

## **Reflexivity: where's the rub?**

*Reflexividad: ¿dónde está el obstáculo?*

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### **Abstract**

Influenced by linguistic relativism and social constructivism, recent sociologists have called for a reflexive methodology in the study of science. However, I argue that reflexivity has radical methodological consequences only for forms of inquiry that presuppose a strong sense of essentialism or universalism, and hence the possibility of the same thing manifesting itself in contradictory ways. In other words, reflexivity should have little effect on relativist or constructivist sociology of science itself. I explain this paradoxical result by observing that reflexivity has been traditionally urged by the Sophists, Skeptics, and Jesuits on their opponents but not on themselves. I end with some considerations for whether reflexivity demands that sociologists of science adopt "new literary forms".

Key words: Linguistic relativity, social constructivism, paradox, reflexivity.

### **Resumen**

Los sociólogos contemporáneos, influidos por el relativismo lingüístico y el constructivismo social, han demandado una metodología reflexiva en el estudio de la ciencia. Sin embargo, cuestiono que la reflexividad tiene consecuencias metodológicas radicales solo para las formas de investigación que presuponen un sentido fuerte de esencialismo o universalismo, y por consiguiente la posibilidad de que la misma cosa se manifieste de maneras contradictorias. En otras palabras, la reflexividad tendría poco efecto sobre la propia sociología de la ciencia relativista o constructivista. Explico este resultado paradójico observando que la reflexividad ha sido requerida tradicionalmente por los sofistas, los

escépticos y los jesuitas sobre sus oponentes pero no para ellos mismos. Concluyo con algunas consideraciones respecto de si la reflexividad demanda que los sociólogos de la ciencia adopten “nuevas formas literarias”.

Palabras clave: Relativismo lingüístico, constructivismo social, paradoja, reflexividad.

### 1. The ultimate irony

From the concern expressed by linguistic relativists and social constructivists in the sociology of science community, it would be easy to conclude that their projects would be the ones most greatly affected by the implications of a reflexive methodology. Certainly, the proposal of taking the reflexive turn is one that relativists and constructivists would easily endorse, since any strategy of self-reference involves showing that the status of the uttering subject is, at least in part, constituted by what she utters. But to admit this point is not necessarily to admit that reflexivity would enhance or inhibit relativist and constructivist sociology in any significant way. Indeed —and ironically— the reflexive turn may have little effect at all on the conduct of these radical sociologies, simply being a case of “business as usual”. However, the reflexive turn could seriously alter more classical forms of sociological inquiry, which presuppose that the social agent has an “essence” that remains constant across different social contexts. Therefore, insofar as the relativists and constructivists continue to be fascinated by reflexivity as an especially potent critical tool, they are backsliding into more classical presuppositions about social agency.

To bring this point into focus, let us consider the paradigm case of the critical potency of reflexive thinking, *paradox*. Among the oldest and most famous paradoxes concerns Epimenides the Cretan who claims that all Cretans are always liars. The source of the claims’s paradoxicality is its reflexivity: if Epimenides is indeed correct that all Cretans are liars, then it follows that he too, as a Cretan, is a liar, which seems to imply that his claim must really be false. Had we taken Epimenides’ claim at face value, and had thereby failed to apply the claim to the claimant, we have then thought Epimenides a rather astute ethnologist of his own people. But by taking the reflexive turn, we become more critical of his testimony. Now the relevant question is this: What must we have presupposed about Epimenides in order for the reflexive turn to make us *more* critical of his testimony?

Consider what we could *not* have presupposed about the lying Cretan,

namely, the standard relativist and constructivist interpretations of utterances. On these interpretations, the sociologist would gloss Epimenides as having made a claim about all individuals who satisfy the social function of "Cretan". Satisfying such a function involves being treated in a certain way (in the manner of those called "Cretan citizens") on certain conventionally prescribed occasions (e. g., an opportunity for satisfying the function of "Cretan" may be on Election Day). Given the relativist\constructivist interpretive canon, no one is ever literally a Cretan (or any other social category) all of one's life; rather, the relevant evaluators determine, on the relevant occasions, whether an individual conforms or not to the behavior that is taken as criterial of being a "Cretan". Thus, to describe someone, with the imprecision of ordinary language, as "being a Cretan" is simply to mean that on (virtually) all the occasions in which she could have served the role of Cretan, she did. It does *not* mean—as the association of "being" with "essence" might connote—that Epimenides' life consists *entirely* of such occasions.

