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UNLOADING THE SELF-REFUTATION CHARGE

Barbara Herrnstein Smith

Philosophers, logicians, and those whom they have instructed demonstrate recurrently—in classrooms, at conferences, in the pages of professional journals—the "incoherence" of certain theoretical positions, for example, relativism, skepticism, perspectivism, constructivism, and postmodernism. They often do this by exposing to their audiences—students, colleagues, and readers—how such positions are self-refuting. The positions so exposed are generally those that diverge from the relevant philosophical orthodoxy. Though presumably not impossible, it is certainly not common to find a neo-Platonist or neo-Kantian charged with self-refutation. Defenses of orthodox positions are, to be sure, charged with hollow arguments, but the charge here is characteristically petitio principii, begging the question: that is, circular self-affirmation rather than specular self-refutation. The classic agents and victims of self-refutation, however, are Protagoras, the relativist; Hume, the epistemological skeptic; Nietzsche, the perspectivist; and, in our own era, postmodernists such as Kuhn, Feyerabend, Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard, Goodman, and Rorty, whose individual and collective incoherence,

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self-contradiction, and self-refutation have been demonstrated by, among others, Davidson, Putnam, and Habermas.[1]

As the foregoing list suggests, the agents/victims of self-refutation are also usually philosophical innovators: that is, theorists who have articulated original substantive views on various matters of philosophical interest: knowledge, language, science, and so forth. When their self-refutation is being exposed, however, they are seen primarily in their role of negative critics of orthodox thought: that is, as deniers, rejecters, and abandoners of views that are widely experienced as intuitively correct and manifestly true. Indeed, even prior to and independent of any formal demonstration of their self-refutation, the views of such theorists tend to be experienced by disciplinary philosophers—and those whom they have instructed—as self-evidently absurd.

Because various elements of the orthodoxies in question—that is, those from which the views of the skeptic/relativist/postmodernist diverge—are also widely seen as sustaining important communal goods (e.g., the authority of law, the possibility of moral and aesthetic judgment, the progress of science) and as averting corresponding evils (e.g., social anarchy, moral paralysis, aesthetic decline, intellectual chaos), the questioning or denial of those elements is also widely seen as, at the least, communally perilous and often morally criminal as well. It is not surprising, then, that the theoretical innovators mentioned above have often been demonized. Nor is it surprising that much of the energy of disciplinary philosophy has been and continues to be devoted to demonstrating—as the self-refutation charge itself proclaims—that the apparently dangerous demons are actually impotent, self-deceived fools. That, in fact, seems to be the point of the self-refutation charge: to show, so to speak, that the devil is an ass.

What officially justifies the charge of self-refutation is a manifestly self-canceling, self-disabling statement: "All generalizations are false," "Relativism is (absolutely) true," "It is wrong to make value judgments," etc. What more commonly elicits the charge, however, is some set of analyses and arguments that is said to "come down to" such a statement or, duly paraphrased, to have the "logical form" of such a statement. The justice of the charge, in either case, may be more or less readily acknowledged by the person accused, who may then attempt to eliminate the problem through some appropriate self-qualification. For example, the relatively alarming "All generalizations are false" may be amended to the relatively unexceptionable "Most generalizations have exceptions." Or, more strik-

1. Individual instances are cited where discussed, below. For recent rehearsals, collections, and surveys, see Harvey Siegel, *Relativism Refuted: A Critique of Contemporary Epistemological Relativism* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1987); Michael Krausz, ed., *Relativism: Interpretation and Confrontation* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989); and Larry Laudan, *Science and Relativism: Some Key Controversies in the Philosophy of Science* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990).

ingly, acknowledgment of the justice of the charge of self-contradiction has had important effects on the development of the sociology of science.[2]

Charges of self-refutation do not always, however, yield genial or self-transformative resolutions. On the contrary, although a particular charge may be manifestly on target from the perspective of many members of some immediate audience, it may also appear empty and irrelevant to the alleged agent/victim and to his or her partisans. Indeed, a charge of self-refutation is, often enough, a sign of head-on intellectual collision and also an occasion of mutually frustrating nonengagement or impasse. Accordingly, it provides an instructive illustration of what could be called the microdynamics of incommensurability.

Although I am sympathetic to many of the views of the unorthodox theorists mentioned above (and have developed some relatively unorthodox views myself[3]), my purpose here is not to defend any of them (theorists or views) per se or to "refute" any specific charges leveled against them. It is, rather, to examine the more general rhetorical and psychological operations of the charge itself and, to some extent, its institutional operations as well. Though necessarily limited, the examination will, I hope, illuminate some issues of broader current interest and, perhaps, make the charge of self-refutation, in some quarters, somewhat less *automatic*.

