1. A Crisis of Conversation

It is a manifest fact that immense consciousness of language is at the present time characteristic of every main stream of Western philosophy.

Ian Hacking, *Why Does Language Matter to Philosophy*

A Jules Pfeiffer cartoon shows a sad-faced Greek philosopher walking the streets of New York with a lantern, in broad daylight, examining the passers-by. An acquaintance asks, "What are you looking for Diogenes, an honest man?" "Gave that up long ago," the philosopher replies.

"Are you looking for truth then?"
"Truth is relative."
"For Freedom?"
"Freedom is illusion."
"For Justice?"
"Justice is the interest of the strong."
"So what are you looking for, Diogenes?"
"Someone to talk to."

We often think of this time as the "Age of Information," but it is better understood as an age of *overloaded, fractured conversation*. In the 20th century, discourse gained much and lost much. It achieved a scope, magnitude, intensity and self-awareness beyond anything the world had previously known. It achieved a comprehensive natural science, and an extraordinary technological mastery. It acquired the beginnings of a scientific understanding of the human animal, and of human society. At the same time, it became poorer in many ways: through an erosion of historical and cultural memory, and of the values of literacy; through a languishing of civility, urbanity and sheer decency. Knowledge and commerce have become increasingly global in scope; at the same time, ethnic and religious hatreds have become increasingly virulent. These contrapuntal trends can be viewed as a monstrous paradox or as simple cause-and-effect.

Thinking beyond our situation to its causes, we are struck by the meagreness of our resources for public conversation, as compared with the size and complexity of the issues it is required to handle. Everywhere we look, peoples and sub-cultures are colliding faster than they can evolve and accommodate. Technological, economic and social conditions are changing faster than values and habits can adjust. Public issues arise much faster than public discussion can formulate policy. Our civilization cannot assimilate the diverse cultures it has conquered. It cannot hold itself together. The old

canonical texts have lost their authority and no new ones have replaced them, or seem likely to. Ordinary people grow increasingly frustrated, feeling their vital concerns ignored by their leaders. Our leaders also grow increasingly frustrated – or else increasingly cynical and self-serving. Meanwhile, the tones of public discourse are reduced to three: the shrill, the smarmy, and the violent. All these can be seen as effects of a desperately strained conversation, unable to manage its workload.

The conversation of any social group resembles the digestive system of a human body. In different ways, both are processes of adaptation and assimilation. Both serve purposes of nourishment and growth, by converting materials appropriated from the outside world. Both can accept and process a wide, but not unlimited range of materials. Both perform analogous basic functions of recognition, response, transformation, and absorption. Both systems can collapse from starvation, and can be swamped or poisoned by the wrong kind of input, or by too much of the right kind. Both are vulnerable to a pathology of auto-phagy: under stress, they start to devour themselves. And for both, the consequences of malfunction have an absurdly broad range: from momentary discomfort, to the collapse and death of the whole system.

Now, many of the ills of our post-modern world can be seen as symptoms of a sort of conversational indigestion. It is as if the political body were convulsed with upset stomach, from issues it cannot resolve – or perhaps *could* resolve at lower rates of intake, in smaller doses. On this analogy, to treat such disorders we would have to look beneath the specific situations and issues, to the conversational facilities that have to cope with them: our political processes, our economic and social customs, our philosophical preconceptions and, of course, our languages. All these appear to be in crisis. That they are under stress, from overload and rapid change, is the least of it. More serious is the manifest withdrawal of confidence from our conversational institutions – e.g. governments, corporate boardrooms, universities, media – as the naivete of trusting to their authority, their honourable intentions, their simple competence becomes increasingly obvious. These are symptoms of a conversation devouring itself, a conversation suffering from ulcer.

I think this withdrawal of confidence from our institutions is largely justified, though how we could sustain ourselves if these break down is beyond me. I think words can be used to make good sense, deceptive sense or nonsense, and in this book will try to show how this distinction is made, and good sense sometimes achieved. I also think the rejection of reason by many of my generation, our insistence on moral purity, and our unwillingness to distinguish among degrees of evil, was a disastrous political mistake. For example, I think Foucault and his followers were right to insist on reason's role as an instrument of power, but very wrong to ignore its role as a check on *arbitrary*

power – as the only tool, probably, by which power can be tamed, and made somewhat responsible. My deepest political conviction is that reason, defined as respectful dialogue and competent negotiation among conflicting interest groups, has become a basic requirement for the viable government of any post-modern, technological state, let alone a whole world of such states. Without reason and the civic trust it generates, society will end by tearing itself apart. Yet civic trust is just what our adversarial system is eroding.

Post-modern states depend on vast, complex systems, whose costs and benefits are distributed unequally. The design of these systems, and the balancing of their costs and benefits is one of the main tasks of political conversation. If this design process is not honest – and perceived as honest – it will become impossible. As matters stand, without a political conversation of substantial integrity, without negotiations in good faith based on a serious sharing of concerns, the necessary accords cannot be reached. What we mean, what we must and can only mean by reason under post-modern conditions is the theme of this book.

