certain visible existence as a domain of knowledge, the definition of the four variables of description, the constitution of an area of adjacencies in which any individual being whatever can find its place. Natural history in the Classical age is not merely the discovery of a new object of curiosity; it covers a series of complex operations that introduce the possibility of a constant order into a totality of representations. It constitutes a whole domain of empiricity as at the same time *describable* and *orderable*.⁵¹

This passage consists of two parts: a general description of the historical a priori, and a more specific description of the a priori for eighteenth-century natural history. The first part consists of four functions of the historical a priori, plus the (anti-Husserlian?) caveat that this holds "in a given period." According to Foucault, the historical a priori

- (a) delimits in the totality of experience a field of knowledge
- (b) defines the mode of being of the objects that appear in that field
- (c) provides man's everyday perception with theoretical powers
- (d) defines the conditions in which he can sustain a discourse about things that is recognized to be true.

Of these four functions, (a) and (b) clearly belong to the "philosophy of consciousness" rather than to the "philosophy of the concept." Moreover, (a)–(c) are all formulations that are alien to *The Archaeology of Knowledge*: appeals to "the totality of experience," the "mode of being" of objects, or "man's everyday perception" do not fit the discourse-oriented approach Foucault would later take. Condition (d) is the only one that Foucault would not

repudiate in later works; in fact, the conditions for true discourse become the linchpin of the “late archaeology” of *The Archaeology of Knowledge* and “The Order of Discourse.”

In the specific description of the historical a priori of natural history, the situation looks more Cavallèsian:

- α. the organization of a certain visible existence as a domain of knowledge
- β. the definition of the four variables of description
- γ. the constitution of an area of adjacencies in which any individual being whatever can find its place.

Although α, in focusing on visible existence, suggests a consciousness-based definition of a field of science, β and γ are both abstract and conceptual in nature. We will discuss this passage in greater detail below, but for now, suffice it to say that this quotation suggests that in *The Order of Things* Foucault is somewhere between Husserl and Cavallès. He vacillates between a consciousness-based approach to the historical a priori (where the historical a priori consists of structures of experience) and a concept-based approach (where it consists of a terminology of description, a grid for ordering, or a form of discourse).

We should be careful to separate the question of what Foucault actually does in *The Order of Things* from what Foucault ought to be doing. The tradition of Cavallès is clearly better suited to Foucault’s project than the Husserlian heritage. The obvious problem with any reliance on a philosophy of consciousness is that it will also rely on the empirical-transcendental doublet of “man” that Foucault will go on to criticize in the final chapters of *The Order of Things*. The Husserlian notion of the historical a priori would anchor the archaeological project in a philosophy of consciousness, relegating it to the status of a mere byproduct of the modern episteme, and dooming it to the same methodological instability that haunts the human sciences. This makes *The Order of Things* self-defeating. It makes sense, then, that Foucault would change tack when developing the methodology in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. But the Foucault of *The Order of Things* seems to be stuck between the two positions: sometimes simply historicizing Husserl’s intentional acts, and sometimes making a more elaborate conceptual argument along the lines of Cavallès.

Test Case: From Natural History to the Classical Episteme

Bracketing for a moment the vexed question of the epistemological and ontological status of the historical a priori, we can try to reconstruct how the archaeologist can get knowledge of an episteme. If, as we have seen, an

episteme consists of the relations between fields of science considered “at the level of discursive regularities,” and if the historical a priori of any science is its principle of unity, or “the group of rules that characterize a discursive practice,”⁵² we may conjecture that studying the historical a priori of different sciences will get us some way towards mapping out an episteme. If a historical a priori gives us the discursive regularity that unites a science, the relations between historical a prioris could constitute an episteme. We will now try to see how this might work by taking Foucault’s treatment of natural history in the eighteenth century as a test case.