Tricks of Thought

In the dialogue that bears his name, the good-natured, mathematically precocious Theaetetus offers, in reply to Socrates' questions about the nature of knowledge, the teachings of Protagoras: "Man is the measure," and so on. Through cross-questioning, certain implications and difficulties of the doctrine are explored. Protagoras himself is imagined risen from the grave and arguing in his own defense. Other difficulties, notably an "exquisite" self-contradiction, are drawn out. These are acknowledged by Theaetetus, now delivered to better understanding.[4]

2. The crucial charge here has been tu quoque, that is, unwarranted self-exception and thus (if condemnations are involved) implicit self-condemnation. See Steve Woolgar, ed., *Knowledge and Reflexivity: New Frontiers in the Sociology of Knowledge*, (London: Sage, 1988); Malcolm Ashmore, *The Reflective Thesis: Writing Sociology of Scientific Knowledge* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); Andrew Pickering, "From Science as Knowledge to Science as Practice," in *Science as Practice and Culture*, ed. Pickering (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 1–28.

3. *Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988).

4. Plato, *Theaetetus* (170a–172c, 177c–179b). The translation by M. J. Levett is appended to Myles Burnyeat's study of the text, *The Theaetetus of Plato* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1990). I draw here also on the following: Edward N. Lee, "'Hoist with His Own Petard': Ironic and Comic Elements in Plato's Critique of Protagoras (Tht. 161–71)," in *Exegesis and Argument*, ed. Lee, A. P. D. Mourelatos, and R. M. Rorty (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1973), 225–61; Myles Burnyear, "Protagoras and Self-Refutation in Plato's Theaetetus," *The Philosophical Review* 85 (April 1976): 172–95; David Bostock, *Plato's Theaetetus* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988); and Rosemary Desjardins, *The Rational Enterprise: Logos in Plato's Theaetetus* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990).

This is the archetypal exposure of self-refutation, both in its dramatic, triangular form—student, false teacher, true teacher—(to which I return below) and in the logical/rhetorical details of the turnabout. Through the explications and applications of subsequent commentators, Socrates' exposure of self-refutation becomes the authority for charging, and the model for exposing, the incoherence of latter-day Protagoreans.

Man is the measure of all things, says the Protagorean, or *Each thing is as it is perceived.* Thus he denies the possibility of (objective, absolute) truth and (objectively) valid knowledge. But then he cannot claim that his own doctrine is (objectively, absolutely) true or the product of (objectively valid) knowledge. Thus also he declares the (objective, absolute) truth of the views that disagree with his own. But, then, he acknowledges that what he says is false and worthless. His doctrine refutes itself.

These moves are simple enough. So also is the problem with them, namely that they hinge on dubious paraphrase and dubious inference. For the self-refutation charge to have logical force (as officially measured), the mirror reversal it indicates must be exact: What the self-refuter explicitly, wittingly denies must be the same as what she unwittingly, implicitly affirms. Accordingly, the charge fails to go off properly, and the supposed demonstration is declared a trick or an error, if the restatement diverges too obviously or too crucially from the original[5] or if the supposedly implied affirmation is itself questionable: if, for example, Protagoras had actually said "*It appears to me that* man is the measure of all things . . . ," or obviously meant his doctrine to be taken as only *relatively* true, or obviously meant to affirm only that each thing is as it is perceived *to those who perceive it that way.* Similarly, in the case of the related tu quoque charge, the trait evidently condemned by the self-refuter must be the same as that thereby exhibited, as in the (social-)scientific theory that claims: "Scientific theories are (mere) reflections of the social interests of those who produce and promote them." Here the charge fails if the supposed self-refuter disavows the "mere" and the presumably self-*excepting* claim is revealed as (or transformed into) an explicitly and flagrantly self-*exemplifying* one: "You charge my theory of the social interests of all theories with reflecting social interests? But *of course* it does: it could hardly prosper otherwise!" Thus, as in the schoolyard exchange, the target of the taunt ("You, too. So *there!")* turns the tables back again ("Me, too. So *what?").*

5. When the texts of fertile and original theorists (Nietzsche or Foucault, for example) are paraphrased as one-line "theses," "claims," or "*p's*," the assumption is that specific analyses, examples, and counterproposals are irrelevant to the identity of a theoretical position, and also that particulars of verbal idiom—diction, voice, imagery, style, etc.—are irrelevant to its force, uptake, interest, and appropriability. This assumption, fundamental to the operations of formal logic, is implicitly contested by the rhetoricist/pragmatist line in contemporary theory. See, for example, Stanley Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally: Change, Rhetoric, and the Practice of Theory in Literary and Legal Studies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1989), and, of course, the works of Nietzsche and Foucault.

