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Commentary on: N. Shackel's "Two Rhetorical Manoeuvres"

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What we got here is a failure to comm-u-nicate.
—The Captain, *Cool Hand Luke*

First, I want to extend apologies for my accent. I am caught, in this commentary, between two dialects, with both of which I am familiar, but in neither of which am I fluent. My postmodernese and my rationalese are similar to my German: I can order beer in them if I find myself in Hannover, but I can't use them to conduct serious business. (In postmodernese, by the way, the appropriate phrase for ordering beer is "A pint of counter-hegemonic solvent, please"; in rationalese, it is "I quaff, therefore I am; two, please.") Nevertheless, my role here compels me to try to conduct moderately serious business in them, or negotiate it between them. Professor Shackel, I fear, speaks only one of these dialects fluently, and his strategy is to shoehorn the concerns of the other one into that dialect—which increases the onus on me to try and render them both into a somewhat less combative idiom.

Professor Shackel's hostile shoehorning leaves me little choice. His smug attack on postmodernism unfortunately epitomizes something I believe argumentation theory should constantly strive against; indeed, epitomizes something which frequently gives philosophers a bad name, and which I have always regarded argumentation theory as helping to redeem: uncharitable extraneous polemics. There's nothing wrong with counter-argument—it is downright wholesome, in principle. I wouldn't be responding the way I am if I didn't think voicing opposition was valuable. But there is something very wrong with failures of charity, and equally wrong with extraneousness—adding them to counter argument amounts to refusing to understand another in his own terms, but insisting on confrontation anyway; a recipe that, not coincidentally, tends to correlate highly with smugness.

The level of Professor Shackel's contempt, however, and my own attempt to restore some charity to his arguments, puts me in the uncomfortable position of trying to defend a constellation of views I don't fully understand against mischaracterization in terms I don't completely follow.

Postmodernism, *insofar as I understand it* (hereafter, *iaIui*), is an amorphous collection of perspectives sharing a deep and comprehensive scepticism of any and all monisms, with a corresponding conviction that human domains are fractured into partially overlapping but ultimately isolated pluralities. No single method is capable of understanding the social conditions of humans; we are partially united, partially divided, by our discursive practices; both the units and the divisions of social life are legion.

Rationalism (*iaIui*) is a monist approach to knowledge that appeals to transcendent procedures for finding truth and assembling it into bodies of knowledge. One single method, though it may have a variety of realizations, brings order and therefore understanding to problems of truth and knowledge.

It takes some work, therefore, to frame one respectfully in terms recognizable to the other. In particular, the fundamental social concerns and the discursive preoccupations of one, the transcendent concerns and epistemological preoccupations of the other, don't even appear to put them in the same business.

Professor Shackel does not undertake this work of respectful framing, but one wonders then, why bother? He frames postmodernism rather brutally in Rationalist terms, with no attempt to understand postmodernism any further than to find the leverage to attack it. His attack is therefore extraneous in the sense of staying almost completely outside the positions he rejects, and is also inevitably extraneous in the sense of being irrelevant to it.

I will look at only one of his attacks, to see if we can uncross some of its purposes. Professor Shackel attacks two specific texts, one by Foucault, one by Bloor, holding them as metonyms of postmodernism. I will only discuss one of his attacks, on Foucault, taking it as emblematic of his method. I will try to uncover something approximating the real Foucault—that is the textually real Foucault, the real positions and interests that play in his work—out from under the misrepresentations of Professor Shackel.

The rhetorical manoeuvres

Rhetoric ... should be a study of misunderstanding and its remedies.

—I.A.Richards, *The philosophy of rhetoric*

I won't waste anyone's time addressing Professor Shackel's two rhetorical manoeuvres, the Motte and Bailey and the Postmodernist Foxtrot. He may well mean them in all seriousness, and they are interesting diagnoses of discursive strategies; I will be on the lookout for them myself now that I have these handy labels. But they are clearly just clubs with which to beat postmodernism. The real issue for Professor Shackel is what he sees as postmodernism's intellectual bankruptcy, and the morally suspect people trying to pass its bank-notes all the same. Rather, the job I've set for myself is try to get at some of Professor Shackel's substantive accusations, which appear to revolve entirely around the notion of rationally certified truth.

I pause only to note that his use of the word *rhetoric* is almost as contemptuous as his use of *postmodernism*.