Now Epimenides may be an exemplary Cretan in the relativist\constructivist sense just outlined. Nevertheless, when he makes empirical generalizations about Cretans, he is no longer serving the social role of Cretan (which presumably involves no special attitudes toward the scientific method), but rather the social role of ethnographer. If we are consistent relativists and constructivists—that is, if we apply our radical methods even in reflexive situations—then Epimenides is essentially neither a Cretan nor an ethnographer, but becomes one or the other whenever he is socially constructed as such. Thus, from the relativist\constructivist standpoint, there is nothing especially paradoxical about Epimenides' claim that should lead the sociologist to regard it as any more revealing than any other generalization that Epimenides might make about Cretans.

Epimenides' claim seems paradoxical only when we fall back on our natural attitude toward the ontological status of the uttering subject, namely, that his name refers to an essence that remains invariant across the different contexts in which he utters. Analytic philosophers, following Strawson, would dub this putative essence Epimenides' *personhood*, while phenomenologists would revert to Kantian jargon and call it his *transcendental subjectivity*. Thus, the paradox arises because Epimenides' essence, his underlying substance, seems to have two incompatible properties: telling the truth (about lying) and telling lies (as a rule). Admittedly, much of classical sociology presupposes that social agents have essences, and this has had the effect of making *social* entities

ontologically unstable, mere reifications that could easily be reduced to the sum of the actions of individuals who have the status of atoms.

The discussion so far suggests that the critical potency of the reflexive turn depends on two sorts of presumption: first, that the material individual Epimenides coincides with one continuous social role or voice; second, that any sentence that Epimenides may utter on various occasions has a core of meaning common to all the occasions in which it is uttered. Thus, to undermine the paradoxicality of Epimenides' assertion about lying Cretans, one could claim that when he makes the assertion, either his social identity has changed or his words have taken on a somewhat different meaning. In the following historical sketch of relativist attempts at subverting the paradoxicality of the reflexive turn, we shall see how tactics for fragmenting the subject have been used to aid this subversion.

## 2. Sophists, skeptics, and Jesuits

We should be clear at the outset what is *and is not* subverted by the fragmentation tactics common to the Sophists, Skeptics, and Jesuits, since we shall later see that some social constructivists, especially Mulkay (1988 and 1985), have not been careful to attend to the sense of *realism* that relativism has traditionally permitted. Our three historical forms of relativism have all been *anti-universalist* and *anti-essentialist*, though on progressively more sophisticated grounds. Briefly put, the Sophists opposed the very existence of universals, the Skeptics opposed our ever having knowledge of universals (even assuming they exist), and the Jesuits opposed the existence of rules for applying universals in particular cases (even assuming that we have general knowledge of universals). As it turns out, the progression suggested here reproduces the line of reasoning originally used by the sophist Gorgias in denying the *relevance* of essences to human affairs (Guthrie, 1969: 196-200).

However, the denial of universals and essences —whether it be their very existence or simply our knowledge of them— leaves a certain sense of realism intact, which indeed has permitted relativism to survive as a more coherent position than its opponents (or even some of its friends!) have liked to admit. For example, to say (rather extremely) that the material individual named “Epimenides” is a different person whenever he opens his mouth is *not* to imply that there is no fact of the matter as to which person he is at any given moment. Rather, all that the relativist means to say here is that the name “Epimenides”

does not always stand for the *same* person. Yet, at any given moment, one can identify which person "Epimenides" stands for: Cretan, ethnographer, etc. A similar point can be made about a sentence that Epimenides may utter on several different occasions: to say that these different utterances of the same sentence mean differently is not imply that they lack determinate meaning. It is just to imply that the interpreter needs to take more than the lone sentence into account when determining its meaning, namely, its context of utterance. We should thus resist the temptation of Potter (1988) and other self-styled "discourse analysts" to attach much significance to the interpretive openness found in a couple of sentences isolated from their original context of utterance, since such openness is likely to be as much due to the units of discourse chosen for analysis being too small as to some deep fact about the indeterminacy of linguistic meaning.

With these points in mind, let us now turn to our potted history of relativism's escape from the paradoxically reflexive.

## 2A. The sophists

The first moment in our story occurred when Socrates tried to convince the sophist Protagoras that relativism must be false because it cannot be expressed coherently as a true doctrine. If Protagoras believes that "Man is the measure of all things" is true, then either it is true only for him (or his social group or some other relativized frame of reference) or, if he believes that it is a universal truth, then it is false (since relativism prohibits universal truths). If Protagoras believes the first disjunct, then he has no reason to think that he could convince those who do not already share his position; if he believes the second, then the very making of his claim undermines its truth. Clearly, then, Socrates understood the appeal to reflexivity as especially telling against sophistic relativism.