The discovery of cognition's ineluctable dependence on acts of interpretation challenged a conception of reason that had been a corner-stone of Western civilization since the time of Plato, and that in the Enlightenment had acquired a status approximating to secular religion. For many it still retains that status, although the precise doctrines of the faith are sharply at issue. Its main outlines, however, are clear enough. Classical reason conceived ideas as natural and God-given features of reality; and it understood words as *referring* either to ideas, or material things, or both. Correspondingly, it held to a doctrine of absolute Truth, conceiving knowledge as a body of propositions, true for everyone, everywhere, and for all time. To claim to know something meant roughly to claim that one was certain, and had a right to be certain, of its truth. Accordingly classical reason attached very high value to intellectual certainty, and sometimes fantasized it had achieved this with dubious "proofs" modelled on those of mathematics. Once validly "proven", a result was considered "true", and therefore obligatory for everyone who did not wish to place himself beyond Reason's pale. An unfortunate side effect was to encourage an attitude that all who refused to be convinced by your proofs could be considered *unreasonable*, and ostracized from society – if not consigned to an asylum, or burned at the stake.

From the time of Vico in the 17th Century to that of Nietzsche in the late 19th, these classical views became less and less tenable, and the role of reason in our world – even its potential and ideal role – became increasingly unclear. Events have not been encouraging; and even the meaning of reason,

let alone its practical possibility, has become a matter with highly political overtones.

After the First World War, and still more after the Second, whole academic industries devoted themselves to showing that reason and reliable knowledge were impossible in the classical sense – and (as some argued) in any sense whatever. This nihilistic mood was natural enough in a Europe that had become a slaughterhouse. There was also a revolutionary motive: Western rationalism (not at all the same thing as reason, as we shall see, but readily confused with it[1]) came to be seen as the ideology of an imperialistic capitalism bearing the ultimate responsibility for two suicidal world wars. Insisting on the relativity of values and of truth was a gesture of solidarity with colonized peoples against the hegemony of Western Civilization, if not a positive contribution to their liberation. Some academics saw themselves waging a kind intellectual guerilla warfare. If the ideology of capitalism were discredited in the universities, it could be hoped that the system itself would collapse.

Among the campus guerilleros in those days, there was a competition of scepticism, to see who could raise the most serious difficulties for the Western tradition, and show himself least duped by its insidious values and assumptions. Chief among these were the value of reason, and the assumption of its possibility. Not that reason had lacked enemies before. In the past, many others had tried to set limits to it, in the name of faith, or social stability, or naked power. What was new about the 20th century assault was the attempt to turn the Logos against itself – to get language and reason to self-destruct.

This attempt was at least partly successful. We will never again be able to speak of truth or knowledge or reason with the assurance of the Victorians, to whom all things seemed plain. Our problem today is just the opposite: to see what firm cognitive ground is left to stand on.

To get our discussion started, we'll take this chapter to review five post-modern themes, which seem to me prime causes of the intellectual nausea captured so well by Pfeiffer's cartoon. To understand the nature and logical basis of reasoned conversation, we'll begin by recalling some recent ideas that have made this seem impossible. We can tag them: the scandal of interpretations, the barrier of culture, the prison-house of language, the tyranny of meaning, and the de-centred self.

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[1] Sometimes, inexcusably confused, as in a best-selling book called _Voltaire's Bastards_, by John Raulston Saul.

1.1 The Scandal of Interpretations

The human brain is not an organ of thinking, but an organ of survival like claw and fangs.
It is made in such a way as to make us accept as truth that which is only advantage.
Albert Szent-Györgi

If any single idea divides the classical reason of John Locke and the Enlightenment from the anti-reason of Nietzsche, Heidegger and Derrida, it is the *scandal of interpretations* – the insight that cognition occurs through the active, purposeful appropriation of a world, and not through passive reception of the world as it is[2]. We do not see thing as they are (as the ancients thought, and as ordinary language still suggests); rather we *construe* a world according to our differing life histories and habits, our differing values, our differing purposes. When people insist on seeing the same thing in different ways, it is meaningless to ask who is right.

Until the late 19th century, no one in the Western world seriously worried that a meaningful question might not have a correct answer, humanly unknowable though it might be. The ancients knew about wishful thinking, and they knew that sense-experience could deceive. They considered the possibility that some important questions might be radically unanswerable – not just beyond anyone's current knowledge, but beyond human understanding in principle. They knew that rhetoric could alter appearances, and could "make the worse appear the better cause." But they enjoyed a robust confidence in the solidity of reality. It never occurred to ancient, or medieval, or early modern thinkers to worry that perceptions only become true or false through irreducible acts of construction and interpretation – through irreducible acts of will. This corrosive thought only begins with the German Idealist thinkers, notably with Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. Their work was an effort to digest Kant, who in turn had been attempting to absorb the scepticism of a hard-headed Scot: David Hume.

In 1748, Hume published a critique of the metaphysical foundations of science as understood at that time[3], pointing out that no accumulation of sensory stimuli can present the observer with an intelligible world of entities and events and causes. Purely empirical observation presents to the mind a huge

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2 The *scandal* is in our discovery that such meaning as we find in the world is our own creative achievement. We do not take sense from the world; we actively make sense of it, according to our own aesthetic sensibilities, and for our own purposes. There are no absolute truths. There is no clear-cut separation between facts and values.

3 *Philosophical Essays Concerning Human Understanding*

array of unrelated impressions. It does not present anything like the world of ordinary experience. In modern terms we would say that without prior hypotheses and prior methodological commitments, the outcome of observation is an array of unrelated data points, recording innumerable separate locations and instants of perception or measurement. Such a mass of raw data looks like the bit-map of ones and zeroes in a computer's memory, and is as empty of meaning until interpreted.

For a simple analogy, think of those follow-the-dots puzzles that reveal a picture when their numbered points are correctly connected. In effect, Hume's observation was that a world of raw sense data is like a dot puzzle without the numbers. Bit-mapped images on the retina could not by themselves supply the perceived relationships of things – the rules for connecting the dots. Without those crucial relationships, the world cannot be intelligible. Since it *is* more-or-less intelligible to us, most of the time, those relationships must be imposed or inserted, somehow, upon the raw sensory data; they cannot be deduced from our sensory impressions themselves.

