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Source: *SubStance*, Vol. 24, No. 3, Issue 78 (1995), pp. 29-48

Published by: University of Wisconsin Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3685006>

Accessed: 06/02/2010 12:59

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Nihilism, Relativism, and Literary Theory

Tony Jackson

NOW THAT THE TURBULENT EMERGENCE of the various poststructuralist kinds of theory has subsided into the past, we can assess these theories with some historical perspective. Few would be likely to dispute that "theory" has been a major event in the history of criticism, but as with all such events, significance changes as meanings are rewritten over time. We can begin to ask now, just how important, and indeed what kind of an intellectual "event" has theory been? Of course, we need even more temporal distance than we now have to make a solid judgment, but we can perhaps turn to other twentieth-century histories for help. For instance, in looking back at the history of theory in the last few decades, we can readily find interesting similarities to the history of physics in the first half of the century, similarities that can help us understand what has happened in the humanities.

Now it is true that humanistic disciplines and physical sciences establish their truths in significantly different ways. The sciences have the blessing of what appears to be a neutral language—mathematics—by which to bring about belief. The humanities, in contrast, are rendered hopelessly messy and yet endlessly fascinating because there exists no language that can, even apparently, escape desires, contexts—in a word, history. But still, the concepts and reception of the new physics bear striking similarities to the concepts and reception of the various poststructuralisms. I will draw out the similarities here, hoping to help bridge the ongoing divide, at least in English departments, between those who have been persuaded by poststructuralist claims and those who have not. Needless to say, in some departments, often the most prestigious ones, the theory camp has solidly fortified its position. But by definition, the prestigious are the few, and the fact is that even now, many English departments remain divided about the meaning, intellectual legitimacy, moral rightness, and pedagogical usefulness of theory. In many departments this split has become a kind of given, like a tolerated disjunction in an otherwise adequate marriage, only making itself conspicuous at certain uncomfortable moments. Unfortunately, these moments often involve new hires: first-time jobseekers know only

too well the fear of being either too theoretical or not theoretical enough for a given department.

In any event, in spite of the great divide, the kind of reading for which the various poststructuralisms became (in)famous remains the primary *kind* of interpretive method. New Historicism, for instance, because of the “concepts and procedures that it has assimilated from various recent theories” is distinctly marked as a “poststructural” reading practice (Abrams 249). Postcolonial studies, gay and lesbian studies—in fact cultural studies in general—commonly employ deconstructive reading methods and often arrive at the enigmatic conclusions we associate with Paul de Man, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault and Jacques Lacan. In short, for better or worse, the contemporary turn to history and culture has not at all been a turn away from poststructuralism.

In order to categorize the various kinds of “theory” as a specifiable historical event, we need a single term that describes a definitive property shared by most or all of the important theoretical positions. And in spite of their great disputes (the charges and countercharges between Derrida, Foucault, and Lacan are of course the most famous), it seems to me that there does exist such a shared property. The term we choose for it will be more useful, especially in convincing those who remain skeptical of theory, if it is different from any of the theories it describes, and yet is not ostentatiously neologistic. I propose a term that is at once very common and very commonly misunderstood: relativism.¹ At first glance, this no doubt seems a banal choice: relativism has all along been the main charge against poststructuralist thinking. But we will do well to consider more closely the meaning of relativism. Most people have little trouble accepting the vague and general notion of relativism wherein we admit that truth and value on some level are always relative to a particular point of view. But this is an inadequate understanding. What matters most about relativistic thinking, especially in the context of poststructuralism, is that it always admits, one way or another, the paradoxical truth that there is no absolute truth. In fact, this explains why relativistic claims can be so difficult to understand and accept as true: such claims appear to be at the same moment both true and false, rather than either true or false, and so they appear to violate the everyday acceptance of the law of non-contradiction. Because relativistic claims all share this apparently paradoxical nature, the simple act of reading arguments that include relativism will be, in a generic way, more difficult than reading arguments that leave out relativism. Relativistic arguments can seem to dodge perversely and confusingly in and out of the logical light, darting into conclusive clarity at one point only to scurry into

shadowy contradiction at the next, so that, unfortunately, some readers may give up the chase before they have caught, or at least identified, the prey. But, although some relativistic arguments, like some twentieth-century literatures, seem to strive for a kind of perverse obscurity, or to make themselves comprehensible to only a very limited audience, the fact remains that relativistic ideas cannot be made simple in some general way. Being generically counter-intuitive, they always rub against the grain of everyday understanding. Yet in spite of their necessary difficulty, they are nonetheless comprehensible. And for better or worse, they are ideas that seem central to our intellectual epoch.