However, the sophists remained generally unmoved by the Socratic critique because they saw the criticism as resting primarily on a belief that there are essences behind the appearances (or universals behind the particulars), which begged the question in favor of essentialism (or universalism). And as we shall now see, the sophist—who after all were the great teachers of the persuasive arts—had no need to worry about reflexivity subverting *their* communicative powers, since they believed that persuasion made people indifferent to the differences in their ideas rather than, as Socrates thought, brought people to comprehend the same universal idea.

One sophistic escape from Socrates was to claim that “Man is the measure of all things” is indeed universally true, insofar as the sentence would be endorsed by all rational beings (taking “beings” to be neutral as between individuals and communities) upon reflection. But each of these beings would mean something somewhat different by the claim, its “endorsement”, and all the other relevant probative terms, most notably “true”. The differences need not be especially vast or noticeable, they just need to be present. Thus, the sophist claims, in a manner quite consistent with relativism, that it is still possible to utter universal truths, but their significance has changed, since “universal” now means “indifferent to the relevant differences arising from changes in context”. This change of significance can also be used to encompass the universalist’s position, for he too has a characteristic set of differences to which he is indifferent— though he wants the relativist to think that the universalist’s contexts of utterance are the only ones that should count, since they allegedly reflect an underlying sameness of meaning. Notice, finally, that the sophistic escape would clearly involve taking the reflexive turn, yet it would not be making any point greater than the one normally made by relativist.

Despite our sympathetic portrayal of the sophists, the philosophical tradition has clearly sided with Socrates, which has made the sophists seem like dialectical cheats, deliberately dodging the application of reflexivity. It may be worthwhile to attempt to diagnose the matter, since from a classical sociological standpoint, relativists and constructivists are likewise often seen as, so to speak “empirical cheats”, though the issue is not usually cast as one involving the dodging of the reflexive turn. If anything, the radical sociologists are seen as embracing reflexivity all too willingly.

There is at least this much similarity between the cheating ascribed to the sophists and the sociologists. The sophists were said to have cheated because in the course of defending their positions, they continually shifted the interpretive context with each utterance they made, which served to greatly restrict the scope of their claims to truth, thereby preventing Socrates from judging those claims by such universal logical principles as consistency, which presuppose that the meaning of an utterance can remain constant across contexts. Similarly, linguistic relativists and social constructivists may seem to cheat because their research strategies presume that two interpretive contexts are —unless shown otherwise— two *different* contexts, which has the effect of greatly restricting the amount of real control that macrosocial structures like institutions can exert on social action, insofar as such control is typically exerted by the imposition of regularity. Indeed, given Wynne’s (1988) report of the criticism that her re-

flexively monitored, free from interview strategy has received, the relevant macrosocial structures may include those of "the sociological method" itself.

However, there are potential differences. On the one hand, the philosophical tradition stemming from Socrates has presumed the existence of universals or essences of some sort, which has led it to illegitimately impute that viewpoint to Protagoras and his relativistic progeny. Thus, once the reflexive turn is taken, the *self-same* Protagoras (and not a Protagoras whose utterances undergo a change in meaning between contexts) is seen as incoherently propounding relativism as a universal doctrine. On the other hand, social constructivism sometimes secretly embraces the doctrine of essences and, with that, turns reflexivity into a potent critical tool. And perhaps contrary to intentions, this embrace can be seen in the very enactment of dramatic model, whose avowed aim to fragment the agent into a collection of voice. But more later.

## 2B. The skeptics

The delve more deeply into what really bothers universalists will require that we raise a few more spectres from the history of philosophy. Consider the classical skeptics, whose position was "codified", so to speak, by Sextus Empiricus in the second century. The philosophical tradition has given us two paradigmatic images of the skeptic, a negative and a positive one (For more, see Fuller, 1985).

The *negative* image, which Descartes popularized and philosophy textbooks continue to promote, portrays the skeptic as the ultimate critic of knowledge claims. In the ancient world, skeptics of this sort identified themselves as "left-wing" members of Plato's Academy and were subsequently banned from conducting their inquiries in Alexandria, for fear of corroding the knowledge base with relentless doubt (Fuller and Gorman, 1987). They presupposed Plato's account of universal forms, their status as the only proper objects of knowledge, and Plato's doctrine that the only reliable sign of having knowledge is the certainty that comes from understanding a geometric demonstration. (The "right-wing" Platonist presupposed all this, too, but they then attempted to render everything geometrical, rather than simply evaluate claims in our normally imperfect epistemic states). Every claim to knowledge would thus be evaluated against the stringent criteria of such a demonstration and would, not surprisingly, fail. But that would not be the end of it, because the skeptic could not thereby conclude that a particular knowledge claim had been shown false, since she herself was in no better position to produce a geometric proof of the

claim's falsehood than of its truth. Thus, since the skeptic presupposed certain universal truths about knowledge and knowers, reflexivity always reduced her either to silence or to an infinitely regressive "doubting of the doubts".

