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Meaning makers make it: Ambivalence about ambiguity in academic discourse

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a broad survey of the uses of ambiguity in academic discourse. I note the uses of ambiguity in literary criticism, linking ambiguity with epistemic relativism. Then I pose the question, is the notion of "reframing" in psychotherapy analogous to the concept of "spin" in propaganda, advertising and public relations? In a consideration of theories that posit the social construction of reality, I examine articles by Judith Butler and Ian Hacking, noting the ambiguous reception of performativity and nominalism, respectively, within academia. In 1996 a physicist named Alan Sokal published an article which argued that reality is a social and linguistic construct. Sokal later revealed that his article was actually an elaborate spoof of postmodernist and social constructionist writing. According to Sokal, such relativistic discourse erodes the distinction between fact and fiction. I look at the implications of Sokal's hoax for the social sciences and humanities.

Preface

> It is the nature of an intellectual quest to be undefined. To name it and to define it is to wrap it up and tie the knot. What is left? (Jean Paul Sartre, *Search for a Method*, 1963)
>
> What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, p. 74).
>
> "When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean, neither more nor less."
> "The question is," said Alice, "whether you *can* make words mean so many different things."
> "The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master - that's all"
> (Lewis Caroll, quoted in Carmichael, 1968, p. 153).

In this thesis I would like to apply the concept of strategic ambiguity (Eisenberg, 1984, 2007) to the subject of academic discourse in the social sciences and humanities. I will entertain two contradictory views of ambiguity: The first assessment is mostly positive: ambiguity in academic writing (as found in postmodernism, cultural studies, and communication theory, etc.) allows for an interpretive richness that inspires the imagination like the best poetry and literature. The hermeneutician Hans Georg Gadamer writes: "To leave an enormous amount open seems to me the essence of a fruitful fable and myth" (1975, p. 498). The literary theorist Philip Wheelwright (1954) coined the "principle of plurisignation" (p. 61) and the "principle of soft focus" (p. 62) in order to defend the uses of ambiguity in literature.

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The second assessment of ambiguity is more wary and conflicted: that when applied to academic theory, ambiguity might run the risk of what R.D. Laing (1965) terms "mystification." By mystification, Laing means an activity of befuddling, clouding, obscuring or masking the issues (1965, p. 200). I am concerned that certain types of academic discourses may serve this latter purpose. I am aware that obscurantism or obfuscation is a serious accusation to make, therefore I want to stress the tentative, speculative, and provisional pretext of this thesis. Here are a few of the sites of ambiguity that I hope to address:

1) *Excessive verbosity or jargon*: Eric Eisenberg (1984) notes that jargon can constitute an exclusionary code that only some individuals are privy to (p. 233). In an alleged criticism of jargon, Peter Berger and Hansfried Kellner write (without any hint of irony) that they are not convinced that "theoretical lucidity is necessarily enhanced by terminological ponderosity" (1964, p. 219). In this thesis I will cite specific examples where run on sentences and esoteric terminology might amount to an exclusionary practice.

2) *Epistemic relativism*: In this thesis I will discuss relativism in the context of strategic ambiguity. It seems to me the statement "its all relative" means never having to be pinned down. While "plausible deniability" (Eisenberg, 2007) might be advantageous for some scholars, it could be problematic when clear distinctions are required between fact and fiction. (For example, in investigative journalism, criminal justice, etc).

3) *Scientistic or pseudo-scientific analogies*: Sometimes, social scientists will invoke the rhetoric of science to inculcate an aura of objectivity and uncontestable fact. This is a criticism often leveled against quantitative and positivist social science. Yet it also can be applied to those theorists who (for example) invoke Heisenberg's indeterminacy principle to argue for observer dependant observations in social science, or those who apply Einstein's theory of general relativity to argue for relativity in general. As I hope to show, sometimes it appears that theoretical physics is invoked to imply some sort of scientific mandate for confusion and ambiguity.

In the tradition of performative writing (Pollock, 1998) this thesis largely eschews traditional academic writing style based on argumentative models. I will not attempt to 'prove' any pet hypothesis. Instead, I have juxtaposed citations and let them interact on the page, resonating in a free association of meanings. I try to draw the readers attention to resonances and dissonances in texts, and in an attempt at Socratic irony I will raise questions about them in a diplomatic way. I leave it to my reader to as to whether or not strategic ambiguity is being employed.

This thesis is intended less as a polemic than as a survey of a variety of interconnected topics. I intend to broadly survey a number of different theoretical and epistemological perspectives in the social sciences and humanities. These intellectual postures, such as antirepresentationalism, antifoundationalism, postpositivism and postmodernism, are not synonymous but are interrelated and I intend to discuss their places of overlap. To attempt a taxonomy of these perspectives as stable, discrete

philosophical positions would be like affixing post-its onto transitory breezes. They are by their own wily definition, hard to pin down.

I will focus on the overarching theme of *ambiguity* in social science and the humanities. Broadly defined, I think that ambiguity is useful in characterizing polysemic meaning in human communication. William Empson (1947) defines ambiguity as "any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language" (p. 1). Where Empson is famous for his seven types of ambiguity, I prefer to let ambiguity retain a broad, ambiguous definition. I use similar (though not identical) synonyms for ambiguity interchangeably, such as vagueness, indeterminacy and doubt. What I would like to point out in Empson's definition is the spatial analogy. Namely, ambiguity "gives room," some range of movement, to meanings.

Besides its application in literary theory, ambiguity can also be very useful in therapy and mental health. Techniques like reframing (Watzlawick, 1974; Bandler & Grinder, 1982; Burns, 1999), can be wonderful for helping to overcome a depressed mood. Reframing helps a therapeutic client see that meanings are not set in stone, and there are a number of ways of looking at things. For cognitive behavioral therapist David Burns (1999), reframing implies semantic elasticity when considering events and mental states. Using the example of anxiety about public speaking, Burns (1999) suggests that trait apprehension should be viewed as a *positive* force of energy which can enhance a speech (p. 317) instead of a *negative* source of embarrassment. Reframing is a concept that deals with the element of volition involved in the enigmatic interplay between cognition, affect, and behavior. With reframing, advantage can be taken of ambiguities in a situation to suggest different interpretations and demonstrate that meaning is a flexible thing.

But what about a situation where more literal meanings are preferable? For example, in matters of health and safety, a consumer might want a minimum of equivocation from the manufacturer about the utility of their product. When drug company Eli Lilly's patent on the drug Prozac (fluoxetine) ran out, they 'reframed' or re-branded the product as Sarafem, for the treatment of "premenstrual dysphoric disorder" ("FDA approves fluoxetine" 2000). Critics have argued that such rebranding of a product constitutes a transparent profit motive on the part of the manufacturer and a medicalization of a symptom that is not essentially pathological (Spartos, 2000; Rubin, 2004).

In a rhetorical analysis of the marketing of psychotropic drugs, Lawrence Rubin (2004) argues that drug companies use broad, ambiguous definitions of mental illness to better market their products. Rubin (2004) writes about:

> the blurring of boundaries between discomforts of daily living and psychiatric symptomatology to the point that both can be equally and efficiently remedied through mass-marketed products (p. 369).

The example of brain medicines has been used to suggest how ambiguity might be used in a manipulative way. What is it that essentially constitutes a medical condition? Where a broad, ambiguous definition prevails in consumer consciousness, unscrupulous marketing finds an opportunity. While it is appreciated in literary criticism, therapeutic techniques, and communication theory, I wonder if ambiguity could also be used for disinformation or mass deception when it enters the public sphere of advertising, public relations, and propaganda.

A declassified 1969 memo from a tobacco company suggests how public relations might use doubt, confusion, and ambiguity to deceive the public about the dangers of smoking. In part, the memo reads:

> Doubt is our product since it is the best means of competing with the 'body of fact' that exists in the mind of the general public (quoted in Michaels, 2005).

This quote has been used to suggest how the indeterminacy of meaning might serve various ends. A margin of ambiguity, in some cases, might interfere with the effective transmission of a message. Admittedly, this goes against the prevailing disdain for the transmission model of communication (Condit, 2006).

In another, similar example, a *New York Times* article reports on a Republican lobbyist who wants to accentuate a small margin of doubt about global warming within the scientific consensus. In a practically postmodern fashion, this *apparatchik* of pollution would like to cultivate a distrust towards scientific truth claims. He wants to seize on whatever ambiguity still exists about the causality of anthropogenic climate change:

> Most scientists believe that [global] warming is caused largely by manmade pollutants that require strict regulation. Mr. Luntz [a lobbyist for the Republicans] seems to acknowledge as much when he says that "the scientific debate is closing against us." His advice, however, is to emphasize that the evidence is not complete. "Should the public come to believe that the scientific issues are settled," he writes, "their views about global warming will change accordingly. Therefore, you need to continue to make the *lack of scientific certainty* a primary issue (quoted in Latour, 2004).

This quote suggests to me how doubt and uncertainty may be used to advance dubious political agendas. A spin doctor wants to blur the distinction between truth and falsehood, and ambiguity, doubt and uncertainty are in his toolkit. For a spin doctor who is obliged

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to doubt scientific consensus about global warming, the existence of a few assertions contrary to scientific hegemony can be nursed into public skepticism. Ironically, as scientific data mounts and academic papers get published, there may be more opportunities to exploit semantic ambiguity in the public mind. For the republican lobbyist Luntz, the sheer volume of academic evidence on climate change increases the likelihood of any dissenting opinions.

There is, nowadays, such a sheer volume of knowledge that perhaps the increased incidence of ambiguity is likely. Ernest Becker (1973) wrote that "knowledge is in a state of useless overproduction...it is strewn all over the place, spoken in a thousand competitive voices" (p. xviii). Since Becker's deathbed lament, academic production has only increased exponentially. With the advent of mass literacy in there is an incredible amount of knowledge out there, in the form of countless academic papers, and it is difficult to zoom out for macro perspectives. With fracturing and specialization in the so-called human sciences I wonder if there might be a certain amount of reinventing the wheel, as truisms about the relativity of knowledge come to be called by various nomenclature. I believe that, in my own institution, the fact that speech communication, mass communication, and humanities are taught in different departments constitutes an unfortunate fracturing of knowledge. Many insights between these fields are complementary, yet disciplinary sectarianism sometimes inhibits the sharing of knowledge. My goal is not to cling too tightly to any particular discipline, label or theory. Often, insights are translatable between disciplines or discursive schemes, and the jargon that co-describes phenomena serve as interdisciplinary stepping stones.

Often I will examine literature from outside of the communication field, such as philosophy, historiography, linguistics and others, in an attempt at pluralism. Stanley Deetz (1993) is wary of "shallow interdisciplinarity" (p. 571) in the communication field. Deetz cites George Kelly's notion of "accumulative fragmentalism" and also Clifford Geertz, who calls interdisciplinary eclecticism a "sterile exoticism... cosmopolitan without context" (quoted in Deetz, 1993, p. 570). For Deetz, interdisciplinary adventures interfere with the development of communication as a coherent discipline. Other communication theorists, such as Art Bochner and Eric Eisenberg (1985) argue that the demand for coherence may actually engender division within the communication field. For Bochner and Eisenberg "No field of knowledge has ever been able to settle on a final set of terms under which all its inquiry could be subsumed" (1985, p. 315). While I would like to avoid shallow interdisciplinarity and heed the concerns of Deetz, I am more inclined to agree with Bochner and Eisenberg, who argue that academic specialization is a result of careerism and social conflicts, *not* epistemological mandates (Bochner & Eisenberg, 320). I think that the will to a discrete discipline is symptomatic of a fracturing and sectarianism in academia.

No doubt the phenomena of academic specialization has many practical reasons for existing. A 'top-down' aggregation of the social sciences and humanities is an unwieldy proposition. There are also, surely, careerist considerations here, because academia tends to reward intensive knowledge and discount extensive knowledge. The branching out of subdisciplines is a path of less resistance for academic knowledge. Subject matters are accorded congruence according to their 'thingness' or *object* of study. Therefore, the academy has fields with intensive focus, and cross comparisons between disciplines are

liable to be deemed cursory and uniformed. It is unseemly for a lay observer to comment on a field outside of her or his expertise. Wittgenstein's closing injunction of the *Tractatus* rings in our ears; if you are uniformed, pipe down. Knowledge, flowing and associative, balls up like beads of mercury.

Interdisciplinary studies is to me a worthy ideal, although in terms of an academic career it may be a road strewn with obstacles. Personally, I am interested in ideas that don't necessarily fall into any one discipline, such as feminist theory, historical materialism, pragmatism, cybernetics, family systems, cognitive theory, intellectual history, ethnography, etc. I appreciate the field of communication because, more than any other discipline I know, it is pluralistic. Woolbert said in 1923 that he wanted communication to be the widest of all possible academic programs (Bochner and Eisenberg, p. 305). The pluralism of my discipline has allowed me the range of movement needed to recombine interdisciplinary insights.

The historical background of this thesis is the "crisis of representation in the human sciences" (Marcus & Fischer, 1986) and the challenges to representational epistemology raised by postmodernism. A related concept is the "linguistic turn" (Rorty, 1967; Palmer, 1990; Anderson, 1995) that can be associated with postmodernism. To summarize, postmodernism notes the constitutive power of language, and as such it offers a different view of truth and reality than did modern perspectives. To crudely reduce this infinitely complex intellectual issue, I would say that for postmodernism and the linguistic turn, language doesn't just represent reality, it makes it. In the words of one commentator, with the linguistic turn, "we come to see that no truths are, so to speak, untouched by human hands" (Anderson, 1995, p. 9).

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My concern is that the concept of "truth," while it may be epistemologically problematic to some, still serves a useful normative function in the struggle against disinformation, false flags, and various other contemporary incarnations of bullshit. From the outset I would like to state that my sympathies are with skepticism, hypotheticism, and the interpretive license allowed by my chosen discipline, communication. Yet I am also, in principle if not in praxis, a latent empiricist, probably owing to the influence of my parents who are social scientists. When Alan Sokal's (1996) hoax on the postmodern establishment became public, I remember my father pumping his fist in vindication. My academic mission is diplomacy between positivism and postmodern positions. I loathe to savage postmodernism with the snooty indignance, of, say, Roger Kimball (1998), yet I confess to winsome nostalgia for the old representational model.

The science wars (Koertge, 1998; The Editors of Lingua Franca, 2000; Hacking, 1999) refer to a rather public eruption of animosity between so-called postmodernists and their foes. As postmodern tenets became increasingly institutionalized in the late twentieth century, certain shrill voices maintained that the emperor's luxurious new fabric was nothing but a birthday suit. The science wars evince a rather flagrant wardrobe malfunction between discursive regimes. There is plenty of surplus hot air in the science wars. It appears to be a domain loaded with bluster but sometimes lacking in sincere dialogue. The bombardment of hyperbole leaves a battlefield littered with eviscerated straw men. Instead of taking sides and holding on for dear life I have been carried to and fro on each polemical gust with bemused detachment (Eisenberg, 2007). My goal is not to decide between realism or relativism, if that dualism is even valid. Instead, I am interested in the rhetorical strategy of casting doubt on received knowledge. To be

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purposefully enigmatic is to leave open the possibility of interpretation and dialogue. Who benefits when, in the interests of full disclosure, a theory lays bare its parameters? There is a political utility in being ambiguous, and I wonder if some kinds of academic discourses resist cohesion by being willfully vague.

Sometimes in this thesis I will try on a position for size, and for the sake of argument, play devil's advocate, as it were. For me there is very little that is holy writ, absolutely beyond reproach. While the communication discipline has nourished my intellectual growth, to paraphrase Nietzsche, one repays a teacher poorly by remaining a student. In his *Prolegomena* Immanuel Kant has written "Human reason so delights in building that it has several times built up a tower and then razed it to see how the foundation was laid" (1950, p. 4). Karl Popper's (1965) notion of hypotheticism suggests that a discursive regime will endure the sometimes probing criticism that tries to unseat it. A tolerance for ambiguity might want to have at least a passing interest in the hyperbolic claims made by its worst critics. Communication theory should interrogate its own implicit assumptions, and it is with that in mind that I offer this survey.

A Preview

In what follows I will preview this document. This thesis aims to consider

philosophical questions about epistemology. First, I will look at assertions made by

Gregory Bateson, Kenneth Burke, Jacques Derrida, and Eric Eisenberg about the

importance of context and the strategic uses of ambiguity. Included in this discussion are

the quaint claims of logical positivism. Next, I will examine the history of indeterminacy,

perspectivism, and ambiguity, in a discussion of Anaximander of Miletus, Freidrich

Nietzsche and others. This is not meant to be an exhaustive history, only a cursory

sampling as it is relevant to my broader concerns. Then, I will look at the suggestion, by

Nietzsche, Theodor Adorno, Michel Foucault, Eisenberg and others, that the will to

certainty is akin to totalitarianism. Such a suggestion posits ambiguity as a political tool

in resisting authoritarian demands.

After that, I introduce the notion of reframing, which suggests a certain malleability of

meaning. While I note the uses of reframing in a therapeutic setting, I also wonder if

reframing could be used for the purpose of 'spin.' Then I will quote Richard Rorty,

Donald Davidson and others in their philosophical defense of relativism. Following that, I

look at the relational view of communication as advanced by Celeste Condit. Next, I

introduce Peter Berger and Hanfried Luckmann, two theorists who argued for the social

construction of reality. I consider the hypothesis that what people sometimes assume to

be 'real' is actually a social construct, and I point out some of the uses of this approach. Here, I am interested in how doubt is cast on certainty, and how unexamined assumptions are called into question.

In a further exploration of constructionist approaches, I look at two theorists, Judith Butler and Ian Hacking. These theorists argue persuasively that gender and child abuse, respectively, are social constructs. I try to point out those places in the texts where Butler and Hacking may may contradict themselves. Having suggested the possible limits of the constructionist position, I introduce Alan Sokal, a physicist with no training in social science or the humanities. Sokal is notorious for having a wordy spoof of postmodernism published in a leading cultural studies journal, *Social Text*, back in 1996. Among other things, Sokal argued that gravity was a linguistic construct. The Sokal scandal, which signaled the high water mark in the science wars, serves as a way to discuss epistemological issues raised thus far. Sokal teamed up with a Belgian colleague, Jean Bricmont, to publish a book length explanation of his hoax, entitled *Fashionable Nonsense* (1998). This book claims to be a defense of scientific realism and a critique of postmodernism. What the book lacks in subtlety it makes up for in vitriol and bite sized didacticism. While highly problematic, this is still a very important book for me, because it manages to explain complicated issues of science criticism within an easily understood heuristic of 'realism versus relativism.' Sokal and Bricmont claim that analogies from theoretical physics are sometimes erroneously employed by so-called postmodern theorists. This serves as an opportunity to look at analogies from physics in the writings of Bateson, Fritof Capra, and others. Sokal and Bricmont's survey of relativism introduces the ideas of Karl Popper, Thomas Kuhn, and others, which I use as an

occasion to discover these thinkers and chart the ideas in the philosophy of science. Finally I will introduce a self refuting axiom that "everything is relative, including relativism." In conclusion, I argue for a measured approach when deciding between epistemological binaries such as realism versus relativism.

Introduction: The Territory Precedes the Map

Critics of philosophy sometimes complain that it is overly contemplative. In a book

called *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, the Marxist critic Terry Eagleton (1996) sees the

preoccupation with epistemology as symptomatic of political retreat. About the political

left's interest in epistemology, Eagleton (1996) writes:

> ...it would take rather less than a cynic to suspect that some of this morbid
> fascination might well be a form of political displacement. Talk of whether the
> signifier produces the signified or vice versa, valuable though it doubtless is, is
> not quite what stormed the Winter Palace or brought down the Heath
> government (p. 13).

