

SNOW IS WHITE IF AND ONLY IF SNOW IS WHITE

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In the post-modern sense there is no “Truth” (with a capital “T”) and no habit of mind distinguishable as “rationality.” This dogma is bound to cripple dialogue and the pursuit of the truth or wisdom, call it what you will, and it is high time scholars showed sufficient courage to object to such intellectual tyranny.

To my way of understanding, Professor Burbules and Rice are correct in disparaging post-modernism for constraining discussion and depriving it of nearly all value — save associated psychological satisfaction on the one hand and sociological convenience on the other. Moreover, I think Professor Collins is right in wanting to preserve a pragmatic element in post-modern discourse. However, rather than embracing the pragmatism of Dewey, as Collins recommends, I think one is better off with the pragmatism, or say, pragmaticism of Peirce.

My points of contention with Professor Collins are really quite minor. For the most part I prefer to join with him and, Burbules and Rice for that matter and caution listeners against the excesses of post-modernism.

My strategy is to comment broadly on but a few of the themes Professor Collins raises expressing sympathy where I can and, acknowledging points of variance. I will not take issue with specific “faults” that I find troublesome for in the spirit of post-modernism I want to avoid sounding contentious. My approach will be much more like that of Professor Collins himself. I will sketch my thoughts in high relief. In so doing I hope to invite thoughtfulness of the issues at hand while avoiding controversy over detail or at least confrontation.

I shall begin my acknowledging that like Collins, I am at best, a “thoroughly modern Millie” in issues of epistemology. I may even be a bit more stodgy because, unlike Collins, I have certain unwavering predilections when it comes to my faith in the existence of epistemically, relevant, concepts of truth. For example, I am persuaded at the deepest levels that Alfred Tarski performed for philosophy a task of enduring use when he defined truth (written with the small “t” of logic) in such a manner that, in lay terms, the idea captured the common sense recognition that snow is white *if and only if* snow is white! In his discussion of truth, Tarski conjured no Platonic forms, what he did was remind us that there is an epistemic difference among the various utterances about the world each is likely to make. In, particular, truthful statements reflect upon the world in a manner different from more clumsily-crafted sentences.

In reminding us that truthful utterances are different from other propositions about the world, Tarski is addressing post-modern pessimism regarding the meaning of truth. This pessimism harbors some very threatening implications for scholars as Burbules and Rice are right to insist. Without some concept of “truth,” all scholarship becomes nothing more than vanity.

An even more appropriate response to post-modern pessimism is found in the work of the American philosophers, Charles S. Peirce and Nicholas Rescher.² Peirce and Rescher hold out truth as an ideal. Each notes that control over ourselves and the world within which we live has increased over the centuries. Since the extension of such control has always been a human objective — at least as long

there has been a recorded history — the fact that we progressively succeed in this objective makes it nearly undeniable that in some sense we must be more nearly approximating truth.³

Peirce, the original father of pragmatism, is not so naive as to suppose we will apprehend truth in its entirety or that even when we apprehend small bits of truth we will *know* we have done so. (That is to say *know* with absolute certainty.) He only insists that increased control over the world suggests an undeniable epistemic potency. Peirce's notion of truth (as epistemic potency) serves two purposes. First, it is an epistemic ideal. Second, it constrains wildly speculative metaphysics.

In establishing truth as an epistemic ideal and advocating its relentless pursuit, Peirce must surely be the most paradigmatic of modern thinkers. Peirce also speculated at times about the possibility of Truth (the real thing) in the spiritual domain making him something of a pre-modern as well. For Peirce, as for most moderns and pre-moderns alike, the quest for truth must proceed in all domains regardless of fashions, prejudices or, other inhibiting sociological constraints.

For Peirce and Rescher, if there is anything at all in this world — populated as it is by epistemic engines — then there must also be a class of concepts that constitute truth as well as close approximations to truth. This is a position much stronger than that held by Collins or Burbules and Rice for that matter.

Rescher and Peirce's position does not suggest we have or can identify truths reliably. They only make what I take to be a common sense claim that, in principle, truthful concepts even *truth-full* concepts must exist. And, it is the quest for such concepts that is the psychological and social motivation driving learning forward. Perhaps post-modernism is best understood in light of its psychological and sociological motivations rather than pretending it presents a serious and respectable epistemic position. Moderns have been aggressive and, at times, dogmatic in their single-minded drives towards truth. Post-moderns feign offence at the modern's aggressions. I suspect the alleged objectionableness of the modern's single-minded drive toward truth is well-captured for the post-modern in the personage of Peirce.

Peirce was relentless not only in his epistemology but also in his demeanor in seeking knowledge. He was an abrupt and contentious fellow. Surely no one, not even other "moderns" ever thought Peirce's contentiousness a social virtue. On the other hand, in the mid-twentieth century most of us became well-acquainted with philosophers and scientists who evidently tolerated some contentiousness as a sort of epistemic virtue. Surely, members of PES recollect more than a few smashing debates at our annual meeting. While these occasions are exciting they sometimes become brutal and intimidating. I think it is such intellectual brutalities that gained sympathy for the post-modern hostility toward modern concerns with epistemology and linguistics. And this sympathy is, I think now shared by us all. There is, simply put, something "wrong" about public ruthlessness in the alleged pursuit of truth. Still, should the objectionableness of ceaseless, contentious behavior lead to post-modern advocacy? Collins' answer, as I understand it, is to acknowledge the human element in disputation but not to dismiss an important point of controversy — namely, furthering shared understanding. Moderns and post-moderns both go wrong when they frustrate shared understanding. And, for the moderns, that shared understanding can be in the pursuit of truth — not mere post-modern shared sympathies.