The *positive* image of the skeptic, which was prevalent from the time of Sextus to that of Descartes and has been revived in recent years by the Norwegian analytic philosopher Arne Naess (1970), portrays her as a moral therapist who thinks that if we are ill at ease with life, it is only because our natural attitude toward the world involves having beliefs, which we then feel compelled to defend but which often prove false or in some other way frustrating. The therapy, then, is to suspend all belief by realizing that language can function in many ways —besides asserting propositions— which do not set up expectations for how the world will behave on a regular basis. In this state of mind, when the skeptic says, "All beliefs could well be false", she is not herself articulating a belief but rather a somewhat different attitude to the world, one which is not directly sensitive —as beliefs are— to whether the world conforms to her words. By the skeptic adopting this attitude to the world, often called "indifference" (*ataraxia*), her discourse may thus take the reflexive turn without ending up in a destructive paradox, since her utterances about beliefs are not themselves meant to be taken as beliefs.

We are now in a position to identify the key logical moves that Protagoras and the positive skeptic made in order to remain coherent while taking the reflexive turn. Sextus writes of the skeptic often being baited with questions like "Do you *believe* that all beliefs could well be false?" to which she responds negatively. Then, the natural follow-up is, "Then you don't *believe* that all beliefs could well be false?" And, much to the interlocutor's bewilderment, the skeptic answers negatively here as well. (Compare Ashmore, 1988). The reason she answers this way, of course, is that she doesn't engage in *believing* at all: the content of the propositions is irrelevant to her making point.

Logically speaking, it looks as though the skeptic is violating the principle of bivalence (i. e., if a proposition is not true, then it must be false, and if it is not false, then it must be true) by admitting a third truth value. And, in a sense, the skeptic *is*, but not because she is operating with a logic that posits many values "between" truth and falsehood —as, say, in the case of a logic of quantum mechanics that posited probability values between 0 and 1 to represent degrees of indeterminacy (Haack, 1974). Rather, she is simply denying the presupposition that underlies a straightforward "yes" or "no" answer to the question, namely, that she has beliefs. Admittedly, such a presupposition is easy to make, since the question is, after all, about beliefs. And so, to entertain questions



about beliefs would reasonably imply oneself holding beliefs. Reasonably? Perhaps. Necessarily? No. Since we can never say exactly all that we mean by what we say, there is always room for potential surprises in what remains unarticulated, as the positive skeptic's questioner learned. What makes the second image of the skeptic "positive" in contrast to the first, "negative" image of the skeptic is that the positive skeptic realizes that standards of relevance in a discourse are under continual negotiation, which means that parties to an exchange always have the option of ruling something out of the discussion. In contrast, the negative skeptic operates with what may be called a "principle of inertia" for discourse, namely, that there is a presumption to continue discussing whatever is currently being discussed. In short, it is the idea that relevance implies continuity—clearly, an idea that sustains the sense of language representing a world that subsists regardless of what the social agents do. Thus, the negative skeptic is caught in an infinite regress because each moment of her doubt is presumed to be essentially the same as the previous moment.

Now if the skeptic were to claim that the regress stops after, say, the fourth such moment (i. e., after she had doubted the doubts of the doubts of the doubts), because the discursive context had changed and with it the meanings of the words, an essentialist would invoke the principle of inertia to say that she had made an "arbitrary decision" to stop the regress. However, the positive skeptic can enter the fray at this point and declare that the essentialist begs the question by presupposing that there is something more arbitrary about changing than continuing a particular discourse. And with that move, the standards of relevance for the discourse are, once again, rendered negotiable.

To give some ironic bite to these last remarks, consider the essentialist in question to be the social constructivist Steve Woolgar (1938; at least according to Pinch and Pinch, 1988) who privileges reflexive discourse and thus deems "arbitrary" the decision by Harry Collins (1975) to curtail reflexivity in his studies that reveal a lack of clear-cut experimental replications in the natural sciences. In our terms, then, Woolgar is a negative skeptic to Collins' positive one. Moreover, this case brings to the fore a principle besides that of inertia that operates in essentialist discourse, namely, a "principle of progress". After all, for Woolgar, it is not merely that continuing in a reflexive mode, once started, is the path of least discursive resistance. More importantly, it is that each additional reflexive turn is presumed to be more critical, at least in the sense of being more self-conscious of what is presumed in the previous turns in the discourse. To avoid the essentialist presuppositions of the negative skeptic, Woolgar would have to deconstruct the instances of "more" in the last sentence.