Professor Shackel is one of those philosophers for whom, as Stephen Toulmin put it, "Aristotle, Hermagoras, and the rhetoricians wrote in vain" (1989, 387). We all need a term for slippery language, of course, and I'm resigned to the fact that said term will often be *rhetoric*, just as philosophers have to resign themselves to such uses of their disciplinary appellation as when some Billy-Bob says "My philosophy is, 'let sleepin dogs lie'"; or, for that matter, just as people named *Billy-Bob* need to resign themselves to their names being used metonymically for sloppy, backwoods thinking. But still it makes me cringe, when I move from reading Aristotle or Hermagoras to reading someone who treats rhetoric as a collection of wily devices used by sneaks and cheats, and I occasionally feel compelled to draw attention to it.

Postmodernism

What's in a word? Often, an ideology.

—Ian Hacking, "The disunities of the sciences"

I share some of Professor Shackel's anxiety about postmodernism. I live with that anxiety every day. Allow me to quote from a recent thesis I just wrestled with for days. Long passages in it might have been written by Alan Sokal:

Advertisements provide an excellent tool for privation of History by saturating a text in culture that carefully selects and excludes cultural units, which are outside of hegemonic ideology. In this way, the inoculation of selected social truths can be naturalized into the ideological fibers of society.

But the thesis turned out to be quite good in the end—even this passage is sensibly useful in the frame of this student's exploration—once I could acclimatize myself to its register, which required some charity.

What Professor Shackel needs to realize if he does not, is that postmodernism is not a cult of modish professors at Yale, and the Sorbonne, and the sociology department at the University of Edinburgh. Postmodernism is a sweeping confluence of grand cultural themes, articulated by a range of scholars in a variety of disciplines. It is, most emphatically, not author-dependent. There are not just a handful of scattered authors espousing a theory, or framework, or paradigm. It is a full-flight, interdisciplinary movement, clustering around an identifiable lexicon and a swarm of themes. It is a register, a style of thought and talk, an approach, a clumsy but powerful set of practices. There may well be lots of things wrong with this style—the ease with which it can be mouthed in the absence of insight, not the least of them, and its tendency towards oracular pronouncements, and an unnecessary proliferation of deliberately recalcitrant terminology—but it is not refutable, any more than democracy or liberalism or Christianity are refutable. Nor can it be embarrassed. One might certainly succeed in refuting or embarrassing a postmodernist, but not the movement as a whole.

One can, and often should, attack specific arguments, or themes and practices that run through bunches of arguments. But the time is surely passed, if it was ever here, to condemn a widespread, diverse, serious collection of scholars by attacking one or two and holding them accountable for the whole amorphous movement.

I won't venture a prediction about the direction of this movement, its overall cultural significance, or its historical importance, though it has better legs than I first thought possible. I thought post-structuralism and deconstruction were dead-ends; instead, they were the early swells of a sea-change.

It could ebb, or it could keep swelling. But there is certainly a danger that many of us could end up scholastics, muttering amongst ourselves about the advent of humanism. We can ignore it altogether, if we are convinced it is unprofitable for our own work. Or we can address it. If we address it, as Professor Shackel does, we are obliged to penetrate the discourse, not simply throw bricks at it. Professor Shackel shows signs of penetrating it on occasion, but consistently retreats a safe distance to just throw bricks. He accuses postmodernists of withdrawing to their Mottes rather than hoisting their battle axes to fight it out on the Bailey, but

he is just as guilty of avoiding a true fight, systematically retreating to his siege engine, or whatever the offensive corollary of the defensive Motte is.

As best I can articulate a general postmodernist reply to Professor Shackel, if both parties were out on the Bailey, is to suggest that two responses would be prominent: that his attack is pointless, and that it is hegemonic. The first is a predicted outcome, the second is a projected motive.

Let's take the predicted outcome. Professor Shackel's attack is pointless because it is misguided foundationalism. It attempts to find some firm ground on which to base not just his Rationalist programme, but everyone else's programme. While he may satisfy himself and a few associates that they are standing on firm ground, he will not get anywhere trying to establish a universalist *terra firma* that will satisfy everyone. That's a lesson postmodernists have learned, if others have not. They tend to abandon all claims over other people's foundations, and the affirmative among them hope that—if and when serious communication is called for between distinct groups—they can build bridges out of each other's assumptions, practices, and goals. (I am borrowing Pauline Marie Rosenau's convenient binary, artificiality and all, between "sceptical" and "affirmative" postmodernists—1992, 15-16). The bridge is a much different metaphor from the foundation or the ground. A bridge is local, built according to the demands of some particular situation, case by case. The overall postmodernist model of discourses is actually quite a bit like Canada's self-image of its multiculturalism—a mosaic—and postmodernists contrast it specifically to a Rationalist model that looks much like the traditional U.S. characterization of their immigration policy, a melting pot.