What's wrong with modern academic ruthlessness is not an underlying epistemology. Epistemology demands no special attitude towards persons — only ethics and metaphysics make such demands. But the *shared* quest for truth demands an ethic which epistemology alone can ill-afford to neglect. This immensely important point is overlooked by most post-moderns. And instead, they simply advise abandoning the quest for shared truth altogether.

Since it is persons who are epistemic engines and since persons are normative in every deliberate quest, ethics and virtue are as relevant to the quest for truth as they are to human interpersonal action generally. This is a metaphysical truth of enormous psychological and social impact. But since all

“truths” are denied by post-moderns they must deny this, along with all other truths. There is a considerable risk to the preservation of post-modernism itself in pursuing this anarchistic pessimism. For example, there is a considerateness and a tolerance that serves to advance debate and the quest for truth. When such considerateness and tolerance is lacking, participants may simply be bullied into submission. When this happens the quest for truth gets lost. And, when tolerance is lost, post-moderns declare, “There you have it! All that really matters is power.” Indeed, it is just this social digression that serves as the most convincing basis for Kuhn’s sociological thesis about the emergence of scientific paradigms. However, rather than lapse again, into mindless skepticism, it is precisely at this point we need to remind ourselves that it is the ethics of scholarly debate that needs attention not the abandonment of epistemic standards. Kuhn himself is as adamant about the fact that science advances as he is about his sociological thesis regarding scientific revolutions.⁴ Intellectual fashion indeed plays a role but so too does the human desire to extend shared beliefs.

It seems to me and, I take it, Professors Burbules and Rice as well, that where the post-modern has most often gone wrong is in confusing an ethic of debate and a virtue of scholarly productivity with epistemology. Epistemology deals with justifications to know, not with the appropriate decorum for generating a system of shared beliefs. The quest for truth has a timelessness about it that post-moderns are wont to ignore.

I applaud Burbules and Rice’s attempt to get us past the post-moderns own brand of contentionment and, Professor Collins’ attempt to move us even further yet. I heartily endorse what I take to be the positive, ethical heuristic I find somewhat hidden in Collins’ position. I hope he does not subsequently fail to demarcate the ethical and the aesthetical from the epistemological as have so many other post-moderns.

To return for a moment to the respectability of a quest for truth, Professor Collins might pause momentarily and ask what post-moderns hope to gain by their extreme nominalism. Is it really important to muster awe and reverence for what is true and dismiss “falsehood”. Or, are all statements equally false and equally true? Consider, for example, the demands of de Man and Foucault for absolute ideological tolerance and their refusal to lend credence to the social speculations of others (lest the speaker himself or herself suffered the “appropriate” experience). These dogmatic demands for “tolerance” often appear as little more than attempts to secure license for the post-modern’s lax epistemic standards and his or her self-serving behaviors. In short, truth is not really at issue — only personal license. For example, what substantive tolerance did de Man show for the plight of Jews in Nazi-infested Europe? What choice did Foucault leave his San Francisco consorts after learning he had AIDS?⁵

De Man and Foucault both seem eager to use the abandonment of epistemic standards to free them from the force of public criticism; to further license them to live as they please — regardless of the effects their behaviors have on others.⁶ Is this where the abandonment of “truth” leads? Is this where we should find philosophical soundness?

In contrast to the self-serving rhetoric of these titans of the post-modern movement, Collins’ apparent plea that conversation be respected for its intrinsic and private virtues as well as for its pragmatic potency is right-minded. Conversations that are abusive of the idea of respect for truth, respect for persons and regard for community endanger everyone involved. As novelist, Walker Percy says in reference to the holocaust, when the unthinkable becomes sayable then it becomes do-able.⁷ I think Percy is cautioning us about the importance of maintaining certain external constraints in conversation.

Professor Collins would do well to re-think his position and consider seriously Percy’s warning. In the face of post-modern rhetoric, Professor Collins might still be too timid with regards to truth. For example, for my part, I hope that we have learned universal and epoch-crossing “truths”. For example, I hope that; along with the Jews, we all learn never to forget the Holocaust. I hope we all

learn from Aristotle the importance of organizing our thinking in the most broadly accessible manner possible. I hope we all learned from Galileo the importance of subjecting empirical claims to empirical verification. I hope we all learn from our forefathers the importance of religious freedom. I would hate to think that these notions are to be regarded by any educator today as mere vestiges of previous historical epochs. I hope when the post-modern infliction abates, we find teachers still teaching and modelling the ethical and epistemic virtues it has taken us generations to acquire. Finally, I hope that the gentleness underlying the concerns of Burbules, Rice and Collins will shortly become a staple of schooling behavior. Through this contribution, Burbules, Rice and Clinton can indeed advance the success with which the great conversation of humankind continues to progress throughout successive generations.

¹ Alfred Tarski, *Logic, Semantics, Metamathematics* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983), 401-08.

² C. S. Peirce, *Collected Papers*, 8 vols., ed. C. Hartshorne, et. al. (Cambridge, 1931-1950), vol. 2, sec. 2.110-2.112.

³ C. S. Peirce, *Collected Papers*, vol. 8 (secs. 102-121); See also, Nicholas Rescher, *A System of Pragmatic Idealism* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992).

⁴ Thomas S. Kuhn, "Reflections on My Critics," in *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge*, ed. I. Lakatos and A. Musgrove (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

⁵ J. Kvanvig, *The Intellectual Virtues and the Life of Mind* (Savage, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 1992).

⁶ James Miller, *Foucault* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993).

⁷ Walker Percy, *The Thanatos Syndrome* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1987).

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