But were he to do that, and thereby become a positive skeptic, he would then seem to be left without any principled objection to Collins' attempt to stop the reflexive turn at a methodologically convenient moment.

## 2C. The Jesuits

In making our way to the Jesuits, start by recalling the dialectical tactics that we picked up from the sophistic treatment of universal truths and the positive skeptic's refusal to mindlessly continue the current discourse. Under what circumstances would it be valuable to assume that a universal truth can be held under many different interpretations, and may even not be applicable at every moment in a discourse?

Imagine that you are an apologist for ecclesiastical law, which is based on Natural Law, which is handed down by God as the principles that govern all his creatures, is clearly intended to be both universal and infallible. Moreover, Natural Law is very much infused with the spirit of the Ten Commandments, one of which is "Thou shalt not kill". However, avowedly Christian princes have fought in the Crusades and slaughtered heretics in religious wars at home. But even more difficult to explain is how the Church can constitute a priestly order, the Jesuits, whose primary function is to eliminate the Protestant heresies by methods which, in many cases, are self-consciously modeled on military discipline. The intended aggression implied by the creation of the Jesuits is a far cry from the Church blessing princes who voluntarily chose to fight the Saracens. How could the Church justify such an action to itself?

It should be noted here that the creation of the Society of Jesus at the Council of Trent was only the most vivid of countless cases in which the Church's actions ran up against its own laws—at least that is how it would seem to those unfamiliar with the workings of ecclesiastical law. Although the following interpretive tenets of Church law may be traced back to the "Angelic Doctor", Thomas Aquinas, the Jesuits became notorious as their most articulate proponents (For more, see Fauconnier, 1981).

1. Just because Natural Law is universally valid, it does not follow that it is globally applicable. What the later Wittgenstein said of concepts could equally be said of Natural Law: that its meaning does not determine its use. Indeed, ecclesiastical law is best conducted as *casuistry* i. e., on a case-by-case basis. Cases where the Law seems to be contradicted by Church practice, such as when

the Church directly wages religious wars, are thus properly interpreted as cases where the Law in question really does not apply.

2. The reason why it is easy to get confused about the difference between the Law actually being contradicted and its simply not applying is that the words of the Law mean different things when people occupying different roles speak them. For example, a prince whose hostility to the Saracens drives him to seemingly deny the Fifth Commandment is really just denying a *homonym* of the Commandment, since being driven by the passions, the prince is not in the frame of mind needed for making sense of what the Commandment means.

3. A look at the history of Papal politics would suggest that the policy of any given Pope contradicted the policy of another. This would seem to undermine the status of the Pope as a flawless divine instrument. However, these are only apparent contradictions, once again, arising from human failure to perceive the fullness of the Law's meaning. Moreover, this point does not render God *needlessly* complex, since divine virtues are not merely infinite extensions of human virtues but incommensurable with them; hence, *we* should not expect to find simple what is "simple" for God. Indeed, to think of the virtues in anything less than equivocal terms would be to court an heretical anthropomorphism.

4. In the religious wars waged against the Protestants, the Jesuits themselves were notorious for feats of deception, often telling —what seemed at first blush— outright lies. Even in argument, they seemed to use their rhetorical powers in whatever way was most expedient. How could a priestly order conduct itself in this unethical manner? As the great Jesuit scholastic of the Counter-Reformation, Francisco Suárez, pointed out, to tell the truth is not to guarantee that the other party will not be deceived. Since discourse is (indeed, as the social constructivist maintains!) nothing more than the concatenation of its constitutive contexts, it may be that in the course of his exchange, the interlocutor does not catch every change in context initiated by the Jesuit (or *vice versa*, of course). This may give the impression that the Jesuit is trying to be evasive, but all that has strictly taken place is a failure of understanding: that is, the Jesuit is simply telling the truth relative to a context of which his interlocutor is ignorant. Errors of this kind are thus *epistemic*, not ethical, and, in any case, unavoidable in the normal course of imperfect communication. The Jesuit only needs to make sure that, regardless of the consequences of his speech, he attempts to tell the truth at all times.