For Eagleton, epistemological concerns are faulted for rarely tackling concrete

political issues. Ever since Marx argued that the point is to change the world instead of

merely interpret it (Russell, 1959, p. 271), an interest in philosophical questions has been

regarded as akin to quietism. This is sometimes a criticism leveled against

postmodernism (Ebert, 1996; Nussbaum, 1999; Sokal & Bricmont, 1998), and it is a

charge that is worthy of consideration. Issues of philosophy can be seen as somehow

trivial, ephemeral or superstructural when compared to such realities as social inequality,

racism, imperial warfare, etc. Yet it is interesting to note that Marxists have historically

been invested in philosophical problems. For example, V.I Lenin (1970 [1927]) wrote a

prodigious defense of materialist philosophy, and Chairman Mao's legacy today appears

to be as an expositor of dialectics for communication theory (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). The fact that these Marxist honchos were so sincerely concerned with philosophical matters might contradict Eagleton's equation of epistemology with political retreat.

I chose the discipline of communication because it seemed to me to offer more concern for lived reality than did the more formal discipline of philosophy. I have been interested in philosophy for a while. My copy of Kant's *Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysics* has "David Lee, 1987" written on the inside jacket. Often, my father, a materialist anthropologist, criticizes me for what he feels is an effete, overly contemplative interest in philosophy and a lack of concern for material reality. Philosophy, my dad points out, is a field born of socioeconomic subjugation. Ancient Greece, a slave society, created opportunities for mental contemplation previously unrealized in more egalitarian modes of production. Philosophy is a discourse born of the subjugation of others.

I have always been troubled by my father's categorical objections to philosophy, and I don't want to dismiss them outright. The abstraction of philosophy is undoubtedly born of privilege, a privilege for which I am very grateful for. Yet there are many notable occasions in the human tale where philosophy descends from its ivory tower to interact in the rough and tumble world of others. The field of communication is, in a way, a field of applied philosophy. It takes insights gained from philosophy and tries them out in the practical world, bringing together theory and practice (e.g. Knapp & Daly, 2002; Frey, Botan, Friedman & Kreps, 1991; Sheppard, St. John & Stiphas, 2006; Anderson, Baxter & Cissna, 2004; Goffman, 1967). Communication is a field where ideas leave the realm

of pure abstraction and interact in the interrelational, intersubjective world where other people reside.

The injunction, commanded by critics of contemplation, to 'just do it' seems to invite rashness and unreflective intervention. Don't think about taking action; just *do* something, goes the activist refrain. With respect to philosophical consideration, we can invert the saying to read, don't just do something, stand there. Ignorant of past instances of thoughtful consideration, I might wander up a blind alley that had already been mapped. While theory ideally should include equal parts practice, I think that practice devoid of theory risks blundering into the world of others without sufficient reflexive mandate. The mistakes of the past, doomed to be repeated. The cringing failures of Marxist regimes in the 20th century serves as a backdrop. While I don't want to totally retreat from the material world into a realm of pure ideas, I believe that any activism should be reflective and interrogate its own assumptions occasionally. This hedges against dogmatism and fanaticism (Eisenberg, 2007). In what follows I will suggest that, instead of being trivial, discussions of knowledge, truth, and epistemology have vast political consequences.

Epistemology is at least a several millennia old conversation, and there are any number of ways to break into it. From the point of view of the communication discipline, let us begin with a canonical figure who provoked epistemological questions with everything he did. Gregory Bateson has a wonderfully recursive writing style that always contain playful epistemological investigations, weather his stated topic is schizophrenia, metacommunication, or whale language. Bateson's uncanny ability to force people to think differently can happen to a reader wherever they may enter the conversation. Open

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to any page in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (1972) and one can be introduced to puzzling

epistemological questions wherever Bateson happens to be.

In 1969, Bateson gave a paper in Hawaii, entitled "Pathologies of Epistemology."

Standing at the podium, he addressed those in attendance with the following question:

> Let me ask you for a show of hands. How many of you will agree that *you see me*? I see a number of hands—so I guess insanity loves company. Of course, *you* don't "really" see *me*. What you "see" is a bunch of pieces of information about me, which you synthesize into a picture of me. You make that image. Its that simple (in Bateson, 1972: p. 486).

Most people assume that their sense data provides an accurate representation of the

material world. For Bateson, such naive realism is a sort of insanity. What people take to

be an unadulterated apprehension of reality is really a complex perceptual and

biophysical process. Rays of light hit an object which makes an impression on a retina,

which is converted into binary neurological pulses, which is contrasted differentially with

other such codes in memory banks, etc. Bateson says "You make the image, its that

simple" yet the process he alludes to is complex. In most of his writings, Bateson will go

out of his way to question commonly held views and trouble the commonly held

representational standpoint. Bateson's examples will be used throughout this thesis to

suggest the normative fictions implicit within distinctions (such as reality and its

representations, signifiers and their signifieds, fact and fiction, etc.).

Going back over Bateson's writings over the years, I am impressed by his stoic

tolerance for an ambiguous world where representations don't replicate their objects with

any particular fidelity. What is commonly regarded as given facts are to Bateson like a

reflexive hall of funhouse mirrors. For an earlier example, Bateson has alluded to

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epistemological issues besetting the human sciences in his (1972 [1954]) essay "A Theory of Play and Fantasy." According to Bateson, we humans often mistake our representations of things for the objects themselves. Bateson (1972 [1954]) explains this problematic thusly:

> We all too often respond automatically to newspaper headlines as though these stimuli were direct object indications of events in our environment instead of signals concocted and transmitted by creatures as complexly motivated as ourselves (p. 178).

In this view, something like a newspaper article should not be uncritically received as an unmediated replication of reality. This insight is congruent with the General Semantics movement, whose journals Bateson often published in (M.C Bateson, 1999: p. xi). Centered around philosopher of science Alfred Korzybski, General Semantics is associated with the truism that the map should be distinguished from the territory (Bateson, 1972, p. 180). Just as a map is not the same as the territory it denotes, so is language to be distinguished from the phenomena it represents. The map-territory relation is expressed in the humorous injunction "don't eat the menu." Representations are not mirror images of reality, but are abstractions, dependent on the position, biases, and selectivity of the observer. As such, the 'truth' of a phenomenon is hard to obtain. When referring to things, we should occasionally remind ourselves that we are referring to our linguistic constructs and not the things themselves. Korzybski (1973 [1933]) contrasted linear, either/or Aristotelian logic with so-called non-Aristotelian logic which emphasized relationality and reflexivity. Korzybski insists on distinguishing the world from our

linguistic constructs of it. Although he is perhaps an obscure figure, Korzybski is

probably a predecessor of Bateson, as well as postmodern perspectives.

The Map Precedes the Territory

Yet what if there are only linguistic constructs, and no things themselves? The recently deceased theorist Jean Baudrillard, regarded as a sage of postmodernism, will further problematize the map/territory analogy. In his oracular description of "hyperreality" Baudrillard (1988) writes:

> The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. Henceforth, it is the map that precedes the territory...the age of simulation thus begins with a liquidation of all referentials (p. 167).

For Baudrillard, not only is the map to be distinguished from the territory, but the original referent upon which the map was based is an abstraction, indistinguishable from its simulations. This quote captures a theme in postmodern discourse. While in empiricist epistemology, absolute or essential knowledge about things was hard to obtain, now it seems altogether out of the question. This type of philosophical perspective leads to a hairline fracture in the monolith of empirical, logical and scientific inquiry.

"Signature Event Context" by Jacques Derrida (1991) is a deconstructive reading of Étienne Bonnot de Condillac, Edmund Husserl, and, to a greater extent, J.L Austin. In what follows, I will use this essay to discuss the epistemological problematics of postmodernism. Derrida comments on the map-territory relation, using different terminology. Derrida mentions "the problem of polysemia" (p. 83) which means that a

text can have multiple meanings. Polysemia is implicated in a process that, it seems to me, is associated with ambiguity. For Derrida, as for structural linguistics (Culler, 1976) there are no absolute meanings for words. The definitions of words themselves depend on other definitions, which depend on others, ad infinitum. The sun is 'very bright' only according to the comparison we can make. To someone on Pluto, a very bright sun might look like a 40-watt bulb. Words can also mean different things depending on how they are arranged in a sentence. It seems that for Derrida, writing is something easily taken out of context as it is quoted and cited. In the process of such transposition, the original meaning of a text is not preserved. Where naive models of communication posit a simple transmission of meaning, Derrida points out that this is actually a very mediated, negotiated process.

Étienne Bonnot de Condillac was an 18th century empiricist philosopher who wrote "Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge." For Condillac, language was a process of truncation, which nevertheless preserved the original meaning of things. For Condillac, language could abbreviate ideas without undue alteration of their meanings. In such a representational view of language, writing has the ability to transmit meaning unabbreviated. Summarizing this view, Derrida (1991) writes:

> The history of writing will conform to a law of mechanical economy: to gain the most space and time by means of the most convenient abbreviation; it will never have the least effect on the structure and content of the meaning (of ideas) that it will have to vehiculate (p. 86).

For Condillac, language is a one to one representation of things. Derrida (1991) italicizes words in Condillac's essay that reveal his rhetorical strategy. Words like *simple, simply*

and *succinct* show how Condillac saw representational strategies as a natural progression from pictographs to the written word. By highlighting these words, Derrida suggests that Condillac's discourse is one of simplification, omission, and absence. "…this absence is never examined by Condillac" (1991, p. 88). For Derrida there is no neat, linear progression from ideas to writing. Like Bateson, Derrida points out how there is no simple correspondence between ideas and their representations. For Derrida, absence is a feature of *all* writing (1991, p. 88). Similarly, for Bateson and Ruesch (1951), codification is a process of omission. In their discussion of the figure/ground phenomenon, Bateson and Ruesch (1951) show that the ability to perceive relies on the inhibition of gratuitous sense data. Perception, or the mental representation of sensory information, relies on absence.

Condillac wants to "retrace" the progress of writing back to some originary presence, according to Derrida (1991). Instead, for Derrida, every sign "supposes a certain absence" (1991, p. 89). A written text takes on a life of its own, and the original context becomes lost. "A written sign is proffered in the absence of an addressee" (Derrida, 1991, p. 90). In writing, the audience is not known, but still the message must be legible, or iterable. "All writing, therefore, in order to be what it is, must be able to function in the radical absence of every empirically determined addressee in general" (Derrida, 1991, p. 91). In this view representation is a break; a "death" of presence. Writing continues to function as a code even in the event that no one is left who can read it. The text is like an automaton that keeps signifying even after the author is long gone. Unlike mental representations, writing continues to act even after the non-presence of the author. The importance of Derrida's essay here is to suggest that, in the distinction between map and

territory, the map may take on a life of its own. The territory, meanwhile, is nowhere to be found.

Derrida (1991) describes writing as "an iterative structure cut off from any absolute responsibility…" (p. 92). Interesting that the founder of Western philosophy, Socrates, disliked writing, because it lacked the accountability of oral dialogue. This is what Derrida is referencing when he mentions the *Phaedrus* dialogue of Plato (1991, p. 92). With writing, meanings are not transmitted unmediated from consciousness to consciousness. Derrida writes:

> …a written sign carries with it a force of breaking with its context, that is, the set of presences which organize the moment of its inscription. This force of breaking is not an accidental predicate, but the very structure of the written (1991, pp. 92-93).

Bateson often emphasizes the importance of context, but according to Derrida, writing, by definition, *breaks* with context. Writing can always be copied and pasted into new contexts. No context can enclose it. In a discussion of Husserl, Derrida notes that a statement can be possible without its referent (1991, p. 94). This could be compared to Baudrillard's claim that the map precedes the territory. Derrida looks at ambiguous phrases that lack grammatical meaning, such as "green is or" and "abracadabra" (1991, p. 97). To Derrida, such statements are nonsensical because of intentionality, or "will to know" (1991, p. 96). But Derrida shows that a statement like "le vert est ou" can still be connotative, depending on how the words are spelled (1991, p. 97). Derrida is trying to show that all writing is subject to "citational grafting" (p. 97). Derrida, and the

deconstructive ethos he spawned, seeks to trouble the relationship between signifier and signified; map and territory.

Martin Heidegger, an intellectual predecessor of Derrida and deconstruction, liked to create enigmatic sentences. Heidegger's (1977) sentences, taken out of context, such as "Being is always the Being of a being" (p. 50) and "The Being of beings 'is' not a being" (p. 46) are puzzling and appear nonsensical. Such ambiguous sentences were presumably intended to connote how language fails to describe the mystery of existence. Arguably, such convoluted sentences could also constitute a maddening obscurantism. For Heidegger, language was unable to access originary presence.

J.L Austin was a 20th century philosopher of language. Austin's (1962) notion of "illocutionary acts" is sometimes cited in contemporary theory (Butler, 1993, 1997; Searle, 1995) to demonstrate that language does more than just state the facts. For Austin, language does not merely represent the world, but it performs a certain kind of action. Derrida (1991) introduces Austin in order to explore the differences between writing and speech. In an appreciative assessment of Austin, Derrida (1991) writes:

> …it could appear that Austin has exploded the concept of communication as a purely semiotic, linguistic, or symbolic concept. The performative is a 'communication' which does not essentially limit itself to transporting an already constituted semantic content guarded by its own aiming at truth…(p. 98).

Austin can be seen as an early critic of the transmission model of communication. Austin objected to the citation of performative utterances, which he felt destroyed the original context within which a statement was made. Austin saw citation as an abnormal, parasitical process, best to be avoided (Derrida, 1991, p. 103). Yet it seems that for

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Derrida citationality is unavoidable. Performative or illocutionary acts are subject to the same citability as texts. As long as such speech acts are iterable, or repeatable, then they are works of indeterminate context. Derrida

asks:

> Could a performative statement succeed if its formulation did not repeat a 'coded' or iterable statement, in other words, if the expressions I use to open a meeting, launch a ship or marriage were not identifiable as conforming to an iterative model, and therefore if they were not identifiable in a way as 'citation'? (p. 104).

For Derrida, speech acts, being iterable statements, are also subject to citationality, as is the written word.

Derrida's essay has been summarized here in order to give a certain flavor of the postmodern zeitgeist. For Derrida, as well as the postmodern sentiment that elevates his ideas to orthodoxy, the space between reality/ representation and territory/ map is troubled. 'Reality' is at least ambiguous, because representations are liable to have been taken out of context in the process of iteration. Citationality is like a game of broken telephone where meaning is transformed at every step along the way. For someone who maintains that intended meaning is hard to grasp, the writings of Derrida are regarded as notoriously difficult. For me the fabled "sliding of the signifier" paints a mental image of a slippery eel that is hard to hold. Sometimes I wonder if Derrida emphasis on *absence* might be at the expense of a normative myth that communication can even take place.

Frankly, I also wish that Derrida used plainer language. If his point is that 'everything can be taken out of context,' this strikes me as a truism, and I wonder if the point might have been better made heeding the principle of that 14th-century Franciscan friar,

William of Ockham, who stated *"entities should not be multiplied beyond necessity"* (Burke, 1954, pp. 80-81). If Derrida's point is that 'everything is *always already* taken out of context' then I wonder how can we evaluate between citations. Can some citations be *more* representative of a thinker than others, or does citationality, by definition, destroy the possibility of a faithful transmission of meaning? The fact that Derrida argues his point using citations from other thinkers is another puzzling contradiction.

I hesitate to criticize Derrida, whose philosophy of deconstruction informs so much research in the humanities and social sciences. By raising questions about Derrida, I risk being lumped in with outspoken right wing critics of postmodernism, the likes of which I would rather distance myself from. For Roger Kimball (1998), Derrida was evasive when it was revealed that Paul de Man (a proponent of deconstruction) published anti-Semitic articles in the early 1940s. In a book called *Higher Superstition*, Paul Gross and Norman Levitt (1994) claim that deconstruction has an "ambiguous reputation" because of its "epistemological pessimism" (p. 76). Gross and Levitt (1994) are rabid in their bid to destruct deconstruction:

> Deconstruction holds that truly meaningful utterance is impossible, that language is ultimately *impotent*....Strings of words, whether on the page or in our heads, have at best a shadowy and unstable relation to reality. In fact "reality" is itself a mere construct, the persistent but illusory remnant of the Western metaphysical tradition. There is no reality outside the text, but texts themselves are vertiginously unstable, inherently self contradictory and self canceling (p. 76, Italics added).

Gross and Levitt illustrate the process of citationality beautifully. Derrida's nuanced theories are caricatured, then burned in effigy. Their quote illustrates the fervor of backlash against postmodernism generally and deconstruction in particular. Gross and

Levitt threw their hats into the ring early on during the so-called science wars. They represent the first wave of books that loudly proclaim that all this deconstruction business had gone far enough. Notice the phallocentric anxiety in their quote above, when they equate deconstruction with erectile dysfunction.

Bateson: Positivist or Postmodernist?

Like Derrida, Bateson emphasizes difference in a way that could make him herald the coming of deconstruction. Bateson defined "information" as "any difference which makes a difference" (1972, pp. 381). Yet there is another sense in which Bateson could be seen as beholding to postmodernism's passé antecedent, positivism. Specifically, Bateson is fond of Bertrand Russell's Theory of Logical Types as a means of distinguishing between levels of abstraction in statements (1972, p. 180). Russell is associated with analytical thinkers in the tradition of British empiricism, as well as logical positivism. Does this make Bateson a positivist?

To be sure, positivism is an ambiguous term which has become a scapegoat for everything that postmodernists wish to distance themselves from. But what is it exactly that people reference when they invoke positivism in the negative; as term of derision? According to Bertrand Russell (1959), positivism is a term derived from the August Comte, who created a positive philosophy grounded in sensory experience (p. 274). Comte saw philosophy as a holdover from metaphysics, which he would replace with a "science of man" he christened as "sociology" (Russell, 1959, p. 275). Logical positivism, a special instance of positivism, was a product of the Vienna Circle theorists such as Schlick, Neurath, and Carnap (Russell, 1959, p. 306). Like Comte, the logical positivists rejected metaphysics and held that science provides the sum total of human

knowledge (Russell, 1959, p. 306). When people invoke positivism in the negative, it is probably meant as an animadversion of scientism.

According to A.J Ayer, in his exposition of logical positivism called *Language, Truth, and Logic* (1946), any statement that is not empirically verifiable can be consigned to the realm of metaphysical nonsense (p. 31). Yet Ayer's dismissal, along with Wittgenstein's (1961 [1921]) killjoy injunction at the closing of his *Tractatus*, "What we cannot speak about must be passed over in silence" (p. 74) has not deterred the exponential production of academic discourse. For positivism, unless meaning can be verified, one must clam up. For deconstruction, meaning is polysemic and can never be transmitted exactly, so a vow of silence is besides the point. Unlike postmodern and relational (Condit, 2006) approaches, an empiricist or positivist epistemology presumes a stable relationship between the map and territory, or between words and the things they represent. For the early Wittgenstein, if certain words in a sentence lacked a universally agreed upon definition, the entire sentence should be stricken from the record. In the closing stanzas of the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein (1961 [1921]) writes:

> The correct method in philosophy would really be the following: to say nothing except what can be said, i.e. propositions of natural science —i.e. something that has nothing to do with philosophy— and then, whenever someone else wanted to say something metaphysical, to demonstrate to him that he had failed to give a meaning to certain signs in his propositions (pp. 73-74, 6.44).

For the early Wittgenstein, any statement in philosophy which lacked the deductive rigor of scientific method could be deemed nonsensical. This argument was seized upon by the Vienna circle positivists, to Wittgenstein's later lamentation. Wittgenstein would, in the course of the second wind of his career, seek to repudiate the logical atomism of

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the *Tractatus* (Russell, 1959, p. 309). The later Wittgenstein would deny that language can ever be purified or broken down into elemental constituents, preferring instead to focus on the practical usage of words (Russell, 1959, p. 309).