Kant, roused by Hume's argument from (what he described as) his dogmatic slumbers, replied that the crucial relationships must be inherent in the structure of the reasoning mind. They must be constructions of the nervous system itself, as this imposes its built-in categories of space and time and cause upon the raw data of the senses. What makes the difference between a perceived cat and a certain pattern of stimuli at the retina of the eye is an automatic construction and interpretation by the brain. In the same way, what makes the difference between a data bank of hourly readings from weather instruments around the country, and the weather report on the evening news is an application of organizing ideas from meteorological theory.[4]

The next step was taken by Hegel, who may have been the first to recognize the systemic nature of conversation – which he calls "the life of spirit." (The dependence of cognition on the individual's membership in a particular conversation or "culture" had already been recognized by Vico and Herder.) But it was Marx and Nietzsche, tracing the origins of cognition to self-interested acts of interpretation, who raised the scandal in its virulent, post-modern form: Meaningful cognition depends not only on the brain's parsing of stimuli, but on

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[4] Since Kant's time, cognitive scientists have put it beyond question that perception is an active process, not a passive one. Perception is a three-term relationship between a perceiving organism, the thing perceived, and the pre-given "categories" by which perception is framed. What we see depends not only on the world "out there", but (at least as much) on the cognitive structures "in here": on the physiology of sense-perception, pain and pleasure, on our priorities for allocating attention, and on culture-dependent categories for classification and measurement.

their assimilation to pre-constructed categories, shaped by human purposes over many generations, and then deployed by a self-interested subject. Freud offered an important correction here, pointing out that attributed meaning can also result from "neurosis", the traces of psychological trauma, as well as from rational self-interest.

Either way, cognition is a matter of interpretation and "viewpoint" – one's position and interest relative to the situation, and to preferred or habitual paradigms and categories. Without a supreme cognitive authority – an all-knowing God, or a secular equivalent – there can be no privileged viewpoint. Lacking a privileged viewpoint there can be no "master narrative", and no authoritative interpretations. Interpretation comes to be seen primarily as ideology – an expression of cultural membership or class interest. Belief, whether religious or otherwise, becomes a matter of choice – about which, it can then be argued, we have little personal choice at all, our beliefs having been "programmed" by the cultures we belong to. An interpretation is only as good as the rhetorical and coercive forces mobilized in its "will to power." All truth is relative. Things in the world, written documents, our lives themselves, mean only what we want them to mean, and make them mean. Or else, they mean nothing at all.

The more clearly one understands this relativist line of thinking (which resonated with Einstein's theory of relativity in the public mind, but is a wholly separate affair), the more scandalous it becomes:

- Cognition is a matter of interpretation all the way down: nowhere is there any firm basis of authority or fact. Thus, there can be no basis for objective comparison among the perceptions of different people and different groups. All thinking is "wishful thinking" in this sense. Thus, *credibility* comes to seem a more fundamental notion than *truth*.
- Every viewpoint, every interest, every scheme of interpretation, must be expected to generate a culture of persons who affirm and live by it. Lacking a basis for comparison, these cultures are not commensurable. One culture may intrude upon another, but can never either comprehend or legitimately contribute to it. Thus, the idea of "culture" acquires a sovereignty, a self-justifying finality, that is altogether new, and very dangerous – as we'll see in the next section.
- But meanwhile, classical reason (which had always esteemed itself beyond and above the vagaries of opinion and local culture) becomes impossible. Without some plausible mandate to pursue ultimate reality in a disinterested way, philosophy loses its role altogether, and even science becomes little more than a bag of magic tricks; or, for some,

> an ideology that sustains the power of proprietors and technocrats against the interests of "the People."

Throughout the 20th century, "rationalist" philosophers beavered away to build a floor of some kind over the abyss this argument opens, opposed by anti-rationalist critics who dismantled these floors as fast as they were built. The academic fruits of this struggle included phenomenology and pragmatism, and the so-called "linguistic turn", along with post-Heideggerian existentialism, the deconstructionist movement in literary criticism, and the new discipline of semiotics – the theory of signs. All these represent attempts to grasp and come to terms with the re-discovery by Western philosophy of what has long been a staple of Oriental thought: the concept of *maya*, the veil of interpretation that separates the illusory world of perception from what "really" is.

The *scandal* in the concept of interpretation is that I cannot drop the quotation marks in the last sentence without embarrassment. Neither can you. Neither can anyone today, even if he or she is too innocent or brazen to stammer about it. It has become impossible to sustain a concept of reality apart from the current interpretive consensus of a conversation. Or rather, we can form the bare concept of objective reality – of the world as it *really* is before we get around to interpreting it – but must right away admit that we can never know anything about it. For every practical purpose, "reality" for anyone is just the world that his conversation construes. We'll be discussing this situation, and its implications for reason, for the remainder of this book.

Meanwhile, it is enough to point out that the worst aspect of this corrosive relativism is its stifling effect on conversation itself. For, if there is no reality (beyond that of one culture or another), then what is there for two cultures – or people – to talk about? There can be no such thing as public knowledge that transcends, and thus is common to them both. The most earnest or learned conversation may then seem nothing but a dreary power struggle: a pointless, rhetorical contest.

The scandal of interpretations is certainly reason's most serious theoretical difficulty: The notions of *truth*, *logical argument*, *public knowledge* and *rational public choice* are all deranged by it. In direct consequence, their meanings are shifted as a matter of theory, and they become more difficult to achieve in practice. Some think they have no meaning at all.

