The Craving for Objectivity

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COUNT ALFRED KORSZYSKI used to claim that to say of anything that it is anything—for example, to say of my car that it is an automobile—is to falsify, since (to stick to the example of my car) there are many automobiles and my car is not identical with all of them, nor is it identical with the Platonic Idea of an automobile. As part of the pseudoscience that he created, the pseudoscience of “General Semantics,” he recommended that one should use the word etcetera as often as possible. In his view, it would be highly therapeutic to say, “That is an automobile, etc.,” and not, “That is an automobile,” in order to keep it in mind that the “that” referred to (my car) has infinitely many properties besides those mentioned in my statement.

That everything we say is false because everything we say falls short of being everything that could be said is an adolescent sort of error; it is the burden of this essay to suggest that this adolescent error haunts the entire subject of interpretation.

It must be conceded that the error has deep roots. Talk of “otherness,” “exotopy,” and “incommensurability” would not be as widespread as it is if the ideas of perfect knowledge, of falling short of perfect knowledge, and of the falsity of everything short of perfect knowledge did not speak to us. What those roots are is a matter for speculation. Certainly there is the desire for what psychoanalysts call “fusional” relationships. It is commonplace to say that the tragedy of life is that we are “alone,” that such relationships are impossible; but perhaps as one grows older one comes to feel that separateness is a blessing as well as a curse. I really don’t know what I’d do with a “fusional” relationship. Secondly, there is the epistemological worry which Stanley Cavell has brilliantly described in a recent book, the worry that one may simply not be getting the other right, that one may be deceived by a facade or be misreading all the clues. As Cavell points out, the classic epistemological problem, whether one can know what goes on inside another mind, can be a very real existential problem. And even if one makes the leap of trust and manages to understand another person more than superficially, and the further leap which allows one to trust one’s perception that one is understanding the other more than superficially, one knows that what one understands is only a part of something infinitely complex. Human
nature (whether in the individual case or in the abstract) is simply not *surveryable*. Yet to conclude that if one does not know, acknowledge, share everything there is to know, acknowledge, share about another, then one cannot truly interpret what the other says, is just to repeat Korszybski’s mistake in a different form.

“Enough is enough, enough isn’t everything,” John Austin wrote, and that applies to interpretation as much as to justification. There is an ultimate separateness that really exists. To identify *that* with a situation that crops up in interpretation (incommensurability) or with a trope that crops up in literature (exotopy) is to confuse background for foreground. Enough is enough, enough isn’t everything.

But there are other routes to the notion of incommensurability than the Romantic ones. A somewhat oversophisticated route to the same erroneous conclusion is the following: traditionally, interpretation was thought of as a process or act by which the mind was able to relate words and sentences to objects in the world. Avicenna, writing in the tenth century, claimed that to think that any belief is true is just to relate that belief to objects, for example. But the idea that we sometimes compare our beliefs directly with unconceptualized reality, or think about objects sometimes by thinking our thoughts and sometimes by thinking our thoughts and “relating” those thoughts to objects (according to Avicenna, this would be the difference between merely entertaining a proposition and thinking that the proposition is true) has come to seem untenable. Access to the world is *through* our discourse and the role that discourse plays in our lives; we compare our discourse with the world as it is presented to us or constructed for us by discourse itself, making in the process new worlds out of old ones; and a psychological act of comparing our discourse with things as they are in themselves has come to have the status of a “mystery act.” The writings of contemporary philosophers on ontological questions, of Heidegger as much as of Wittgenstein or Quine, have undermined our confidence in the notion of an object and have caused us to see reference itself as relative to scheme of interpretation. With reference indeterminate, and with our capacity to relate thought and object directly banished to the status of a “mystery act,” the very category of an object has begun to crumble for contemporary thought. And as the category of an object crumbles, so—it has seemed to some thinkers—must the notion of *interpretation* crumble as well.

What this last line of thought overlooks is that the notion of interpretation as correlation with objects in themselves is not the only notion of interpretation available to us. If interpretation cannot be meaningfully thought of as mediated by a correlation between the
words or thought-signs to be interpreted and neutral, discourse-independent objects, it still remains the case that we can seek to correlate discourse with discourse; or if perfect correlation is impossible, then we can at least seek to construct a meaningful commentary on one discourse in another without first passing through the supposed discourse-independent objects.