The demarcation by positivism between empirical facts and metaphysical nonsense has proven to be not always easily distinguishable (Derrida, 1991; Rorty, 1991; Hacking, 1999). The definition of words in a sentence themselves depend on other words, which depend on others, and so on. This brings us back to language. The position that words have no transcontextual meaning is known as nominalism (Burke, 1945, p. 248). The nominalist Ian Hacking questions the apparently fixed and given definition of words. Hacking (1999) writes:

> High level semantical words like "fact," "real," "true," and "knowledge" are
> tricky. Their definitions, being prone to vicious circles, embarrass the makers of
> dictionaries (p. 80).

Like Hacking, above, Bateson (1972) lists a bunch of words, such as *instinct, ego, mind,* and *self*, and then he proceeds to call them all into question:

> I call these "heuristic" concepts; but in truth, most of them are so loosely
> derived and so mutually irrelevant that they mix together to make a sort of
> conceptual fog which does much to delay the progress of science (p. xxvi).

According to its critics, realist epistemology is based on a logical flaw, namely, that the words we choose can never have a simple, unmediated relationship to the things they describe. The topics of this thesis, postmodernism, perspectivism, antirepresentationalism, skepticism, solipsism, relativism, etc.: all rush in like a cold gush of wind.

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Postmodern perspectives are often skeptical of empirical data. Rather than seeing data as an unmediated representation of reality, a postmodernist might question the political motivations and framing techniques behind assertions of fact. In a quaint passage from his book *Science and the Modern World*, Alfred North Whitehead (1925) describes the scientific ethos of evidence and general principles:

> This new tinge to modern minds is a vehement and passionate interest in the relation of general principles to irreducible and stubborn facts (p. 3).

The postmodern zeitgeist cocks an eyebrow in suspicion at everything in Whitehead's sentence, above. As we have seen with Derrida, general principles and stubborn facts are subject to iterability and can be taken out of context. For postmodern perspectives within which deconstruction is often included, general principles, 'facts' and especially the vehemence and passion that fuels their wide eyed search are all suspect. For Michel Foucault, 'truth' is an ambiguous concept linked to power and subjugation. Rather than truth being something global, timeless, or essential, Foucault spoke about *regimes* of truth:

> Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth; that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who charged with saying what counts as true (1980, p. 131).

In the above run on sentence from Foucault, I notice an equivocal view of truth and knowledge. Truth is not something simple that remains after all value judgements have

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been trimmed away. Whereas for Whitehead, facts are rudimental, stubborn, irreducible elements, for Foucault facts are produced relative to the political imperitives of a given society. Compare Whitehead's sentence, above, with the following quote from Michel Foucault:

> ...all knowledge rests upon injustice...there is no right, not even in the act of knowing, to truth or a foundation for truth...the instinct for knowledge is malicious (something murderous, opposed to the happiness of mankind). (quoted in Wolin, 2004, p. 42)

It could be argued that postmodern perspectives, with their "incredulity towards metanarratives" (Lyotard, 1984) are a contemporary incarnation of a philosophical legacy that is suspicious of truth claims and the referentiality of language. Bateson's emphasis on difference (1972, p. 490) could be said to herald Derrida's (1978) and as such, Bateson has more in common with deconstruction than the positivists who argued for a stable, unambiguous relationship between things and their representations. The result of differential arguments, it seems, is that meanings are never fixed— what was credulously assumed to be a discrete object of inquiry is revealed to be an ambiguous, context dependent, ever shifting network of *relationships*.

Embracing Ambiguity

Some thinkers, rather than insist on fixed meanings for words, have instead embraced ambiguity. Besides Bateson, Kenneth Burke is another interdisciplinary thinker who has been adopted by the field of communication. Burke (1945), has written suggestively about the strategic resources of ambiguity. Burke sees ambiguity as an asset instead of a liability. Burke, as opposed to positivists who seek to ground knowledge on rational foundations, does not see ambiguity as an anathema. In the introduction to his influential *A Grammar of Motives*, Burke writes:

> Accordingly, what we want is *not terms that avoid ambiguity, but terms that clearly reveal the strategic spots at which ambiguities necessarily arise* (1945, p. xii-xiii. Italics in original).

For Burke, ambiguities can be useful and resourceful. In his view, where there is ambiguity there exists a sort of plasticity of meaning where transformations can take place (1945, p. xiii). Were things defined distinctly, there would be stasis. Like the quote from Sartre that opens this thesis, what is so great about having everything wrapped up in a neat package? Who wants to be totalized definitively? To be neatly summarized is to be reified. It might even be argued that clearly distinguished parameters makes a discourse susceptible to attack, leaving a flank exposed to a careerist mercenary who wants to make

a name for them self, assassinating the latest theory *du jour*. A broadness of definition is

a moving target. With a beautiful analogy, Burke defends ambiguity as a concept:

> Distinctions, we might say, arise out of a great central moltenness, where all is
> merged. They have been thrown from a liquid center to the surface, where they
> have congealed. Let one of these crusted distinctions return to its source, and in
> this alchemic center it may be remade, again becoming molten liquid, and may
> enter into new combinations, whereat it may be again thrown forth as a new
> crust, a different distinction (1945, p. xiii).

The communication theorist Eric Eisenberg (1984) cites Burke when he argues for the

strategic use of ambiguity in organizations. According to Eisenberg, in his influential

essay "Ambiguity as Strategy in Organizational Communication" (1984), there is an

overemphasis on clarity in organizational teaching and research (p. 228). For Eisenberg,

sometimes it is useful to be purposefully vague, because it allows for a pluralism of

viewpoints (p. 231). While Eisenberg does not suggest a retreat from clarity (p. 228), he

notes that ambiguity can be a useful strategy in organizations, because it doesn't limit the

scope of interpretations. If a message is ambiguous enough, people can project their own

meaning onto it. The semanticist of poetry, Phillip Wheelwright (1954) distinguished

between expressive and literal statements. For Wheelwright, expressive statements

carried less assertorial weight than did literal propositions (1954, p. 281). Eisenberg

(1984) suggests that the expressive statements associated with poetry may be useful in an

organizational setting. "Assertorial lightness" (Wheelright, quoted in Eisenberg, 1984, p.

235) allows for plausible deniability. If a statement is ambiguous enough, it becomes

harder to hold it accountable.

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Eisenberg (1984) notes that ambiguity can be strategically useful in preserving

privileged positions (p. 234) which introduces an ethical concern into his argument. In

the conclusion, Eisenberg (1984) takes note of the ethical problems that could result from

the strategic use of ambiguity (p. 239). In a recently published collection of Eisenberg's

essays, the author (2007) writes a new preface to his 1984 article that briefly revisits

some of its ethical dimensions. Eisenberg recounts how the notion of "plausible

deniability" was invoked by Colonel Oliver North in his testimony to the Iran-Contra

hearings, to rationalize the illegal sale of weapons to the Nicaraguan Contras (2007, p. 3).

Eisenberg writes that in his "youthful desire to edify and explore the more mysterious and

less rational aspects of human connection" he "paid little attention to other dynamics,

such as how ambiguity can mask and sustain abuses of power" (2007, p. 3). The

implication of Eisenberg's frank reflection is that sometimes ambiguity can be used to

coyly maintain hierarchies and evade criticisms of the status quo. It seems to me that

power relations are a vector to be contended with when it comes to strategic ambiguity.

Aperion, or, Indeterminate Moltenness

Its hard to find many people who self define themselves as relativists. Relativism is often a term of derogation hurled at a thinker in order to discredit them. In the blustering *Tenured Radicals: How Politics has Corrupted Our Higher Education*, unrepentant bigot Roger Kimball (1990) rails against those "anti-foundationalists" who dare to question the essential greatness of the white, male, Western canon (p. 182). While antifoundationalism is not a direct translation of relativism, they are two terms predicated on a common complaint. Namely, that relativists lack a firm foundation upon which to make claims. To its critics, relativism pulls the foundational rug of bedrock principles out from under itself. In the absence of firm foundations, relativists are free falling into an epistemological abyss. 'Its all relative' means that nothing is certain.

Relativism is nothing new. It has haunted philosophy and the Western tradition from its known beginnings. Heraclites is credited with the saying "You cannot step in the same river twice..." (quoted in Russell, 1959, p. 25) which implies that it is futile to ascribe properties to something which is always changing. Protagoras famously said that "man [sic] is the measure of all things" (quoted in Russell, 1959, p. 25) which could imply that the world is without fixed meaning until people come along to measure it. The impression I get reading about the earliest scientists and philosophers on record is that

they saw the universe as fluid and in flux. Thales of Miletus thought that the cosmos was derived from water (Goodman, 1982, p. 22).

The critical theorist Theodor Adorno has a book entitled *Against Epistemology* (1983) that is concerned with epistemological problems. In this arcane treatise Adorno mysteriously mentions "Anaximander's curse" as the thwarting of any epistemological first principle (1983: p. 25). Anaximader was a pre-Socratic philosopher from the 6th century, B.C. While none of his writings survive today, it is from Anaximander that we have the notion of *aperion:* an infinite indeterminacy from which all derives. Like Burke's analogy of molten indeterminacy, the narrative of aperion stands counterposed to any epistemology which would seek a solid foundation upon which knowledge can be built. Perhaps, as the infinite appears in Anaximander, so is it futile to imagine a finite beginning or ultimate resting place for epistemology. Imagine as if our totalizations of knowledge will always give way to their original indistinctness, to aperion. Perhaps, vis-à-vis Anaximander, objectification is an injustice to indeterminate origins.

For Adorno, a yawning epistemological abyss is caused, not by relativism, but by the futile desire to ground knowledge on bedrock first principles. In Adorno's words "The search for the utterly first... results in infinite regress" (1983: p. 28). The regress argument is associated with the *diallelus* of the Athenian physician Sextus Empiricus in the second century, A.D. (Sosa, 1980, p. 424). To paraphrase, the *diallelus* states that any positive statement about knowledge is reliant upon other statements, also requiring justification, *ad infinitum*. For Gregory Bateson, infinite regress results from the always contextual bias of the observer. Bateson explains:

> The observer must be included within the focus of observation, and what can be studied is always a relationship or an infinite regress of relationships. Never a "thing" (1972: p. 246).

Bateson and the systems and cybernetics view where his ideas hold so much influence (c.f. Capra, 1996; Watzlawick, *et al*, 1967; Hoffman, 1981; Keeney, 1983) tries to train the gaze away from 'things' and towards the contexts that constitute them. Besides the discourse of infinite regress, Bateson employs other rhetorical strategies—such as *entropy*—to suggest the conceptual deficiencies germane to the concept of 'things.'

With Bateson, ideas of reality can never refer exactly to their object, because reality is in a state of flux. Elsewhere I have called this a "telos of entropy" (Lee, 2006, p. 4) because it raises the poetic 'things fall apart' to the status of a determinism. According to Bateson, one of the problems with naming things and affixing secure labels to them is that they are in a constant state of decay. This, it seems, is a problem endemic to codification. In the essay "Information and Codification: A Philosophical Approach" Gregory Bateson and his co-author Jurgen Ruesch explain:

> ...in seeking information and in seeking values...man is trying to establish an otherwise improbable relationship between ideas and events (1951, p. 179).

The quote from Bateson and Ruesch betrays an epistemological defeatism, as it suggests the improbability of stable knowledge about events and values. According to entropy, the second law of thermodynamics, discrete entities are in constant flux towards indeterminacy. Entropy is a scientific vindication of Thales' liquid metaphor, as well as Anaximander's and Burke's rhapsodies to indeterminacy. By ascribing essential, static qualities to an object that is otherwise in a state of change, human beings misrepresent that object. Totalizations of things always leave a remainder because they treat a phenomena as static instead of dynamic. By this account, reality is plucked,

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undifferentiated from the ether and forced into the sausage casings of language. The implication of Bateson's notion of entropy is that the impulse name things is perhaps imperious or absolutist. Some people want to pin things down, but according to physical law those things are rotting away with all the drama of time lapse photography. What we might name as a pumpkin, a gorilla, or a person, will all too soon go back to undifferentiated carbon protoplasm.

Later, I will argue that sometimes systems theorists may employ mixed metaphors to advance their emphasis on overall context. Where the discourse of entropy (invoked by Bateson and Ruesch in their essay from the 1950's) comes from thermodynamics, the notion of 'the thing' will later be criticized using the discourse of quantum theory. The contemporary systems theorist Fritof Capra (1996) will disparage 'things' using a different scientific metaphor than Bateson's. Where entropy posits a thing as a temporary vessel for matter and energy, quantum theory shows that "the solid material objects of classical physics dissolve at the subatomic level into wavelike patterns of probabilities" (Capra, 1996: p. 30). Either explanation, although perhaps at cross purposes as explanatory hypotheses, arrives at a material world shifting, transitory and ambiguous.

Theoretical physics are sometimes associated with Cartesian anxiety about lack of epistemological foundations. Capra (1996) portrays the scientific epistemology of Descartes and Newton as having been rendered archaic by insights from Albert Einstein, Werner Heisenberg, and twentieth century theoretical physics (pp. 38-39). In Capra's (1996) *The Web of Life* the Cartesian worldview seems to want to fit an infinite regress of relationships into static, confining boxes. Capra portrays Newtonian physics and Cartesian rationalism as historically passe paradigm that was mechanistic, reductionist, and atomistic (1996, p. 17). Such terms suggest a theory that was at least overly rigid and imperious. Cybernetics and ecology, as articulated by Capra (1996), instead of clinging to absolutist conceptions of meaning, is content with approximate knowledge (p. 41). Capra

notes that the truth claims advanced by science are tentative by definition: "In science we always deal with limited and approximate descriptions of knowledge" (p. 43). In order to hedge against fanaticism and arrogance, science must contain its urge to formulate eternal iron clad laws that are somehow beyond reproach.

Is Totalization Necessarily Totalitarian?

A specter haunts epistemology; the specter of totalitarianism. George Orwell's *1984* (1949) imagines a totalitarian language called "newspeak" where any margin of interpretation is truncated. Synonyms and antonyms are abolished for the sake of parsimony. In newspeak, good, gooder, goodest, and ungood replace the myriad of words that make up value judgments. Forever after, the language of sinister, cartoonish utility will be called Orwellian. Efforts to regulate meaning become associated with the totalitarian impulse.

The media critics Sheldon Rampton and John Stauber (2003) note that the "axis of evil" concept used to metonymize Iran, Iraq, and North Korea, has particularily Orwellian overtones (pp. 113- 115). By linking three unrelated nations through the term "axis", American propagandists invoke the alliance of Germany, Italy and Japan in World War Two. For Rampton and Stauber (2003), this analogy is not apt. There is something Orwellian about demonizing nations with the rhetorical currency of fascism.

In 1941, Count Korzybski wrote a preface to his 1933 book *Science and Sanity* that linked epistemological issues with fascism. Korzybski (1958 [1941]) equates the vanquishing of fascism with the closure of Aristotelian absolutism. Korzybski (1958 [1941]) writes:

> Present day scientific researches and historical world developments show there is no doubt that the old aristotelian epoch of human evolution is dying. The terrors and horrors we are witnessing in the East and the West are the deathbed agonies of that passing epoch...(p. 1vii).

For Korbyzski, Aristotelian logic and fascism were flawed for their narrow, "two-valued" *either/or* thinking (p. 1xii). Korbyzski implies that fascism was the exit strategy of such a logical fallacy. For Korbyzski, epistemological certainty, far from being a matter of genteel contemplation, descended from its ivory tower to wreak havoc in the mid 20th century. The search for foundation and epistemological stability is to Theodor Adorno a tautology he ominously equates with fascism. In his nearly impenetrable *Against Epistemology*, Adorno writes "Fascism sought to actualize philosophy of origins" (1983, p. 20). Written in the 1950s, Adorno's oblique equation of axiomatic epistemology with fascism is in keeping with the Frankfurt School's romanticist disdain for reason. In *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer maintain that the Enlightenment has run its course, with regrettable results, culminating in fascism and advanced capitalism. "The fully enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant" (1999 [1944], p. 3).

In contemporary communication theory, endeavors to 'fix' meaning are sometimes associated with tyranny. For one theorist of communication, the will to certainty is equated with history's worst bullies. In an article entitled "Flirting With Meaning," Eric Eisenberg writes:

> The postmodern critique of fixed meaning offers some clear lessons for zealots of certainty, wherever they reside. Battles over who has access to the 'truth' are bloody markers in the history of the world—each holocaust finds its reasons in certainty and separation (1998 [2007], p. 212).

Elsewhere in the article, Eisenberg uses the expression "final solution," a term reminiscent of National Socialism's death camps:

> Despite centuries of scientific, philosophical and political efforts to purify language and 'save' human beings from ambiguity, we have found the world profoundly resistant to any such final solution (2007 [1998]: p. 219).

Eisenberg (2007 [1998]) cites an oracle of postmodern theory, Michel Foucault, when he argues that efforts to "fix" meaning are maneuvers of power and control (p. 212). Foucault's claim that knowledge is malicious has affinities with Friedrich Nietzsche's notion of "will to power." (Eagleton, 1990; Wolin, 2004; Appleby, Hunt & Jacob 1994, Palmer, 1990). Eagleton (1990) offers the following definition of "will to power":

> Will to power is just the universal truth that there is no universal truth, the interpretation that all is interpretation; and this paradox, not least in the hands of Nietzsche's modern inheritors, allows an iconoclastic radicalism to blend with a prudently pragmatist suspicion of all 'global' theorizing (p. 248).

Foucault inherits the Nietzschean supicion of totalizing, global theories. In an article length appreciation of Nietzsche's "geneological" method, Foucault (1977) views knowledge as less than a totalized, unified whole, and more as a process of fracturing and difference. Foucault (1977) writes obliquely "...knowledge is not made for understanding; it is made for cutting" (p. 154). I interpret this statement as questioning received wisdom about the inherent benevolence of knowledge. The use of the word "cutting" conjures an imagery of butchery. This sentiment, that knowledge is cutting, is echoed by Bateson (1972) who wrote that thought "slices everything to bits" (p. 49).

Where postmodern thinkers such as Adorno, Foucault, and Eisenberg might link the will to certainty with a totalitarian impulse, there are those intellectual historians who claim that it is in fact the other way around: It was the relativism and perspectivism of Friedrich Nietzsche that precipitated fascist totalitarianism. Nietzsche is a troubling figure who is sometimes invoked as a predecessor of both postmodernism and fascism. The historians Appleby, Hunt and Jacob (1994) call Nietzsche "morally repugnant" for his occasionally genocidal pronouncements (p. 209). For some conservative social

historians, Nietzsche is a baneful presence in postmodern discourse (e.g., Windschuttle, 1996, Shattuck, 1996).

Foucault's "geneological" method is associated with Nietzsche (Hawes, 2004, p. 182; Ebert, 1996; Rorty, 1991). Sometimes, the comparison of Nietzsche and Foucault is used to discredit the latter. In the heavy handed *The Seduction Of Unreason: The Intellectual Romance With Fascism From Nietzsche to Postmodernism* Richard Wolin (2004) refers to Nietzsche as a "protofascist" (p. 62) and scolds American scholars for their adoption of the Foucauldian/Nietzschean idea that truth is akin to power:

> This claim [by Foucault, that knowledge is 'malicious'] gleefully parroted by numerous American acolytes, has in its various versions and forms probably wreaked more intellectual havoc, has been responsible for more pseudo-scholarly feeblemindedness, than one could possibly recount (p. 42).

Wolin aims to implicate Foucault and Foucauldians in what appears to be, at least in part, an *ad hominem* argument about Nietzschean taint. Wolin (2004) frames his attack on Nietzschean perspectivism as a defense of classical liberal ideals. The problem with Wolin staking an ideological claim just left of center is the rhetorical affinities his book shares with onerous right wing attacks on academia (c.f. Bloom, 1987; Kimball, 1998). In tone and bluster, Wolin's (2004) stridulous criticisms of postmodernism are akin to conservative tirades like Bloom's (1987) and Kimball's (1998), although his stated political affinity is liberalism.