Plato and Sophistry

One great aim (implicit or explicit) of philosophical thought until this century has been the banishment or domestication of certain relativistic conclusions. To speak generally and historically, relativism has always been the troublemaker prowling the perimeter of any kind of Platonic metaphysics.² Given this, Plato himself provides the best starting point from which to evaluate such thinking in our own time. And indeed, Plato challenges relativism directly in a number of dialogues, though of course he calls it by other names, one of the most important being sophistry. In the *Sophist*, the argumentative protagonist called the "stranger" sets out to save Platonic truth (that is, truth as ultimately self-consistent, universal and unaffected by the contingencies of historical, material reality) by hunting down and capturing (this is the continuing imagery of the dialogue) the wily and dangerous Sophists. And what is the nature of this cunning threat? The Sophists tend to be argumentative tricksters (and worse, to make good money at it [965, 967, 974]). In general, they refuse to take part in the great Platonic program that strives for an absolute, eternally same, self-identical realm of truth. More specifically, they are famed for arguing to self-contradictory conclusions ("they contradict one another about the same things" [973]), and this kind of conclusion violates Plato's version of the truth. For these reasons, the stranger scoffs at them for being lawless (991), for being "illusionists" (978), for being insincere and trivial. And yet, the Sophists earn all these epithets precisely because their conclusions cannot be disproved. They perform, then, in the realm of paradox: they arrive, by means of valid deduction from acceptable premises, at self-contradictory conclusions.

Now, though Plato stands firmly by the truth-founding ability of deductive logic, he just as firmly rejects paradoxical conclusions. And this in spite of the fact that the Sophists argue to such conclusions about some of the most fundamental ideas. For instance, of the paradox of the nonexistent, the stranger must admit that "the nonexistent reduces even one who is refuting its claims to such straits that, as soon as he sets about doing so, he is forced to contradict himself" (981). As soon as nonexistence is brought into language, it has already been given some kind of existence. It would appear to be a necessarily paradoxical idea. Though the stranger acknowledges this paradox, he cannot really do anything with it, neither refute it logically, nor adjust what we could call his pattern of thinking in such a way as to include it.

Finally, after many pages of logical wrangling, the "stranger" proves only that Sophistic arguments arrive at such paradoxical, and therefore self-contradictory, conclusions (sophistry is the "art of contradiction making" [1016]), and then he simply disallows such conclusions, no matter the logical necessity that brings them about. Though he argues against them, he does not, strictly speaking, attack Sophistic conclusions for being incorrect or untrue. To cite another example: of the proof that it is logically necessary that things are both different and the same, he can only claim that there is "nothing clever in such a discovery, nor is it hard to make" (1006). We must, he says, leave "such quibbling alone as leading nowhere." From the stranger's perspective on truth, the word "nowhere" accurately describes the situation. However, at other places of impasse, where the Sophists' aporetic or infinitely regressive conclusions seem inescapable, the stranger speaks even more evocatively of "an impenetrable lurking place" at the end of their arguments (978, 982). Any such logically valid but self-contradictory conclusion, if accepted, presents grave problems for the Platonic notion of truth and so for Plato's whole cosmology. Knowledge and being cannot be quite what Plato claims they are, if such conclusions are allowed to participate in the truth.

What never gets addressed in all this is that Sophistic conclusions violate *only* the notion of an absolutely self-consistent truth. From the Platonic position, we have either this kind of truth, the kind towards which all material-world truths must strive, or we have only material-world truth, which is relative to specific material-world times and places. This latter truth, for Plato, is "nowhere," is essentially meaningless.³ In modern terms, such truth has been called nihilism. Now, in what I have just said, and in what I will come to say, I do not suggest a wholesale acceptance of self-contradictory conclusions, for though all relativist conclusions are (or

appear to be) self-contradictory, not all self-contradictory conclusions are relativistic. But we may say that poststructuralist kinds of critical thinking are distinctive in that they try to incorporate certain unavoidable paradoxes into their claims about the nature of textuality. And this is where poststructuralism splits significantly apart from the criticism that precedes it.

As everyone knows, the New Critics, too, were involved with paradox, and deconstruction established itself historically in part by rejecting New Criticism. But this does not mean that New Criticism's paradoxical baby was tossed out with its logocentric bathwater. In fact, Paul de Man's critique of Formalism in such essays as "Form and Intent in the American New Criticism" and "The Dead-End of Formalist Criticism" involves, among other things, uncovering the Formalist failure to recognize the larger significance of paradox (de Man 28, 238). In short, poststructuralism concerns itself not with what Cleanth Brooks famously called the language of paradox, but with the paradoxical nature of language and language-like structures. Linguistic signs (especially after Saussure) are the function of a presence that consists of an essential absence: signs by their nature are unself-identical. Since consciousness is unthinkable without some such language-like structure, then human being itself is essentially paradoxical, essentially unself-identical. And this was not recognized, or was inadequately recognized by the New Critics.

Nietzsche on the Impossibility of Platonic Truth

To return to philosophy, we may say that from early on it has been much concerned with fending off the perceived (at least by those who hold, consciously or unconsciously, Platonic notions of truth) threat of relativism. But with Friedrich Nietzsche, many people would say that this general, anti-relativist orientation of philosophy reaches a fairly distinct turning point. In much of his writing, but perhaps most concisely in the piece, "Truth and Falsity in an Ultramoral Sense," Nietzsche argues for the impossibility of Platonic truth. Truth, Nietzsche says categorically, is "invented" and ruled by the "legislature of language" (635). Truth occurs not as a function of some eternally unchanging, extra-human reality, but as a self-serving "forgetfulness" on the part of particular cultures in particular times. Truth is, in the famous words, "a mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms: in short a sum of human relations which became poetically and rhetorically intensified, metamorphosed,

adorned, and after long usage seems to a nation fixed, canonic, and binding" (636). Now we must notice here that these claims do not say that there is no truth, but only that there is no absolute or Platonic truth, that truth is historically specific.