One of the many provocative claims of *The Order of Things* is that there was no biology in the eighteenth century:

Historians want to write histories of biology in the eighteenth century; but they do not realize that biology did not exist then, and that the pattern of knowledge that has been familiar to us for a hundred and fifty years is not valid for a previous period. And that, if biology was unknown, there was a very simple reason for it: that life itself did not exist. All that existed was living beings, which were viewed through a grid of knowledge constituted by *natural history*.⁵³

In the chapter on the historical a priori in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault recapitulates this provocation by saying that “one cannot say that Darwin is talking about the same thing as Diderot,” even though both hold that species are formed by mutations from generation to generation.⁵⁴

We can rephrase the claim that Darwin is not talking about the same thing as Diderot by saying that the historical a priori of a science of living things is different in Darwin’s time than in Diderot’s time. That is why Darwin is somehow “closer” to his contemporaries who disagreed with him than to his supposed “predecessor” Diderot who might have agreed with his central insight. That is also why it is not right to speak of an eighteenth century science of “biology”: the conditions that define the unity of the field of biology did not hold sway over eighteenth century studies of nature.

Foucault does not just claim that biology did not exist in the eighteenth century; he also claims that there is a “very simple reason” for this: “that life itself did not exist. All that existed was living beings, which were viewed through a grid of knowledge constituted by *natural history*.”⁵⁵ The difference between the two sciences comes down to a difference between “life” on the one hand and “living beings as viewed through natural history” on the other, the former being characteristic of “biology” and the latter of eighteenth-century studies of nature. Later in the same chapter, Foucault pins a name to these characteristics: it is the historical a priori of these inquiries. This quote, which we discussed above, is worth repeating in this context:

In the eighteenth century, the historical *a priori* that provided the basis for inquiry into or controversy about the existence of genera, the stability of species, and the transmission of characters from generation to generation, was the existence of a natural history: the organization of a certain visible existence as a domain of knowledge, the definition of the four variables of description, the constitution of an area of adjacencies in which any individual being whatever can find its place. [. . .] What makes it akin to theories of language also distinguishes it from what we have understood, since the nineteenth century, by biology, and causes it to play a certain critical role in Classical thought.⁵⁶

The existence of natural history (and more particularly, what we earlier called functions $(\alpha) - (\gamma)$) is the historical *a priori* that unites divergent inquiries into one field, and that sets it apart from the nineteenth century's way of thinking about living things.

I want to emphasize two points in the preceding quote. First, Foucault gives us a relatively detailed picture of what this historical *a priori* looks like: it is the organization of a visible existence as a domain of knowledge (i.e., the fact that visible surfaces, rather than depths or functions, that are the relevant data when studying living beings;⁵⁷ the definition of the four variables of description;⁵⁸ and the constitution of an area of adjacencies, i.e., the ideal of drawing up a table in the style of Linnaeus.⁵⁹ These are all crucial features of natural history, that Foucault has apparently distilled from the sources in the preceding chapter. This gives an indication of how an archaeologist could identify the historical *a priori* of a field (although it bears repeating that the ontological and epistemological status is far from consistent or clear throughout *The Order of Things*).

The second point to emphasize is that this set of conditions of unity for the science of natural history is, at the same time, "what makes it akin to theories of language": Foucault's claim is not merely that there is some kind of affinity between natural history and general grammar, but that the two are fundamentally related in such a way that it is viable to describe them as being based on the same configuration of thought, or as informed by the same episteme. In this passage, we get a glimpse of the nature of this fundamental relation: it is a relation of one historical *a priori* to another. Read in light of the definition of episteme in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, this passage thus suggests that Foucault does employ a kind of bottom-up analysis: from the sources (texts of scientists), to the conditions of unity for the field that they belong to (historical *a priori*), to the relations between these conditions for different scientific fields (episteme). This is certainly not the order of

presentation that Foucault uses in *The Order of Things*, but it is plausible that this is the order of discovery.