Here, too, there is a problem. Frege thought that words and sentences were correlated not only to objects but also to concepts, to *senses*. But it is not only the idea of discourse-independent objects that has crumbled under philosophical critique; Wittgenstein and Quine have savaged the idea that the question “Do A and B have the same meaning?” is a question which has any context-independent answer. Bereft of Fregean “senses” as well as of discourse-independent objects, we are left without either *Sinn* or *Bedeutung*.

Still, *enough is enough, enough isn’t everything*. We have practices of interpretation. Those practices may be context-sensitive and interest-relative, but there is, given enough context—given, as Wittgenstein says, the language in place—such a thing as *getting it right* or *getting it wrong*. There may be some indeterminacy of translation, but it isn’t a case of “anything goes.” The appeal that incoherent ideas often have is greatly reinforced when the incoherent idea rests on a sophisticated background of a paradoxical kind. Such is the situation with the idea that there are “incommensurable” discourses, discourses that represent concepts and contents that we, imprisoned as we are in our discourse, in our conceptual frame, can never fully understand.

I. Incommensurability in the Philosophy of Science

According to Hegel, the whole of existence flows from the supposition that Being is identical with Nothing. What flows from the incoherent idea of “incommensurable” discourse? Let us study the development of one of the most ingenious contemporary philosophers and historians of science, Thomas Kuhn.

In the first edition of his book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Kuhn went all out. Not only the *concepts* of scientists who work with different paradigms, but also the objects to which they refer, are supposed to be incommensurable. The Copernican astronomer and the Ptolemaic astronomer “inhabit different worlds,” Kuhn tells us. One goes from one paradigm to another by a “Gestalt switch.”

Taken at face value, Kuhn represented a kind of latter-day Protagoreanism. In Kuhn’s discourse, Protagoras’s great maxim gets al-
tered to read: *the paradigm is the measure*. And like Protagoras, Kuhn was vulnerable to Plato's arguments in the *Theaetetus*.

A few years ago Edward N. Lee gave us a wonderful reading of those arguments (*Tht.* 161–71). There are several strands, Lee suggests: (1) "the peculiarly proprietary, self-protective and self-centered tone in which 'Protagoras' is made to take up his defense throughout Socrates' impersonations of him"; (2) "the fact that the content of Protagoras' great maxim, far from helping to distinguish man from other forms of life, in fact applies indiscriminately to the lowest common denominator of all sentient being—the sheer possession of some form of sentience, a capacity ranging from the gods down to the merest plant life." Both of these strands meet and fuse in (3), the "final image," according to Lee. That is the image of Protagoras's curious "return."

Protagoras is imagined to return—incredibly enough—by "popping his head up through the ground right there as far as to the neck."

"But what is the meaning of the curious detail that Protagoras would rise up *just as far as to his neck*—that far and no further?" Lee asks. "Just as soon as one visualizes this bizarre scene, I believe, the point of the detail becomes clear: the 'returned' Protagoras is being depicted as a 'living creature rooted in the earth'—that is, he is being presented as a *plant*."

To show us in what way Protagoras is supposed to resemble a plant, Lee finds it useful to employ a different image: the image of the chess player who keeps his hand upon his piece. He may have made a move that appears to him to be a good move (one "valid for him," as it were), but he has not actually *made* the move. "Now," Lee writes, "the person systematically saddled with Protagoras' relativizers is like someone who can never remove his hand from his pieces. Though he may say that he believes something, that it is true-for-him, he cannot say that it is true *simpliciter*; and though he cannot be refuted in such statements (read: made his move), he has not 'released' his opinion from the sphere of an expression of his subjectivity and placed it into a public arena of open and objective discussion (read: exposed his piece to capture)."

As Lee goes on to show, the image of Protagoras as a plant has deep affiliations with what he calls "Plato's spiritualistic phytology"—especially the metaphor for human nature as a "plant which is not earthly but heavenly" at *Timaeus* 90A. Aristotle makes a similar use of the plant metaphor in his defense of the Principle of Non-Contradiction in the *Metaphysics* when he writes that he can refute any opponent of that principle who will *say* something, but that "if he says *nothing*, it is absurd to give an account of our views to one who cannot give an
account of anything, in so far as he cannot do so. For such a man, as such, is from the start no better than a plant” (1006a13–15; cf. 1008b10–12).