Friedrich Nietzsche's mistrust of epistemological certainties was directed against systematizers of knowledge: "I mistrust all systematizers and I avoid them. The will to a system is lack of integrity" (quoted in Adorno, 1983, p. 28). Indeed, in the writings of Nietzsche we can find many forceful declarations of antifoundationalism, perspectivism and relativism. For social historian Bryan D. Palmer, Nietzsche is

associated with the questioning of representational conceptions of language. Palmer (1990) writes:

> Essentially figurative and nonreferential for Nietzsche, language is incapable of conveying objective historical knowledge, which cannot possibly exist (p. 7).

In his book *The Twilight of the Idols*, written in 1888, Nietzsche (1968) has a thought provoking scenario entitled "How the Real World at Last Became a Myth: The History of an Error." In this brief synopsis of Western intellectual history, Nietzsche details the fate of the 'real world' in six easy steps. He progresses from Platonic realism, through Cartesian skepticism, right up to "the cockcrow of positivism" (p. 40). In the modern period (which of course is centered around Nietzsche's own self aggrandizing, syphilitic philosophy), the ontological notion of reality is abandoned outright. Nietzsche rejoices glibly:

> The 'real world' – an idea no longer of any use, not even a duty any longer – an idea grown useless, superfluous, *consequently* a refuted idea: let us abolish it! (Broad daylight; breakfast, return of cheerfulness and *bon sens* [good sense]; Plato blushes for shame; all free spirits run riot) (1968: p. 41).

Nietzsche is often cited as a foundational figure in antifoundationalism and antirepresentationalism (c.f. Bloom, 1987; Rorty, 1991; Wolin, 2004; Eagleton, 2003; Swoyer, 1982; Palmer, 1990) as well as a herald of postmodernism (West, 1981). In their patronizing attack on postmodernism, Paul Gross and Norman Levitt (1994) state:

> If there is a prototype of postmodernism, a previous thinker whose sweep and ambition are mirrored in its swagger and whose corrosiveness is echoed in its skepticism, it is probably Nietzsche (p. 74).

Nietzsche, as a troubling herald of the postmodern period, is invoked retroactively to cast

a shadow on the reigning idols of French postmodernism. According to Wolin (2004),

French poststructuralists like Foucault and Derrida, by getting cozy with Nietzsche:

> ...proudly embraced an epistemological nihilism in which the differences
> between fiction and reality, truth and illusion, were deconstructed and then
> effaced outright (p. 35).

Depending on who you ask, totalitarianism is symptomatic of either epistemological

foundation, or the *lack* of epistemological foundation. The invocation of fascism suggests

the high rhetorical stakes that predicate epistemological stances. The trauma of the

holocaust hovers over questions of truth. To compare something with fascism is the

strongest condemnation available to critics. As suggested above, relativists and

foundationalists alike accuse eachother of incipient totalitarianism.

In what follows, I will look at epistemic relativism and its practical uses. Reframing,

as we will see, uses epistemological uncertainty to suggest that reality can be viewed in a

number of different ways. As a result, the very concept of 'reality' becomes an untenable

abstraction. While reframing has helped people in psychotherapy, I wonder if the same

epistemological uncertainty could be used for the purposes of 'spin.'

Reframing: The Broad Daylight of Context?

While systems theorists like Bateson don't cite Nietzsche, one can speculate that they have both arrived at similar conclusions independently. A common theme is that 'reality' or realism is problematic. The philosopher and clinical psychologist Paul Watzlawick a close colleague of Bateson's, has a book entitled *How Real Is Real? Confusion—Disinformation—Communication* (1976) that contains a passage that is redolent of Nietzsche's, above. In this book, Watzlawick expounds on the view known as "radical constructivism." Watzlawick (1976) begins the book with the following statement:

> This book is about the way in which communication creates what we call reality. At first glance this may seem a most peculiar statement, for surely reality is what is, and communication is merely a way of expressing or explaining it. Not at all. As the book will show, our everyday, traditional ideas of reality are delusions which we spend substantial parts of our daily lives shoring up, even at considerable risk of trying to face facts to fit our definition of reality instead of vice versa. And the most dangerous delusion of all is that there is only one reality. What there are, in fact, are many different versions of reality, some of which are contradictory, but all of which are the results of communication and not reflections of eternal, objective truths (p. x).

Admittedly, Watzlawick does not dispense with the real world altogether in brash Nietzschean fashion. Instead, he replaces the idea of one *single* reality with *multiple* realities, perceptively constituted, that may sometimes contradict one another. The Batesonian scientists Maturana and Varela (1992) imagine a 'multiverse' consisting of multiple realities instead of a universe. It is as if Wheelwright's (1954) "assertorial lightness" leaves its stated domain of literary criticism to crash the party of scientific

objectivity. While there may be perceptively constituted, relative truths,

there is no *one* reality. In this worldview, surely ambiguity reigns, because reality is not

something 'out there' that we can intercept. Such a notion, according to Watzlawick, is a

dangerous delusion.

Bateson (1972), and Watzlawick, Beavin and Jackson (1967) argue that events can

mean different things according to how the sequence of events is punctuated.

Watzlawick, et al (1967) demonstrate how every item in a chain of events could be

variously regarded as stimulus, response, *and* reinforcement (p. 55). The hypothetical

example they give is of a rat that claims "I have got my experimenter trained. Every time

I press the lever, he gives me food" (Watzlawick, Beavin & Jackson, 1967, p. 55). I

interpret Watzlawick, et al's (1967) notion of punctuation as casting doubt on the

scientific truth claims of behavioral science, with the latter's stimulus-response

preoccupation. *The Pragmatics of Human Communication* introduces a dose of

relativism into the behaviorist premise. In one example, a husband withdraws and a wife

nags. Or does the wife nag, and *then* the husband withdraws? (Watzlawick, et al, 1967,

pp. 56-59). Instead of the possible assignation of blame to one or the other party, the

couple is locked in a mutually causative, recursive loop. The refrain of 'but he/she *started*

it' is a tautology potentially without end. The notion of punctuation implies that a single

event can be described differently, depending on how one looks at it. As opposed to the

conundrum of either/or logic, a pragmatically inclined clinician can truly say "you're

both right" (see Baxter & Montgomery, 1996, on the dialectical concept of *both/and*

logic).

In a 1974 book entitled *Change: Principles of Problem Formation and Problem

Resolution,* Watzlawick and his co-authors John Weakland and Richard Fisch introduced

a concept called "reframing" that employs ambiguity, paradox, and contradiction as

strategic resources for solving problems. Reframing takes up where the notion of

punctuation leaves off. Reframing is a means of problem solving that emphasizes the semantic plasticity of so-called 'reality.' If you find yourself in a hopeless situation, try punctuating it differently. The example that Watzlawick and his co-authors give is from Mark Twain's *Tom Sawyer,* who gets his friends to paint his fence for him. Instead of being stuck with the drudgerous job, Tom got his friends to think it was enviable.

> Tom has succeeded in reframing drudgery as a pleasure for which one has to pay, and his friends, to a man, have followed this change of his definition of reality (Watzlawick, et al, 1974, p. 93).

With reframing, would-be liabilities are transformed into assets with semantic finesse. The beauty of reframing is that it uses polysemy in the interpretation of everyday problems. Lemons can be turned into lemonade. The legacy of reframing can be seen in psychotherapy techniques that help people recover from depression and anxiety. The efficacy of clinical techniques like cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) —with its emphasis on reframing—has been persuasively demonstrated (cf. Burns, 1999; DeVries, 1993; Rotheram-Borus, 1994). A psychotherapeutic technique called neurolinguistic programming also uses the concept of reframing (Bandler & Grinder, 1982). In a celebration of ambiguity, Eisenberg (2007) cites the therapist Friedman who helps clients "re-story" and reframe there lives (p. 217). By focusing on exceptions to problems, Friedman helps clients punctuate the syntax of their life stories differently. Eisenberg suggests the creative use of perspectivism and relativism for creating a meaningful life.

Reframing suggests that meaning is not fixed and is always open to interpretation. Ambiguities in a narrative suggest alternate storylines. Reframing suggests an element of volition when it comes to someone suffering from depression or other mental problems. Yet while reframing may be relativism at its best, it is not without ethical pitfalls. In the preface to *Change*, Watzlawick and his coauthors state:

From past experience, we fully expect to be attacked by some for the 'manipulative,' 'insincere' nature of our approach—both practical and conceptual—to human problems (Watzlawick, et al, 1974, p. xv).

The troubling part about Watzlawick, et al's (1974) example of Tom Sawyer is that Tom was being manipulative. Conceivably, a realization that meaning is a malleble property of phenomena could be employed for dubious ends.

Reframing, with its emphasis on the creative exploitation of ambiguity, is not altogether different from the notion of 'spin.' Spin is a term of derogation sometimes applied to advertising, public relations, and political propaganda. With spin, realities can be creatively presented to advance a particular motive. Media critics have argued that spin can be pernicious because it is designed to *misrepresent* reality 'as it *really* is' (c.f. Rampton & Stauber, 2001; 2003: Ewen, 1996).

In a 2005 *New York Times Magazine* article entitled "The Framing Wars" Matt Lai notes that framing and relanguaging in politics can be manipulative and deceptive (pp. 41, 43). The linguist George Lakoff notes that Republicans have a rhetorical advantage when, for example, they rename tax cuts 'tax relief.' The phrase 'tax relief' implies that taxes are essentially burdensome (Bai, 2005, p. 43). Lakoff notes that naming and relanguaging can have powerful political effects. According to Lakoff, Republican ideologues like Frank Lunz exploit the ambiguities of political events and language in order to advance a conservative agenda. Not only does framing twist the facts but it "also renders facts meaningless by actually reprogramming, through long term repetition, the neural networks inside our brains" (Bai, 2005, p. 43).

The point that Batesonians like Watzlawick and cognitive theorists like Lakoff may agree on is this: communication doesn't just transmit or reflect reality with varying degrees of veracity. Communication actually *creates* reality, and therein lies its powers. The theorist of mass communication, Herbert Schiller, in his *Communication and Cultural Domination* (1976) writes:

> Communication, it needs to be said, includes much more than messages and the recognizable circuits through which the messages flow. It defines social reality and...the basic arrangements of living (p. 3).

According to this argument, reality is constituted—not merely reflected—through communication. A realist conception of spin and propaganda might assert that communication tends to misrepresent, mask and distort reality, not wholly create it. But can scholars of communication have recourse to a narrative of the '*really* real,' having jettisoned a representationalist epistemology? Language, from the point of view of some theories of communication, does not just express reality, it effectively makes it. The result is a kind of relativism, or "new principle of relativity," as elaborated in the following quote by the linguist Benjamin Whorf:

> We are inclined to think of language as a technique of expression, and not to realize that language first of all is a classification and arrangement of the stream of sensory experience which results in a certain world-order... We are thus introduced to a new principle of relativity, which holds that all observers are not led by the same physical evidence to the same picture of the universe, unless their linguistic backgrounds are similar or can in some way be calibrated (quoted in Davidson, 1982, p. 72).

Whorf is arguing for the primary, constitutive nature of language. The classic example that Whorfian arguments use is that the Eskimos have many words for snow (Woodward

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& Denton, 1988, p. 55). According to this premise, the Eskimos have a less semantically ambiguous way to describe the phenomena of snow. Do such extra words for a phenomena effectively *create* a plethora of more phenomena? Which description of the material world is more accurate or more representational: ours, or the proverbial Eskimo's?

The problem with this example as a cornerstone of linguistic relativism (or the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis) is that it isn't true. We anglo Americans have multiple words for snow (such as blizzards and flurries) while the Eskimo of lore may have up to seven words, not fifty or one hundred as is sometimes claimed (Pullam, 1991; Martin, 1986). The eskimo metaphor, while of heuristic value, appears to be underdetermined by evidence. In the next section, I will further investigate relativist arguments against truth, reality and objectivity.

Fuzziness, or, When Keeping it Real Goes Wrong

Eisenberg (1984) notes that theorists of communication have found relativist ideas to be appealing (p. 229). In the interactional view of Bateson, Watzlawick, and others, everything depends on context (Eisenberg, 1984: p. 229; Watzlawick, Beavin & Jackson, 1967). In a 1985 book chapter, Art Bochner writes about a "crisis of confidence" in the empirical social sciences (1985, p. 28). According to Bochner:

> Logical empiricists assumed that science led to truth through method. They thought there was a way to get in touch with 'absolute reality' and describe it in terms that would be absolutely independent of the subjective meanings reality can have for human perceivers (1985, p. 33).

To critique logical empiricism, Bochner (1985) suggests pragmatism and cites the philosopher Richard Rorty. Eisenberg (1984) cites Rorty when discussing the relativist idea there is no objective reality that waits to be discovered (p. 229). Rorty (1991) argues that, by trying to know the real, we are trying to climb out of our own minds and obtain a "God's eye view" (p. 7). One implication of such an anti-representationalist view is that trying to obtain 'objective' knowledge of reality is a arrogant conceit. We should content ourselves with our narrow embeddedness, for to gain clarity into the 'big-picture' is to fashion ourselves as godlike. Rorty (1991), writes:

> ...one consequence of antirepresentationalism is the recognition that no description of how things are from a God's point of view, no skyhook provided

from some contemporary or yet-to-be developed science, is going to free us from the contingency of having been acculturated as we were (p.13).

Rorty is a subscriber to Donald Davidson's "arch-antirealist" philosophy that proposes that we drop the "scheme-content" distinction (Rorty, 1991: p. 8, 9). Davidson (1982 [1973]) writes: "Reality itself is relative to a scheme: what counts as real in one system may not in another" (p. 66). In the words of Rorty "These distinctions between hard facts and soft values, truth and pleasure, and objectivity and subjectivity are awkward and clumsy instruments" (1991, p.36). The implication is that we should tolerate ambiguity and relativism as a necessary humility. The result is a certain "fuzziness" and Rorty adopts the description of himself as a "fuzzy." The metaphor of fuzziness conjures blurriness, as opposed to Nietzsche's metaphor of "broad daylight." For Rorty, the closest people can get to objectivity is "solidarity," that is, the consensual agreement between members in a community. According to Rorty "We fuzzies would like to substitute the idea of 'unforced argument' for that of 'objectivity'" (p.38).

For its advocates, who are sometimes derisively called positivists, science is held to be more objective than mere opinion. For an antirepresentationalist like Rorty, science holds no privileged position in the evaluation between competing world views. "...antirepresentationalists see no sense in which physics is more independent of our human peculiarities than astrology or literary criticism" (1991, p. 8). If the truth claims of science are treated so skeptically, how do we go about evaluating competing world-views, such as creationism vs. natural selection? We are left with fuzzy ambiguity which could conceivably be disorienting. I think that the idea of 'fact versus fiction' is, at least, a useful way of codifying sense data. The notion of 'truth' carries rhetorical weight and

serves a normative function. The problem with relativizing truth or dropping the notion of truth altogether is that it might be politically debilitating in some circumstances. Criminal justice, for example, would probably be unable to function were it not for at least the *fiction* of truth. The purchaser of pet food assumes that the product is truly edible and not poisonous before feeding it to their animals.

A normative conception of truth can be useful for outspoken critics of society. In a national bestseller entitled *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, historian James W. Loewen (1995) lambastes school textbooks for what he claims is an outright misrepresentation of historical facts. Citing historical records, Loewen (1995) persuasively maintains that the truth of American history is one of racism and genocide. Even in the title of his book, Loewen invokes a true/false distinction and the representationalist epistemology that underwrites it. In another example, a coffee table book entitled *Everything You Know is Wrong* (2002) aggregates empirically based investigative reports from authors such as Ariana Huffington, Thomas Szasz, Howard Zinn. Using arguments based on material evidence, the authors argue, variously, that the pharmaceutical industry is driven by profit and not ethics; that psychiatry is a pernicious means of social control; and that the labor movement has been brutally repressed in American history. It could be argued that these claims are predicated on a representationalist epistemology deemed problematic by relativists like Rorty. The relativist might respond: but who's to say that these arguments have universal merit? Its all in how you look at things. From another point of view, a completely different take on history could be proffered. Different 'facts' could be utilized to argue for an opposing interpretation. Neither description would be right or wrong;

instead, it is all in how you frame the issues. A tolerence for differences in opinion is a hallmark of liberalism.

Rorty is a fascinating philosopher because he is able to link the liberal American tradition of pragmatism with the continental tradition of hermeneutics and poststructuralism. This wide aggregation, coupled with Rorty's unusually readable writing style, makes him a significant philosopher and one of the most forthright defenders of epistemic relativism. Like the continental tradition of hermeneutics and poststructuralism, pragmatism is an interpretive doctrine that questions simplistic notions of 'truth.' Stanley Aronowitz (2003) summarizes the pragmatic notion of 'truth':

> For pragmatism there is no question of intrinsic "truth" if by that term we designate the possibility that truth may be independent of the context within which a proposition about the social world is uttered. The truth of a proposition is closely tied to the practical consequences that might, under specific conditions, issue from it (p. 15).

Like other theorists I have mentioned so far, for pragmatism, context is important. The pragmatist John Dewey (1938) felt that a term like "knowledge" is "ambiguous," as is the word "empirical" (p. 9). In place of these ambiguous terms, Dewey would put "warranted assertibility" which leaves room for the possibility knowledge can be modified (1938, p. 9). Warranted assertibility is a term that suggests that 'facts' are not mirror representations of the world that exist apart from human intentionality. Instead, they are claims made by people, that may warrant assertion according to their utility. Bochner (1985) describes the pragmatist position as follows:

> The pragmatist point is that the terms that will prove most useful depend upon the purposes to which inquiry is directed (p. 36).

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The idea that consciousness is selective and differential is something that the

sociologist George Herbert Mead (1934) associates with William James:

> William James points out that the amount of difference which you have to give
> to a certain stimulus to make it dominant is very slight, and he could conceive of
> an act of volition which holds on to a certain stimulus, and just gives it a little
> more emphasis than it otherwise would have (p. 28).

For James, there is an element of volition in how reality is intercepted. The implication is,

by valuing one stimulus over another, people can perceive what they wish to perceive.

The human ability to differentiate and discriminate is seen as not only strategically

advantageous, but a distinguishing characteristic of human intelligence:

> Man [sic] is distinguished by that power of analysis of the field of stimulation
> which enables him to pick out one stimulus rather than another and so to hold
> onto the response that belongs to that stimulus, picking it out from others, and
> recombining it with others (Mead, 1934, p. 94).

By such a pragmatic conception, knowledge is selective. People must constantly

discriminate between manifold sense data and ideas, then choose their relevance to the

given circumstance. Truth, in this sense, is observer dependent, provisional, and

conditional pending further inquiry. Dewey (1938) writes "stability...of meanings is a

limiting ideal" (p. 345). Rorty (1991) explains, "For the pragmatist... 'truth' (is) simply a

compliment paid to the beliefs which we think are so justified that, for the moment,

further justification is not needed" (p. 24). Heeding Nietzsche's clarion call, the 'real

world' becomes an idea no longer of any use; it is an idea grown useless and superfluous.

The preceding discussion was meant to suggest the epistemological relativism of pragmatism. There are many situations where I can imagine that a roomy, provisional notion of truth could be useful. For example, in a psychotherapeutic setting when a situation seems negative, a clinician or therapist might ask if there are exceptions that are not being taken into consideration. Reframing seems to me to be an effective use of epistemologically 'fuzzy' perspectives. But what if fuzzy perspectives are used in advertising and public relations for nefarious purposes?

Pragmatics, or Spin?