An error or perhaps trick of this kind—that is, dubious paraphrase and/or dubious inference—occurs, according to most classical scholars, in the course of Socrates' examination of Protagoras' doctrine in *Theaetetus*.[6] Almost all of those scholars, however, read the charge of self-refutation as redeemed—both there and more generally—on shifted grounds. Thus it is said that Protagoras *must* claim the *absolute* truth of his doctrine because all assertions are implicit claims of absolute truth and/or that otherwise there would be no point to anyone's listening to or believing him. One commentator, for example, after extensive consideration of the text, concludes that Protagoras' doctrine and "relativism" more generally are self-refuting "for reasons that go deep into the nature of assertion and belief."[7] "No amount of maneuvering with his relativizing qualifiers will extricate Protagoras from the commitment to truth absolute which is bound up with the very act of assertion. To assert is to assert that *p*— . . . that something is the case—and if *p*, indeed if and only if *p*, then *p* is true (period)."[8] Another commentator assures his readers, "'Relative rightness' is not rightness at all. . . . The relativist cannot regard her beliefs, or her relative truths, as warranted or worthy of belief."[9] Yet another, acknowledging Socrates' dubious paraphrase of Protagoras' thesis, insists on the ignominious outcome of the examination: for, he observes, "if what [Protagoras] says is right he has no claim on our attention."[10]

It will be noted that, in all these recuperations, the assumption is that the particular conceptions of "truth," "assertion," "rightness," etc., to which they appeal are not themselves contestable, that those concepts and also the discursive/conceptual ("logical") connections among them could not be seen, framed, or configured otherwise. I return to this matter below.

Logic is not my primary concern here, but one point deserves emphasis in view of its significance in contemporary debates and also because it opens into the more general questions of psychology and cognition that are my main interest here. In explications of *Theaetetus* and elsewhere, the supposed self-refutation often hinges on what is taken to be an *egalitarian* claim implied by the unorthodox doctrine at hand: that is, a claim seen as erasing all differences of (presumably inherent, objective) better and worse, superiority and inferiority. A commentator writes: ". . . [T]he point of Protagoras' theory which is to be attacked [in the dialogue] is its implication that no man is wiser than any other." This supposed

6. G. B. Kerferd, "Plato's Account of the Relativism of Protagoras," *Durham University Journal* 42 (1949): 20–26; Gregory Vlastos, ed., *Plato's Protagoras*, trans. B. Jowett (Indianapolis: Liberal Arts Press, 1956), intro. The trick or error is noted and discussed in all the commentaries cited in n. 4, above, and also by Siegel, *Relativism Refuted*.

7. Burnyeat, *Theaetetus of Plato*, 30.

8. Burnyeat, "Protagoras and Self-Refutation," 195. See Smith, *Contingencies*, 112–14, 205, for a (self-exemplifying) reply to this formulation and argument.

9. Siegel, *Relativism Refuted*, 8, 20.

10. Bostock, *Plato's Theaetetus*, 95. Lee, "'Hoist with His Own Petard,'" argues the same point as Bostock.

implication leads to a self-refutation because, "according to his own theory (Protagoras) cannot himself be any better judge of truth than the ignorant audience he mocks."[11] Indeed, the familiar image of "relativism" as a fatuous, sophomoric demonism and, accordingly, the rhetorical force of the epithet itself derive largely from a supposed implication of this kind: that is, the idea that, according to the (unorthodox) doctrine in question, everything—every opinion, every scientific theory, every artwork, every moral practice, and so on—is "just as good" as every other.

I discuss this general supposition and argument elsewhere as the Egalitarian Fallacy.[12] It is a fallacy because, if someone rejects the notion of validity in the classic sense, what follows is not that she thinks *all* theories (etc.) are *equally* valid but that she thinks *no* theory (etc.) is valid *in the classic sense*.[13] The non sequitur here is the product of the common and commonly unshakable conviction that differences of better and worse must be objective or could not otherwise be measured. When appealed to in the argument, the conviction is obviously question-begging. Thus, the supposed relativist could observe that her point is, precisely, that theories (etc.) can be and are evaluated in *other* non-"objective" ways. Not all theories are equal because they (including her own) can be, and commonly will be, found better or worse than others in relation to measures such as applicability, connectibility, stability, and so forth. These measures are not objective in the classic sense, since they depend on matters of perspective, interpretation, and judgment, and will vary under different historical conditions. Nevertheless, they appear to figure routinely, and operate well enough, in scientific, judicial, and critical practice.

