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### Two Rhetorical Manoeuvres

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Many of the philosophical doctrines purveyed by postmodernists has been roundly refuted, yet people continue to be taken in by a set of dishonest tropes and devices used in proselytizing for postmodernism. It is getting tiring to repeat refutations of the same type for each new appearance of these various manoeuvres. For this reason, then, rather than yet another set of specific refutations, I offer you instead two exhibits from my little museum of manoeuvres, each exhibit neatly labelled, each label inscribed with a name, each name adding to a vocabulary of dismissal.

When speaking of postmodernism I shall be speaking only of its philosophical doctrines; nevertheless, I find postmodernists using the manoeuvres I have analysed in support of their other doctrines as well. By 'postmodernists' I mean not just self appellating postmodernists such as Lyotard and Rorty, but also post-structuralists, deconstructivists, exponents of the strong programme in the sociology of knowledge, and feminist anti-rationalists. I unite them under the term because, philosophically, they are united by a sceptical doctrine about rationality (which they mistake for a profound discovery): namely, that rationality cannot be an independent constraint on us, but is just whatever we make it. This doctrine is often thought to be grounded in the proposition that *whatever* rationality is, it is what it is because rational beings are what *they* are. Opponents are held to be committed to a metaphysically inflated view of rationality in which Reason-with-a-capital-'R' transcends the mere empirical selves of rational beings.

Let us name this sceptical doctrine. How about 'logophobia'? A name with much to recommend it. Patronising, question-begging, pre-emptive of further thought, ensuring easy evasion of the merely Gradgrindian question of the truth or falsity of the doctrine, so permitting us to move on swiftly to the fun of abusing logophobics. What more could one want from a term?

Alas, I am a dogged rationalist, and have renounced the pleasures of such sophisticated trickery. Instead I have named the doctrine 'alogosia' to convey its denial of reason's objectivity, and its purveyors 'alogosists,' of which postmodernists are only the most recent. I am not going to discuss that doctrine here, but I may exploit some of its absurdities.

OK. Enough of such fun. Let's turn to my manoeuvres about their manoeuvres.

#### Motte and Bailey Doctrines.

Elsewhere I define a Troll's Truism to be a mildly ambiguous statement by which an exciting falsehood may trade on a trivial truth. Troll's Truisms are used to insinuate an exciting falsehood, which is a desired doctrine, yet permit retreat to the trivial truth when pressed by an opponent. In so doing they exhibit a property which makes them the simplest possible case of what I shall call a Motte and Bailey Doctrine (since a doctrine can single belief or an entire body of beliefs).

A Motte and Bailey castle is a medieval system of defence in which a stone tower on a mound (the Motte) is surrounded by an area of land (the Bailey) which in turn is encompassed by some sort of a barrier such as a ditch. Being dark and dank, the Motte is not a habitation of

choice. The only reason for its existence is the desirability of the Bailey, which the combination of the Motte and ditch makes relatively easy to retain despite attack by marauders. When only lightly pressed, the ditch makes small numbers of attackers easy to defeat as they struggle across it: when heavily pressed the ditch is not defensible and so neither is the Bailey. Rather one retreats to the insalubrious but defensible, perhaps impregnable, Motte. Eventually the marauders give up, when one is well placed to reoccupy desirable land.

For my purposes the desirable but only lightly defensible territory of the Motte and Bailey castle, that is to say, the Bailey, represents a philosophical doctrine or position with similar properties: desirable to its proponent but only lightly defensible. The Motte is the defensible but undesired position to which one retreats when hard pressed. I think it is evident that Troll's Truisms have the Motte and Bailey property, since the exciting falsehoods constitute the desired but indefensible region within the ditch whilst the trivial truth constitutes the defensible but dank Motte to which one may retreat when pressed.

An entire philosophical position or theory may be a Motte and Bailey Doctrine just by virtue of having a central core of defensible but not terribly interesting or original doctrines surrounded by a region of exciting but only lightly defensible doctrines. Just as the medieval Motte was often constructed by the stonemasons art from stone in the surrounding land, the Motte of dull but defensible doctrines is often constructed by the use of the sophists art from the desired but indefensible doctrines lying within the ditch.