The question of the relationship of priority between the historical *a priori* and the episteme in *The Order of Things* remains obscure. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault moves in the direction of nominalism: archaeology starts with discursive practices, constructs a historical *a priori* from discursive regularities, and finally constructs an episteme from the relations between sciences. The suggestion that the episteme has a reality over and above statements is absent from *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. In *The Order of Things*, though, Foucault is much less cautious. This is especially apparent in his accounts of the breaks between epistemes, where he calls discursive events “only so many signs of a deeper rupture.”⁶⁰ When we look at the breaks between epistemes, an important question is whether this is also the causal order. Do the simultaneous changes in the historical *a priori* of different fields of inquiry cause the episteme to topple? Does a change in episteme cause the historical *a priori* to change? Or does a change in episteme amount to nothing more than a simultaneous change in historical *a priori* for a number of disciplines? On this issue of causation, archaeology is notoriously silent, and it is not clear that a better conception of the internal structure of an episteme would make the breaks between different epistemes any less mysterious. But Foucault’s prose in *The Order of Things* often suggests that he thinks of the episteme as the deeper reality, and individual sciences and discourses as mere surface effects, suggesting an ontological priority for the episteme.

Later in *The Order of Things*, when discussing the break that took place in the Western episteme around 1800, Foucault again invokes the historical *a priori* of natural history as a key factor in the break: “[The dominant principle] is no longer that of the possibilities of being, it is that of the conditions of life. The whole historical *a priori* of a science of living beings is thus overthrown and then renewed.”⁶¹ The introduction of the idea of “life” in Cuvier’s studies meant that the invisible interior drives and forces of the organism suddenly became a part of the science of living things which up to that point had been concerned mostly with the external surfaces of creatures. This made the old study of surfaces and taxonomical relations largely obsolete, and thus spawned a whole new way of thinking about living beings—guided by the notion of “life.” The historical *a priori* of this science changes so drastically that it does not make sense to say that Darwin and Diderot are talking about the same thing.

The condition of unity for biology, then, is an interest in the living being as an expression of the deeper drive of *life*. Independently of this discussion, Foucault has also found out that, from Adam Smith on, the theory of *value* changes: value is no longer the surface effect of a commodity, but an expression of the deeper investment of *labor*.⁶² And in the study of words, the interest in inflections has suggested the idea that, beyond the intentions of speakers and the references of words, grammar is an expression of a deeper

history of *language*.⁶³ These three changes in three different historical a priors take place at about the same time and have a strong structural similarity: in each of the cases, the interest shifts from visible surfaces to invisible depths. This is therefore a reason for saying that the episteme itself changes at this moment. If we use as our criterion the description of *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, this looks like good archaeological practice: start with discursive practices, uncover their regularities, and when the relations between those regularities look significant, it becomes possible to make some claims about what happens at the level of the episteme.

Here again, a comparison with Thomas Kuhn can be useful. Kuhn's claim that different sciences adopt different paradigms at different periods in their histories is very close to Foucault's claim that the historical a priori of a science can be "overthrown and then renewed."⁶⁴ To understand Foucault's more radical and esoteric claims about the changes at the large-scale level of an episteme, we can do a thought experiment: suppose that Kuhn had found in his research, not just that sciences sometimes change paradigms, but that at some moments in history, a number of sciences suddenly change paradigms at the same time and in structurally similar ways, without any clear reason why they should do so. Had Kuhn's research pushed him in that direction, he might very well have started to entertain speculations about deep changes in the configuration of Western thought. Whether he would have followed those speculations with the same vehemence as Foucault did is an open question. But the comparison shows, I hope, that Foucault's claims about epistemes need not be as esoteric or metaphysical as they look at a first glance.

Concluding Remarks

At this point, our original question is more or less resolved: we wanted to know by what path or method an archaeological historian could gain access to the level of the episteme, and have found that the conditions of unity for sciences can serve as a bridge between the particular sources and the highly general level of the episteme. This has helped us make some sense of what Foucault talks about when he talks about an episteme. Although the exact method he uses for determining the historical a priori of a science is not quite clear, at least this is a less mysterious exercise than describing an episteme, and a comparison with Thomas Kuhn has helped us demystify Foucault somewhat.