Many readers have seen Nietzsche's notion of truth as nihilistic, as arguing that there is no truth to be had at all, and Nietzsche himself wants to be seen this way. But I would argue that even the arch-nihilist himself typically misconstrues the meaning of his own claims. The fact is that it requires a certain diligence to incorporate relativistic truth fully into one's thinking. For example, after the above description of truth, Nietzsche goes on immediately to declare, with his usual iconoclastic glee, that "truths are illusions of which one has forgotten that they *are* illusions." Society, he says, creates truth by enforcing an "obligation to lie according to a fixed convention" (636). But here we see Nietzsche himself step into the lurking logical trap that awaits those who do not think relativism fully through. If it is true that, as Nietzsche has argued, there is no absolute truth, but only truths that are relative to specific times and places, then it cannot be true that such truths in general are simply illusions or lies. The truth in general could only be evaluated as a lie if there were somewhere some realm of true truth (i.e. Platonic truth) in relation to which the truth that we live with could be found to be false. Falsehood can only be determined, pragmatically, in relation to some specific realm of operative truth. There simply *is* no truth *in general*.⁴

Relativized Truth Claims

But, having said this, it turns out that I am making the same kind of inadequately relativized claim for which I am taking Nietzsche to task. In order to be relativistic, I need to say that the only truth in general is the *kind* of self-contradictory truth I just stated: that there can be no truth in general. Though it may seem perverse, we cannot logically escape this paradox, this infinite regression, and those who would comprehend relativistic truth must adjust their thinking in such a way as to accept it because only this kind of truth claim can legitimately be labeled absolute, from a relativist perspective. So we can see how Nietzsche himself appears to assume, apparently without knowing it, an absolute, Platonic truth even as he argues for the impossibility of such truth. The fact that even a thinker such as Nietzsche slips into this inconsistency indicates the difficulty of main-

taining a consistency that includes relativism.⁵ This helps explain why many readers find Nietzsche simply nihilistic.

Our analysis brings to ground two useful insights. The first has to do with the law of non-contradiction in relativistic thought of any kind. Commonly enough, poststructuralist thinkers are accused of flouting the law of non-contradiction, but if we look closely at the above analysis of Nietzsche, it is clear that I have argued for Nietzsche's misconstrual of his own ideas based upon a contradiction or inconsistency that he does not appear to have seen. He contradicts his own conclusion about the truth when he makes key judgements that presume the kind of truth he has disproved. Said another way, I have accused him of self-contradiction in having proved the relativistic nature of truth and then having made a certain claim that seems to ignore relativism—of having made, in fact, a metaphysical truth-claim (that the truth in general is an illusion). What has happened is this: once we become convinced by the arguments for the truth of relativism (that is, once we become convinced of both the inevitableness and the strange significance of the different proofs that there can be no absolute truth), then we are obligated always to arrive at relativized conclusions, always to make relativized truth claims. I am arguing that this is one way to describe the generic intellectual situation of the various poststructuralisms. Accordingly, one important way that poststructuralist thinkers judge an argument is by the logical necessity of its arrival at relativized, or paradoxical, conclusions.

Before turning to the second insight from my comments on Nietzsche, we may pause to look at some recent examples of relativized arguments. To see what I mean in, for instance, New Historical studies, H. Aram Veerer's *The New Historicism Reader* will offer us an abundant selection. We find Stephen Greenblatt's "The Improvisation of Power," in which, writing of *Othello*, he concludes that Iago's "recourse to narrative...is both the affirmation of absolute self-interest and the affirmation of absolute vacancy; the oscillation between the two incompatible positions suggests in Iago the principle of narrativity itself, cut off from original motive and final disclosure" (Veerer, 58). The "oscillation between two incompatible positions" accurately describes the generic conclusion of all relativized arguments. We shall look at this in more detail below. Similarly, Joel Fineman, reviewing the main claims of his *Shakespeare's Perjured Eye*, says that in the sonnets the "linguistic revision of a traditional language of vision both enables and constrains Shakespeare to develop novel literary subjects or verbal representations for whom the very speaking of language is what serves and works to cut them off from their ideal and visionary presence to themself-

ves" (Veese 116). He refers to this historical event as the productive, "disjunctive conjunction" of a thematics of language and a thematics of vision (Veese, 118). Brook Thomas, writing of *The Bostonians*, argues that the "self cannot achieve definition without a 'space *between*' that only interpersonal relations can provide, while, at the same time, interpersonal relations are impossible without an emptiness *within* the self, an emptiness making one vulnerable to penetrations...by another" (Veese 175). Self-identity can only be achieved through a kind of lack. To turn to an important, recent feminist work, *Gender Trouble*, we read that the "injunction to *be* a given gender produces necessary failures, a variety of incoherent configurations that in their multiplicity exceed and defy the injunction by which they are generated" (Butler, 145). That which causes gender at the same time subverts gender. Lastly, we may take an example from the thriving realm of postcolonial studies. Homi Bhabha, perhaps the most famous theorist in this area, writes of the concept of nation that "the boundary that marks the nation's selfhood interrupts the self-generating time of national production and disrupts the the signification of the people as homogeneous" (148). That which gives a sense of national self at the same moment disallows homogeneity, or, precisely, a sense of national self. None of these writers tries to argue for a resolution of the apparently "impossible" conclusions about such fundamental categories.

