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### Commentary on Hundleby

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# Commentary on Catherine Hundleby: “The Need for Rhetorical Listening to Ground Scientific Objectivity”

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I was tempted to restrict my comments today to a long moment of silence. In the present context, such a silence could, it seems, communicate something about the nature of linguistic communication and its absence, if we were to listen to it in the right way. For example, it could mean that I am in agreement with Hundleby about the importance of listening to what is not said (which in fact I am). Or it could be meant to illustrate Hundleby’s claim that silence, like verbal language, is ambiguous. After sitting in silence for a few minutes, someone might still be unsure about my reasons for this silence. Was I too lazy to write comments? Was I trying to provide a *reductio* of Hundleby’s arguments by showing that silence is too blunt an instrument to do what language does? My silence itself would soon become the subject of interest, debate, and engender emotional responses such as amusement or anger.

This illustrates how it is sometimes just as important to listen to what *is not* said as it is to listen to what *is* said, one of the points made in Catherine Hundleby’s thought-provoking and original paper on rhetorical listening and scientific objectivity. As Hundleby claims, scientific discourse places a premium on explicitly stating assumptions, methods, and all relevant facts related to a scientific study or experiment, while it treats unstated claims with disinterest or suspicion. Think, for example, of the classic Quine/Duhem problem in 20<sup>th</sup> Century philosophy of science. Since no scientific hypothesis can be tested in isolation from auxiliary hypotheses, then disconfirming evidence proves that either the main hypothesis, or one of the auxiliary hypotheses is false, and does not simply prove the falsity of the main hypothesis. So a researcher who is very committed to an hypothesis is not rationally required to reject it when faced with disconfirming evidence but can examine those pesky auxiliary premises to see where to “lay blame.” However, this invites concerns about the *ad hocness* of picking out an auxiliary premise to explain an unplanned result. The moral of the story is that the auxiliary premises have to be stated as clearly as possible so that when an hypothesis is disconfirmed, the researcher can go back and see if it was the main hypothesis at fault, or a background assumption.

Thus it makes sense then that Hundleby would characterize scientific discourse as being focused on making every relevant detail explicit. For the most part, contemporary feminist epistemologists, philosophers of science, and critical race theorists interested in science tend to agree that a problem with contemporary science is that not enough voices

are heard, especially the voices of women, people of color, LGBT people, and the disabled. This has led to a predominance of concerns related to straight white men, and a scientific methodology that conforms to stereotypically western, white-male ideas about proof and rationality. If more voices were heard, their methods of communication given a “hearing,” and their background assumptions/biases made explicit, then the overall objectivity of science would be increased. More is more on this approach to scientific objectivity.

Hundleby’s contribution to the discussion is the point that not only should there be more speaking of different scientific perspectives, but more listening to the silences that are as telling as the positive data. In this vein, Hundleby criticizes Longino’s contextual empiricism, claiming that it “ignores the significance silence can have” (3). Instead, one of the means by which the overall objectivity of science can be enhanced is through the use of rhetorical listening, a concept with which I have limited familiarity, except for the work of Krista Ratcliffe. For Ratcliffe, rhetorical listening is “a stance of openness that a person may choose to assume in relation to any person, text, or culture” (1). While I am sympathetic to Hundleby’s project, here I have two small quibbles. First, I’m not sure that the concept of rhetorical listening has been sufficiently explained in the paper to assess its applicability to scientific discourse. Second, the connection between rhetorical listening, silence, scientific methodology, and scientific discourse remains a bit obscure.

I’ll leave it to Hundleby to fill in the details about the nature of rhetorical listening for us, but have some suggestions about how rhetorical listening and an appreciation for silences have applications to scientific practice and discourse. The first thing that came to my mind when reading the paper was the work of primatologist Jean Altman (cf. Haraway). Altman was critical of the popular 1-0 method of data collection. On this method, a researcher goes into the field to study a particular type of animal’s proclivity to engage in a certain type of behavior, for example, sexual behavior. Each time the researcher observes this behavior, he or she checks off a 1, and each time the researcher observes some other behavior a 0 is assigned. At the end of the period of study, the prevalence of this type of activity is then determined. Altman saw this method of data acquisition as flawed because the researcher always came to the field with a predetermined activity to be tested. And, perhaps because the researchers were predominantly white men or for some other reason, they were particularly concerned with two activities, sexual behavior and aggression. Altman argued that such a method distorts our understanding of the subjects because the researchers’ expectations and interests are what are studied, and not the subjects themselves. As an alternative, Altman proposed something called focal point sampling. Using this method, a researcher goes into the field with no set hypothesis or activity to study, but rather observes the subjects at various points during the day, making note of the activities in which the subjects are engaged. Such a method of analysis strikes me as being more similar to rhetorical listening than the 1-0 method. Using the focal point method, the researcher has no set activity, no clear-cut agenda for the study. Instead, the subjects of the study determine what is reported, to a greater extent.

Bruce Bagemihl’s work investigating studies of animal sexuality and the ways in which non-heterosexuality in nonhuman animals remained unreported and/or downplayed also come to mind. Evidence of such behavior was often put to the side as “anomalous”

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even though the frequency of such occurrences was higher than the standard level of significance. So, here is another case in which no one what listening with a “stance of openness” that Ratcliffe mentions.

Completely attentive listening, like infallible empirical knowledge is an ideal that can be approached by not achieved. I commend Catherine Hundleby for emphasizing the importance of listening to the silences in science, and expect her applications of the concept of rhetorical listening to scientific methodology and scientific discourse to increase the objectivity of scientific practice and discourse.

[link to paper](#)

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