At the same time, we must admit that Foucault's early work cannot be completely demystified: there is still a lot of obscure and obscurantist metaphysico-literary prose, and even in the more comprehensible passages Foucault sometimes makes claims that seem unwarranted and hard to uphold. The differences between *The Order of Things* and *The Archaeology of Knowledge* remain an obstacle to really understanding what Foucault is up to

in the former work. Maybe we have succeeded in making the episteme slightly less mysterious, but our account does not explain, for example, how the episteme could influence the forms that creative literature takes, or how the episteme could spontaneously generate the “human sciences,” as Foucault claims it can. So whether Foucault is worth emulating or criticizing is still an open question at this point and there is still work to be done in interpreting Foucault’s early work.

¹ I am grateful to Michiel Leezenberg, Jacques Bos, Thalia Lysen, Joel Isaac, Jan Goldstein, and Lorraine Daston for their support and for feedback on different versions of this paper. In addition, I am indebted to my students at the University of Amsterdam for forcing me to make Foucault comprehensible. Finally, I thank the anonymous reviewers of JFFP for their incisive comments, which helped significantly in improving my argument. Of course, any errors, inaccuracies, and mistakes in the paper are entirely my own.

² Jean-Luc Godard, “Lutter sur deux fronts,” *Cahiers du cinéma* 194 (1967): 12-27, 66-70.

³ Notes available at <http://lbf-ehess.ens-lyon.fr/>.

⁴ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, trans. Anonymous (London: Tavistock, 1970; New York: Routledge, 1989).

⁵ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 239.

⁶ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 236.

⁷ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 239.

⁸ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 54.

⁹ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 78 and 187.

¹⁰ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 40, 340, 398.

¹¹ For Foucault’s disavowals of structuralism, see the *Foreword to the English Edition* in *The Order of Things*, xv; as well as Foucault, *Archaeology*, 15.

¹² Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 34-35 and 35-37, respectively.

¹³ The exact nature of this priority is obscure. It could be an explanatory priority, an epistemological priority, or a metaphysical priority. All of those readings bring their own interpretative and methodological problems, so I will leave the question open here.

¹⁴ See the foreword to the English Edition in *The Order of Things*, x: “It was not my intention, on the basis of a particular type of knowledge or body of ideas, to draw up a picture of a period, or to reconstitute the spirit of a century. See also, “in *The Order*

of *Things*, the absence of methodological signposting may have given the impression that my analyses were being conducted in terms of cultural totality”; Foucault, *Archaeology*, 16.

¹⁵ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and The Discourse on Language*, trans. Alan Sheridan Smith and Rupert Sawyer (New York: Vintage, 2010), 16. The French is “absence de balisage méthodologique”; Michel Foucault, *L’archéologie du savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), 27.

¹⁶ Foucault, *Archaeology*, 16. For a forceful attempt at clarifying *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, see David Webb, *Foucault’s Archaeology: Science and Transformation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013).

¹⁷ Foucault, *Archaeology*, 191. For the sake of brevity I have omitted another series of negative qualifications. The French (Foucault, *Archéologie*, 250) is: “Par épistémè, on entend, en fait, l’ensemble des relations pouvant unir, à une époque donnée, les pratiques discursives qui donnent lieu à des figures épistémologiques, à des sciences, éventuellement à des systèmes formalisés; le mode selon lequel, dans chacune de ces formations discursives, se situent et s’opèrent les passages à l’épistemologisation, à la scientificité, à la formalisation; la répartition de ces seuils, qui peuvent entrer en coïncidence, être subordonnés les uns aux autres, ou être décalés dans le temps; les rapports latéraux qui peuvent exister entre des figures épistémologiques ou des sciences dans la mesure où elles relèvent de pratiques discursives voisines mais distinctes. L’épistémè, [. . .] c’est l’ensemble des relations qu’on peut découvrir, pour une époque donnée, entre les sciences quand on les analyse au niveau des régularités discursives.”