1.2 The Barrier of Culture

Even apart from the problems arising from divergences of interpretation, the idea of *culture* is also troublesome for reason. The term is used with a wide range of meanings, but rarely with precision: Every tribe and nation, but also every profession, social class and sexual taste is said to have a culture that its

members share in common. With this concept so readily available, it is difficult these days to urge that "all humanity is one spirit." It is much easier to hold that every culture has its own, unique spirit or "genius", not even capable of expression except on its own terms, in its own tongue. Invariably, the innate "genius" of a cherished culture is contrasted with the de-natured, cosmopolitan world of "reason", and always to the latter's disadvantage.

This view resists the crassest forms of Eurocentrism, and similar jingoisms elsewhere; and it draws a line of defence against the cognitive imperialism of science, and the homogenizing influences of a global economy. Other aspects are less attractive: The idea of "culture" notes the existence of barriers to free conversation due to language, paradigm, "attitude" – to every conceivable form of cognitive baggage. It tends to valorize such barriers as protectors of the culture's purity against contamination by alien ideas. In fact, the notion of culture turns out to be explosive. It gives the man in the street a cheap, ready-made identity – a hand-crafted, individuated, cosmopolitan identity being more difficult and more costly. It gives the rich a handy diversion, to distract public attention from issues more threatening to their interests. It gives the cynical politician a ready means to manipulate his constituents by flattering them with the glories of their language, their religion, their history, their mystical destiny – and exhorting them to be worthy of their great heritage by making him their leader.

Insofar as cultural relativism encourages a diversity of cultural and sub-cultural expression, insisting that these have value on their own terms, it contributes positively to the integrity of global conversation. But insofar as it tends toward a view of cultures as mutually unintelligible ("You can't understand us unless you're one of us!"), or holds up an idea of cultures as self-contained entities whose purity must be maintained by avoiding alien influences, it makes dialogue impossible, even with the best will in the world: "If we can't understand each other, and you'd rather be left alone anyway, then we might as well ignore you altogether . . ." At the limit, the doctrines of cultural relativism and cultural sovereignty lend themselves to persecutions and crusades, while making other forms of activism impossible. They tend toward a kind of ethnocentric solipsism, with everyone trapped in his own sub-cultural bubble, unable to communicate with anyone else. Indeed, as we'll see, this world-view can be taken inside the head, to a point where individuality itself is fractured into an "inner committee" of introjected personalities and programs, in competition for the same vital resource: the body.

A related idea, cultural determinism, sees the individual as created and wholly informed by the culture(s) into which he was born and raised, and in

which his actions find their meaning. In its extreme forms, it sees the culture as a reified entity, and the person as a sort of meat-robot, programmed by various cultural "scripts." At the limit, it attempts to dispense with the notions of *mind*, *desire*, *intention* – indeed, with all the concepts of subjectivity.[5] It makes two basic claims: that a culture is a quasi-stable, self-consistent structure with a reality of its own; and that people are more the artifacts of their cultures than the other way round.

Rousseau may be said to have founded the contemporary rhetoric of cultural determinism with his rejection of the Judaeo-Christian doctrine of Original Sin, and his insistence on "the natural goodness of Man." That is to say, he reverses the causal arrow in the traditional account of evil: Instead of blaming the faults of society on human viciousness or frailty, he blames the latter on the former. The objective evils of society perpetuate themselves by corrupting and enslaving individual men and women. "Man is born free," Rousseau tells us, "but everywhere he is in chains. . . ." This is well and good, but in weakening the idea of the individual's moral responsibility, he also undermines that of the individual as a locus of consciousness and agency. The implications of this shift are still being worked out, and fought out, at the level of practical politics.

Hegel proposed a more explicit cultural determinism in his account of the dialectical process through which societies, and consciousness, develop. He sees the drama of history as an unfolding of the World Spirit[6] – an entity superordinate to, and exerting controlling influence upon, the passions of individual lives. Hegel's World Spirit develops through the interplay of antithetical ideas – e.g. mastery and submission, slavery and freedom – of which human institutions (and human lives) are the embodiment. For abstract ideas, Marx substitutes the forces of economic production, but he too sees individual ideas and choices as rigorously conditioned by socially defined interests and roles in a world-historical game of evolving economic culture. In our own century, French structuralist and post-structuralist thinkers – e.g. Claude Levi-Straus, Jacques Lacan, Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault – and the neo-Marxist thinkers of the Frankfurt school, gave

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[5] In this respect, it is is similar to the project of Artificial Intelligence (AI). Since this new field, representing a merger of cognitive science with computer science, hopes to explain and duplicate the phenomena of subjectivity, it cannot use these as explicatory principles, and must begin by banishing them from its discourse. Cultural determinism seeks a different kind of explanation, deriving subjectivity from culture, rather than seeking to trace it further downward into physiology.

[6] The *Weltgeist* in German. Much the same as is meant today when we speak of "Discourse", or "The Conversation" but with fewer mystical, quasi-religious overtones.

rich play to this idea of objective culture, leading an often oppressive life of its own.

However, the difficulties for reason are already full-blown in Rousseau's original idea. For as soon as culture is understood as a system exerting causal influence on its human participants, the humanism of the Enlightenment is subverted. First, the idea of Man – humanity as a whole – loses its moral and intellectual force. Instead of Man, we have a myriad of cultures and sub-cultures, more or less unintelligible and often hostile to each other. The idea that all humankind together has undergone a common biological and then cultural evolution becomes suspect. Worse, the idea that the world is comprised of individual men and women with tastes, interests, beliefs, and reasons of their own becomes dubious, if not politically incorrect. Finally, reason as the act or attitude of autonomous, competent agents, becomes impossible. People who understand themselves as culturally programmed meat-puppets, dancing through culturally prescribed motions as jerked by their cultural strings, are not good candidates for the life of self-understanding and rational thought.