Plato is saying that on Protagoras’s view it would not be possible for two people to disagree; and where the very possibility of disagreement between speakers is ruled out, so is, equally, the possibility of agreement. Even the possibility of repeating what another said is ruled out, in any sense that goes beyond repeating the mere noise. For if Jones says “Snow is white,” he means “Snow is white is true for me,” and that is not something I can say and mean as he means it. Even if I say, “Snow is white is true for Jones,” what that means is “Snow is white appears true to Jones is true for Hilary Putnam,” and that is certainly not what Jones meant. We might say that Protagoras was the first deconstructionist. We turn out to be mere facts of nature making our noises and our subvocalizations (just as an animal goes through its natural life growling or grumbling, or just as a plant goes through its natural life putting out now a leaf and now a flower). When Donald Davidson suggests that if we couldn’t interpret a conceptual scheme, then we would have no basis for calling it a conceptual scheme, he is simply restating Plato’s argument against Protagoras.

Davidson adds the observation that interpretative practice always requires us to attribute to the speaker a substantial number of true beliefs and reasonable desires. If I attribute to you as absurd a belief as one could attribute to another, say the belief that you have built a perpetual motion machine, or the belief that the earth is flat, or the belief that all government expenditure on welfare is morally wrong, I thereby credit you with the concepts of a machine, of the earth, of flatness, or of welfare; and I could not credit you with these concepts if my “translation scheme” did not make a great many of your more mundane beliefs about what is and is not a machine, what is and is not the earth, what is and is not flat, what is and is not a case of giving someone welfare agree with mine. All disagreement presupposes an indefinitely large fund of shared beliefs. As Davidson puts it, in interpretation we seek to make others come out “believers of truth and lovers of the good.”

The conclusion Davidson draws from all this is that an interpreted conceptual scheme will necessarily turn out to be for the most part like our own, however violently it may contradict our own in its higher reaches. Kuhn seems to have anticipated some such criticism, for long before the argument was voiced so strongly by Davidson, Kuhn had begun to revise (or reinterpret) his own doctrines. He did this by playing down the psychological machinery. We no longer find Kuhn speaking of gestalt switches. More and more we find him talking about anomalies, predictions, simplicity, and the rest. The idea that
paradigm shifts are just things that happen has been replaced by the idea that it can be justified to start looking for a paradigm to replace one's existing paradigm, and it can be justified to decide that one has found a good paradigm to serve as the replacement.

I do not wish to suggest that this was merely a fall-back position. The new position had substantial merit on its own. The idea that there is a notion of justification which is transcultural and, as Kuhn puts it, "nonparadigmatic"—not simply a creature of the local epistemology and the standards of the time—is a right and important one. To deny it is to land oneself in the commonest sort of self-refuting relativism. If one says (as Rorty recently has)⁶ that rightness is simply a matter of what one's "cultural peers" would agree to, or worse, that it is defined by the "standards of one's culture" (Rorty compares these to an algorithm), then the question can immediately be put: Do the standards of Rorty's culture (which he identifies as "European culture") really require Rorty's "cultural peers" to assent to what he has written? Fortunately, the answer is negative. Extreme versions of relativism are inconsistent in more than one way, as Plato saw. It is important to recognize, as Kuhn came to do, that rationality and justification are presupposed by the activity of criticizing and inventing paradigms and are not themselves defined by any single paradigm. Kuhn's move away from relativism is one that I hail.

But—here's the rub—it must be recognized that justified and rational are words like any others. We do have paradigms of justification, even if they don't define the required nonparadigmatic sense of justification. We do have images of knowledge; we do have more or less elaborate methodological doctrines. These change from time to time. There have been revolutions in methodology as there have been revolutions in everything else. What Kuhn is doing is allowing selected exceptions to his own doctrine of incommensurability. What he is saying is that, whereas we cannot equate either the meaning or reference of the word electron as used by Bohr in 1900 with the meaning or reference of the word as used by Bohr in 1934, even if Bohr himself kept the same word, nevertheless we can equate the meaning and reference of reasonableness and justification, or at least partially equate them, across changes in our paradigms of justification as great as those which occurred between the tenth century and the time of Newton. The "Principle of Charity," which, in all of its various forms, is designed to allow us to say that some terms keep their meaning and reference the same, or roughly the same, across a body of theory change, is implicitly accepted by Kuhn in the case of the notions of justification and rationality but not in the case of other notions.

This leads to a pervasive incoherence in Kuhn's thought. If there is a nonparadigmatic notion of justification, then it must be possible
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to say certain things about theories independently of the paradigms to which they belong. The notion of justification, like any other, depends on a vast number of other notions. To tell whether a theory is justified requires knowing that it is a theory, and, in general, what sort of a theory it is. To know whether a theory is justified, I have to know what sorts of perceptual reports it explains, and what sort of explanation it gives (e.g., Is it a causal explanation?). Hanson thought that we cannot mean what someone living in the age of Ptolemaic astronomy meant by saying “I see the sun rise” because even the perceptual notion of a “sunrise” has been affected by the shift from Ptolemaic to Copernican astronomy. But Hanson was wrong. We can say what Ptolemaic astronomy was trying to explain, and we can give a good description of how it went about trying to explain it. Once one has allowed interpretation (for that is what it is to allow charity in interpretation), it is utterly inconsistent to restrict the practice of interpretation to a handful of our most abstract epistemological notions.