Diagnosis of a philosophical position as being a Motte and Bailey Doctrine is invariably fatal. Once made it is relatively obvious to those familiar with the position that its survival required a systematic vacillation between exploiting the desired territory and retreating to the Motte when pressed.

The dialectic of many refutations of specific postmodernist doctrines and the postmodernist defences correspond exactly to the dynamics of Motte and Bailey Doctrines. When pressed with refutation the postmodernists retreat to their Mottes, only to venture out and repossess the desired territory when the refutation is not in immediate evidence. For these reasons, I think the proper diagnosis of postmodernism is precisely that it is a Motte and Bailey Doctrine. I do not have time to defend that rather large claim in detail here. Rather, we are going to look at some examples. I hope that for those familiar with postmodernism as a whole, seeing the mechanism laid bare in a few cases will suffice to make evident the larger truth.

### Humpty Dumptying

So a Motte and Bailey Doctrine is a Troll's Truism writ large: indeed, Motte and Bailey Doctrines are often constructed out of nothing more than a set of Troll's Truisms; but that need not be the case. They can be established by the use of a very simple device: arbitrary redefinition, which manoeuvre, after Lewis Carroll, is often called Humpty Dumptying. Much as I would enjoy quoting the entire passage, since it seems to me that in Humpty Dumpty's remarks and demeanour Carroll captures perfectly the mode of discourse of postmodernists when engaged in this manoeuvre, I shall confine myself to the strictly relevant parts.

"I don't know what you mean by 'glory,'" Alice said.

Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. "Of course you don't—till I tell you. I meant 'there's a nice knock-down argument for you!'"

"But 'glory' doesn't mean 'a nice knockdown argument,'" Alice objected.

"When *I* use a word," Humpty Dumpty said in rather a 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 different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master—that's all" (Carroll 1962, 74-5).

And of course, we *are* the masters, only we can't pretend that having redefined 'glory' to mean 'a nice knockdown argument' that we are continuing to speak of glory when using the word. But that is precisely what arbitrary redefinition permits.

## Foucault

Let us now turn to Foucault's theory identifying truth and power. Here is an example of the exciting ground lying within the Bailey:

In societies like ours, the 'political economy' of truth is characterised by five important traits. Truth is centred on the form of scientific discourse and the institutions which produce it; it is subject to constant economic and political incitement (Foucault 1972, 131).

The essential political problem for the intellectual is not to criticise the ideological contents supposedly linked to science, or to ensure that his own scientific practice is accompanied by a correct ideology, but that of ascertaining the possibility of constituting a new politics of truth. The problem is not changing people's consciousnesses – or what's in their heads – but the political, economic, institutional regime of the production of truth....

It's not a matter of emancipating truth from every system of power (which would be a chimera, for truth is already power) but of detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic and cultural, within which it operates at the present time.

The political question, to sum up, is not error, illusion, alienated consciousness or ideology; it is truth itself. Hence the importance of Nietzsche (Foucault 1972, 133).

And here is Foucault's Humpty Dumptying by which the Motte may be constructed from the material of the surrounding land.

'Truth' is to be understood as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements (Foucault 1972, 132).

Well if *that* is how truth is to be understood, it makes all those exciting statements about truth virtually analytic. Just go through the passage, crossing out truth and substituting 'a system of ordered procedures for the production... of statements' and you can see the boring Motte to which Foucault may retreat:

In societies like ours, the 'political economy' of -- ~~truth~~ -- a system of ordered procedures for the production... of statements -- is characterised by five important traits. -- ~~truth~~ -- a system of ordered procedures for the production... of statements -- is centred on the form

of scientific discourse and the institutions which produce it; it is subject to constant economic and political incitement

The essential political problem for the intellectual is not to criticise the ideological contents supposedly linked to science, or to ensure that his own scientific practice is accompanied by a correct ideology, but that of ascertaining the possibility of constituting a new politics of --~~truth~~--a system of ordered procedures for the production... of statements --. The problem is not changing people's consciousnesses --or what's in their heads --but the political, economic, institutional regime of the production of --~~truth~~--a system of ordered procedures for the production... of statements --.