Needless to say, the ways in which the Jesuits squared their actions with their professed beliefs may not be entirely satisfying. Nevertheless, it must be said that they did succeed, by strictly relativist and constructivist means, in saving the

appearances of several universalist and essentialist assumptions normally made in discourse. This is an important result, for it shows that the relativist is able to avoid the contradictory consequences of reflexively applying what she says to what she does. As we shall now see, in Woolgar (1988), the authors—especially Walker and Latour—are most Jesuitical in their account of social explanation.

Walker's argument, which probes to ironic implications of explanation for both the explaining social scientist and the explained social agent, seems to be drawing on principles akin to (4) and (3), respectively. On the one hand, (4) shows that regardless of the sincerity of his intentions, the Jesuit cannot apply his constructivist views of language to his own discourse and still have a clear sense of the difference between deception and mere misunderstanding. Walker may be read as arguing that the social constructivist who continues to want to provide "explanations" and yet be faithful to her own views of language is similarly incapacitated. For the occasions that give rise to the "explanatory form" of discourse need not be ones in which the agent's behavior is accounted for by some demonstrably true principles, but rather may simply be times when the epistemic significance of the agent's actual behavior is *replaced* (and, in that sense, "explained away") by principles, such as those found in psychoanalysis, whose own epistemic significance is probably even more dubious but which nevertheless serve to empower the explaining therapist over the agent.

On the other hand, (3) shows that the ease with which we attribute certain properties, such as simplicity, to God says nothing about our ability (if any) to recognize those properties when they are manifested in the world. Likewise, Walker may be read as arguing that the agent may accept the therapist's account as the authoritative explanation of his behavior—perhaps even of the agent's own self-understanding—without the agent actually understanding the account. This is especially true if the therapist is rather social scientifically oriented, and hence regards the primary goal of explanation as the subsumption of cases under principles which are meaningful only to someone trained in the particular social scientific discipline.

In contrast, Latour's Jesuitical account of social explanation draws largely on (1) and (2). First, Latour dramatizes the wedge driven between validity and applicability in (1) by labeling social explanation "action at a distance", by which he seems to mean that the sort of universal laws traditionally sought by the social sciences govern not only the particular cases that are used explicitly to demonstrate the existence of the laws, but also other spatiotemporally dispersed cases, about which the social scientist would not normally know until they had been revealed through the species of embodied casuistry known as "experi-

ments" (though Latour stresses that the scientist would also typically assert the existence of these cases, and hence power over them, in advance of his having knowledge of them). The successful performance of these experiments, and hence the successful revelation of new cases of the law, in turn, requires the kind of "action in a setting" that social constructivists have shown to be inherently indeterminate and negotiable in practice.

As Latour concludes his paper, an analogue to (2) becomes more prominent. The Jesuits realized that to preserve the universal validity of ecclesiastical law, its applicability must be completely manipulable, which is to say, that the clever Jesuit must be ready to ironize or, in some other way, deliteralize the law at any moment. Generalizing this point, Latour observes that any text has the capacity for eliciting the reflexive turn, insofar as readers normally think of how what the text says applies in their own case. Apropos the Jesuits, Latour draws his prime examples from religious and other inspirational literature. And so, for deconstructionists and ethnomethodologists to think that a text requires special syntactic markers, such as a self-involved style, in order to "be reflexive" is simply to fall prey to a naive representationalism which presumes that texts mean literally, unless written otherwise. Indeed, it is to fall prey to the very view that these reflexive stylists crafted their styles to avoid!

### 3. A turn to the dramatic: the case of Mulkay

If the foregoing considerations have been on the mark, we might say that social constructivist approaches to science studies have been especially successful in getting *scientists* to take the reflexive turn and thereby to realize that their deeds do not quite match up with their words. For example, scientists frequently profess an interest in *the* truth, but when pressed in interview, they rarely know what that means and, hence, whether there really is any such thing (Gilbert and Mulkay, 1984: chap. 5). Likewise, they frequently claim to have reached consensus about the status of a particular finding, but they do not seem to be able to agree on what that status is. These striking results are possible because, regardless of what they end up saying, the scientists —perhaps unlike government bureaucrats— see themselves as the self-same individuals whether they are rewriting their results for publication or speaking off the cuff to a laboratory ethnologist. Given such a healthy dose of essentialism, it is therefore easy for the sociologist to point out reflexive tensions in the scientist's discourse.