What we see here is a deep trend of post-modern culture. Every crime, every defect of character can be passed off as the consequence of social deprivation or abusive upbringing. This moral theory is obviously congenial to people who feel themselves strangers in a world they never made: more done-tos than doers. It encourages the climate of victimology and self-pity that we see everywhere today, and has proven remarkably discouraging to the cause of reason, which depends crucially on our willingness to accept responsibility for our own judgments and actions.

The externalization of blame also happens to be a necessary move for any critical, reformist project – Freudian, Marxist, or whatever – that seeks to alter the existing order. Any such project stands toward personal responsibility and reason in a paradoxical relationship: On one hand, wishing to improve the cultural arrangements, it must start from the premise that Man himself can be improved, and that his imperfections result from social evils and not from his own nature. He must conceive culture as a system with its own objective existence, at present sick in some way, producing individuals who fall ill themselves as they become adapted to it. But, at the same time, the reformer must also assume that these victims of society still retain sufficient autonomy and reason to recognize their condition, rally to the cause, and cast off their chains. Thus, the advocate of reform or revolution faces a perennial problem: He needs to let people off the hook of responsibility and keep them on it, at the same time.

British and American thinkers have held a deep antipathy for the cultural determinist position, and for the whole idea of society as a reified entity. By contrast, most European thinkers have found it deeply attractive as the only stance from which social criticism is possible. Today it is taken seriously everywhere, even by thinkers with a visceral dislike for it. Quite apart from its intellectual merits, it plays a central role in various political struggles. As ideology, it is too important to ignore.

To summarize: A heavy emphasis on cultural separateness discourages reason in two ways: First, culture is enveloping. When he insists on the inability of people to go beyond their cultural horizons, the cultural determinist simultaneously denies them the autonomous subjectivity to reason their way toward meaningful choices. Programmed by culture to perform their roles, seeking programmed gratifications of programmed desires and tastes, they lack (on this determinist view) the independence to influence their cultures meaningfully, or develop private cultures of their own.

Second, culture is divisive. By insisting on the paramount value of cultural autonomy and actualization, the purist denies not only the possibility but the value of dialogue between cultures. This position tends toward the extreme of denying that people have something of importance in common, simply by virtue of being human. At the limit, since no two people share exactly the same culture, it concludes that no person can be more than superficially intelligible to another – that no worthwhile conversation can take place at all. To say the least, conflict resolution through the joint exercise of reason becomes a dimmer hope.

1.3 The "Prison-House" of Language

One aspect of culture has proved especially troubling. While language is only one element of culture, it seems more pervasive and more deeply constitutive than any other; it encodes basic cultural attitudes and values beyond the reach of all but the deepest and most persistent conscious criticism, and is a pre-condition for access to almost every form of knowledge.

One school holds that language constrains not only whom we can talk with, but the thoughts we can think. In linguistics, this conjecture is known as the Whorf-Sapir hypothesis. If correct, it implies that the speakers of any given language are effectively trapped in a kind of mental "prison-house," unable to think outside the categories their language makes available. A double effect is at work: First, a given language makes it easier to think and express some things than others. Since it will be easier to bring perception into line with the available categories than to articulate a perception that departs from them, the language tends to channel thought into well-worn "grooves." Thus, it directly influences, (not to say determines), what speakers can say to each other or

think for themselves. Language also restricts what its speakers are prepared to listen to, understand, and take seriously. People will not sit still long enough to understand an idea that departs too radically from what their linguistic habits have prepared them to expect.

Whorf's hypothesis is probably an over-simplification, and the exact role of language as a determinant of thought is still a matter for research. It seems to be culture as a whole, not just language, that constrains individual perception and thought. However, the argument that follows is not much affected whether we think of language in a narrow sense, or with its cultural connections. The debate around Whorf's hypothesis is largely a technical quarrel about the extent to which the cognitive influences of language can be separated from those of culture at large; and it is generally agreed that the cognitive influence of language probably goes deeper, and is less open to review and revision, than other aspects of culture.

Language provides the clearest example we have of a cultural artifact that is not a human product in the same sense that my desk is, for example. The desk was designed and manufactured and can be modified at will. If it suits me, I can decide to paint it purple, or lower its surface by sawing down the legs. With language our situation is different. A language evolves over centuries and millennia as the cumulative product of innumerable spoken and written utterances. Like other broad features of culture – dress styles, table manners, marriage customs, what have you – it is a human creation, but not a creation of individual humans. At any given moment it can be said to exist as a system of conventions with normative force for its individual speakers – over their heads, so to speak. Nor are the language(s) acquired in early childhood really "learned" in the ordinary sense, in which one might consciously decide to learn pottery, or political philosophy. It seems more apt to think of a mother tongue as written by ambient conversation onto the growing child's brain, enrolling her or him in one particular culture – one tradition of speech and literature, and one way of being human.

Like all norms, those of language can be breached at one's discretion and peril – but they are observed more often than not, and their power is felt even when they are broken. Coining new words or abusing the grammar does not alter language unless the novel usage becomes a fashion. Accordingly, it is not so much the innovator as his imitators who work the change. Even the most original users of a tongue, its Chaucers and Shakespeares, find more in the language of their time then they add to it. Their originality is constrained by the need to be intelligible, or at least by the need to attract and hold an audience. But given sufficient time, the mass of speakers will change a language beyond

recognition.