It's not a matter of emancipating --~~truth~~--a system of ordered procedures for the production... of statements --from every system of power (which would be a chimera, for --~~truth~~--a system of ordered procedures for the production... of statements --is already power) but of detaching the power of --~~truth~~--a system of ordered procedures for the production... of statements --from the forms of hegemony, social, economic and cultural, within which it operates at the present time.

The political question, to sum up, is not error, illusion, alienated consciousness or ideology; it is --~~truth~~--a system of ordered procedures for the production... of statements --itself.

Suddenly the glamour of paradoxical profundities such as '[the] regime of truth... is not merely ideological... it was a condition of the ...development of capitalism' evaporates and we are left with rather mundane observations about social institutions without gaining any insight into why some social institutions might be more truth conducive than others. The upshot of this Humpty-Dumptying is a puerile and pernicious scepticism about the possibility of knowledge.

The analysis just given reveals Foucault's statement " 'Truth' is to be understood as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements." to be Trollish. We have an exciting false theory of truth trading on an arbitrary redefinition. When pressed, he can retreat to his Motte and point out that he is using 'truth' in this redefined way. Once the pressure eases he can leave his Motte and reoccupy the exciting Bailey. The redefinition sheds its grubby attire and once again appears arrayed as a glamorous proclamation of the identity of truth and power. Indeed, Foucault achieves yet more. Having it both ways is essential to the appeal of postmodernism, for it is precisely by apparently speaking simultaneously of two different concepts with the same word that the appearance of giving a profound but subtle analysis of a taken for granted concept is created. Here is Foucault doing exactly that:

The important thing here, I believe, is that truth (1) isn't outside power, or lacking in power: contrary to a myth whose history and functions would repay further study, truth (2) isn't the reward of free spirits, the child of protracted solitude, nor the privilege of those who have succeeded in liberating themselves. Truth (3) is a thing of this world: it (4) is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it (5) induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth (6), its 'general politics' of truth (7): that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true (7); the mechanisms (8) and instances which enable one to distinguish true (9) and false statements, the means (10) by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth (11); the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true (12) (Foucault 1972, 131, my numbering).

Let us say that Foucauldian truth is truth as 'a system of ordered procedures for the production... of statements' and say that plain truth is whatever that property T it is that is had by true truth bearers that satisfies at least the disquotational schema ('S' is T iff S). In this quote, I analyse the appearances of truth as being satisfiable by these two different notions of truth as follows:

- 1) Foucauldian
- 2) Plain and Foucauldian
- 3) Plain and Foucauldian
- 4) Foucauldian
- 5) Foucauldian
- 6) Foucauldian
- 7) Foucauldian
- 8) Foucauldian
- 9) Plain
- 10) Foucauldian
- 11) Plain
- 12) Plain

As Humpty Dumpty said, 'There's glory for you!' (Carroll 1962, 74).

#### The Postmodernist Fox-trot.

A normative theory of rationality is a theory which says that there are ways for us to be correctly related to the world and offers substantial theories of what those ways are. Such a position on rationality is often attacked by postmodernists by use of what I call the Postmodernist Fox-trot, often prefaced by Troll's Truisms such as: 'rationality has a history' (Derrida – Oxford Amnesty Lectures), 'rationality is merely whatever we take it to be' (Rorty).

The Postmodernist Fox-trot goes like this:

Firstly the meta-philosophical claim is made that philosophy cannot properly be done except negatively: that to occupy a position is already to be mistaken. I am going to refer to this position as the Non-Position Position. Secondly, it is claimed that true normative theories of rationality are not available: that whatever we take to be the canons of rationality are constructed, so could have been constructed differently (the ur-Troll's Truism), and that although there may be some ways in which they could not be constructed, among those ways in which they can be constructed there are no better or worse ways of constructing them. The upshot of this pair, the foxy bit, is that the postmodernist can *use* normative notions of rationality without acknowledgement. By the substitution of vague terminology in place of standard rational terminology, for example, the use of 'valid' instead of 'true,' by the widespread use of scare quotes whenever rational terminology is used, he exploits a contradiction which the official position, the Non-Position Position, allows him to keep hidden. For he denies, yet uses, normative rationality.