¹⁸ Accessed May 27, 2017.

¹⁹ Johanna Oksala, *Foucault On Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 22.

²⁰ Beatrice Han, *Foucault’s Critical Project: Between the Transcendental and the Historical*, trans. Edward Pile (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 60 and 67.

²¹ David Hyder, “Foucault, Cavaillès, and Husserl on the Historical Epistemology of the Sciences,” in *Science and the Life-World: Essays on Husserl’s Crisis of European Sciences*, ed. Hans-Jörg Rheinberger and David Hyder (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 195.

²² Andreea Smaranda Aldea and Amy Allen, “History, Critique, Freedom: The Historical a Priori in Husserl and Foucault,” *Continental Philosophy Review* 49 (2016): 7.

²³ *Continental Philosophy Review* 49 (2016); e.g., Thomas R. Flynn: “Thus the historical a priori of what counts for knowledge in a certain era is the *episteme* of

that era” (61). Beatrice Han-Pile speaks of “the historical a priori of the Renaissance” and “the historical a priori of the Classical Age” (87), and says that “each historical a priori defined binding epistemically enabling conditions at a given time” (88). Thomas R. Flynn, “Foucault on Experiences and the Historical a Priori: With Husserl in the Rearview Mirror of History,” *Continental Philosophy Review* 49 (2016): 55-65; and Beatrice Han-Pile, “Foucault, Normativity and Critique as Practice of the Self,” *Continental Philosophy Review* 49 (2016): 85-101.

²⁴ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 299.

²⁵ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 381.

²⁶ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*, trans. A. M. Sheridan (London: Routledge, 1976), 192.

²⁷ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 172.

²⁸ Foucault, *Archaeology*, 126. French: “La positivité d’un discours—comme celui de l’histoire naturelle, de l’économie politique, ou de la médecine clinique—en caractérise l’unité à travers le temps, et bien au-delà des œuvres individuelles, des livres et des textes”; Foucault, *Archéologie*, 166.

²⁹ Foucault, *Archaeology*, 126. French: “la mesure selon laquelle Buffon et Linné (ou Turgot et Quesnay, Broussais et Bichat) parlaient de ‘la même chose,’ en se plaçant au ‘même niveau’ ou à ‘la même distance,’ en déployant ‘le même champ conceptuel,’ en s’opposant sur ‘le même champ de bataille’”; Foucault, *Archéologie*, 166.

³⁰ This is why the historical *a priori* also defines the “archive”: it is the principle that allows the historian to treat a series of disparate texts as a single unit, a delimited archive.

³¹ For example, Gérard Lebrun, “Should one forget that ‘historical *a priori*’ is a term which originates with Husserl?” Gérard Lebrun, “Notes on Phenomenology in *Les Mots et les Choses*,” in *Michel Foucault Philosopher*, ed. Timothy Armstrong (Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf), 33.

³² It is very likely that Foucault was familiar with Husserl’s text at an even earlier date: in the 1957 article “La recherche scientifique et la psychologie,” he was already talking about “l’*a priori* conceptuel et historique” of psychology; Michel Foucault, *Dits et écrits I. 1954-1975*. (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 138. I owe the reference to Dermot Moran, “Sinnboden der Geschichte: Foucault and Husserl on the Structural a Priori of History,” *Continental Philosophy Review* 49 (2016): 16. Moran mistakenly attributes the quote to the 1957 “La psychologie de 1850 à 1950.”

³³ Quoted in Benoît Peeters, *Derrida: A Biography*, trans. Andrew Brown. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 129-30. The letter is dated January 27, 1963.

³⁴ There is some difficulty determining the exact chronology here: Foucault apparently had already finished the manuscript for *The Birth of the Clinic* on November 27, 1961 (Foucault, *Dits et écrits I*, 29), which would make his use of Husserl's phrase independent from Derrida's commentary. It may be significant that Merleau-Ponty gave a course about Husserl's *Origin of Geometry* at the Collège de France in 1960. However, Foucault lived in Hamburg at the time of this course, so he cannot have attended it regularly. Whatever the case may be, by the time he wrote *The Order of Things*, Foucault was certainly familiar with Husserl's text.