And so we find a generic *kind* of argument that underlies the various important categories of contemporary interpretation, and that stands significantly apart from earlier kinds of argument. From the Platonic perspective, such conclusions can only be seen as false or nonsensical, in violation of the law of non-contradiction. Here of course we come to one reason that these arguments can be so obnoxious to those who either do not understand or do not accept the necessity of including relativism this way. Such readers will always charge poststructuralist writers with doing away with the law of non-contradiction and yet at the same time depending upon it in their own argumentative practice. But arriving at relativized conclusions does not in some general way prove a disregard for the law of non-contradiction. The use of that law is what brings about the conviction of the truth of relativism to begin with. In fact, it can be argued that relativistic arguments demonstrate a more strict adherence to non-contradiction because they do not simply rule out of court the unavoidable self-unraveling of metaphysical concepts. If the most fundamental ideas—origin, identity, presence, etc—can continually be shown to be logically inconsistent, then at some point it begins to seem advisable to accept these inconsistencies as true, and to see what they can mean for our other beliefs and attitudes. So

in the relativized argument the indispensable law remains oddly in place, altered yet not negated.

The second insight from my quick look at Nietzsche involves the relationship between relativism and nihilism. The common situation is that we begin with some attitude or position or belief based, often without knowing it, on a Platonic or essentialist or—as deconstruction would have it—logocentric idea of truth. This belief encounters the logically necessary truth of relativism and, assuming that the original, essentialist belief does not simply reject relativism, it concludes that only the opposite of itself can be true: if there is no absolute truth, then there is no truth at all. Otherwise said, either truth is anchored essentially somewhere in an absolutely present, eternal, unchanging real, or it is entirely unanchored and so is a lie, a sham, a fraud. To come from the opposite devaluation: either our words free us in a natural way to a direct apprehension of the real world, or we are trapped in a prisonhouse of mere language. Either we are individually, uniquely, essentially our very own selves, or we are illusions. This paradigmatic leap from Platonic solidity to nihilistic nothingness, however, is not a logically necessary conclusion from the truth of relativism, and wherever the leap occurs, it reveals an inadequate understanding of the meaning of relativism: we may in fact define nihilism as relativism miscomprehended in this specific way.

So, to argue for the essential metaphoricity of language, is not to argue, *pace* Nietzsche, that we live, in general, by lies. To argue that it is absolutely true that there is no absolute truth is not to argue that there is absolutely no truth. It is only to argue that there is no truth in the Platonic sense. Plenty of truth remains. We operate within it all the time. But it is culturally and historically specific. At least some of the truth around us acts as if it were absolute in the Platonic sense, and in our given context we must abide by its constraints or else violate them at our own risk. But, although truth may act absolute, it is not: it can change. Many people find no significant difference between this pragmatic version of truth and no truth at all. And such reactions are not limited to the realm of philosophy and the humanities.

Relativity in Physics

Relativistic claims occur most famously, of course, in physics. The paradoxical conclusion most widely known from that discipline occurred when it was found that electromagnetic energy appeared to be not either a

wave or a particle, but in some way both a wave and particle. Relativity theory arose when, from different perspectives, both of which remained true within the constraints of Newtonian physics, the same object appeared to consist of mutually exclusive characteristics. This was a clear violation of the Newtonian description of the world, so the alien object had to be either domesticated, somehow resolved into non-contradiction, or else it had to be banished as absurd. Relativity and its relative (however at odds), quantum theory, are at once Newtonian and not Newtonian, by virtue of adjusting their thinking in such a way as to make a place for the wave/particle paradox.⁶ Werner Heisenberg deals with this situation throughout his *Physics and Philosophy*, a book of essays written in the fifties that look back on the history of physics in the earlier part of the century. Quantum theory came about, he writes, through attempts to deal “with the strange apparent contradictions between results of different experiments. How could it be that the same radiation that produces interference patterns, and therefore must consist of waves, also produces the photoelectric effect, and therefore must consist of moving particles?” (35). Heisenberg recounts how physicists tried for years to clear away the contradiction, but in fact “the paradoxes of quantum theory did not disappear during this process of clarification; on the contrary, they became even more marked and more exciting” (36) until many physicists became “convinced that these apparent contradictions belonged to the intrinsic structure of atomic physics” (37). Finally, the uncertainty principle (and Bohr’s notion of complementarity) became the means of “eliminating” the paradox by admitting “limitations in the use of those concepts that had been the basis of classical physics” (42). To speak either of wave or particle “can be only partially true, there must be limitations to the use of the particle concept as well as of the wave concept, else one could not avoid contradictions. If one takes into account those limitations which can be expressed by the uncertainty relations, the contradictions disappear” (43). But of course one unsettling result of the uncertainty principle is that the “object,” rather than being some self-identical presence in space, seems to become a function of whatever kind of measurement is being used. For many people this idea is of course unacceptable: the uncertainty principle simply relocates the paradox rather than eliminating it.