#### Rorty's Fox-trot

Neither of these claims need be stated plainly. Rather, they can be appealed to by insinuation whenever someone, such as myself, attempts to refute the position. Since the position is never plainly occupied, it need never be plainly defended. For example, for Rorty

'truth is not the sort of thing one should expect to have a philosophically interesting theory about' (Rorty 1982, xiii) so a demonstration that his position on truth is incoherent is ultimately irrelevant, because in such a case he can retreat to the Non-Position Position (or rather, allude to the possibility of such retreat, since to overtly retreat there would be to adopt a position: possibly inconsistent and certainly unwise since now opponents have something to get their teeth into). If, on the other hand, the Non-Position Position is argued against, why, argument has already been shown to be bankrupt in the attack on normative theories of rationality, which attack will have claimed that argument is a tool of oppression, a structuring of power relations or whatever.

Now it may be that Rorty is right when he says "This [thinking about rationality and truth] is one of those issues which puts everything up for grabs at once, where there is no point in trying to find agreement about 'the data' or about what would count as deciding the questions" (Rorty 1982, xliii). It may be that once we have thought about it we just find ourselves to be subscribers to a Non-Position Position. This is similar to Kierkegaard's doctrine: that to subscribe to rationality (the rationality which at that time seemed to be refuting Christian belief) is no less a leap of faith than religious belief.

Certainly, at some point it comes down to what premisses seem self evident. But it is not yet clear that at that point we *do* come to widely differing premisses. Furthermore, those who subscribe to negative and anti-rationalist meta-philosophical theses often seem to count those theses as among the premisses self evident at the beginning of the enquiry, and that surely is a mistake. So it is no defence to claim that the Non-Position Position is just there after a bit of ground clearing. There must be some path to it, and that path cannot consist of an application of that very position without begging the question.

Consistency demands that if one subscribes to the Non-Position Position one cannot put it forward. Its supporters seem to believe their position coherent so long as they do not overtly advance it, but only allude to it, insinuate it. To me, this seems to be a distinction without a difference. To subscribe to it is to advance it. No matter that you don't write it down or say it or think it. Even though they haven't said it, it is clear what the claim is, despite their immediate retreat to other step of the Fox-trot when challenged on this point.

I think it is incoherent to subscribe to the Non-Position Position, but suppose it were not. There is still a question of how one comes to adopt it. Postmodernists cannot just appeal to the Non-Position Position as part of an argument for it. Indeed, it must be incoherent to argue for it. As far as I can see, the *only* way of establishing such a position is to lead us to a thought, a vision perhaps, which compels assent, which assent must itself transcend what we normally mean by assent in thought, since otherwise the very assent is incoherent. This really does seem to be a view from the top of Wittgenstein's ladder.

So the Non-Position Position faces several charges. Firstly, it looks too convenient. Far from the being a serious consideration of the difficulties of rationality and thought, the Non-Position Position looks like a device that allows one to spout off whilst avoiding awkward arguments and possible refutation. Secondly, to adopt it requires some transcendent vision. Thirdly, it is incoherent. Now it may well be that the people who live at the top of the ladder have answers to these charges, in which case they must give us those answers, instead of, as they often seem to do, think that the insinuation of the Non-Position Position is itself an answer.

And given that Postmodernists do not lead us to a transcendent vision and cannot just appeal to their Non-Position Position as a self evident premiss, we must reject claims that there can be no meta-philosophical discussion beyond stating, as Rorty does, that 'this is one of those issues which puts everything up for grabs at once' and that all that is left is blank and mute subscription to the meta-philosophical premisses to one's taste.