In a way, Kuhn has come to concede all of this. In more recent work one finds him expressing admiration for the work of Joseph Sneed and Wolfgang Stegmüller. The notion of incommensurability still appears in his writing, but now it seems to signify nothing more than intertheoretic meaning change, as opposed to uninterpretability. According to Sneed and Stegmüller, who build on ideas that go back to Carnap, the theoretical terms in a theory refer to complex logical constructions out of the set of models of that theory, which in turn depend on an open set of “intended applications.” I shall not go into details. But one point is worth mentioning: When two theories conflict, then, although the common theoretical terms generally have different meanings and a different reference on the Sneed-Stegmüller account (that is what “incommensurability” becomes), that does not mean that there is no “common language” in which one can say what the theoretical terms of both theories refer to. In fact, if we have available the “old terms,” that is, the terms which existed in the language prior to the introduction of the specific new terms characteristic of the two theories, and enough set theoretic vocabulary, we can express the empirical claim of both theories, and we can say what the admissible models of both theories are.

Kuhn still maintains that we cannot interpret the term phlogiston in the language present-day scientists use; but what this in fact means is that we must use a highly indirect mode of interpretation, which involves describing the entire phlogiston theory, its set of intended applications, and its set of admissible models in order to say what phlogiston means. A serious residual difficulty still faces Kuhn: he has long maintained that the meaning of old terms (say, observation
terms) is altered when new theories are constructed. But the whole assumption of Sneed and Stegmüller is precisely that this is not the case. Their sets of admissible models are well defined only if we can assume that the old terms have fixed meanings which are not altered by theory construction. It is precisely the aim of neopositivism to view scientific theories as constructed in levels in such a way that the terms of one level may depend for their meaning on terms of a lower level but not vice versa. Neopositivism denies that there is a two-way dependence between observation terms and theoretical terms, whereas Kuhn has long agreed with Quine that the dependence goes both ways.

Even if I cannot make full sense of his current position, I think that I have said enough to indicate the general nature of the development. This might be summed up in three stages. Stage one: There is a doctrine of radical incommensurability, that is, impossibility of interpretation. Stage two: The doctrine is softened. We can, it turns out, say something about theories which are incommensurable with our own, and we can use some notions (justification, rationality) across paradigm changes. Stage three: Something which is thought to be better than interpretation is embraced and propounded, namely, the structural description of theories.

II. Incommensurability in Literature

A strikingly similar set of ideas can be found in the writings of some well-known deconstructionist critics. Thus in a recent paper by Paul de Man, we have the idea of radical “otherness” described in a way reminiscent of “stage one” Kuhn.8

Bakhtin is criticized by de Man for reintroducing “the categorical foundations of a precritical phenomenalism in which there is no room for exotopy, or otherness, in any shape or degree.” This is a striking charge, since exotopy is one of Bakhtin's central notions. De Man elaborates:

When it is said, for example, that “the heteroglot voices create the background necessary for (the author’s) own voice,” we recognize the foreground-background model derived from Husserl's theories of perception and here uncritically assimilating the structure of language to the structure of a secure perception: from that moment on, the figure of refraction and of the light ray becomes coercive as the only possible trope for trope, and we are within a reflective system of mise en abyme that is anything but dialogical. It is therefore not at all surprising that, still in the same passage, Bakhtin modulates
irrevocably from dialogism to a conception of dialogue as question and answer of which it can then be said that "the speaker breaks through the alien conceptual horizon of the listener, constructs his own utterance on alien conceptual horizon against his, the listener's, apperceptive background." Again, there is no trace of dialogism left in such a gesture of dialectical imperialism that is an inevitable part of any hermeneutic system of question and answer.

De Man, speaking in his most authoritative tone of voice, pronounces a verdict: "The ideologies of otherness and of hermeneutic understanding are simply not compatible, and therefore their relationship is not a dialogical but simply a contradictory one." (He hastens to add that Bakhtin might himself have been engaged in a complex "trope" in this "contradiction": "It is not a foregone conclusion whether Bakhtin's discourse is itself dialogical or simply contradictory.")