A language is used for many purposes and, in use, generates a vast body of utterance – of genres and literary traditions. Its features – pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, etc. – evolve over time, allowing it a certain continuity of existence as it changes. But language can also be thought of as a static structure, defined at any time and place by conventions whose mastery establishes the individual's membership and competence in some particular speech community. Language as a static structure of acceptable usage can be distinguished from language as an evolving tradition of speech and writing.

Now, the English word "language" covers both aspects: the structure of conventions, and the history of usage. But French has two different words: *langue* and *parole*, for the structure and history respectively. *Langue* exists synchronically, as a structure of linguistic distinctions and conventions at some moment in time. *Parole* exists diachronically, as a tradition of utterances over time. These terms can be extended to distinguish the synchronic and diachronic aspects of culture in general: culture as structure and as history. Traditionally, societies and cultures were described and studied from the historical, synchronic perspective. The structuralists, by contrast, wished to study culture as *langue* – as a game defined by its formal rules, comparable to chess, for example.

We need not discuss to what extent it is possible to understand language and culture in structuralist terms. But we must note how structuralism further erodes the possibilities for reason when its ideas are carelessly deployed.

The central idea of the structuralist paradigm[7] is that the elements of a game (like chess), a language (like French or English), or a whole culture, take their meaning not only, or even primarily from their reference or usefulness in an external world, but from their relationships with other elements of the same system. In the case of language this is easily demonstrated. Consider the contrast-pair *masculine/feminine*, or the triplet *animal/ vegetable/mineral*, or the sextuple of basic English colour names: *red/ orange/yellow/green/blue/violet*. In each case, it is obvious that the precise meaning of one member of the group is tightly linked to that of the other members. For example, what we mean by "masculine" behaviour and "masculine" interests is understood by contrast with what we mean by "feminine" behaviour and interests. As one concept changes, the other must shift in corresponding ways. Likewise our idea of what is "animal" e.g. (for a

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7 First set forth by the Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure in an important book published posthumously in 1916.

game of Twenty Questions) depends on our ideas of what is "vegetable" or "mineral." Our idea of what is centrally or typically "green" depends on where we place the limits of what we call "yellow" and "blue."

In these cases, the words seem to serve as abstract tokens enabling certain language games, just as chess pieces are abstract tokens that enable the game of chess. There is no real-world connection between the bishops on chessboards, and those in churches. There is no direct or necessary connection of the word spelled *t-a-b-l-e* to the actual table in my kitchen, or even to the idea of a table in my mind. The word is not like the territory, nor like the idea of the territory (assuming ideas can be distinguished from the words that represent them).

In short, it now appears that word meanings are nodes in an inter-dependent structure of distinctions rather than direct pointers to states of affairs in the real world. This is an important insight about the way that systems of meaning hang together, but it is easily pushed toward the very silly notion that words and other cultural artifacts refer only to each other, without regard to the external world. This leap is gratuitous, however. The thrust of the structuralist insight, is not that language is a self-contained structure insulated from the real world. Rather, it is an evolving structure, exquisitely connected to structures of remembered experience and thence, presumably, to a real world, through the brain's faculties of memory and imagination.

Undeniably however, by revealing the sense in which culture and language can be considered reified entities, structuralism encourages the doctrine of culture as an autonomous causative agent exerting influence on people's lives. In placing emphasis on the unique, self-positing arbitrariness of each culture's internal structure, it raises doubts of people's ability to talk intelligibly across cultural boundaries, and of the value of their doing so. Finally, it suggests the very powerful metaphor of language and culture as a kind of prison-cell – a lattice-work of meanings that keep us trapped inside. It suggests that we can "rattle each other's cages," as the expression has it, but not actually converse – engage in dialogue – in any meaningful way.

1.4 The Tyranny of Meaning

Instead of "interpretation" the grammatologist's investigation is characterized as "deconstruction" or "dissemination." It does not search for the hidden intentional unity of the text, but it decodes the lack of such unity by searching out the tensions, oppositions, and even the incoherence that propagates further writing. . . . The text is not autonomous but is the interplay of an infinity of other texts.

David Couzens Hoy, *Must We Say What We Mean?*

Deconstruction is more a method than a coherent idea. It is a critical method of reading literary texts, not to interpret them but to expose their internal tensions, their lines of ambiguity and stress. Or we might say it is a method of interrogation, designed to extract a confession of incoherence from a text, and from the reader in search of some intrinsic meaning. Instead of reading *empathetically*, to understand the author's intention, or reading *literally*, to grasp the meanings of the words on the page, or reading *charitably*, to make the best sense one can of the author's words, one reads "deconstructively" to display a superfluity of possible meanings, and the absence of any "privileged", intentional meaning at the centre. We may well ask why anyone would want to read a book, or a poem, or a balance sheet, or anything whatever, if he did not think its author had been trying to say something worth saying – and had, to whatever limited extent, succeeded in saying it?

I can see two clear answers here: First, in the context of the academic quest for objective truth and tenure, interpretive reading can seem improperly subjective, and unsuited to scholarship and university-level teaching. If one is seeking "the truth" about Finnegan's Wake (as classical reason insists one should), then no merely interpretative reading can supply it. Who cares what O'Strofsky thinks the book is about, eminent Joyce scholar though he may be? However learned, astute and balanced, interpretation cannot add up to knowledge in the classical, academic sense.