However, since the social constructivist is not himself supposed to be an

essentialist, apparent reflexive tensions in his own discourse should be resolved as the Sophists, (positive) Sceptics, and the Jesuits did theirs. Unfortunately, the dramatic turn may obscure this move by causing the constructivist to treat social roles as if they were substantial persons whose identities remain constant across several conversational exchanges. A quite subtle case of this problem arises in Michael Mulkey's (1985) *The Word and the World*. First, we shall present a four-point critique of this work, which is entirely written in what the authors in Woolgar (1988) call "New Literary Forms". Our critique presumes what may be called a "common sense sociological realist" standpoint, which accepts the *prima facie* legitimacy of sociological perspectives often seen in competition with social constructivism. After that, the "subtle case" of essentialism will be considered from a perspective more "internal" to Mulkey's own constructivist concerns.

### 3A. Contingency vs. its dramatizations

On the weight of ethnographic evidence alone, it is difficult to argue against the socially contingent nature of even the most seemingly objective features of scientific practice. Still, it does not follow that the reality of this social contingency is in any way enhanced by dramatizing it, such that the scientists are made to appear quite self-conscious that they are, say, collectively bargaining about the identity of an object. On the contrary, it would seem that a necessary condition for science being the product of social contingency yet continuing in its "business as usual" fashion is that the contingency goes largely unrecognized. And indeed, laboratory ethnographers have identified many discourse mechanisms designed to prevent the scientists from noticing the extent to which their judgments are context-sensitive.

However, were the scientists routinely brought to appreciate the extent of this contingency, as Mulkey's dramatizations would seem to have it, then either scientific practice would take on a rather game-like quality or steps would be taken to minimize the social contingency (perhaps by more closely monitored discourses and more closely scrutinized experiments). Mulkey seems to think that the former is the natural outcome, whereas the latter may well be more likely. In other words, raising the scientist's consciousness of social contingency is not necessarily to have him come to adopt (or even appreciate) the sociologist's perspective: it may simply be to have him recognize a technical difficulty

in the implementation of scientific norms. ("Collins", as scripted by Ashmore, 1988, seems to echo this view).

### **3b. The openness of discourse vs. the incompleteness of its analysis**

Above all, Mulkay's literary experiments drive home the point that discourse is inherently open: any social attribution could have been otherwise, perhaps even radically otherwise, as in the case of a scientific discovery being attributed to "cultural maturation" instead of "individual genius" (Mulkay, 1985: chap. 6). But what is the force of "could" in this familiar constructivist claim? No doubt it is easy to *entertain* alternative accounts of a scientific discovery across a few quick exchanges in which the discovery is recontextualized. But this point merely testifies to the versatility of the human imagination. A stronger sense of "could" would require showing that *authoritative* accounts of the origin of a particular discovery could be relatively easily altered.

However, this stronger sense of "could" would probably not be borne out empirically, since recasting a product of "individual genius" as one of "cultural maturation" would involve significant shifts in the balance of power and status in science. What this suggests, then, is that the only reason why Mulkay can find scientific discourse so radically indeterminate is that his analysis of it is so radically incomplete, especially in its systematic omission of larger institutional constraints that function to keep the authoritative interpretation of scientific episodes within certain bounds.

### **3C. The phenomenon of the text vs. the reality of the work**

The incompleteness of Mulkay's sociological analysis can be seen even at the level of discourse analysis. Perhaps the best way to bring this point out is by considering Mulkay's contribution to Woolgar (1988; also Mulkay, 1985; chap. 4), an explication of the Borges story, "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*". The story is in the form of an obituary for an early twentieth century symbolist poet-scholar, Menard, who had the intriguing ambition of writing *Don Quixote* word-for-word by drawing exclusively on the experiences of a man of his time. Thus, rather than engaging in the more "ordinary" task of conveying Cervantes' intentions in twentieth century terms, Menard wanted to produce the exact *Quixote* text by means of twentieth century intentions. Menard succeeds in

producing only a few fragments, which the obituarist shows to have been banalities in the seventeenth century context, but are strikingly original as twentieth century pieces. Mulkay takes the moral of this ironic tale to be that given a change in context, even the self-same text can be interpreted as having radically different meanings, which Mulkay then uses as a model for understanding how scientists construct originality in the course of replicating each other's experiments.

However, Mulkay's reading of Borges makes for bad literary criticism because it leaves unanswered why Menard would be interested in *writing*, rather than simply reinterpreting, *Don Quixote*. It would seem that Borges is suggesting something stronger than Mulkay wants to admit, namely, that Menard and Cervantes wrote two entirely different *works* that happen to share a title and a *text* in common. What differentiates the two works, of course, is the tacit knowledge that each author would have to presuppose of his intended readers in order for them to understand what he has written. In short, just as there is a fact of the matter as to what each work says (i. e. the same text), there is also a fact of the matter as to what each work *doesn't* say (i. e. the different presuppositions). Moreover, these presuppositions are clearly implicit social constructions between the author and reader, yet they are also clearly no less real than the actual textual phenomena. Indeed, Borges' point is that they are *more* real, since they establish that the texts are essentially different works.