In another discursive context, the pragmatic conception of truth has come under criticism. The media critic Stuart Ewen, in his critique of the public relations industry entitled *PR! A Social History of Spin,* links relativism to the pragmatic philosophy of William James, for whom "there are no absolute truths" (1996, p. 39). Ewen calls the pragmatic conception of truth "volatile" because it allows for truths to be willfully engineered by the publicity industry. James' belief that "truth happens to idea" is to Ewen "a total blurring of all distinctions between social fact and theatrical fantasy" (1996, p. 380). In a recent interview with the Canadian Broadcasting Company, Ewen reiterates the link between the pragmatism of William James and the pernicious spin of public relations:

> alongside of the progressive idea that truth is not something written in stone
> there is also this problem with this very malleable idea of truth which is that it's
> an invitation for cynicism and for inventing truths that serve certain interests
> (quoted in Basen, 2007).

It seems that a view of truth as a selective process could lend itself to both therapeutic breakthroughs as well as the sinister engineering of compliance. In a brief exposition of pragmatic philosophy, Nel Noddings (2005) does not easily dismiss ethical concerns raised about pragmatic philosophy. Noddings suggests the use of "care theory" to supplement the ethical weaknesses of pragmatism (2005, p. 59). "Care theory" is a

concern for any injuries which may result from a philosophy that emphasizes ends over means (Noddings, 2005, p. 59).

A problematizing of notions of truth could serve various purposes. If a psychiatric patient is tormented by the persistent perception that his life is a failure, a therapist might productively reframe the same sequence of life events towards a more positive interpretation. The therapist might argue that the patient met some difficult circumstances and managed to gain precious wisdom in the process. In this instance, meaning seems to want some elasticity. For the communication theorist David Payne (1989) failure is a rhetorical device rather than a statement of fact.

Meanwhile, in a whole other sphere of public life, the spin doctor could argue that raw sewage was merely "beneficial biosolids" or a war of aggression was only a preemptive quashing of incipient terrorism. The malleability of meaning works both ways. If all notions of 'reality' and 'truth' are relativized or dispensed with entirely, it could be politically debilitating.

In the Nietzschean 'broad daylight' heralding positivism's demise, the theorist D.C Phillips (2005) has suggested a perspective called "postpositivism" (p. 49). Postpositivism is positivism cut down to size, shorn of its smug certainty yet still insisting on the evidentiary basis for advancing claims. In the place of 'truth' postpositivists insert John Dewey's notion of "warranted beliefs" (Phillips, 2005, p. 50). With postpositivism, the insights of the pragmatic tradition are incorporated. Postpositivism is a position that acknowledges the postmodern critique of representation, yet still holds that empirical evidence has some relevance.

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Phillips' exposition of postpositivism is in a textbook entitled *Introduction to Philosophies of Research and Criticism in Education and the Social Sciences*, edited by James L. Paul. In the preface to this book, Paul (2005) cites Nietzsche and the concept of "perspectivism" (p. vi). In this unique book, postpositivism has no privileged position among methodologies. Postpositivism is presented by Phillips as but one approach among a host of others, including pragmatism, constructivism, poststructuralism, and others. In this sense, Paul's *Philosophies of Research and Criticism in Education and the Social Sciences* is itself a postpositivist effort which grants scientism no special place in the toolkit of methodologies. Instead, in perspectivist fashion, social scientific concern for empirical reality is just one of a many faceted means of inquiry. Paul's book shows the effect Nietzsche has had on social science. In what follows, I will attempt to suggest that, while he is not always cited explicitly, Nietzsche's emphasis on perspective tacitly informs research in the communication discipline.

Communication as Relational, Not Representational

In his essay about strategic ambiguity, Eisenberg (1984) argues that ambiguity is a relational property that is not inherent in any given message. He writes: "Clarity (and conversely, ambiguity) is not an attribute of messages; it is a relational variable which arises through a combination of source, message, and receiver factors" (1984, p. 229). In this view, a message is never inherently ambiguous. Instead, it all depends on the reception of it. Decades later, in his 2007 preface to "Ambiguity as Strategy in Organizational Communication," Eisenberg questions this relational definition of ambiguity:

> Looking back, I am also unsure about my relational definition of strategic ambiguity; it seemed to make sense at the time, but has proven difficult to study (2007: p. 3).

The advantage of a relational approach to communication is that it allows for ambiguity. Somewhere in the relational definition of ambiguity and clarity there is a logical antinomy that is itself ambiguous. In *Language and Mind*, the linguist Noam Chomsky (2006) is concerned with ambiguity only insofar as it poses a problem for syntax, or the arrangement of words within a sentence (p. 28-29). For Chomsky (2006) some sentences are inherently ambiguous, such as "I don't like John's cooking any more than Bill's" (p. 29). By contrast, a relational definition of ambiguity holds that there is

nothing inherent to an assertion to make it ambiguous. Instead, the meaning of an

utterance is dependent on contextually contingent relational factors, such as the variable

meaning different receivers might make of a message. If ambiguity is in the eyes of the

beholder then what is ambiguous to one receiver might be clear to another. The message

in dispute, however, by virtue of having at least two separate interpretations, is polysemic

by definition. The fact that one message can be taken a number of ways is actually an

operational definition of ambiguity. A relational definition of ambiguity at once suggests

the strategic resources of ambiguous definitions!

In an essay entitled "Communication as Relationality," Celeste M. Condit (2006)

proposes a relational approach to communication studies, as opposed to a referential one.

Much like the antirepresentationalist viewpoint of, say, Rorty, an antirefferential

philosophy would posit that there is no simple, one-to-one relationship between thought

and its object. Condit asserts that communication is not merely a process of transferring

information. After structuralism and post structuralism, Condit claims that we can no

longer cling to the idea that words have a simple referential relationship to things (2006,

p. 3). This view reminds me of Dewey (1938) who writes "there is not possible any such

thing as a direct one-to-one correspondence of names with existential objects" (p. 53).

Besides pragmatism, Condit also references structural linguistics and the Swiss linguist

Ferdinand de Saussure, for whom meanings are not fixed, but always constituted through

difference. In this perspective, linguistic signs act relationally or differentially rather than

referentially (Culler, 1976). Instead of a word referring directly to its object, our

meanings are interconnected and depend on the relationship between signs. Depending on

the syntagmatic arrangement of words, a sentence can take on divergent meanings. In this

view meaning is never fixed or static, but is always contextual. The importance of context and difference has already been noted in my mention of Derrida and Bateson, earlier.

According to a relational perspective, the essential nature of things is always contestable, and hence, ambiguous. For example, the sky is 'very blue' depending on its relation to other blue things for which we have a comparison. Our definition of blueness is 'differential.' Condit (2006) offers a criticism of structuralist and poststructuralist theories, and even lumps Jacques Derrida in with Plato and the whole metaphysical, logocentric tradition (p. 3). According to Condit, even as the dominant strain of poststructuralism tries to negate the referential character of signs, it still privileges the sign as the object of theoretical fixation. For Condit, its about more than just signifier/signified. "Signs and symbols, however, are merely components in the process of communication, which is better understood as a process of relating" (Condit, 2006, p. 4). Relationality turns our undue attention away from a fetishism of the sign.

What Condit does retain from a poststructuralist perspective is its nonessentialism. She claims that a 'thing' has no qualities intrinsic to itself, existing in isolation from other things. A thing is merely the aggregate of relationships that constitute it. She uses the term "perspectively constituted" (Condit, 2006, p. 5) as a way of suggesting that something is constituted entirely by from what angle you look at it. It depends on your particular place, time and socially bounded viewpoint. Besides Nietzsche, this radical perspectivism reminds me of the philosopher Martin Heidegger who has this idea about *thrownness* (geworfenheit). With thrownness, there is a fatalistic emphasis on perspective. For Heidegger, 'being thrown' means we are always prejudiced by our narrow viewpoint (Heidegger, 1977). To me thrownness connotes discombobulation.

Condit's emphasis on perspectival constitution illustrates the importance of context and perspective in communication studies. A focus on context and perspective hedges against the arrogance of fanatical certainty. Yet I wonder if this type of relational perspective may have other risks. I wonder if relationality can adequately account for issues of power.

Condit's (2006) hyperbolic relationality raised eyebrows for me when she makes a claim about slavery. I'm afraid that the assertion "...the slaves control you even as you control them.." (Condit, p. 6) runs the risk of making slave master and slave relationally equivalent. To say that slavery is found in the relationship seems to let the slave owner off the hook, while granting an imaginary agency to the person who is enslaved. This, I fear, is a type of obscurantism that might be used to apologize for slavery. It implies that slavery is not the deed of the slave owner, but that slavery involves some sort of pseudo-consent.

In her campaign against essentialism, Condit takes issue with two of 'the big three' (race, class and gender) in social science. Condit (2006) writes "The concepts of race and class used in the United States have been flawed by the assumption that race or class must constitute an essential similarity" (p. 7). Condit suggests that the categories of race and class are not essential. Instead, she mentions the idea of "strategic essentialism" (Condit, 1996, p. 5) whereby an individual may self identify with a particular race, ethnic group or social class because of a strategic imperative or political expediency. The notion of strategic essentialism makes me wonder about the strategic resources of essential definitions, even after a relational perspective has rendered such essentialism suspect.

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In testy debate with Condit that appeared in the pages of *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, the unabashedly Marxist communication theorist Dana Cloud articulates my concerns about relationality. According to Cloud (1997) Condit overemphasizes ideas and consciousness over materiality (p. 194). Condit's (1994) redefinition of hegemony as "concordance" takes the critical teeth out of Gramsci's concept, according to Cloud (1997). Condit's "retreat from class as an analytical category" amounts to an unfortunate accomodation of socioeconomic disparities (Cloud, 1997, p. 194). For Cloud, class is something of an esssentialism, as it forms a wide arc of solidarity between a vast array of social groups. To Condit (1996), meanwhile, Cloud is operating under an antiquated 19th century reductionism that is not relevant to contemporary society. It would seem that, for Condit, class is an outmoded theoretical construct, rather than an essential fact of society. In the next section, I will suggest how the relational perspective is related to theories that posit the social construction of reality.

Social Construction of Reality Versus "Brute Facts"?

A fore bearer of Condit's relational perspective can be found in Gregory Bateson. In the aforementioned article "Information and Codification: A Philosophical Approach," Bateson and Ruesch (1951) emphasize that specifically *human* means of classification, Gestalt (p. 173). Gestalt thinks in terms, not of relationships, but things. According to Bateson and Ruesch, Gestalt is a process where we convince ourselves we are thinking about the thing and not the relationships that constitute it. Bateson and Ruesch assert that value and perception are codeterminate (1951: p. 177). As we perceive, so do we value. A thing attains its thingness by virtue of how it is perceived. This implies that a thing is without fixed value, that is, until someone perceives it. Like Condit, Bateson and Ruesch suggest the primacy of situational biases when they maintain that it is difficult to gain insight into one's own culture, and that the capacity for cultural comparison has come to people relatively late in their history (1951, p. 199).

Bateson's emphasis on context corresponds to another theoretical perspective, namely social constructionism. In the book *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966) recount a famous statement by Pascal that "what is truth on one side of the Pyrenees is error on another" (quoted in Berger and Luckmann, 1966: p. 5). Berger and Luckmann (1966) detail the importance of context in a way that is similar to Bateson, Ruesch and Condit:

What is "real" to a Tibetan monk may not be "real" to the American businessman...It follows that specific agglomerations of "reality" and "knowledge" pertain to specific social contexts...(p. 3).

Social constructionist approaches are concerned with social, cultural and historical context. Berger and Luckmann frame their approach within a Germanic intellectual pedigree that includes Nietzschean perspectivism, Marxian ideological critique, and Dilthean historicism (p. 5) as well as phenomenology. Such an intellectual background is mentioned to suggest longstanding history of interpretivism that informs Berger and Luckmann's sociology of knowledge. Kenneth Gergen (1998) argues social constructionism is a pluralistic viewpoint that is critical of scientific claims to objectivity. Berger and Luckmann's book, according to Gergen, "had effectively replaced scientific objectivity with a conception of socially informed subjectivity" (1998, p. 7). While Berger and Luckmann's book is theoretically dense and difficult to understand, the notion of social constructs has been widely adapted by those who are critical of so-called 'facts.' Gergen notes that social construction approaches were partly derived from the Marxist practice of ideological critique. However, where ideological critique draws a strong distinction between ideology and the 'real,' social constructionism goes further in questioning the epistemic foundation of any truth claim.

In the decades since Berger and Luckmann's book, critical approaches to social problems will reveal certain "realities" to be mere culturally and historically bounded contrivances. Sometimes, critics of science have argued that what scientists might advance as "facts" are, in hindsight, more a reflection of ideological biases according to class, race, and culture. Such criticisms are social constructionist insofar as they come

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from a tradition of ideological critique, which posits a distinction between 'facts' and social constructs.

Here are some examples of putative 'facts' that have been revealed to be social constructs. In *Sexing the Body*, Anne Fausto-Sterling (2000) notes that the dichotomy of female and male sexuality is a scientific reductionism that is called into question by organisms born with ambiguous sex characteristics. Historically, intersexuality or "hermaphrodism" as it has been labeled, presents such a problem for the male/female dualism that medicine sees fit to brutally mutilate intersexed bodies. Fausto-Sterling argues that the supposedly natural and essential differences between male and female sexes are actually a social construct; a fictive strategy aimed at discipline and control:

> Choosing which criteria to use in determining sex, and choosing to make the determination at all, are social decisions for which scientists can offer no absolute guidelines (2000, p. 5).

In another example of feminist science and technology criticism, Donna Haraway (1991) notes that primatologists of the 1960s crafted competing fictions about male dominance when comparing baboons and langur monkeys. Haraway (1991) argues that primate biology, supposedly a domain of 'value-free' science, is actually an arena where conjectures about hominid nature (including human nature) are often drawn from case studies. Claims about monkeys can sometimes be implicitly about *more* than monkeys. Haraway (1991) writes "Biology has intrinsically been a branch of political discourse, not a compendium of objective truth" (p. 98). For Haraway, it is useful to consider the historical and cultural contexts that surround scientific claims. Haraway is mentioned

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here to suggest, at least indirectly, the social constructionist legacy for critical historians of science.

There are other forms of critique which share some affinities with social construction theories. These critiques may not claim to be constructionist *per se*, yet they can be understood in the same spirit of questioning received knowledge. Criticisms of science note the rhetorical currency of narratives of objective truth. In a book entitled *Racial Formations in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1980s*, Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1998 [1986]) suggest how biologistic theories of race advanced by scientists in the nineteenth century were an elaborate apologia for slavery. Omi and Winant (1998 [1986]) maintain that race is not a biological fact: instead, it is a "sociohistorical concept" (p.14). While not explicitly constructionist, the authors reveal the concept of race to be a social and historical construct rather than a scientifically substantiated, biological 'fact.' The approach to race as a social construct rather than as an essential difference is another way that critical scholarship questions the veracity of putative facts.

Other examples abound in the social sciences and humanities where taken for granted assumptions of fact are revealed to be social, cultural and historical constructs. Here are some examples from the discipline of history: In a collection of essays entitled *The Invention of Tradition*, the historian Eric Hobsbawm (1983) and his colleagues demonstrate that what sometimes passes for a longstanding, noble tradition may only be a recent invention created to bestow an aura of legitimacy on the ruling class. In a book called *Inventing Western Civilization*, Tom Patterson (1997) takes issue with those right wing ideologues such as Newt Gingrich, Roger Kimball and others, who claim to defend Western civilization. Patterson shows that Western 'civilization,' in its racism, sexism,

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and genocide, can barely be described as civilized. In a book about the modern family,

John R. Gillis (1996) portrays a nostalgia for some golden age that in fact never was.

Gillis reveals that the patriarchal family, thought by some conservatives to be the

foundation of human life, is actually an historical construct of relatively recent invention.

All of these examples are ways in which constructionism—or modes of inquiry related to

it—can be employed to criticize the status quo and unseat unexamined assumptions. In

the next section, I would like to look at an article by Judith Butler and see if it resonates

with the *ethos* of social constructionism.

Case Study #1: Judith Butler on Gender

From the critical perspective of constructionism, many things that were once regarded as natural, given, or essential can be called into question. For the feminist theorist Judith Butler, gender, rather than being a natural or essential outgrowth of biological sex, is actually something of a performance. In an influential essay entitled "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" Butler famously wrote that gender, instead of being something we *are*, is instead something that we *do*. Butler (1988), argues that gender identity is instituted through a stylized repetition of acts (p. 402). Arguably, Butler's theory of the performativity of gender could be seen as within the legacy of social constructionism. Kenneth Gergen (1998) associates the postmodern feminism of Butler with the concerns of social constructionism. While her ideas are far too complex and nuanced to be labeled, Butler situates her own research in an intellectual tradition that posits the social constitution of reality. In her 1993 book *Bodies That Matter*, Butler uses the concept "social construction" to problematize the biological 'facts' of sex:

> If gender is the social construction of sex, and if there is no access to this "sex" except by means of its construction, then it appears not only that sex is absorbed by gender, but that "sex" becomes something like a fiction, perhaps a fantasy, retroactively installed at a prelinguistic site to which there is no direct access (1993: p. 5).

To argue that gender is performative, Butler (1988) cites philosopher John Searle's notion of "speech acts" (p. 401). "Speech acts" are related to J.L Austin's (1962) notions of "illocutionary acts" or "performative utterances." The premise of speech acts is that by uttering something, people are effectively making it a reality. A typical example of such a speech act would be 'I now pronounce you man and wife.' What if this notion of speech acts were applied to gender? What if, instead of an anatomical male sprouting according to some natural teleology into 'manliness', he is only parroting an ideal through constant reiteration? Or maybe, per Elizabeth Grosz (cited in Fausto Sterling, 2000, p. 24) there is some sort of circular mutual causality at work.

Butler (1988) quotes Simone de Beauvoir, who writes, "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman" (p. 402). This quote from Beauvoir is richly evocative for Butler's essay. The implication is that besides the anatomical fact of sex organs, gender is something that people are taught to perform over the course of a lifetime. What appears essential is, to Butler, merely the appearance of substance. It's a "compelling illusion" (1988, p. 402) but an illusion nonetheless. Butler's approach is "phenomenological" insofar as it is concerned with appearances, and not the "thing in itself" where the essence is presumably located (Kant, 1950, p. 60). Butler cites the phenomenologist Merleau Ponty, who claims that the body is "an historical idea" rather than a natural species (1988, p. 403). While this is an intriguing idea to me, I wonder if there is a certain brute fact of anatomy and hormones that makes it difficult to dispense with natural facticity altogether. The philosopher John Searle (1995) distinguishes between "institutional facts" and "brute facts" (p. 229). Where institutional facts are those things, like cash money, which have value according to human agreement, brute facts are those facts which

allegedly exist outside of human determination. Butler seems to want to question this distinction. However, might anatomy be *one* of the determining variables in gender identity?

"One is not simply a body, but, in some very key sense, one does one's body" claims Butler (1988, p. 404) and this appears to articulate a constructionist approach to identity. Interesting that Butler's essay was originally published in a journal of theater studies, but has proven to be resonant in a wider sense for a dramaturgical sociology (Goffman, 1962) where 'all the world's a stage.' Gender is not something that happens to people, rather, it is something that people make happen. Butler's approach is optimistic, because it suggests a plasticity of identity. Butler (1988) tempers her emphasis on subjectivity and personal agency by describing gender more as a strategy, or a "situation of duress" (p. 405). She notes that those who fail to 'do' gender within prescribed norms are routinely punished. The one example of this that comes to mind for me is that of Brandon Teena, an anatomical female 'doing' masculinity, who was brutally killed once her female sex organs were discovered (Sloop, 2000).

Returning to the overarching theme of ambiguity, it could be argued that the approach of Butler introduces far more ambiguity into questions of identity than did earlier explanations of sex such as biological determinism. Butler suggests that biologistic discourses constitute a normative fiction that serves to naturalize gender and make it seem 'given.' I wonder, though, if in her zeal to 'de-essentialize' gender Butler may at times overstate her case. It seems that not only is gender not 'natural' to Butler, it is decidedly 'unnatural.' Although Butler claims to forgo the rhetoric of 'natural facts,' at

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one point in her essay she seems rely on that same discredited rhetoric. For example, Butler (1988) writes:

> As Foucault and others have pointed out, the association of a natural sex with a discrete gender and with an ostensibly natural "attraction" to the opposing sex/gender is an unnatural conjunction of cultural constructs in the service of reproductive interests (p. 408).