On the contrary, where the Non-Position Position stops is just where philosophy starts. If all the postmodernist has to say is that he starts from different premisses, but he doesn't want to talk about it, he hasn't begun to engage in a philosophical project.

## Bloor's Fox-trot

With this in mind, I want to turn to a subtle example of the Fox-trot from Bloor. Bloor enumerates (Bloor 1991, 7) some principles to which the strong programme is committed in doing sociology of knowledge; that is, in giving explanations of how beliefs come to be endorsed. The third principle states that the same types of causes should be used to explain true and false beliefs, and this is referred to as 'the symmetry requirement.' Well there is a certain amount of wriggling room in the use of the word 'type' here, but I think the principle has a clear implication: that we must rule out the truth value of a belief from being relevant to explaining why it is believed.

There is a danger of self refutation here, which is brought to light when we come to consider the problem of what we ought to believe.

Bloor considers that there are only two positions that can be taken about reason: you can be a naturalist like him or a rationalist like Worrall (1990) or Geach. Bloor denies that there is any position between these two:

composite positions are incoherent...[by] making reason both a part of nature and also not a part of nature. If they don't put it outside nature they lose their grip on its privileged and normative character, but if they do, they deny its natural status. They can't have it both ways (Bloor 1991, 178).

He remarks "clear headed rationalists know what is at stake... [they] must suppose that we can intuit evidential relations and some logical truths" (Bloor 1991, 178). Rationalists must appeal to an "abstract, non-physical realm [existing] over and above the flux of biological and cultural change" (Bloor 1991, 178) if they are to explain and justify the normative force of reasons for belief. But such rationalists are always embarrassed by the problem of explaining how we can get a grip on the abstract so we can get a grip on the norms.

For Bloor, then, the rationality of belief is 'an hypothesis not needed.' The symmetry requirement encapsulates this by virtue of stopping "the intrusion of a non-naturalistic notion of reason into the causal story" (Bloor 1991, 177).

So here is a rather subtle denial of normative theories of rationality: such theories are not available to naturalists, and Bloor is claiming that his strong programme represents natural science applied to knowledge.

However, he cannot, for the reasons I am about to give, adopt an anti-rationalist position explicitly without undermining our grip on why we should listen to anything he has to say. So for this reason, having fainted at the rationalists he must himself adopt the Non-Position Position about rationality, and this is why he says

The symmetry requirement... is not designed to exclude an appropriately naturalistic construal of reason, whether this be psychological or sociological. Brown (1989) for example, is typical in mistaking the sociologists rejection of a non-naturalistic notion of reason as a rejection of reasoning as such (Bloor 1991, 177).

The strong programme asks for our acceptance of it on the grounds that it is true, whilst at the same time claiming that such grounds are irrelevant when explaining how it is that we believe what we believe. So in its own lights, it cannot account for the normative force of its own truth as part of how we might come to believe in the strong programme. Yet Bloor quite plainly thinks we ought to believe in the strong programme for the reasons that he gives: he



seems to be saying that reasons, qua reasons, are not what brings us to belief. Why then does he adduce reasons *as reasons*? Why reason with us at all? Why append an afterword to the second edition of his book in which at some length he takes on and rebuts the arguments of his critics?

For simplicity, and in order to avoid the easy slips which etiolated redefinitions of 'premisses' and 'conclusions' might import, let us talk of the set S of considerations he adduces and the doctrine D he wishes to induce.

One reply that is available to him is that he takes it that in uttering S he is issuing the appropriate causes to bring about belief in D.

First of all, we can recognise from the content of S that what we would accept to be rationally relevant considerations are what he must be taking to be causally efficacious. Suppose for the sake of argument that S constitutes reasons for believing D. That, of itself, and in the light of the body of empirical evidence about human irrationality, would not lead us to think that the uttering of those reasons would be reliably causally efficacious in bringing about the desired belief. Precisely the opposite in fact. So it cannot be that he takes what he is doing to be in any very simple sense causally efficacious in bringing about belief in D.