On the projected motive, Professor Shackel's attack is hegemonic because his purported universal foundations are really *his* foundations, which he is attempting to assemble underneath others. There is ample evidence in his paper that other people's argumentative assumptions, goals, and practices are of little concern to Professor Shackel, except for how they deviate from his own. And, of course, if everyone plays by your rules, it's your game. That's hegemony.

Postmodernists might tend to say (in this case, with a surfeit of charity) that it really isn't Professor Shackel's fault, that the hegemonic motive isn't even his, but his discourse's, that he's caught in the grip of an oppressive meta-narrative driving his texts towards this intellectual imperialism. You'll notice, I hope, that this characteristic of finding impulses in the text above and beyond those of the author's, is one that Professor Shackel shares to some degree. It is not Foucault and Bloor that he is arguing with; it is their metanarrative, postmodernism, of which they are merely convenient indexes.

Me, I'm a rhetorician. I prefer to see texts as having specific agents behind them. And this perspective appears to be both consonant with argumentation theory and conducive to charity. If you see the person with whom you argue *as* a person, and not as a puppet of ideology, the chances are better that you will be able to recognize that they are struggling through issues, like you are, and that where they appear to go wrong they are corrigible.

In this spirit, I want to look at the contention over truth between Professors Shackel and Foucault, as Professor Shackel instantiates it.

Truth

What is truth? A moving army of metaphors, metonymies and anthropomorphisms, in short a summa of human relationships that are being poetically and rhetorically sublimated, transposed, and beautified until, after long and repeated use, a people considers them as solid, canonical, and unavoidable.

—Friedrich Nietzsche, "On truth and lying in an extra-moral sense"

To start with, Professor Shackel is right to link Foucault (or postmodernism, emblemized by Foucault) with pragmatism. While Foucault tells a markedly different story, one of his goals (iaIui) with regard to the word and the concept, *truth*, shares a great deal with the pragmatic programme of (1) deglamourizing truth and (2) detaching truth from any and all privileged monisms. Professor Shackel comes close to penetrating his target discourse on this score, but uses the reference to pragmatism as an excuse to acknowledge some slight merit to that *-ism*, which has to be withheld from the target *-ism*. Pragmatism is wrong but respectable; postmodernism is just wrong—oh, and dishonest.

It is glamour, I think, that leads Professor Shackel furthest astray. If there's one notion that most prevents him from getting postmodernism, it is the lustre that the word *truth* holds in a great many philosophical vocabularies, certainly in Professor Shackel's (iaIui).

He purports to render mundane Foucault's allegedly "exciting" proclamations about truth, by a substitution trick, relentlessly replacing *truth* with *a system of ordered procedures for the production ... of statements* in some excerpts from an interview with Foucault. But the mundanity was already there. All Professor Shackel adds is monotony. Truth is, for Foucault (iaIui), simply one property of sentences among many, all generated by their own machinery of conditions—grammaticality, humorousness, morality, titillation, authority, ... This may or may not be correct—my own sense is that truth has special characteristics, and that they are linked in significant ways to perceptions of reality, which is one of the aspects of language that has given our species such a technological edge over all others—but it is not exciting. What Foucault cares about is how that truth property is wielded. Just the way grammaticality can be wielded to exclude and intimidate outsiders and social subordinates, truth can be used to build knowledges that exclude and intimidate.

What most troubles Professor Shackel (iaIui) seems to be the disengagement of truth from ontology, the failure of his targets to worry about correspondence. So, for instance, he falls back on the old saw of "the sun revolves around the earth for Ptolemy in Foucault's scheme, but the earth revolves around the sun for us in Foucault's scheme." —An absurdity, we all diligently nod our heads in agreement, since orbits don't change on the basis of human belief. But for someone who is agnostic about ontology, the issue of what revolves around what is just not in the picture. I'm pretty confident that the earth revolves around the sun, but I am with many people who would want, when absolutely pushed, to admit that my confidence is not infinite, and that I don't really know the True Workings of the planets in an ultimate God's eye sense. Descartes got to this point in the *Meditations*, and I am not at all comfortable with the way he wormed his way out of it.

In any case, my own sense of the malleability of science and the ingenuity of engineers is that we could probably have got Neil Armstrong to the moon on the basis of a Ptolemaic, or a Braheist, or a Mayan model of the heavens. But here's what counts: all of that remains beside the point when confronting postmodernism. Ontology just isn't on the table, and if one wants to

make any headway with politically driven views of truth, ontology has to be left out of the discussion. It is a brick one can throw, perhaps, but not a brick one can use to build a bridge to social-political arguments about truth, if one wants to get anywhere.