The idea that there can be incommensurability so great that it is a logical blunder to think that any sort of communication could take place across it was immediately softened in the discussion (at the symposium at which de Man's paper was read) by the cheerful admission that "of course" there are better and worse interpretations of what an "other" says or thinks. Interpretation turns out not to be totally subjective after all. There is something very much like a trans-paradigmatic notion of rationality available to the literary critic, too.

What is more interesting than this (it's not very surprising that even deconstructionists draw back from the abýme) is that while interpretation is admitted some place, it is admitted, as it were, grudgingly. (The tone suggests that interpretation is a dumb activity to engage in, not that it's impossible.) The moral of de Man's paper was that we should recognize an activity different from interpretation, one to which it was clear he gave some priority: the activity of analysis of tropes, or, as he called it, "poetics."

III. Interpretation and Absoluteness

We all realize that we cannot hope to mechanize interpretation. The dream of formalizing interpretation is as utopian as the dream of formalizing nonparadigmatic rationality itself. Not only is interpretation a highly informal activity, guided by few, if any, settled rules or methods, but it is one that involves much more than linear propositional reasoning. It involves our imagination, our feelings—in short, our full sensibility.

If one thinks of sociology of science and neopositivist set-theoretic description of theories as "real science" (like physics), then it may
seem that Kuhn is suggesting that we replace our traditional (and, in his view, unsound) practices of interpretation with "scientific" procedures. If one thinks of poetics as a structuralist discipline (like Lévi-Straussian anthropology), then it may seem that de Man is doing the same (though with a different notion of what being "scientific" consists in). It would be easy, but I think wrong, to suspect Kuhn and de Man of a refusal to grant any sort of objective status to whatever cannot be reduced to "scientific" rules and procedures.

This would be an incorrect interpretation because Kuhn and de Man are both far too sophisticated to be victims of what amounts to a vulgar fact/value dichotomy. They recognize that sociology of science and poetics are no more formalizable than interpretation is. They are not asking us to trade in our informal practice of interpretation for the kind of objectivity we have in physics.

What troubles people about interpretation, I think, is not its lack of methodology but its lack of convergence. Interpretations of bodies of thought, whether of the Weltbilder of scientific theories or of literary works, have always reflected the philosophical views, religious views, political views, literary crotchets, and so on, of their authors and of the times in which they were produced. Out-of-date scientific theories are often inspiring; out-of-date interpretations seem quaint.

If we think of the search for convergent description as a search for absoluteness (a term suggested by Bernard Williams), then we may say that what is missing in interpretation, as it is missing in morality, philosophy, ideology generally, is even the possibility of an absolute knowledge. But why should we be disturbed by the fact that every interpretation is at the same time a commentary? Interpretation is commentary-laden, after all, in the same way and for much the same reasons that observation is theory-laden. Common sense suggests that the fact that an interpretation presupposes a view is deplorable only if the view is deplorable. And the views of past interpreters have not always been deplorable. Instead of finding past interpretations quaint, I wonder if we might not find many of them enlightening if we learned to interpret the interpretations? Interpretations of complex systems of thought and of complex works of art are, after all, creations, and as worthy of interpretation as any other creations.

To leave the matter here, however, would be to reinstitute something suspiciously like a fact/value dichotomy. I am not content with Bernard Williams's contrast between the absoluteness of science and the "relativity" of the rest of the culture. In my own work, I have often emphasized that theories in a mature science typically include earlier theories as limiting cases. But it is important to notice that what they include as limiting cases are the equations of the earlier
theories, not the world views of the earlier theories. There is no sense in which the world view of Newtonian physics is a “limiting case” of the world view of general relativity, or a “limiting case” of the world view of quantum mechanics. There is no more evidence that science converges to one final world view than there is that literature or morality converge to one final world view.

Yet for all that, we do sometimes get things right. Newton got it right when he said that the tides are caused by the gravitational pull of the moon and the sun. He got it right, even though his statement has been reinterpreted in an age of general relativity and may have to be reinterpreted as long as there continue to be scientific revolutions in physics. Matthew Arnold (dare I say?) got some things right, even if he got many others wrong.

The contemporary tendency to regard interpretation as something second class reflects, I think, not a craving for objectivity but a craving for absolutes—a craving for absolutes and a tendency which is inseparable from that craving, the tendency to think that if the absolute is unobtainable, then “anything goes.” But “enough is enough, enough isn’t everything.” Craving absoluteness leads to monism, and monism is a bad outlook in every area of human life.

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NOTES