Notice the word "unnatural." According to the sentence, it could be surmised that Butler views the heterosexual impulse as something unnatural. Not only is heterosexuality a social construct *independent* of nature, it actually *violates* the laws of nature. It seems to me that once we argue that gender is a social construct instead of a natural fact, then its problematic to turn around and employ the concept of nature. I am comfortable with the suggestion that heterosexuality is a social construct, but here Butler implies that it goes against the natural essence of reality. I wonder if Butler seeks recourse in the very type of forgone conclusions that she elsewhere jettisons. In the above quote, Butler seems to imply that it is in fact heterosexuality which goes against nature by reducing attraction to the cultural necessity of procreation. This strikes me as perplexing, if I have in fact correctly understood her argument. By this logic, two bunnies making baby bunnies are not acting out of biological imperative. Instead, they are at the behest of some unnatural, cultural brainwashing. Butler (1993) anticipates this objection, yet claims to use the terms of the debate in order to alter the debate. I leave open the possibility that I have misunderstood Butler's nuanced argument.

A tragic story from Canadian headlines ("Man Raised as Girl Dies," 2004) is evocative for Butler's view of gender. In Winnepeg, twin boys were born in 1966. During

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an attempt at circumcision, one of the boy's genitals were burned off. The mutilated child was raised as a girl, based on the hypothesis that it was nurture and not nature that determined gender. As an adult, David Reimer reverted to a male identity, and eventually committed suicide in 2004. It would be remiss to draw any conclusions from this story about the performativity of gender. Surely, a specific instance is not in any way indicative of a general rule. I mention it here only because it is thought provoking about gender questions. While biology may not be destiny, perhaps it is one of the determining variables in gender identity.

Politically, my sympathies are with feminism and the critique of sex and gender. In the book *Sexing the Body*, the biologist Anne Fausto Sterling (2000) uses an example from material reality to question reductive binaries of male/female. What about intersexed or hermaphrodidic individuals, those born with ambiguous genitalia? Such people routinely undergo horrific multilation by parents and doctors who want to cleave the child into one or another biologistic binarism. With this consideration, Fausto Sterling (2000) makes the point about the social construction of sexuality more persuasively for me than does Butler (1993). I think this is because Fausto-Sterling deals in the evidential facticity of anatomy instead of discursive or illocutionary acts.

The preceding discussion of Judith Butler was meant to suggest, however provisionally, the possible rhetorical vagrancies of the social construction of reality hypothesis. While I think demonstrating how what we take as 'reality' is only a social construction, I wonder if, taken to extremes, this perspective could undermine the rhetorical footing of critique. Gergen (1998) notes "...constructionist thinking tends to remove the grounds for any strong claims to the real and the good" (p. 8). If we argue that

allegedly natural dichotomies such as gender are human derived conventions,

independent of nature, can we then invoke the concept of nature to argue against

heterosexual desire? Butler's ideas are incredibly complex and invoke orders of recursion

that may be beyond my cognitive capacity. To me, her ideas are provocative and counter-

intuitive, going against apparently self-evident preconceptions about gender. I find that

her ideas touch a nerve, and this has been commented upon by some others in public

discourse.

An article by feminist legal theorist Martha Nussbaum (1999) entitled The "Professor

of Parody" takes Butler to task in a particularly vitriolic fashion. To Nussbaum, the

philosophy of Butler, which has become something like orthodoxy in American

universities, is masochistic, retreatist, and quietist (1999). Nussbaum argues that Butler's

prose is overly obscure (p. 3). She notes that Butler received first prize in an "annual Bad

Writing Contest" from the journal *Philosophy and Literature* for the following run-on

sentence:

> The move from a structuralist account in which capital is understood to structure
> social relations in relatively homologous ways to a view of hegemony in which
> power relations are subject to repetition, convergence, and rearticulation brought
> the question of temporality into the thinking of structure, and marked a shift
> from a form of Althusserian theory that takes structural totalities as theoretical
> objects to one in which the insights into the contingent possibility of structure
> inaugurate a renewed conception of hegemony as bound up with the contingent
> sites and strategies of the rearticulation of power (quoted in Nussbaum, 1999, p.
> 4).

Does the accusation that a theorist's writings are too wordy constitute a substantive

critique? College professors often admonish students for run on sentences and vagueness,

yet perhaps this points to a double standard. Some theorists employ these same

derelictions with impunity and are even canonized as a result. As a sentence grows longer

and longer, its meaning tends to become more ambiguous and open to interpretation.

Subject and predicate become harder to identify. For Nussbaum, such verbosity as

Butler's, above, is manipulative; an "obscurantist sleight-of-hand" (1999, p. 4). In

Butler's defense, it could be said that this does not constitute a substantive critique of her

concepts. Nussbaum's complaint so far does not engage the ideational content of Butler's

works. A criticism that someone's prose is difficult to understand, and the accusation of

willful obscurantism does not address the claim, made by Butler, that gender is a stylized

repetition of acts. Yet Nussbaum's tirade also takes issue with Butler's claim that gender

is affected or performed. To Nussbaum, this claim is something of a truism, and has been

empirically substantiated in the work of Anne Fausto Sterling and others (1999, p. 5). Yet

Nussbaum objects to Butler's "exaggerated denial of pre-cultural agency" which delimits

gender as a product of nurture and not nature (1999, p. 6).

Nussbaum's article is notable for the outrage it expresses. While Nussbaum's stated

politics are feminist, her article, at least in tenor, reaches the self-righteous indignation of

certain right wing critics of postmodern theory. My aim is to be as diplomatic as possible,

but I can't help but wonder if Nussbaum's ire might be better spent on sworn foes of

women's liberation, instead of Butler. The suggestion that Butler's "hip quietism"

actually "collaborates with evil" (Nussbaum, 1999, p. 11) shows just how much

constructionist positions push peoples buttons. While I think that her attack on Butler is

overly mordant, I also wonder if it suggests the ambivalence about constructionism from

a feminist standpoint. Nussbaum's rant against Butler is a complaint about discursive

form as well as theoretical content. Nussbaum implies that a theorist may resort to

excessive verbiage when their political position becomes untenable. Yet a complaint that a theorist is hard to understand does not, in itself, constitute a substantive criticism. Here, a relational definition of ambiguity (Eisenberg, 2007) is useful. For example I may find a legal briefing or a technical paper on theoretical physics incomprehensible. Does that make those documents *de facto* irrelevant? Just because a paper is theoretically sophisticated or uses esoteric words does not mean that it won't make sense for an audience for whom the article was intended for.

For the feminist theorist Teresa Ebert (1996), Butler's feminism is "ludic," meaning playful but not concerned enough with "emancipation from socioeconomic exploitation" (p. 220). While stated in a calmer, more complicated language than Nussbaum's (1999), Ebert suggests that there is something to the accusation that Butler's theories are a quietistic retreat from sociopolitical issues. Ebert (1996) invokes Marxism but is largely concerned with a rareified poststructuralist discourse, of the type that I have been puzzled by for decades. Ebert's *Ludic Feminism and After: Postmodernism, Desire and Labor in Late Capitalism* (1996), it is lamentably not free from complicated prose. Like Cloud (1996), Ebert aims to resuscitate the materialist concerns of Marxism, yet she remains largely concerned with the discursive realm of theoretical minutae, instead of practical concerns facing women.

In what follows, I will look at another article where I feel the constructionist position might be problematic.

Case Study #2: Ian Hacking on Child Abuse

Another theorist who approaches social issues from a constructionist perspective is Ian

Hacking. In his article "The Making and Molding of Child Abuse" (1991), Hacking

refuses to abstract 'child abuse' separate from its social, historical and political

constitutions. In what he terms "making up people", once labels are applied, then people

start to behave according to their labels (Hacking, 1991, p. 255). In a theoretical approach

that is akin to Howard Becker's (1963) labeling theory, Hacking suggests how the

labeling of certain behavior as 'abuse' might become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Hacking

shows that child abuse is a social construct, an endeavor that might make most otherwise

thoroughgoing nominalists of the social constructionist school queasy (1991, p. 257).

Instead of assigning to child abuse essential qualities, Hacking seems to say that child

abuse is a sort of rhetorically strategic essentialism employed to advance various political

agendas. Hacking sees child abuse not as an eternal moral phenomena, nor as a

commonly agreed upon institutional fact, but as a perhaps relatively recent invention that

is subject to skepticism. He recounts how Henry Kempe's "Battered Child Syndrome"

paper inaugurated the medicalization of child abuse. Careerist motives are implied,

namely, that pediatric radiology was a field in decline, and it needed a self-perpetuating

justification (Hacking, 1991, p. 228). Prior to Kempe, child abuse did not exist as such,

although the experiential phenomena was described using different nomenclature.

Hacking's paper is provocative in that it radically 'relationalizes' the issue of child abuse. Hacking begs the question, what's in a name? Hacking distinguishes child abuse *nominally* from similar phenomena that may have been referred to with a different name. As a result, there is a certain ambiguity about whether Hacking is deconstructing the name or the phenomena itself. Hacking will switch between talking about child abuse as a name and as a social reality. My apprehension is that he is splitting hairs and flirting with a problematic kind of relativism. In his philosophical detachment, I fear that Hacking may be insensitive to this morally loaded issue. I wonder if Hacking practices a type of sophistry which gratuitously troubles the relationship between a term and its referent. At times he sounds a bit like the proverbial spin doctor who puts 'truth' in quotes. "There is not simply a truth of the matter, that, once discovered, will remain the truth..." (Hacking, 1991, p. 254). Hacking will sometimes make contradictory claims about child abuse which might undermine his logical coherency. In a later book chapter about child abuse, Hacking (1999) reiterates his argument from the 1991 article:

No one is astonished to read that child abuse is not a naturalistic category— nothing is 'naturally' child abuse (p. 130).

Yet a few pages later, Hacking (1999) calls child abuse "not only an ultimate evil, but also an ultimate pollution of the child, of the family, of the society" (p. 135). But if nothing is 'naturally' child abuse, then what is it that Hacking attacks as evil and polluting? If Hacking does not deem any particular action as *de facto* child abuse then what is his basis for saying that child abuse is *apriori* evil? That may be a defensible

position in itself, yet it seems to contradict his stated position above, namely, that there is no natural essence to child abuse.

Surely there are philosophical nuances in Hacking's writings that I am missing, yet for the uninitiated, his writings make for ambiguous meanings. There is, I think a nominalistic ambiguity in the writings of Hacking that induces epistemological confusion. For example, napalm is arguably evil because it painfully sears the flesh of human bodies. To be sure, napalm is not a naturalistic category. But what if a military apologist argued that there was nothing essentially evil about napalm? This hypothetical apologist would argue that napalm is actually just, because it gives us a strategic advantage over our enemies. Now, imagine a defense attorney arguing that the visible bruises on a child were not evidence of child abuse. To the abuser, battery of the child was an act of discipline and tough love. If there is no behavior which is naturally child abuse, doesn't this invite obscurantism? If Hacking is saying that there is no eternal law against child abuse, except by human convention, that would be understandable to me. But nature, as evidenced by the observable physical harm done to tiny bodies, seems to me to offer a natural, evidentiary basis for the definition of child abuse. Here, my latent materialism has been provoked and blurts its protest. Essentialism (of the strategic, rather than metaphysical variety) seems to offer utilitarian leverage in argumentative contexts.

Hacking tests the limits of social constructionism, especially where emotions and knee jerk morality get involved. I wonder at times if Hacking is being deliberately provocative, yet equivocating just enough to allow for plausible deniability. Here are some more claims that Hacking makes in his 1991 article, which, for me, raise the suspicion of mystification or obscurantism:

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1. "...nobody could possibly have foreseen that anal dilation would be at the center of public outcry, nor have forecast the intensity of the anger that was evoked" (Hacking, 1991, p. 256). According to Hacking (1991) in 1986 the journal *The Lancet* recommended a procedure called anal dialation in order to detect the buggery of children. The use of this technique provoked anger towards the pediatric social workers who performed it. It seems to surprise Hacking that this invasive procedure could possibly become a matter of public outcry.

2. According to Hacking (1991), incest is not, by definition, a form of child abuse. Hacking claims that incest as a form of abuse came into existence only after a 1977 *Ms.* article (1991, p. 275). According to Hacking, incest has only recently been thought of as a problem for our society (1991: p. 274). Yet are there not grave interdictions against incest in most cultures dating back to the creation of language? Even if nominally it has not always been termed 'abuse', cross cultural, species-wide taboos indicate a widely held aversion to incest.

3. "Vastly fewer children are victims of 'confinement abuse' than are killed in or by automobiles, but 'automobile abuse' is not a kind of child abuse. Cars are virtues, not vices." (Hacking, 1991, p. 278). In this sentence, Hacking seems to resort to the very type of essentialism he elsewhere criticizes. As if to relativize the definition of abuse, Hacking states that automobiles kill more children than confinement abuse, yet cars are *a priori* virtuous. Hacking seems to say, who would ever dream of making automobiles problematic? In other words, where child abuse is said to be a social construct, automobiles are essentially good and

benign. Once we adopt a radical constructionist perspective can we afford to be so selective with its application?

Hacking takes epistemological mandates about the relativity of truth posited by social constructionism and pushes them right to the point where I go 'now wait a minute.' By so doing, he forces me to speculate of the politics of ambiguity.

Enter Alan Sokal

Over ten years ago, a physicist named Alan Sokal published an article that claimed,

among other things, that the force of gravity was a social construct. "Transgressing the

Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity", was

published in the journal *Social Text* in 1996. Meticulously citing the theoretical physicists

Bohr, Heisenberg, and a host of 'postmodern' intellectuals, the article asserted the thesis

that "physical reality" was a human invention. In a burlesque of postmodern and social

constructionist theories, Sokal made a number of bold claims, including the following:

> ...the postmodern sciences deconstruct and transcend the Cartesian metaphysical
> distinctions between humankind and Nature, observer and observed, Subject and
> Object. Already quantum mechanics, earlier in this century, shattered the
> ingenuous Newtonian faith in an objective, pre-linguistic world of material
> objects "out there"; no longer could we ask, as Heisenberg put it, whether
> 'particles exist in space and time objectively' (Sokal, 1996).

As the issue of the journal *Social Text* went to newsstands, the author, NYU physicist

Alan Sokal, revealed in another journal, *Lingua Franca*, that his article was in fact an

elaborate hoax designed to defend a scientific, realist conception of the world and expose

the obscurantism of 'postmodern' intellectuals. Sokal revealed that he didn't agree with

any of the ideas he advanced in "Transgressing the Boundaries." He was only offering a

caricature of a type of writing style and epistemology that he disagreed with. In Sokal's

assessment, postmodernism can be needlessly ambiguous in its use of jargon, and too

pessimistic about epistemological foundation. Sokal is largely ignorant of the social sciences and humanities, yet he does claim to know a thing or two about physics and mathematics. In "Transgressing the Boundaries" Sokal (1996) invokes theoretical physics to argue notions of objectivity. But when he reveals his hoax, Sokal claims that physics and mathematics are sometimes employed, incorrectly, in order to dazzle the scientifically untrained with an aura of scientificity.

Ironically, Sokal claims that science is invoked by postmodern theory, *not* to support empiricist or positivist assertions about verifiability. Instead, complicated insights from theoretical physics are used (erroneously) to support relativism and epistemic confusion. The implication of Sokal's criticism is that by problematizing objective reality, certain types of academic discourse can muddy the waters of clarity. To those critics of science who contend that scientific facts are mere social conventions, Sokal brusquely stated:

> Fair enough: anyone who believes that the laws of physics are mere social conventions is invited to try transgressing those conventions from the windows of my apartment. (I live on the twenty-first floor.) (Sokal, "A Physicist Experiments with Cultural Studies", p. 50).

As far as Sokal is concerned, anybody who doubts the laws of physics can take a leisurely stroll off the balcony of his highrise apartment. Yet gravity, after all, is just a name. Its an explanatory hypothesis that is apparently not without exception. Once an astronaut leaves the thin membrane of the earth's atmosphere, the laws of gravity cease to hold. But Sokal is not talking about the word, he is talking about the thing, by any name. Sokal presumes a linearity between word and referent; map and territory.

Sokal's parody was timely in that it spoofed the ambiguous melange of social constructionism, theoretical physics, poststructuralist theory, systems and 'new age' philosophy, that was sometimes aggregated under the umbrella of 'postmodernism.' It was written with cunning attention to the rhetorical devices of postmodern discourse. What was called postmodernism was perhaps an easy target. Because it is a perspective that shuns labels, no one was willing to rush to its defense as a doctrine. Sokal's hoax made front page headlines in newspapers like *The New York Times*. Unfortunately, some pundits jumped at the opportunity to gang up on left wing social critics. *The National Review* used the hoax as an opportunity to say how out of touch with reality the academic left was (Kimball, 1996; Kopel, 2002). Sokal claimed that this particular fallout of the hoax was unwelcome. Sokal (1996) identified himself as holding left wing beliefs, and offered his volunteer work for the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua as an example of his progressive credentials. Nevertheless, his stated political affiliations notwithstanding, Sokal's huffy, 'holier-than-thou' polemic shares many rhetorical affinities with Bloom (1987), Kimball (1998) and other critics from the right.

Stanley Fish (1996), then an editor of *Social Text*, went to print in *The New York Times* to counter that, just because we say something is socially constructed doesn't mean it isn't "real." In this article, Fish compared the social construction of quarks to a baseball game. For Ian Hacking (1999) this comparison was ill-conceived. For Hacking, quarks, unlike balls and strikes "are not self-evidently ontologically subjective" (p. 30). Regarding Sokal's prank, Fish (1996) pointed out that fraud is a grave transgression in academics, and it undermines the foundations of science that Sokal claimed to defend. Anticipating this accusation, Sokal had already written: "I'm not oblivious to the ethical

issues involved in my rather unorthodox experiment. Professional communities operate largely on trust; deception undercuts that trust" (Sokal, 1996, "A Physicist Experiments with Cultural Studies", p. 52). Yet for Sokal, the burden of academic accountability rested on the editors, who were themselves errant in upholding editorial standards such as peer review. "Evidently the editors of *Social Text* felt comfortable publishing an article on quantum physics without bothering to consult anyone knowledgeable in the subject" (Sokal, 1996, "A Physicist Experiments with Cultural Studies").

I won't dispute that Sokal's hoax was ethically treacherous. It could be argued that Sokal experimented with what we have been calling strategic ambiguity. Could an article be worded in a way that was so vague that erroneous claims could be made while retaining the appearance of scholarly writing? While the Sokal hoax seems like an occasion to note the ethics of strategic ambiguity, it is also provides a point of entry to address the epistemological issues we have discussed so far. Sokal's hoax manages to articulate some of my concerns with constructionist and postmodern theory. While the Sokal hoax is over ten years old, it remains a troubling challenge to the hegemony of postmodern philosophy. His argument is flattering to the neophyte: If you can't understand this stuff, join the club. Its because its not meant to be understood, only to mystify. Sokal ventures to pin down unnecessary ambiguity, insisting on *Occam's Razor*—the plainest explanation is probably the best explanation. Complex ideas are more intelligibly expressed in plainer language. Behind Sokal's humorous hoax there is a serious allegation of treachery: ambiguity is used in academia to deliberately deceive (Sokal & Bricmont, 1998, p. 189).