It must then be that he takes S to be reasons to believe in D, where reasons to believe are yet causes of belief, only their causally efficacy is obscure and indirect. But for him to take his utterances in this way is difficult to understand in the light of his version of naturalism. He is saying that S are reasons for D, that the reason relation is an obscure and intermittent causal relation, which nevertheless we can appreciate as holding. But how can we appreciate it as holding? In his lights all we would have are observations of people believing various doctrines in the light of various sets of considerations, without there being evident relations holding between the sets of considerations and the doctrines.

But without some accessible notion of normative connections between beliefs, this seems quite mysterious. In the absence of such a notion how could we ever appreciate any relation whatsoever holding between S and D when any such relation cannot manifest itself other than in a complicated and inconsistent causal manner. If there is nothing that makes it correct or incorrect that S is a reason for believing D, but merely that S variously brings about or does not bring about the belief that D, how can Bloor maintain that *he* grasps a relation holding between S and D. He can't just retreat to the claim that, for him, they do bring about the belief that D but they may not for us, since that is to renounce his attitude towards them. For clearly he takes it that some sets of considerations for believing in D are correct, and others are not correct (else why bother to correct misapprehensions of the strong programme). Within the strong programme there is no suitable notion of correctness to apply here. Bloor's own theory cannot account for his attitude towards it.

Well, I'm not sure that I have completely nailed down what is wrong here, but I hope I have said enough to further illustrate the potential subtlety of the Postmodernist Fox-trot. Bloor feints at normative theories of rationality, but eschews explicit rejection of rationality, adopting a Non-Position Position instead. Thereby he seems to be able to have it both ways: he's not saying that there is no such thing as reasons, only that the truth or falsity of a belief is not part of the explanation for belief in it; he thinks we ought to agree with him, but not because reasons can have normative force.

One final resort for eager Fox-trotters is the claim that in using rational vocabulary they are really offering rationalists *tu quoque ad hominem* arguments which should lead a rationalist to abandon rationalism and accept alogosia. That is to say, they claim to be offering arguments which have the form

*P*  
 if *P* then  $\neg P$   
 therefore  $\neg P$

where  $P$  is a conjunction of the premisses accepted by rationalists, where the second premiss can be shown to be true or to follow from the first using rules of inference accepted by rationalists, and where this being a valid form of argument rationalists are committed to accepting the conclusion if they accept the premisses.

If Postmodernist Fox-trotters claim to be making this move in their dance between using rational vocabulary whilst officially taking the Non-Position Position, then I would like to see an actual example. For whilst I have heard this defence on a number of occasions, it never seems to get followed up by a case of their own prior use of rational vocabulary as *tu quoque ad hominem*. Rather there is a retreat to quite standard sceptical arguments and classical paradoxes.

First of all, very rarely are standard sceptical arguments and classical paradoxes based on rationalism as a whole and so they cannot threaten rationalism as a whole. The sceptical arguments are certainly important, but to take them as conclusive rather than a protracted and important stalemate which has also been a fertile source of much good philosophy is a mistake. Some questions just are very difficult and their full resolution may even be beyond our capacities. It would therefore be premature to retreat to alogosia because we have yet to resolve the big sceptical arguments.

Now certainly the paradoxical arguments are embarrassing to rationalists. However, there is a long history of displaying such arguments to embarrass rationalists, only for them eventually to show what is going wrong — which is not to say that all paradoxes have been satisfactorily solved. Not uncommonly famous paradoxes are marched out and paraded in an attempt to offer an argument of the just given form. See for example Bloor's use of the Sorites paradox (Bloor 1991, 182). What postmodernists show in their crude use of paradox is a lack of understanding of relevant context. Anyone familiar with the field of work in paradoxes will concede that they are an indication of something amiss, but we take this to be an opportunity for some advancement of understanding. What would be required for the sort of conclusion the postmodernist wants is a sustained history of failure in the face of paradox. But that is exactly what is lacking. Instead we have a sustained history of fruitful work on paradoxes which has resulted in very important extensions and refinements of our conceptual resources.

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