I have brought in Heisenberg because, even in the humanities, most people will admit the truth and necessity of the strange conclusions of modern physics. Of course, few of us in the humanities are familiar in any detail with relativity and quantum theory, but the general upsetting of the idea of an absolute space and time, for instance, has become fairly common

twentieth-century knowledge. And almost everyone carries an impression of the great intellectual complexity of modern physics, though few now find fault with physics simply for being conceptually difficult.⁷ In the humanities, however, we often seem to feel that all ideas should be more or less readily graspable if they are explained clearly, and that ideas that are not more or less readily graspable are either not being explained clearly or else are bad ideas. But, once again, because relativistic ideas are paradoxical from the perspective of Platonic notions of truth, we cannot hope to rope them into our usual conceptual corrals.

Despite their various important differences, the kinds of arguments that we have come to associate with "theory" typically conclude with the kind of aporetic, relativistic claims that we associate with the new physics. I would argue that deconstructive and/or poststructuralist arguments always conclude in this fashion. However, these latter do not appear relativistic in the rather obvious way of the wave/particle example because they do not typically separate out the different, antagonistic perspectives contained within their conclusions. In some ways this problem cannot be avoided. For these arguments find themselves bound by the cords of historical vocabulary. They have little choice but to set out from the accepted vocabulary of (Platonic) metaphysics that has preceded them. So poststructuralist writing continues to use such basic words as truth, presence, identity and the like, but the meaning of these words has fundamentally and systematically changed.

Before looking at this situation in literary theory, we may once again find an interesting similarity with physics. Stanley Goldberg has described an important stumbling block in the reception of relativity theory:

The Einstein analysis of the concept of mass reveals that within the theory of relativity, the meaning of the term *mass* changes. This was also true of concepts like length, time interval and simultaneity. Furthermore, it will be true of almost all other parameters. Although we use the same name for two concepts such as Newtonian mass and relativistic mass, they are not at all the same. (141)

Similarly, quantum theory, Heisenberg says, "starts with a paradox. It starts from the fact that we describe our experiments in the terms of classical [i.e., Newtonian] physics and at the same time from the knowledge that these concepts do not fit nature accurately" (1958, 56). Relativity and quantum theory necessarily take off from a Newtonian vocabulary, because it is only at the point at which Newton's explanations can be shown to fail to account for "nature" that the new explanations become compelling. Both Heisenberg throughout *Physics and Philosophy* as well as F. S. C. Northrop

in the introduction to the book stress the problem of the global vocabulary shift that occurred with the advent of the new physics. Recounting the stormy debates that surrounded special relativity and quantum theory, Heisenberg says that the

real problem behind these many controversies was the fact that no language existed in which one could speak consistently about the new situation. The only language was based upon the old concepts of space and time and this language offered the only unambiguous means of communication about the setting up and the results of the measurements. Yet the experiments showed that the old concepts could not be applied everywhere. (174)

This systemic change in the meaning of long-established key words is perhaps the surest indicator of a fundamental change in the discipline of physics.

Now we may say that relativity and quantum theory become new kinds of physics as a function of adjusting a certain either/or understanding (one object is absolutely either a wave or a particle) of the universe that was essential to Newtonian physics. However, Heisenberg points out regularly that this does not necessarily mean Newtonian physics has been destroyed, though many physicists leaped to this "somewhat rash conclusion" (96). The experiments leading to the conclusions that become the new physics "are based upon Newtonian mechanics," he writes. Further, keeping in mind its limited range of application, "Newtonian mechanics cannot be improved; it can only be replaced by something essentially different!" (97). The "somewhat" in the first quote and the apparent contradiction in the latter (what can it mean that the new physics is based upon Newtonian mechanics and yet is essentially different?) are examples of Heisenberg's decades-long effort to offset the unavoidable "strong resistances" to quantum theory by anyone remaining consciously or unconsciously committed to the Newtonian worldview. That classical mechanical framework had been so successful that, as Heisenberg says elsewhere, "the idea arose that it would eventually be possible to understand all physical phenomena in terms" of Newtonian physics (1974, 155). In other words, Newtonian science assumed the ultimate, absolute adequacy of its methods to the nature of the universe. In this sense, it was a final theory: it was not simply a version of physics, but physics in general. Still, even though Newton's physics should not be rejected as simply false, if it does not describe the micro and the macro levels of the universe, which are what quantum theory and relativity come to describe, then his physics is not *the* explanation of a certainly knowable universe, but is rather *an* explanation; his physics is true, but not universal.

So, no matter how Heisenberg tries to preserve the worth of Newtonian physics, the fact remains that, whatever valuable truths it may provide, it could no longer be what it had always thought of itself as being. Heisenberg says outright that the essential "pattern of thought" of the Newtonian conceptual framework "had to alter if recognition was to be given to the relations between space and time called for by the theory of relativity" (1974, 156). Even as it became undeniable that "unavoidable inner contradictions were making a real understanding of physics possible" (1974, 159), the resistance to relativity theory continued from thinkers who "felt that the change of thought pattern called for [by relativity] was simply insupportable." Nonetheless, such a change was "the prerequisite for an understanding of contemporary physics" (1974, 157).