As a follow up to the controversy, Sokal teamed up with Belgian theoretical physicist

Jean Bricmont, and wrote *Impostures Intellectuelles* (published in the States as

Fashionable Nonsense: Postmodern Intellectuals' Abuse of Science). *Fashionable*

Nonsense (1998) hops onto the anti-postmodern bandwagon which had already been

launched by Gross and Levitt's *Higher Superstition* (1994). Like *Higher Superstition*,

Sokal and Bricmont's occasionally trenchant tome only adds insult to epistemic injury.

Like other attacks on postmodernism, Sokal and Bricmont bring a remarkable amount of

vehemence and temerity. While I don't agree with their scientistic self-righteousness, the

book *Fashionable Nonsense* frames complex epistemological issues within a heuristically

conspicuous dualism of *realism versus relativism*. The fact that Sokal identifies himself

as left wing made his attack far more palatable than the vitriolic *Tenured Radicals*

(Kimball, 1998). *Fashionable Nonsense* is a survey of many diverse viewpoints in the

philosophy of science, including Kuhn, Popper and poststructuralism. For the remainder

of this thesis I will do a close reading of this book as it relates to my themes of ambiguity,

obscurantism and mystification.

    Fashionable Nonsense alternates between a critical polemic against the hallowed idols

of French philosophy (Lacan, Baudrillard, Irigary, etc.), then retreats into "intermezzos";

epistemological 'reconnaissance missions' that discuss mainly Anglo-saxon and

American philosophers of science (Popper, Kuhn, etc.). Its not immediately evident how

the two issues are related. Sokal (1999) has said:

> ...there are really essentially two books under one cover, which are only weakly
> related. There is the critique of the gross abuses of scientific concepts by certain
> French philosophical literary intellectuals – they're not all philosophers in the
> strict sense. Then, on the other hand, there's various versions of epistemic

relativism which we criticize and in that case the targets are mainly British and American, not French, and the two debates are on very different planes (quoted in Baggani).

The tenor of *Fashionable Nonsense* is terse and the authors seem to erupt with irritability as if they have been holding back for too long. Their critique is arguably unfocused, as they attack a certain tendency towards ambiguity as it is manifest in various thinkers and philosophical perspectives. For Sokal and Bricmont, its not just about postmodernism, its about relativism and ambiguity in general. They clearly state that things should be stated clearly. They don't have patience with verbosity or vague arguments. They equate ambiguity with subterfuge, that is, they see it as a deceptive stratagem (Sokal & Bricmont, 1998, p.189). The irony in the accusation of deception is presumably not lost on Sokal, the master of disguise. He was the one who deceived the editors of *Social Text* into publishing his article. The argument seems to be that deception is rampant in academia in the form of intellectual impostors. Its not clear why these impostors would go around deceiving people, but careerism is implied. Academic careers are made by becoming "expert manipulators of erudite jargon" (Sokal and Bricmont, 1998, p. 206). Sokal and Bricmont would discourage the strategic use of ambiguity in academia because social problems demand a minimum of equivocation. In Sokal's (1996) article length revelation of his hoax, he explicitly singles out constructionist approaches:

> Theorizing about 'the social construction of reality' won't help us find an
> effective treatment for AIDS or devise strategies for preventing global warming.
> Nor can we combat false ideas in history, sociology, economics and politics if
> we reject the notions of truth and falsity (p. 52).

In a preceding discussion I tried to suggest the political and rhetorical currency of social constructionist premises as a form of critique. For example, it can be politically empowering to demonstrate that a concept like race, supposedly rooted in fact, is actually a social construct; a fiction implicated in an oppressive ideology. Yet Sokal does not see any political utility in social construct approaches.

"My original motivation had to do with epistemic relativism," Sokal said in a 1999 interview "and what I saw as a rise in sloppily thought-out relativism, being the kind of unexamined *zeitgeist* of large areas of the American humanities and some parts of the social sciences. In particular I had political motivations because I was worried about the extent to which that relativism was identified with certain parts of the academic left and I also consider myself on the left and consider that to be a suicidal attitude for the American left" (Sokal, quoted in Baggani, 1999).

As a self identified leftist, Sokal would say that ambiguity is deceptive because it sidesteps the issues, induces confusion, and leads to a sort of defeatism. This plays into the hands of the oppressors. *Fashionable Nonsense* asks the question, what are the potential political and material implications of epistemological positions? As noted, the book *Fashionable Nonsense* tends to zig zag from epistemological problems endemic to each side of the English channel or the Atlantic. The targets of Sokal and Bricmont are not just ambiguity and epistemic relativism, but also a putative scientificity that is couched in pseudo scientific pretension. Pseudo-science is what Sokal and Bricmont criticize in the writings of French post-structuralists. As much as *Fashionable Nonsense* is intolerant of ambiguity, it is also—at least implicitly—a protest against scientism or pseudo-science. There is a tendency with some "social science" to dress up what is

merely conjecture or bias in pretension of scientific rigor. The history of science is replete with such embarrassments, for example, the scientistic quackery of Wilhelm Reich (1967). This is what Sokal and Bricmont claim to point out in so-called post-structuralist writings: Not orgone generators, *per se*, but vaguely scientistic sounding jargon that intimidates lay people into presuming something profound must be going on.

To begin my analysis of *Fashionable Nonsense* I will revisit the topic of relativism that was discussed earlier in this thesis. I will further examine how epistemic relativism could perhaps be used as a strategy of ambiguity, obscurantism, or mystification. Sokal & Bricmont defend the notion of objectivity:

> While scientists try, as best as they can, to obtain an objective view of certain aspects of the world, relativist thinkers tell them that they are wasting their time. (Sokal and Bricmont, 1998, p. 52)

It has been argued that the problem with this type of realist perspective is that we always stand in some sort of relation to the objects of our inquiry, making a wholly unbiased assessment difficult. According to Richard Rorty (1991) "...the realist thinks that the whole point of philosophical thought is to detach oneself from any particular community and look down on it from a more universal standpoint" (p. 30).

Social science has historically been reluctant to claim scientific objectivity. In *The Sociological Imagination*, C. Wright Mills (1959) is tempted to use the phrase "the social studies" instead of "the social sciences". This is because:

> ...the word 'science' has acquired great prestige and rather imprecise meaning. I do not feel any need to kidnap the prestige or to make the meaning any less precise by using it as a philosophical metaphor (p. 18).

For Mills, science is an ambiguous metaphor that is invoked by social theorists in an attempt to commandeer its cachet of objectivity. Scientific metaphors may be deficient because in social science we are the very thing we attempt to study. According to the philosopher John Searle (2004) "In general, the natural sciences deal with observer-independent phenomenon and the social sciences with the observer dependent" (p. 6). The issue of observer dependence is something that social science must reckon with in order to avoid asserting their own cultural biases as statements of universal facts. As David Braybrooke (1965) asks in the introduction to *Philosophical Problems of the Social Sciences*:

> How much objective truth can social scientists attain about their own society and culture, sharing its dominant prejudices? How fair are they likely to be to the different outlooks of other societies?" (p.16)

Similarly, Berger and Luckmann, in their book *The Social Construction of Reality*, emphasize that a sociology of knowledge needs to take the particularities of observers into account:

> How can I be sure, say, of my sociological analysis of American middle class mores in view of the fact that the categories I use for this analysis are conditioned by historically relative forms of thought, that I myself and everything I think is determined by my genes and by my ingrown hostility to my fellow men, and that, to cap it all, I am myself a member of the American middle class? (1966, p. 13)

By accounting for observer biases, reflexive social science maintains that putative 'facts' leave a lot out of the equation, such as the representational biases of the observer.

Analogies From Theoretical Physics

The problem of observer dependant phenomena and relativity is not limited to the social sciences. Sometimes relativists in the social sciences have taken their cue from theoretical physics. The Heisenberg principle, Einstein's theory of relativity, and Bohr's notion of complementarity are sometimes appropriated by the social sciences and the humanities to argue against objectivity or realism. Sokal and Bricmont (1998) have charged that Einstein's theory of relativity has been erroneously appropriated by postmodern sociologist Bruno Latour (p. 132). After a technical exposition of Einstein's theory of relativity, Sokal and Bricmont (1998) maintain that "Latour confuses the pedagogy of relativity with the 'technical content' of the theory itself" (p. 130). According to Sokal and Bricmont, relativity theory actually has *no* relevance to social science, and furthermore, the human sciences should stop aping the developments in the proper sciences. Theoretical physics deals with tiny, sub-microscopic particles and can't be easily transposed to human society.

In an article in *Physics Today*, Mara Beller (1998) maintains that a lot of relativist confusion resulted from the eccentric speculations of Neils Bohr, Werner Heisenberg and other theoretical physicists. Bohr compared wave particle duality in physics with the "complementarity" of reason and emotion, or complementarity between different cultures. In other words, he perfunctorily superimposed his theoretical grid from physics

onto the human realm. Relativists in the social sciences have seized upon the speculations of Bohr to bolster their arguments against causality and objective truth (Beller, 1998). Sokal and Bricmont argue that the application of theoretical physics to the social sciences is better left to those who grasp theoretical physics. The feminist theoretical physicist Karen Barad avoids superficial analogies with theoretical physics. In the article "Meeting the Universe Halfway: Realism and Social Constructivism Without Contradiction" (1996) Barad writes "I will not put forward any argument to the effect that quantum theory of the microworld is analogous to situations that interest us in the macroworld..." (p. 168). What Barad does focus on is the epistemological implications of observer-relative factors in scientific observation.

The physicist Fritof Capra notes that things which happen on the subatomic level are not easily transposed to our everyday world. Capra (1996) gives the following example:

> At each level of complexity the observed phenomena exhibit properties that do not exist at the lower level. For example, the concept of temperature, which is central to thermodynamics, is meaningless at the level of individual atoms, where the laws of quantum theory operate (p. 28).

Capra notes that the analogy between our everyday physical world and the world of quantum mechanics only goes so far. Newtonian laws, which treats the universe like a cause and effect machine, were not observed to be lawful in the quantum world of subatomic particles (Capra, 1996, p. 30). If there are events that happen in subatomic physics that have no equivalent in the Newtonian world of objects, it follows that insights from quantum theory might not translate well into the realm of human communication. Yet in an article about schizophrenia, Gregory Bateson contrasts the "world of

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communication" with the Newtonian world of physical objects. Where the Newtonian

paradigm is concerned with discrete objects, Bateson's "world of communication" looks

at the relationship between things:

> The difference between the Newtonian world and the world of communication is simply this: that the Newtonian world ascribes reality to objects and achieves its simplicity by excluding the context of the context—indeed excluding all metarelationships—
> a fortiori excluding an infinite regress of such relations. In contrast, the theorist of communication insists upon examining the meta-relationships while achieving its simplicity by excluding all objects (Bateson, 1972, p. 250).

Bateson's quote above contains a theme common to systems theory as well as

communication studies. Instead of thinking in terms of objects, Bateson would consider

the contexts that created them, and the contexts of the contexts, and so on, *ad infinitum*.

Berger and Luckmann (1966) describe "the vertigo of relativity" (p. 5) and I can imagine

that sensation as I read the above quote. The insight of Bateson about "the world of

communication" has been stated in similar terms about quantum theory:

> Ever since Newton, physicists had believed that all physical phenomenon could be reduced to the properties of hard and solid particles. In the 1920's, however, quantum theory forced them to accept the fact that the solid material objects of classic physics dissolve at the subatomic level into wavelike patterns of probabilities. These patterns, moreover, do not represent probabilities of things, but rather probabilities of interconnections. The subatomic particles have no meaning as isolated entities but can be understood only by interconnections, or correlations, among various processes of observation and measurement. In other words, subatomic particles are not "things" but interconnections among things, and these, in turn, are interconnections among other things, and so on. In quantum theory we never end up with things, only interconnections (Capra, 1996: p. 31).

It could be argued that Bateson's description of the "world of communication" arrives at a similar conclusion as Capra's description of quantum mechanics. Both perspectives prioritize context over 'things.' Bateson doesn't explicitly associate the "world of communication" with insights deriving from quantum theory. Still, the communicational world is contrasted with the Newtonian world of physical objects.

The quote from Bateson has been juxtaposed with the quote from Capra above in order to make the following suggestion: Bateson's "world of communication" and Capra's explication of quantum theory are contrasted with Newtonian physics in a similar way. If, in other ways, analogies between the Newtonian world and the subatomic world are found to be lacking (for example, the laws of thermodynamics which have no bearing on subatomic particles) could the claim that physical laws don't apply to human communication also be tenuous? Bateson's may be an example of the strained analogies between human and subatomic worlds that Sokal and Bricmont find so objectionable.

I detect, in Bateson's "world of communication" a tolerance for ambiguity. A realist epistemology gains cognitive clarity by focusing on things, naming them and classifying them, and excluding the metarelationships that constitute their thingness. A communicational model focuses on process instead of content, so that the thing is hard to grasp. How do we go about studying things that are 'out-there' –such as social classes, ethnic groups, and consumers—if we exclude *all* objects for the sake of relationships (Bateson, 1972, p. 250)?

Thus I Refute Thee, Solipsism

In the eighteenth century book *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, British philosopher George Berkeley (1975) argued that there was no material world. Any justification for a material world was circular, and for all we know, we could be a brain in a vat. For Berkeley, "no hypothesis of 'matter' is necessary to account for experience" (Burke, 1954, p. 178). A contemporary of Berkeley, Samuel Johnson, is famous for an anecdote where he was challenged to refute Berkeley's subjective idealism. Gruffly, Johnson kicked a rock and proclaimed "I refute it thus!" (Boswell, 2006).

Strictly speaking, Doctor Johnson's refutation proves nothing, yet the material world has a strong self-evident quality. Although he might shun the label of subjective idealist, Gregory Bateson might be characterized as being in the tradition of Berkeley. Bateson (1972) writes "This world, of communication, is a Berkeleyan world, but the good bishop was guilty of understatement" (p. 250). For Bateson, a tree that falls in the forest makes no real sound, and a chair is only an idea that we put our trust into as we sit (p. 250). For Rorty, the Berkeleyan position is a logical refutation of realism. Rorty (1991) writes "nothing can correspond to a representation except a representation" (p. 131). As such, the circularity of representations are hermetically sealed and there is no recourse to 'reality.'

Epistemologically, the antirepresentationalist position may be in principle irrefutable, yet it seems to border on the ridiculous. In their brief history of epistemology, Sokal and Bricmont (1998) dismiss solipsism as absurd, yet impossible to refute absolutely. "If anyone insists that he is a 'harpsichord playing solo' (Diderot) there is no way to convince him of his error" (Sokal and Bricmont, 1996, p. 53). Sokal and Bricmont claim "we have never met a sincere solipsist and we doubt that any exists" (p. 54). In the communication field, solipsism has no adherents as such, yet in the move away from representationalist theories of language there is sometimes a pessimism about 'objective' knowledge, as well as the facile transmission of meanings from one person to another. In "A Short Essay on Languaging," A.L Becker (1991) writes:

> ...we know from experience that what we mean when we say something need have no relation to what is heard, even by people with whom we have conversed for a lifetime (p. 229).

For Becker (1991), messages "trigger an orientation" but don't transfer meanings (p. 230). Becker quotes Heidegger for whom language "might constantly destroy the possibility of saying that of which we are speaking" (quoted in Becker, 1991: p. 231). The emphasis, it seems to me, in Becker's short tract, is on opacity and the inevitability of ambiguity. It seems to me that such an emphasis on problems in translation may stem from a nostalgia for representationalist theories of language. The philosopher Donald Davidson (1982 [1973]) writes:

> ...there is an idea that any language distorts reality, which implies that it is only wordlessly if at all that the mind comes to grips with things as they really are. This is to conceive of language as an inert (though necessarily distorting)

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medium independent of the human agencies that employ it: a view of language that surely cannot be maintained (p. 67).

I have suggested how human consciousness needs to be selective in the sense data it values. How do we know if language corresponds in any way to reality? How do we know that our claims to accurately describe reality through language are not 'always already' misconstrued in an onto-epistemological game of 'broken telephone?' This type of epistemological inquiry, reaching the absurdities of the first *Meditation* of Rene Descartes (1969), is as far back Sokal and Bricmont (1998) will go in addressing epistemological questions. In a "postpositivist" (Phillips, 2005) allowance to skepticism, Sokal and Bricmont concede that there is nothing to absolutely refute solipsism. There is nothing to prove absolutely that our sensory apparatus accurately reflects reality. Sokal and Bricmont readily admit that there is no unambiguous, "absolutist" criteria for certainty (p. 59). However, while it is not known with absolute certainty, there is good reason to believe that the sun will come up tomorrow, as it has for millennia. There is also good precedent to back up the belief that a chair will cradle us whenever we trustingly plunk down onto its materiality.

In grudging debt to Humean skepticism, Sokal and Bricmont admit "No statement about the real world can ever be literally proven" (1998, p. 60). This admission is not an insignificant sign that a stalemate has been reached in the science wars. The authors make an analogy with criminal justice, namely, that what we call "proof" is "proof beyond a reasonable doubt" (Sokal and Bricmont, pp. 59, 82). The criminal justice analogy will reappear throughout the course of their argument. For the authors, the problem of epistemic relativism is that it is beset with unreasonable doubt. They see relativism in the

context of a vain epistemological obsession to ground method absolutely, that is, beyond

a reasonable doubt.

Science: Facts or Normative Fictions?

This section is about the problem of relativism for philosophers of science. While some foundationalist epistemology insists on bedrock foundations upon which knowledge can be built, science and technology proceed blithely. To mention an obvious example, the Wright brothers, were they to have heeded scientific principles of their day, might have been discouraged from ever attempting air travel. Technological innovation has indifferently progressed without the certainty of axiomatic foundation. Science, as equated with instrumentalism, appears to rely on unexamined assumptions. Science needs to make assumptions as it goes along. If scientists had to justify each hypothesis they were operating with, they could never get any work done. Yet even if the assumptions are unjustified they may get the job done anyway. Albert Einstein wrote that to epistemologists, scientists must appear to be "unscrupulous opportunists" (quoted in Sokal and Bricmont, p. 61), because of their willingness to make statements of fact derived from an infinite regress of unsubstantiated assumptions.

In his "metalogues" (conversations he had with his daughter), Gregory Bateson (1972) claims that Newton didn't discover gravity, he invented it (p. 39). Presumably, Bateson is not arguing that, prior to the apple that fell on Newton's head, there was no force to keep things anchored on solid ground. Instead, Bateson is pointing out to his daughter that what is taken as 'reality' is actually just a name. Scientific theories are ways of framing

the world; instrumentalist narratives that can manipulate things but never define them definitively. As with the map and territory, scientific theories are not to be confused with reality itself. They are conceptual abstractions that describe phenomena, and hence are subject to revision.

Often theoretical perspectives in communication studies can navigate similar problematics using different theoretical nomenclature. A tolerance of ambiguity requires the cultivation of a bemused nonattachment towards the terminologies that cathect onto various phenomena (Eisenberg, 2007). In social scientific theory, names have been coined to describe various overlapping perspectives. Constructionist (Berger and Luckmann, 1966), systems (Bateson, 1972) and relational (Condit, 2006) rubrics all stress the importance of perspective and context. Independently, they arrive at the conclusion that meaning various according to the observer. To this burgeoning taxonomic heap we can add symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969) and phenomenology (Schutz, 1965), two theoretical perspectives I will presently consider. Symbolic interactionism is a perspective attributed to George Herbert Mead, who was a contemporary of pragmatist John Dewey (Blumer, 1969). Symbolic interactionism, in its exposition by Herbert Blumer (1969), stresses the indeterminacy of an object and the relativity of any hypothesis about reality:

> First, the nature of an object is constituted by the meaning it has for the person or persons for whom it is an object. Second, this meaning is not intrinsic to the object but arises from how the person is initially prepared to act toward it. Readiness to use a chair as something in which to sit gives it the meaning of a chair; to one with no experience with the use of chairs the object would appear with a different meaning, such as a strange weapon. It follows that objects vary in their meaning (p. 68-69).