Foucault is (ia)lui talking about some of the characteristics of the bits of language that we call true—in part, this involves a machinery of conditions that certifies truth. In substantially larger part, however, he is talking about the deployment of these bits of language in regimes of power and oppression. Professor Shackel's own machinery (which relies heavily on paraphrase and substitution exercises kept at a distance by ridicule), misses this point completely; and therefore wholly fails to penetrate postmodernist discourse in the process. Take his paraphrase definition of Foucault's *truth* (prefatory to some substitutions):

'S' is true iff 'S' is socially manufactured

This definition is, in the rationalist vocabulary, necessary but not sufficient as a characterization of Foucauldian truth. Foucauldian truth requires the notion of social manufacture, but marriage requires social manufacture, too, and employment, and education, and a great whopping mess of practices, institutions, systems, and objects. What distinguishes truth from *other* socially manufactured things is that it is more atomic (many—possibly all—of these other concepts depend on some notion of truth; many of them are in fact "regimes of truth," in postmodernist terms), and that it is built with different machinery. When you combine Professor Shackel's misleadingly broad definition of *truth*, which itself is a half-truth, with a concern for correspondence that is completely absent from the argument under critical examination, you get (1) an easy shot at deriving absurdity, and (2) a textbook instance of uncharitable argument analysis.

Conclusion

A case of différend between two parties takes place when the 'regulation' of the conflict that opposes them is done in the idiom of one of the parties while the wrong suffered by the other is not signified in that idiom.

—Jean-François Lyotard, *The Différend*

Perhaps the most unfortunate aspect of Professor Shackel's attack is his sampling procedure. If there was ever an example of that longstanding rhetorical situation known technically as "pissing in the wind," this is it. Professor Shackel takes a few scattered examples, from two disciplines, and three countries, published over three decades, and makes them stand for not just for this amorphous movement, postmodernism, but insists that all variants of post-structuralism, deconstruction, strong-programme sociology of knowledge, and feminist anti-rationalism (whatever that might be) get folded in as well. A better man than me might admire the ambition, I suppose, but I can't help thinking, "If you've got a problem with one or another position or one or another author, why not just get to the job of working it out?"

Professor Shackel does look occasionally to be making headway in working out his objections to postmodernist discourse, but it is fleeting and the glimpse of potential progress quickly reveals that progress is not Professor Shackel's goal. In one promising section, for instance, he tries to disentangle the word *truth* in Foucault's usage from its ordinary language usage, as both of them thread through a passage in Foucault's comments. But—and this is

symptomatic of how he retreats to his siege engine whenever there is danger of true understanding—rather than following up this analysis with an explanation of where misapprehensions might arise, or an interpretation of Foucault that shows where he is problematically appropriating a term that traditionally has other sorts of allegiances, or even with a diagnosis of Foucault's failure to engage the specific machinery of conditions that makes truth a more significant discursive property than grammaticality or whimsy; rather, that is, than trying to engage the discourse in at least some of its own terms, Professor Shackel pulls back. "There's glory for you!" he snorts, and it's on to another topic.

Foucault's position (iaui) simply concerns different aspects of truth than the ones that Professor Shackel addresses. Foucault is far more concerned with the mobilization and deployment of truths, Shackel with the creation and testing of truth (possibly even Truth). If we want to avoid talking at cross-purposes, or worse, just sneering at people for having different interests, we need to try to address what others are talking about, not what we would prefer them to talk about. Alternately, of course, we can ignore them and others we also find talking about issues we don't care about, and get on with our own business. But if we want to engage other arguments, especially if we want to get at what makes them tick, and maybe especially if we want to stop them from ticking, we need first to understand them in their own terms; applying charity, we need to start from a place that does not assume they are sinister. I am not saying we should not expose faulty collections of reasons, poorly assembled, mobilized on behalf of some belief or action, when we encounter them, particularly if we have some interest in a related group of reasons with more coherence that support or undermine or run counter to such a case. Nor am I saying that there are no sinister arguments.

My point is only that we need to give arguments, especially arguments that other people seem to find compelling, some room to demonstrate their deficiencies, and their successes. I.A. Richards cautions us about "the combative impulse" that is often far too easy to follow in argumentation, which puts us in "mental blinkers and makes us take another man's words in the ways in which we can down him with the least trouble" (Richards 1936, 25). Professor Shackel does not heed that caution. He wears these blinkers when he looks at postmodernism and they blind him to the ways in which another man's words (say, Foucault's) sincerely attempt to do fruitful work on another man's problems (say, Foucault's). As a consequence he never really gets anywhere in his attempt to compromise those words, let alone the ideology informing those words. That's unfortunate. I hope he is corrigible.

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