Derrida and Determinate Meaning

I have spent so much time on the history of modern physics because both its characteristic ideas and its historical reception seem interestingly analogous to the characteristic ideas and historical reception of the various versions of what I am calling relativist thought. For example, one of the famous conclusions of poststructuralist thinking involves the (absolute) indeterminacy of meaning. Now most readers of, say, Jacques Derrida's work, have grasped this claim, but there has been and continues to be a failure to avoid the nihilistic leap to the unjustified conclusion: if there is no absolutely determinate meaning somewhere along the interpretive line, then there is simply no meaning at all. As we have seen above, the nihilistic conclusion inadequately comprehends the arguments involved. Derrida does not simply reject the idea of determinate meaning. A deconstructive reading, he claims, has no choice but to set out from a determinate meaning of the text (1976, 24). In fact, Derrida sets himself apart from Nietzsche and nihilism by *not* claiming that intended meaning is *merely* a lie or an illusion. This he would not say even of metaphysics, which is of course, the primary target of his project: "it is not a question of 'rejecting' [metaphysical concepts]; they are necessary and, at least at present, nothing is conceivable for us without them" (1976, 13).

I hope the similarity with Heisenberg's attitudes about classical physics is apparent. Deconstructive thinking does not simply reject the metaphysical perspective; rather, it includes that perspective along with the perspective, generated by the same logic that supports metaphysics,

from which determinate meaning is seen to be essentially unstable. Derrida argues for a paradoxical conclusion: determinate meaning, like metaphysics, is both necessary and impossible. So the idea of a determinate meaning remains, but it differs essentially from the Platonic version of determinate: from the Platonic point of view, the idea of a changeable determinate-meaning is simply absurd. Unfortunately, both positions use the same word, determinate, with different meanings in mind.

We may usefully look at another example of all this from Derrida's now canonical works. "The trace," he says in *Of Grammatology*, "is in fact the absolute origin of sense in general. Which amounts to saying once again that there is no absolute origin in general" (65). This conclusion may be called relativistic because, by consciously blending mutually contradictory meanings in the one word, it defines "origin" as a paradox. On the one hand, the metaphysical concept of an absolute, self-identical origin cannot be unproblematically true, because any explanation of such an origin can always be shown to depend upon the trace of some prior, never arrived-at presence. Derrida proves that it is impossible to argue successfully for an origin in general of the conventional, metaphysical kind. On the other hand, and by the same argumentative procedure, an absolute origin does and must remain, but it consists of this avowedly non-self-identical "trace," which is to say that, although the trace can be shown to be a necessary conclusion from the deconstruction of the concept of origin, nonetheless, "no concept of metaphysics can describe it" (65). So we have an unavoidable mix (again, unavoidable in the same way that Heisenberg found the new physics partaking of the Newtonian worldview even as it showed that worldview's inadequacies) of the perspectives of metaphysics and relativism. We have origin as defined by metaphysics, and we have that same origin after it has passed through Derrida's argument—or rather, we have what Greenblatt above called the "oscillation between the two incompatible positions." This essentially confusing situation is one reason that Derrida and others come up with neologisms. But since the neologism cannot remove the basic conceptual difficulty, some readers come away confused and irritated by what they see as jargon-mongering.

In any event, from the perspective of metaphysics, Derrida's notion of the trace does not just redefine, but in fact just plain annihilates any true concept of origin: it is simply "saying that...there is no origin in general." But the nihilistic assessment of Derrida's conclusions can only make sense from the standpoint of metaphysics. The relativised standpoint, in contrast, shares the conviction of an origin in general, but it is a different kind from that of metaphysics in that it is an origin that requires the impossibility of

any self-identical origin. Obviously enough, this latter is a paradoxical definition—precisely what metaphysical thinking wants to disallow. So we may conclude that a relativized argumentative stance occurs when logically necessary, contradictory conclusions about the same idea—in this case the origin—are not sublated into some higher unity, are not shoved aside as absurd, and are not misinterpreted as nihilism.

It very much matters to say that if Derrida's arguments have been construed as nihilistic, the fault lies in part with Derrida himself. This brings us to a rhetorical characteristic of many relativistic arguments: their tendency to devote the bulk of their pages to disproving any kind of Platonic truth. This practice may be unavoidable, because the Platonic idea of truth pervades everyday reality, and so is not easy to dislodge. Once more, we find an analogy with the displacing of Newtonian physics by relativity and quantum theory. "The concepts of classical physics" Heisenberg says, "are just a refinement of the concepts of everyday life and are an essential part of the language which forms the basis of all natural science" (1958, 56), so it is not surprising that any fundamental challenge to these ideas meets strong resistance, and the same situation would occur with respect to Platonic metaphysics. But aside from any general resistance to having the everyday idea of truth upset, many readers often simply miss the point at which a given writer has overtly included the changed version of truth that emerges from a relativist argument. In Derrida's case, while every now and then he slips in an admission of the necessity of a determinate meaning, he spends page after page after page showing how determinate meaning is undecidable. While every now and then he claims that metaphysics is indispensable, that there "is no sense in doing without the concepts of metaphysics in order to shake metaphysics" (1978, 280), he spends book after book showing how metaphysics always fails to support its own conclusions. This is characteristic of most relativistic thinkers, though it happens differently in different disciplines.