Mulkay misses this last point because he assumes that the only feature of discourse that continues to exist even when it is not subject to actual social construction is the text regarded solely as a physical phenomena. (This provides very strong evidence for the tendency of discourse analysts to lapse into the sort of "phenomenalism" endorsed by positivism —*pace* Potter's [1988] strenuous efforts to deny the link). Mulkay thus does not allow the quite reasonable possibility that social constructions of discourse, such as literary works, can retain their identities over time just as well as the texts of which they are constructed. Moreover, this possibility is not merely reasonable, but necessary if coherent sense is to be made of inquiries into the social construction of *historical* episodes.

### 3D. Symmetry vs. commensurability of textual voices

Why does Mulkay want to grant scientists an opportunity to interpret their own discursive practices and to criticize the interpretations proposed by sociolo-



gists? There is a somewhat impressionistic sense in which the reflexive turn lends itself to granting scientist and sociologist "equal status" in the study of science: namely, that the sociologist can undermine his own authoritativeness by showing that his practices are subject to exactly the same contingencies as those of the scientists they study. Does "equal status" simply mean, then, that scientists and their sociologists can legitimately say the same thing to one another? This symmetry thesis leaves unanswered all the conundra associated with the promotion of free speech in liberal society: Do we give both sides equal time, even if they don't want or cannot competently maintain their side of the argument? It would seem from Mulkay's planned even-handedness that he subscribes to the liberal value of "equal time" for all voices, no matter how the argument turns.

Whatever doubts one may have about the value of having the scientist and sociologist in perfect counterpoint are only compounded by the possibility that voices in question may not even be properly *commensurable*. After all, social constructivism has inherited from ethnomethodology the principle that the "accounts" that agents construct of their activities are primarily meant to justify, or normalize, whatever they happened to have done—and only secondarily, and hence only roughly, to describe or explain what actually took place. Indeed, contrary to the dominant tradition in Western philosophy from Aristotle to the present, social constructivism is committed to the view that discourse is not particularly well suited to represent reality in any kind of mirror-image way. This explains the great care with which social constructivists typically approach the study of discourse, which often includes coining new terms and designing new interpretive techniques.

In this regard, given that an anti-reflexive constructivist like Harry Collins is interested in representing the reality of scientific practice, he must try to avoid employing language in the usual unreflective ways. And his "asymmetry" principle for regarding scientific and sociological discourse is one way, if perhaps not the best way. But in any case, Collins reminds us that when scientists and other discursively unreflective folk talk about their own activities—even in response to a sociologist's questions—they are engaged in quite a different sort of speech act (one that aims to normalize what they did) from that of the sociologist who studies these agents for purposes of describing and explaining their activities. The fact that the scientist and sociologist occupy alternate lines of a script thus by no means guarantees that their discourses are commensurable.

#### 4. A subtle essence

Mulkay (1985: esp. chaps. 5, 7) is often quite arch about avoiding the sort of dramatic essentialism associated most clearly with Aristotle, which insists on the unity of character development. In particular, he adopts a strategy perfected in the twentieth century stage by Luigi Pirandello whereby the actors regularly exchange personas and “break frame” (i. e. refer explicitly to the audience or their own acting), thus creating what Mulkay himself calls “strange loops”. However, while the frame is often broken, it is rarely beyond repair, as the following exchange illustrates.

THE SCIENTIST: If I understand you correctly, you are claiming to have validated, through replication, the finding that replication itself is a contingent social accomplishment, and the find that the attempt to treat replication as an unproblematic source of validation is merely part of the rhetoric of persuasion. Does this not involve you in a paradox?

SOCIOLOGIST 2: Not at all. You are trying to force me to be unnecessarily reflexive. Undue reflexivity can be a hindrance and lead to paralysing difficulties...  
(Mulkay 1985: 167-8)

Dear reader, why can't we just say that Mulkay has allowed his characters to misidentify the problem of essentialism as “the problem of reflexivity”? In other words, if we assume that Sociologist 2 (who is modeled on Harry Collins) is a positive skeptic, then The Scientist has falsely accused him of paradox. This would mean, however, that Sociologist 2 is “really” (and we dare not entertain what that might mean) antiessentialist, which implies that he has, in an equally mistaken fashion, presumed himself an essentialist and thus has falsely shifted the blame to “undue reflexivity”.

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