Second, deconstruction will seem a wonderfully appropriate method to graduate students and activists who experience literature (and culture in general) not as a mountain to be mined for its treasure, but as a mountainous weight, crushing down the spirit. Deconstruction is not only a method of criticism, but a *critical method* in the same sense that Marxism and psychoanalysis are critical methods for the overcoming of allegedly "false" consciousness. Its aim is not understanding, but liberation. If you are out to show that Joyce (for example) is just another dead, white, European male, deconstruction is the method of choice.

As a method of literary criticism, deconstruction is flawed by its hostility and its puritanism. But I must at once add that these qualities, which repel me, are signal virtues to others. What seems fair to say is that deconstructionists have little interest in the traditional critic's role of go-between – helping the

author to find his audience, and assisting the latter with scholarly knowledge and cultivated taste to make reading deeper and more pleasurable. Rather they seek to arm the reader against the text, fearful that he or she might be seduced by its aesthetic blandishments. Seduced into what exactly? Not only, or not so much (it seems) into a false or politically incorrect meaning, as into the delusion that any meaning exists. But here the method of deconstruction crosses over into *deconstructionism* as a theory and a movement.

There is no doubt that the deconstructionist philosophy of language played a considerable part in the assault on reason during the second half of the 20th century. Unfortunately, Derrida and other key deconstructionist writers resisted expressing their own meanings very clearly, so that although their ideas were certainly influential, it is hard to know exactly what they were. One suspects that the key works of deconstructionist theory were written as live demonstrations of what may be the cultural determinist point – that text (like all culture) spins itself out endlessly, and endlessly leads to the production of further culture and text, without ever being intended or understood by a conscious subject. Thus it remains unclear who is proposing this theory, and who is supposed to read or apply it.

In general, finding intelligible theory in the writings of Derrida and his followers requires some charitable reading – exactly the sort of reading they refuse to others. Reading them for other than political or comic purposes strikes me as very much a Christian turning of the other cheek. In fairness, however, there is reason to think that their work may make better sense in the original French than in English translation, and may be more appropriate to the European than to the North American scene. At all events, here is what I make of the main points of deconstructionist theory:

- Words do not meekly submit to the meanings we place upon them. Indeed, the concept of stable meaning is illusory. The signifier does not point reliably to any signified; it points only to other signifiers, and even this much closure is "deferred" indefinitely. No part of a text can be finally understood until the meaning of the whole is established. This in turn is not possible until all its parts have been satisfactorily interpreted.[8] Our proper purpose in reading is not to "understand" what has been written but to open a space for further cultural production and activity. Text never reaches a closure of interpretation and understanding; its contradictions always lead beyond itself, to

[8] This reciprocal dependence of part on whole and vice versa is known as the hermeneutic circle. See Section 6.4 for further discussion.

further writing.

- Culture and learning can be seen as forms of writing – the leaving of traces on a receptive medium. The manufacture of human artifacts is a kind of writing on the Earth's surface. Memory is a kind of writing on brain tissue. Derrida embellishes this last point with his ingenious metaphor of the child's magic writing pad. It is not the stylus pressing downward, but the graphite surface showing through the transparent overlay that makes the writing visible – just as perception is an active function of the brain, and not a passive reception of stimuli from the retina and other sensory organs.
- An author is finally just another reader of his own text. His intentions are not knowable (especially when he is long dead), and they are irrelevant in any case to the reader who will be re-programmed by that text in a more accurate sense than he can be said to understand it, and to derive from that understanding some new intentions of his own.

Each of these ideas, compounding with the scandal of interpretations, works overtime to discourage reason yet further: If no text is ever understood, then dialogue and debate will not lead to mutual intelligibility, but to endless muddle and frustration. Reason will indeed be difficult when reliable communication is not possible in principle! If culture and learning are seen merely as writing without referent – just a leaving of traces – then there is little reason to take it seriously. And we need have little respect for the actual state of affairs, since what is written might easily be erased and written differently. That which *is* remains on just the same footing as that which is merely *imagined*. The social world is a poet's dream – or nightmare; there are no social realities to reason about.

Finally, if the intentions of the author are irrelevant to his readers, then reason collapses for want of any respected adversary to reason with. At the very least, reason is a discipline of mutual intelligibility and cognitive accommodation; to reason is to attempt the practice of such a discipline. If the author is not worthy or capable of being met in this way, then relationship itself becomes impossible. There can be no relationship (let alone reason) if only one's own desires and perceptions are given importance. In place of relationship, we get a world of psychopaths for whom other persons are just obstacles or means to an end – who never make it into focus as having viewpoints that count.

1.5 The De-Centred Self

[There are] wide cultural variations on the concept of the self. Some tribal cultures appear to regard a person as identical with his ancestors and descendants . . . Some religions . . . so diffuse the self into experience or community relationships that only the grammar of the first person singular lets an agent refer to himself. Our own stout individualism has emerged from a cultural trail which apparently starts in Homer (role without self), and leads through Roman law (persons as property owners) and Christian theology (the soul as the form of the body), before settling down to Protestant and Cartesian ideas of *res cogitans* (bodiless self without role). There is nothing evidently universal or philosophically undisputed about the concept of a person.

Martin Hollis, *The Cunning of Reason*

A fifth discouragement for reason is the idea of the de-centred self. Western civilization had never doubted the metaphysical reality of the individual soul – created unitary and immortal, in God's image. Endowed with free will and capable of great wickedness as it might be, it was also capable of god-like apprehension. It perceived and responded to its world as a whole.