Foucault, Lacan, and Nihilism

Other examples of relativistic conclusions abound in what we have lumped under the term "theory." Michel Foucault, for instance, in one of the founding texts of New Historicism, *The Order of Things*, says that

Man has not been able to describe himself as a configuration in the *episteme* without thought at the same time discovering, both in itself and outside itself, at its borders yet also in its very warp and woof, an element of

darkness, an apparently inert density in which it is embedded, an unthought which it contains entirely, yet in which it is also caught. (1973, 326)

Foucault is describing what he, as genealogist, has discovered to be the heretofore unrecognized but definitive sign of an episteme, an episteme that would seem to be coming to an end with just this discovery.⁸ The passage is hard to grasp because it stitches together two contradictory argumentative perspectives. One perspective concludes that conscious knowledge and the self can only be adequately explained as functions ("a configuration") of strictly unconscious, discursive structures ("the episteme," "an unthought") that are entirely exterior to self-consciousness. Structure must precede the appearance of a self: the felt interiority of self-presence derives essentially from an alien exterior.⁹ But at the same time, the opposed perspective cannot be left out, for to do so would not fully account for the meaning of this kind of claim. It is logically necessary that self-consciousness must always already have been present in order for any structure to have existed in the first place: this is what he means by the "unthought [structure] which it [thought, self-consciousness] contains entirely." Thus, manifest self-consciousness, precisely because it is precipitated "out," so to speak, of the episteme, is, paradoxically, essential or interior to the episteme. Again, from the perspective of self-identical truth, these claims are paradoxical and thus absurd. But Foucault has found Plato's "lurking place" in the nature of thinking in general, and in fact has made that place the center of his attention.

We find another important example of relativistic thought and its problems in the writings of Jacques Lacan. Lacan's description of the linguistic subject may also be called a relativizing of the subject, an attempt to reveal the essentially relativistic nature, not only of what is known, but also of the knower. Nietzsche and others remove the truth from any kind of metaphysical self-consistency, and yet truth undeniably still happens, happens in fact most significantly when the nature of metaphysical truth is being revealed. One explanation of this situation says that truth and knowledge in general can only be a function of relations between signs. Taking this explanation to a limit, Lacan claims that the self is produced by such relations. In Lacanian terms, any version of "I" consists of a signifier that is given its real-world specificity through its relation to a structure of signifiers (Lacan's symbolic order). Signs, however, exist as "presences" made of a kind of absence (which cannot be a presence in Platonic terms). Therefore, whatever presence the human subject may have is a function of an essential absence. There can be no autonomous or absolutely self-

present "I." Lacan argues in effect that the ego occurs as an effort to repress this latter fact (the imaginary order). As metaphysics is the primary target for Derrida, the ego is the target for Lacan.

The nihilistic interpretation of Lacan's claims? If the self is a function of signs, and signs have no natural, essential relationship with the real, then there is no self. We are merely phantasms produced and imprisoned by alien symbolic structures. But this (mis)understanding of Lacanian ideas only makes sense from the perspective of a metaphysical view of the sign and so of the self. From the relativized perspective, signs *do* have an essential relationship to the real: we cannot possibly know the real without them. We can of course *be* in the real: but since this is true of everything, it is a trivial observation. If we are to *know* of reality, to speak or think or make human judgments of it, then we can only do so because of signs. (Try to imagine thinking or knowing without signs.) Without what Lacan calls symbolic order, we would not know, in the human sense, reality at all. So to lament our alleged imprisonment in symbolic structures indicates a misunderstanding of the meaning of such structures. Only from the perspective of some self-identical real that could be known without signs could we possibly be considered imprisoned by the sign systems in which we occur. But we have just shown that the possibility of human reality without signs is not conceivable. What is the outside-of-signs that we could possibly get to?¹⁰

Again it must be said that, as with Derrida, Lacan himself is at least somewhat to blame for this generic misunderstanding, and not only because of his willfully opaque writing. For often it seems as if Lacan wants to destroy the notion of the self in general. In constantly arguing against the egocentric self-delusion of being essentially just who we think we are, Lacan seems to be arguing against an indispensable element of human being. In constantly arguing against what he so often simply calls the subject, it appears that he is somehow trying to argue for an egoless self, or for the end of the subject in general. But in spite of appearances to the contrary, Lacan is not a nihilist. Like Derrida, every now and then Lacan remembers to state what to him presumably seems self-evident: the ego cannot simply be eliminated. "One trains analysts so that there are subjects in whom the ego is absent. That is the ideal of analysis, which, of course, remains virtual. There is never a subject without an ego" (246).¹¹

We can see how this compares exactly with Derrida's declared relationship to metaphysics. It compares as well with Foucault's stated relationship to previous, narrative kinds of history, what he calls the "pre-existing forms of continuity" that take for granted the idea of beginning,

middle and end as essential to the universe. These, he writes, "must not be rejected definitively of course, but the tranquility with which they are accepted must be disturbed" (1972, 25). Lastly, it compares with Einstein and Heisenberg's relationship to Newtonian physics. The new thinking in each case does not destroy the self, metaphysics, narrative history, or physics, *in general*, as the nihilistic misinterpretation would claim. Rather, by no longer rejecting certain unresolvable paradoxes as absurd or Sophistic, the new thinking reveals the limits of these historically large and powerful categories, which means, precisely, that there is no "in general" of the kind that had been previously taken for granted.