³⁵ Foucault, *Birth of the Clinic*, 192. French: "L'a priori historique et concret du regard médical moderne"; Michel Foucault, *La naissance de la clinique* (Paris: PUF, 1963), 196.

³⁶ Husserl, in Jacques Derrida, *Edmund Husserl's Origin of Geometry: An Introduction*, trans. John P. Leavey, Jr. (Lincoln: Nebraska University Press, 1989), 174. Husserl's original is "das konkrete historische apriori," Edmund Husserl, *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie: eine Einleitung in die phänomenologische Philosophie* (Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1954), 380; Derrida's French translation is "l'apriori historique concret," Edmund Husserl, 1962, *L'origine de la géométrie*, trans. Jacques Derrida (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1962), 204.

³⁷ Husserl, in Derrida, *Origin of Geometry*, 161.

³⁸ Derrida, *Origin of Geometry*, 169.

³⁹ Derrida, *Origin of Geometry*, 174.

⁴⁰ Derrida, *Origin of Geometry*, 177.

⁴¹ Derrida, *Origin of Geometry*, 177-78.

⁴² Derrida, *Origin of Geometry*, 159: "The same thing is true of every science"; "a genuine history of the particular sciences, is nothing other than the tracing of the historical meaning-structures given in the present, or their self-evidences, along the documented chain of historical back-references into the hidden dimension of the primal self-evidences which underlie them. Even the very problem here can be made understandable only through recourse to the historical a priori as the universal source of all conceivable problems of understanding" (175).

⁴³ Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 4th ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 23, and especially the postscript at 186-90. But for a discussion of Kuhn's ambiguity, see Margaret Masterman, "The Nature of a Paradigm", in *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge*, ed. Imre Lakatos and Alan Musgrave (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 59-90.

⁴⁴ Cf. Foucault, *Archaeology*, 128, where Foucault insists that it would be wrong “to conceive of this historical *a priori* as a formal *a priori* that is also endowed with a history.”

⁴⁵ Hyder, “Foucault, Cavailles, and Husserl,” 195.

⁴⁶ Key works are Kevin Thompson, “History and Transcendentality: Foucault, Cavailles, and the Phenomenology of the Concept,” *History and Theory* 47 (2008): 1-18; Kevin Thompson, “From the Historical *a priori* to the Dispositive: Foucault, the Phenomenological Legacy, and the Problem of Transcendental Genesis,” *Continental Philosophy Review* 49: 41-54; David Hyder, “Foucault, Cavailles and Husserl”; and David Webb, *Foucault’s Archaeology*.

⁴⁷ Thompson, “Historicity and Transcendentality,” 10.

⁴⁸ Jean Cavailles, *Sur la logique et la théorie de la science* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1947), 78; “On Logic and the Theory of Science,” transl. Theodore J. Kisiel in *Phenomenology and the Natural Sciences*, ed. Joseph J. Kockelmans and Theodore J. Kisiel (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 409. Quoted in Thompson, “Historicity and Transcendentality,” 11.

⁴⁹ Cavailles, *Logique et théorie* 78; “Logic and Theory” 409, quoted in Thompson, “Historicity and Transcendentality,” 11.

⁵⁰ See Thompson, “Historicity and Transcendentality,” 6-7, for Foucault’s own (later) view on the distinction between the two types of philosophy. My position is that the distinction only became important for Foucault after *The Order of Things* was finished.

⁵¹ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 172.

⁵² Foucault, *Archaeology*, 127.

⁵³ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 139.

⁵⁴ Foucault, *Archaeology*, 126.

⁵⁵ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 139.

⁵⁶ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 172.

⁵⁷ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 144-46.

⁵⁸ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 146

⁵⁹ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 147-49.

⁶⁰ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 239.

⁶¹ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 299

⁶² Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 275-76.

⁶³ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 306-7.

⁶⁴ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 299.