Not necessarily as a *coherent* whole. Plato compared the self to a chariot, pulled by unevenly matched horses – one obedient, the other wild and unruly – and driven by a rational charioteer that Freud later called the *ego*[9]. This model with its distinction between the charioteer-ego and the whole self (chariot, charioteer, horses, and all) leaves ample room for inner conflict. But, coherent or not, there was no questioning the self's fundamental reality as author and enduring subject of its own fate. Neither Plato nor his successors until our own century, ever doubted the unity, the ontological reality and wholeness of the human individual, (as this word itself suggests).

Today, advanced thought has tended to question and, in some cases, to dispense with this notion. The Buddhist doctrine that, "All beings are fundamentally without self" has been making headway in the Western world, though not necessarily with the precise meaning it carried in Oriental thought. The general idea, is similar though: We are asked to contemplate the self as a construct, perhaps an illusory or truly deluded construct, rather than as subsistent reality – as a fabricated, rather than a natural and perduring entity.

In part, also, our way of understanding the self has been shifted by scientific advances and by new metaphors from computer technology. Today we often conceive the self as a kind of operating system that mediates among our various programs. Or we may imagine no coordinating self at all, but see the ego, the "I-ness" of the individual, emerging from a hubbub of competing

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[9] Plato's unruly and obedient horses still survive in Freudian theory as the *id* and the *super-ego* respectively.

"programs," or "scripts" or "texts." Or we may imagine the person as a kind of *inner committee* of distinct personalities, clamouring to drive the common body in pursuit of their various agendas. These metaphors aptly capture the diversity of modern living, and the numerous, separate roles that modern individuals are required to play. Like versatile computing devices, we can do anything – once we've been programmed with the necessary "software." But we are uncertain of any ultimate harmony among our various roles. And we find ourselves "of two minds" and "doing things against our better judgment" more than before.

Unfortunately, although the "Inner Committee" paradigm accounts for realities untouched or slighted by the traditional notion of the self as unitary subject, it also casts doubt on the idea that there are coherent agents either to reason or to reason with. The new metaphor also reinforces the idea of the mutual isolation of cultures by denying the existence of a core self that is the same for all humanity. It is now much harder than in Kant's time to demand that people should be responsible for their actions. It is harder to think of ourselves as autonomous agents with individual but distinctively human viewpoints that can be used to criticize and modify our cultural "programming."

The old-style, unitary self could be conceived as having a single, coherent viewpoint and total responsibility for its actions. Actions could readily be credited or charged to the account of the self in its entirety. States of inner conflict or dividedness could be considered abnormal. As well, a certain symmetry among the interlocutors of a situation could be taken for granted. One self (or soul) was like unto the others, as all were like unto God. Soul could reason with soul on equal terms, in full confidence that, on some level, they could find common ground if they tried hard enough.

The paradigm of the de-centred, multiple self eliminates these certainties. Under the new dispensation, reason is no longer a dialogue of coherent souls, but an exchange of messages between executive committees, each with its own rivalries, tensions, and internal politics. Coherence of the person, like amicable relations between persons, now seems to represent a considerable achievement – specifically, a kind of *political* achievement of the fragmented self's components.

1.6 Second Thoughts About Reason

If the Enlightenment program had been a complete practical success, anti-rationalist notions about interpretation and cultural relativity would have raised some interesting questions for specialists, but would scarcely have penetrated so deeply into the public's consciousness. If its program had proved theoretically sound, its deficiencies in practice would have received less attention from privileged intellectuals. As it stands, living in a world largely

resulting from the Enlightenment program, menaced by disasters that stem from its very successes, we find ourselves having to rethink the foundations of that program from the ground up.

Our claim will be that reason does not depend essentially on Plato's absolute concepts or on Aristotle's absolute distinction between true and false propositions. At most, these are analytical conveniences that are sometimes useful, sometimes deceptive, and always suspect. **Reason does not depend on the apodictic soundness of our categories and interpretations, but on the integrity of our conversation.**

The central defect of classical reason – as Nietzsche and his followers have made us see – is that the world is richer and more legitimately diverse than Plato (and the bulk of the Western tradition with him) had been willing to admit. Theoretically and politically, one claim has proven impossible to resist: The diversities we see in all things may no longer be treated as mere deviations from ideal[1] types. To do so may be seen – and is everywhere being seen – as a kind of intellectual tyranny, a form of cognitive imperialism. It provides too many convenient rationalizations for intolerance, and has become thoroughly disreputable.

On the other hand, there is a problem: If we concede that individuals have an absolute right to diverge from Reason's ideal categories, then what (if anything) is left to think and legislate with? The technique of reason is, and can only be, a method of categories – of ideal prototypes by which the individual situation is grasped and managed. But we now see that reason will not work as a kind of Procrustean bed, a rack on which the individual case is cut or stretched. "I'm a special case," is always a valid defence against its claims. We may overpower the individual, and put him on the rack of our concepts because we have the power to do so, but what remains of Reason's ethical authority when we do so? On the other hand, if we refrain from such Procrustean procedures – the cutting and stretching of particulars to fit our categories – it may seem there are no resources left for reasoned thought and argument, and that the whole notion of reason is empty.

A hundred years of argument – from Nietzsche's time to our own – about the problems of cognition and conversation, have suggested to many that the cause of reason is hopeless. This despair (or glee, in some circles) is premature, but there is no doubt that drastic overhaul is needed to understand

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[1] They may not be so treated even when the ideals are worthwhile and genuine, let alone when they are spurious and self-serving, as has too often been the case.

just what it is that people do, or should do, when they sit down “to reason together” about some issue on which they disagree.