Conclusion

So what we have come to call literary theory has occurred as a paradigmatic inclusion of relativistic thinking in the realm of the humanities. Though I have tried to avoid the off-putting terminology of dialectics, have tried to explain theory in terms of other, already accepted ideas, and have tried to place it in a historical niche, I have not intended to make theory or relativism somehow less unsettling. All relativistic ideas will be unsettling, but again they will not necessarily be nihilistic. The fact is that nihilism is simpler and, in an inverted way, more comforting than relativism. Nihilism comforts in the way that the idea of the apocalypse comforts: in an odd way it feels better to know that there will be an undisputable big-bang ending rather than simply a continuing on without conclusion. Relativism on the other hand does not offer *even* the absolutely negative assurance of apocalypse. The only comfort offered by relativism is that it is a more inclusive version of the truth.

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NOTES

1. I use relativism as the general term for certain kinds of thinking that appear in non-scientific fields, while relativity, for historical reasons, will refer specifically to relativism as it occurs in physics.

2. I am, obviously enough, redescribing what Jacques Derrida has described as logocentrism. My aim is to relate his and other, related claims to more generally known and accepted ideas.

3. The avoidance of relativistic conclusions occurs throughout Plato's work. In "Cratylus," for instance, along with the actual arguments against naming as a kind of convention, we hear Cratylus's categorical rejection of any such suggestion. Socrates

at one point asks Cratylus, of the two possibilities for the meaning of names—representation by likeness or social convention, which would he prefer. “Representation by likeness, Socrates,” he replies, “is infinitely better than representation by any chance sign” (44). Convention, because it is specific to a place and time—which is to say relative, not absolute—can only be seen as random chance from the Platonic perspective. Of course, this is the argumentative foil speaking, and Socrates diligently goes on to investigate various possible ways that names could mean, but he, too, rules out or at least leaves aside any conclusion that seems relativistic.

4. I certainly do not want to suggest that Nietzsche never sees this problem. In the essay in question he makes the following remark in passing about the way humans anthropomorphize the universe. “For our antithesis of individual and species is anthropomorphic too and does not come from the essence of things, although on the other hand we do not dare to say that it does not correspond to it [the essence of things]; for that would be a dogmatic assertion and as such just as undemonstrable as its contrary” (636). Since he has been arguing that there can be no knowable essence of things, there is little point in criticizing our ideas for *not* coming from the essence of things. Though Nietzsche mentions this, he does not really take it up as the serious issue that it is.

5. It is in part this inconsistency in Nietzsche’s work, this failure to recognize certain implications of his own arguments, that leads Heidegger and Derrida to speak of Nietzsche as “a captive of that metaphysical edifice which [he] professes to overthrow” (Derrida 1976, 19).

6. Relativity and quantum theory remain the great irreconcilables in the world of contemporary physics. As Stephen Hawking says, though both of these theories are true, nonetheless, they “are known to be inconsistent with each other—they cannot both be correct” (12). It is generally believed that a grand unified theory can only be achieved by eliminating this inconsistency. The arguments about the nature and significance of the search for a unified theory continue (cf., for instance, Steven Weinberg’s *Dreams of a Final Theory* [New York: Pantheon Books, 1992]). But in any case, relativity and quantum theory are related in accepting what, from the perspective of classical mechanics, are mutually exclusive conclusions about the universe, and in thus dethroning the most recent unified theory: Newtonian physics.

7. Even from within physics, though, this has not always been the case. Stanley Goldberg quotes from a 1912 *Science*, in which respected Princeton physicist, W.F. Magie says, among other things, that “I do not believe that there is any man now living who can assert with truth that he can conceive of time which is a function of velocity or is willing to go to the stake for the conviction that his ‘now’ is another man’s ‘future’ or still another man’s ‘past.’” Part of the problem, as Goldberg says, is that “the theory of relativity could not be fundamental because a fundamental theory must be intelligible to all people” (261). Relativistic ideas are intelligible to people in general, but they take more work than other kinds of ideas.

8. Foucault himself at the end of the book suggests that the previous episteme “is now perhaps drawing to a close” (386).

9. This is, we should add, Foucault’s roundabout acknowledgment of the way in which his own claims are both of the episteme (and so of conventional historiography) and yet not of it at the same moment. He has become, after all, the exemplary describer of “man” as a configuration in the episteme, and yet he himself must be a product of the (or an) episteme: he cannot simply detach himself from it in order to have some absolutely distanced perspective of it. Thus, Foucault’s historiography

relates to what he calls the episteme in the same way that relativity relates to Newtonian physics and the same way that deconstruction relates to metaphysics.

10. There is an answer to this question of course, and it is unconsciousness or, at the limit, death. The essential (relativistic) contradiction brought forth in the Lacanian description of the self (taking off most centrally from *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*) is that the specific nature of our manifest consciousness arises as a function of not wanting to be conscious.

11. Cf. also 210 where the ego "is an element indispensable to the insertion of the symbolic reality into the reality of the subject."

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