The above quote from Blumer has been offered to suggest the importance of

intentionality in human judgement. For Blumer, meaning is accorded from purpose.

Something takes on meaning only according to its uses. Consider the following

conversation between Gregory Bateson and his young daughter, Mary Catherine:

> Daughter: What does 'objective' mean?
> Father: Well. It means that you look very hard at those things which you choose to look at.
> Daughter: That sounds right. But how do the objective people choose which things they will be objective about? (Bateson, 1972, p. 47)

Gregory and Mary Catherine point out the element of choice, of intentionality, in the

codification of lived reality. Returning to the quote from Blumer, while the function of a

chair is probably widely agreed upon, Blumer holds to that hypothetical instance which

might prove exceptional.

Intentionality is also a concern of phenomenology, yet another theoretical perspective

that objects to the scientific method which would subsume particular instances under

some general rule. Phenomenology is concerned with perception and experience instead

of a supposedly objective social science. Here is the problem with an instrumentalist

social science, according to Alfred Schutz (1965):

> ...this type of social science does not deal directly and immediately with the social life-world common to us all, but with skillfully and expediently chosen idealizations and formalizations of the social world which are not repugnant to its facts (p. 57).

Science tends to objectify, and the theoretical model can resemble the lived experience,

but little. Raw human experience can be quantified into numbers, but such numbers are

an abstraction that is distant from perception. Phenomenological perspectives protest that

what purports to be scientific reality can in fact be far removed from people's everyday

experience. In *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*

Edmund Husserl wrote:

> But now we must note something of the highest importance that occurred even
> as early as Galileo: the surreptitious substitution of the mathematically
> substructed world of idealities for the only real world, the one that is actually
> given through perception, that is ever experienced and experienceable-our
> everyday life-world (quoted in Paci, 1964).

Husserl implies that scientific objectifications are strained analogies between

mathematics and everyday reality. Numbers confer an aura of 'hard' data yet they also

function as a rhetorical device that substitute for experiential perception. C. Wright Mills

(1959) writes about "abstracted empiricism" to describe social scientists who reify

numbers and data. Echoing Husserl, above, Mills writes, "What abstracted empiricists

call empirical 'data' represent a very abstracted view of everyday social worlds" (1959,

p. 124). In this view, numerical representations of the material world, for all their claims

to scientificity, are remote and lifeless. The phenomenologically informed psychiatrist,

R.D. Laing, claims that Galileo Galilei offers us a "dead world" (quoted in Capra, 1996:

p. 19) which is devoid of ethics, soul, consciousness and spirit.

The social psychologist Floyd Allport (1965) has suggested that the supposed

"reality" of discrete objects of inquiry are in fact abstractions or generalizations that

scientists take for granted. According to Allport: "...any entity or 'thing', at whatever

level we find it, always seems to break down into a collectivity at a lower order" (1965:

p. 30). This quote is reminiscent of Celeste Condit (2006), who maintains: "Every thing

that exists is in itself nothing more than a particularly, and perspectively, constituted set of relationships" (p. 5). For Allport, a "thing" is only a fiction. This premise calls into question the veracity of scientific claims. The insinuation is that scientific objectivity is but a teetering house of cards:

> ...we now find that the very notion of a 'thing', instead of being distinct and absolute, is shifting, ambiguous in denotation, misleading as to its singularity, overlapping, relativistic and blurred (Allport. 1965: p.31).

This is the import of relativism for Allport and he is admittedly "baffled as to where to turn" (1965: p. 31).

There is a point at which, for the sake of sanity, a philosopher might want to halt this infinite regress of contexts. It could be argued that such bafflement is, in the words of R.D Laing, "a state of mystification" (1965: p.200). At some point there is a normative utility in notions of truth and falsity. For the sake of less ambiguity, someone might provisionally assume that the pencil they hold in their hand is a thing with certain properties that can be relied upon to fulfill a certain function, like jotting down notes.

Sociology of Knowledge and a Syllogism Qua Epimenides

It seems to me that it is important to question assertions of fact and to inquire as to their constructedness. Yet relativism can be confusing, because it induces an infinite questioning of knowledge that potentially never ends. Gadamer (1975) notes that relativism "refutes itself to the extent that it claims to be true" (p. 344). Maybe everything is relative—*including* relativity. From the point of view of formal logic, relativism self-refuting. Consider the following syllogism:

a) All knowledge is relative

b) a) is unconditionally true

A variant of this paradox dates back to the ancient philosopher Epimenides—a Cretan—who stated 'Cretans always lie' (Korzybski, 1933, p. 435; Weinsheimer, 1985, p. 53; Bateson & Ruesch, 1951, p.194; Watzlawick, Beavin & Jackson, 1967, pp. 193, 197-199). The above syllogism is meant to imply that sometimes relativism gets tripped up by its own premises. If everything is relative, then isn't also the proposition —that everything is relative—*also* relative? In this section, I will show that the reflexive or self-refuting premise of relativism sometimes troubles the discourse of certain philosophers of science. Habermas (1990) refers to this as a "performative contradiction" of relativism.

Karl Popper (1965) argues that facts are always provisional. There is always a drift between our theoretical objectifications and the object of inquiry as it really is, but

Popper doesn't throw up his hands in discouragement. For him, the answer seems to be, more rigor, more systematic testing of our theories. Through empirical research, we can at least attain a *better* approximation of reality. Popper could be characterized as making allowances to ambiguity while aiming towards a realist conception of truth. Popper proposes a doctrine of methodological unity, a unity that all science makes use of, whether natural or social. Popper terms this unified scientific method "hypothetical-deductive" (1965, p. 33) which means is that scientific hypotheses need to be rigorously tested and retested. Indebted to skepticism, Popper would maintain that hypotheses are not some stepping stone to proven facts. Popper's "hypotheticism" states that theories "always retain their hypothetical character" (1965, p. 33). The hypothesis that a chair will meet our behinds as we sit down is a provisional one, and one that is tested every time we make the leap of faith that we won't land on the floor.

The Popperian deductive method has to be thorough. "If we are uncritical, we shall always find what we want" (Popper, 1965, p. 35). Popper details the process whereby science selectively chooses data to validate its pet hypothesis. In science there is plenty of room for the cherry picking of sense data which would apparently validate a thesis. It is fairly easy to confirm a theory: just selectively choose data to support it, and ignore data which might challenge it (Popper, 1965, p. 35). For Popper, a scientific theory is an unprivileged life form whose survival is harshly won. If 'the facts' were an actual creature, PETA would charge animal cruelty: "...to ensure that only the fittest theories survive, their struggle for life must be made severe for them." (Popper, 1965, p. 35). To avoid the excesses of scientism, scientific truths should never attain the status of dogmatic gospel. For Popper, the emphasis is on falsification, rather than verification

(Sokal & Bricmont, 1998, p. 63). For the hypotheticist, verification is untenable, because inferential leaps occur whenever particular instances are made into general principles (Bochner, 1985, p. 29).

For a hypotheticist, if we can't take our codifications as being absolutely true, at least they should have the dignity of not *yet* having been proven false. Popper (1965) distinguishes between inductive and deductive reasoning. With induction, a particular phenomenon is imagined to be an instance of a general rule. Deduction refers to a conclusion that follows from a demonstrated premise. While induction can come from a hunch, deduction implies the rigorous protocols of scientific methods. The question, for Popper, is not how someone came up with a theory, but rather, how that theory was tested (1965, p. 36).

For W.V. Quine (1981), hypotheticism is untenable, because it takes us back to a situation of infinite regress. Science relies on previous suppositions, and if each one had to be tested rigorously, science would never get anywhere. For Quine, scientific objectification is a conceptual tool that is useful in predicting the future based on past instances. Quine writes:

> We persist in breaking reality down somehow into a multiplicity of identifiable and discriminable objects... We talk so inveterately of objects that to say we do so seems almost to say nothing at all; for how else is there to talk? (quoted in Davidson, 1982, p. 73).

For Quine, thinking of reality in terms of discrete objects is a function of language. Empiricism is a normative fiction that uses facts as conceptual markers. Truth, meanwhile, is a "sticky" concept (Quine, 1981, p. 38).

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Other epistemologists in the philosophy of science field will trouble the equivalence

of science and 'facts.' For Thomas Kuhn (1962), sometimes pseudo or extra scientific

beliefs precipitate paradigmatic revolutions in science:

> An apparently arbitrary element, compounded of personal and historical
> accident, is always a formative ingredient of the beliefs espoused by a given
> scientific community at a given time (p.4).

Kuhn argues that there is an element of accident when one paradigm replaces another. As

an example, Kuhn claims that the mythical, metaphysical baggage of "sun worship"

helped make Kepler become a Copernican (1962, pp. 152-153). For Kuhn, science is not

progressing towards greater and greater truth. Rather, changes in paradigm contain at

least an element of contingency and extrascientific subtext. Kuhn (1962) explains:

> We may, to be more precise, have to relinquish the notion, explicit or implicit,
> that changes in paradigm carry scientists and those who learn from them closer
> and closer to the truth (p. 170).

Thomas Kuhn de-emphasizes notions of verification, falsification, and scientific progress

(Weinsheimer, 1985, p. 27; Doppelt, 1982, p. 113). Rorty (1991) has applauded Kuhn for

having "softened the distinction between science and non-science" (p. 38).

Kuhn (1962) notes that science doesn't incorporate old paradigms within new ones.

Instead, the old paradigms are deemed "unscientific" and are discarded (p. 103). As such,

there is no rational ground of dialogue between outgoing and incoming paradigms. This

idea has come to be known as the Kuhnian theory of incommensurability. The realist

philosopher Hilary Putnam maintains that the thesis of incommensurability is self-

refuting (Rorty, 1991, p. 25). Sokal and Bricmont try to trip up the Kuhnian position on a

formal level. Theirs is a logical argument, related to the variant of the 'liar' or Epimenides paradox mentioned earlier. The argument goes like this: If irrationality governs scientific paradigms, wouldn't it also interfere with an ostensibly rational philosophy of science? "Why speak in a realist mode about historical categories, such as paradigms, if it is an illusion to speak in a realist mode about scientific concepts?" (Sokal & Bricmont, 1998, p. 77). Is the Kuhnian paradigm somehow exempt from the same contingencies that eclipse other scientific paradigms?

Paul Feyerabend was an anarchist philosopher of science, whose book title *Farewell to Reason* (1987) conjures up the specter of unrepentant irrationality. In a book called *Against Method*, Feyerabend (1975) claims that the only rule that doesn't inhibit scientific progress is "anything goes" (p. 23). As they did with Kuhn, Sokal and Bricmont (1998) try to dispense with Feyerabend by trying to catch him up in his own implicit logical antinomies. They suggest that Feyerabend resorts to crude distinctions between "facts" and "theories," invoking the Vienna Circle epistemology he elsewhere rejects: "...he appears to use implicitly in the social sciences a naively realist epistemology that he rejects in the natural sciences" (Sokal & Bricmont, p. 83). In other words, how come the historian of science is somehow epistemologically privileged to denigrate science from a realist perspective? Sokal and Bricmont claim, once again, that relativism is circular and self-refuting. Behind this rhetorical gambit is an attempt to preserve some notion of truth.

Conclusion: A Measured Approach

The modern esteem for science has long been nearly assumed, but now the technological ethos and the kind of engineering imagination associated with science are more likely to be frightening and ambiguous than hopeful or progressive (Mills, 1959, p. 16).

...it is a hard task to be good; in every case it is a task to find the *median* (Aristotle, 1962, p. 50).

A scientistic attitude abhors ambiguity, and wants to nail things down. But rigid assertions of fact can mask totalitarian agendas. Dwight Conquergood (1991) links science with imperialism and criticizes the empirical attitude for its putative neutrality. To Conquergood, where empiricists seek the *eviction* of politics, "Critical Theorists" seek the *excavation* of political views (1991, p. 179). Its important to interrogate science for its political implications. Think about the terrible things that have happened in the name of so called 'value neutral' science. How about Chernobyl, Tuskegee, Bhopal, Agent Orange, Thalidomide, DDT? Scientific expertise and ethical eviction can make for Frankensteinian horrors.

Scientific objectivity, materialism, and realism is inherently problematic to some. For Gregory Bateson and Jurgen Ruesch (1951), the codification of information is "multiplicative" (p.175). As one truth is asserted, other possible explanations are negated. In this view, consciousness itself is by definition a reduction (Bateson & Ruesch, 1951,

p.183). Hans-Georg Gadamer objects to the "willful domination of existents" (quoted in Weinsheimer, p. 8) For Theodor Adorno (1983), science is "arbitrarily dedicated to separate objects which starkly isolate matter and method" (p. 41).

Fashionable Nonsense, as we have seen, is against obscurantism, unnecessary ambiguity and a "lackadaisical attitude towards scientific rigor" (Sokal & Bricmont, 1998, p. 207). In their rigid scientific self-righteousness, Sokal and Bricmont wear out their welcome and overstate their case. I wonder if their efforts are misdirected. Rather than prank postmodernists who are critical of science, I think they should use their scientific expertise to criticize the sinister ways that science is being used in the world today. For example, what are the potential health risks of eating genetically modified foods? While the FDA has allowed the marketing of genetically modified foods, the Union of Concerned Scientists has raised concerns about their safety (Mellon & Rissler, 2003). What constitutes sound, well documented empirical evidence that such Frankenfoods are safe to eat? What exactly constitutes scientific consensus about an issue, and when data may be ambiguous, isn't it more prudent to err on the side of caution when it comes to health and safety? Hypotheticism (Popper, 1965) suggests that scientific claims should be questioned and not elevated to the status of dogma.

My goal has been to seek a measured and non-devisive approach to the heated conflicts between science and empiricism on the one hand and antirepresentationalism or relativism on the other. The truth, I suspect, is somewhere in between, and I don't want to come down hard on either side of the debate. I am not opposed to relativism, but I have tried to suggest how taken to extremes it can be self refuting. Judiciality and liberal tolerance is something that is suggested to me by Aristotelian ethics. While Aristotelian

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logic has been faulted for its rigid "either/or" preoccupation (Korzybski, 1933), the *Nichomachean Ethics* of Aristotle suggests that the virtue is always somewhere in-between. The doctrine of the mean, as applied to the realism/relativism dualism, suggests that a decision between either polarity is an error. Burke (1954) points out that Korbyzki's rigid dichotomy between "Aristotelian" and "Non-Aristotelian" logics is actually predicated on the very "two-valued" distinction it claims to negate (p. 239)!

In principle I have nothing against positivism or social science, although there is a risk of fetishizing scientific inquiry. This is what Mills (1959) calls "abstracted empiricism." What I have learned from Rorty is that sometimes the scientific attitude is fetishized as being a sort of 'god's eye view.' For Rorty "...there is nothing wrong with science, only the attempt to divinize it, the attempt characteristic of realistic philosophy" (p. 34). According to Popper, we need to treat scientific theories critically and rigorously test their truth claims. In order to hold science accountable, we should engage with it, not put it on a pedestal.

In a academic universe where knowledge is in a relentless mode of overproduction (Becker, 1973), learning to live with uncertainty is advisable. Eisenberg (2007) argues that uncertainty should be reframed as mystery (p. 242). Often, the habit of cathecting too strongly onto meanings makes for zealots and fanatics. But while meaning is variable and mobile, it is also precious and should be handled with care. I wonder if such unconditional acceptance of uncertainty might leave vital meanings subject to perpetual negation. The psychotherapist Viktor Frankl (1959) maintains that he managed to survive Auschwitz because of the meaning he had strongly anchored in his consciousness. The "will to meaning" is to Frankl of primary consideration for human existence (1959, p.

154). Eisenberg (2007) suggests a flirting with meaning, which should be distinguished from a promiscuous, existential void where meaning is perpetually negated.

I am also of the opinion that, in order to prevail against the troubling forces that are in power in our society, sometimes we need a stronger sense of truth and falsehood. Wars of agression are premised on outright disinformation (Rampton & Stauber, 2003), and leniency about the relativity of truth can be discouraging. One blogger argues that George Bush, Jr. uses strategic ambiguity for the purposes of mass deception (see Keefer, 2003). An article called "Strategic Ambiguity, Communication, and Public Diplomacy in an Uncertain World" suggests the uses of strategic ambiguity for United States foreign policy (Goodall, Trethewey & McDonald, 2006). According to Bud Goodall and his co-authors, the United States should utilize strategic ambiguity when issuing statements of policy. Goodall et al (2006) maintain that the meanings of messages are interpretated according to context, and not according the old "monologic" sender reciever model of communication (2006, p. 10).

As an example, Goodall et al (2006) relate an anecdote from the 1960s about Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser who had uttered what Lyndon Johnson interpreted to be "bellicose" comments about the U.S. (p. 10). In his defense, Nasser explained that his comments were only intended for the Egyptians, but actually he wanted to work in "diplomatic backchannel" with America (Goodall, et al, 2006, p. 10). The implication is that Nasser practised strategic ambiguity, but the example implies duplicity. The brief article by Goodall, et al strikes me as Machiavellian, because it appears to whisper in the ear of American imperialism about the uses of guile in international relations. I am reminded of the conservative philosopher Leo Strauss (1952) and his distinction between

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exoteric and *esoteric* meanings of texts. For Strauss, a message could have an ostensible or manifest meaning that masked a latent one with more disturbing implications (Drury, 2004). Strauss cites the Platonic rationale of the "noble lie" (1952, p. 35). Could strategic ambiguity be used as a euphemism for the noble lie? Ambiguity can be seen as strategically benign or as a mystification, depending on which side you are on. Sometimes, per Conquergood's (1991) suggestion, politics should be excavated, not evicted, from statements.

There is also the issue of ambiguity in academic writing. In my experience, Bateson's (1972) emphasis on context over objects can sometimes be cognitively confusing. For the sake of eloquence, sometimes it is useful to speak in terms of objects. Also, as I go through my academic career, frankly, at times I wish for shorter sentences, less jargon, and less theoretical ambiguity. While Orwell (1949) warned about a dumbed down English called "newspeak," he was also against pretentious, wordy diction (1950 [1947]). To look at a contemporary example, what is "antifeminist feminist postfeminism"? (Projansky, 2001). The term appears to be thrice self refuting and incomprehensible. As another example of convoluted discourse, take Jean Paul Sartre:

> A second reason for the illusion of the group as an inert totality has also been adumbrated, namely, that the group, for the non-grouped, and the other groups, appears as a living objective totality, and the interiorization by the group of its being-for-the-other and even of its being-for-other-for-other leads to a semblance of totalized unity which is really the infinite compression of the interiorized group as other-for-the-others, whereby the group, as it were, tries to make itself a totalized unity for itself (quoted in Laing & Cooper, 1964, p. 159).

Admittedly, this quote is taken out of context. Yet I wonder if it is iterable or sensible at all. According to a footnote by R.D. Laing, in this passage Sartre appears to be dealing

with a "meta-meta-meta perspective" (Laing & Cooper, 1964, p. 159). This appears to be so abstract that it is nonnsensical to me, although just because something is not easily understood does not in itself make it null and void.

It is likely that ambiguity in academic writing could be operating at a level of theoretical sophistication that is beyond my cognitive ability. But in the first place, I have always been ambivalent about ascending to the highest heights of conceptual abstraction. I am interested in the practical and political implications of discourse. Communication is a discipline that acknowledges various ways of knowing and other measures of intelligence besides theoretical complexity. A philosopher or scientist might be highly advanced, but at the expense of communicational skills valued by my discipline. I hope that, with the hegemony of deconstructive (Derrida, 1978, 1991) and relational models (Condit, 2006), the ideal of comprehension and lucid transmission of meaning is not rendered untenable.

Epistemology is potentially a "game without end" (Watzlawick, Beavin & Jackson, 1967) that does not submit to neat summarization. If the will to summarize is in fact tantamount to the totalitarian urge, then I can resist such a temptation with a clean conscience.

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