Close kin to the Egalitarian Fallacy is the idea that any theory that does not ultimately affirm the "constraints" of "an objective reality" or "nature itself" implies that "anything"—any practice, any belief, etc.—"goes." The assumption here is that there can be no other explanation for why we do not all run amok or believe ridiculous things: that is, that no alternative accounts of the dynamics of social behavior and cognition are possible. The logic of "anything goes" is identical to that of "everything's just as good as everything else": Both depend on taking for granted as *unquestionable* the classic concepts that *are being questioned* in the theory at hand. Hence the recurrent (and technically proper) countercharge of question-begging; hence the recurrent deadlocks, nonengage-

11. Bostock, *Plato's Theaetetus*, 89 and 85.

12. Smith, *Contingencies*, 98–101, 150–52. For the related idea that a rejection of classic conceptions of objective validity amounts to a rejection/forswearing of all value judgments (and thus to moral/political paralysis or quietism), see Smith, "The Unquiet Judge: Activism Without Objectivism in Law and Politics," *Annals of Scholarship* 9 (1–2) (1992): 111–33. For the idea that relativists who observe circularities, fallacies, and non sequiturs in their adversaries' arguments are caught in a "performative" self-contradiction, see n. 39, below.

13. "Validity" is especially pertinent here, but the analysis applies to the rejection of any classic measure—truth, beauty, virtue, etc.—in an absolute or objectivist sense.

ments, and impasses[14]—or, one could say, incommensurabilities. Which brings us to what is, in my view, the heart of the matter.

The classical scholars cited above, though close readers and scrupulous interpreters, operate within the closures of traditional epistemology and philosophy of language. The confinement is reflected in the strenuously self-affirming and self-absolutizing formulations that recur in their arguments. We recall, from one, "the commitment to truth absolute which is *bound up* with *the very act* of assertion."[15] He cites in support Husserl: "The content of such {relativistic} assertions rejects what is *part of the sense* . . . of *every assertion*. . . ."[16] For another commentator, it is "*the very notion* of rightness" that is undermined by Protagoras and latter-day relativists.[17] He cites in support Hilary Putnam: ". . . it is a *presupposition* of *thought itself* that some kind of objective 'rightness' exists."[18] A passage in the recent work of Jürgen Habermas is relevant here, but I would note that his intricate arguments and far from epigrammatic prose make extraction difficult. In any case, he writes as follows: In the process of "convincing a person who contests the hypothetical reconstructions (of the *inescapable presuppositions* of argument) . . . that he is caught up in performative contradictions[,] . . . I must appeal to the *intuitive preunderstandings* that *every* subject competent in speech and action brings to a process of argumentation."[19]

Two related ideas are notable in these formulations. One is that certain meanings, contents, forces, claims, or commitments inhere in (or are "bound up with," or are "part of the sense of") particular terms (or "concepts") and strings of words per se. The other is that certain concepts, claims, and commitments are deeply connected with ("presupposed by" or "fundamental to the nature of") our mental and discursive activities. Both ideas are recurrent; both, in my view, are dubious; and both, I think, are the product of cognitive tendencies—tricks of thought—that may be (as *tendencies*) endemic.[20]

It appears from the formulations cited above and from the arguments in

14. Since those who assume the unquestionability of ideas such as "intrinsic value," "universal moral norms," and "constraints of an objective reality" foreclose the possibility of alternative—non-objectivist, non-axiological—accounts of judgment, motivation, and cognition, it is not surprising that they have great difficulty entertaining or, it could be said, grasping such accounts.

15. See Burnyeat, above (italics added).

16. Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, 2d ed. (1913), trans. J. N. Findlay (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), 139 (italics added), cited by Burnyeat, *Theaetetus of Plato*, 30.

17. Siegel, *Relativism Refuted*, 4 (italics added); similarly, later: "'Relative rightness' is not rightness *at all*. . . . To defend relativisim relativistically is to fail to defend it *at all*," 8–9 (italics added).

18. Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 124.

19. Habermas, "Discourse Ethics: Notes on a Program of Philosophical Justification," in *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, trans. Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 89–90 (italics added).

20. The emphasis here is meant to distinguish this suggestion from the idea of cognitive universals in a classic (e.g., Kantian) sense.

which they figure that the discursive/conceptual elements in question (concepts, meanings, claims, commitments) and also their interconnectedness are experienced introspectively by those who appeal to them as self-evident—intuitively right. This is not remarkable, I think, in view of the particular conceptual traditions in which, as philosophers, logicians, and classicists, they were presumably both formally educated and professionally disciplined, and in view also of the particular idioms with which, as scholars in those disciplines, they presumably operate more or less every day of their lives. What is worth remarking, however, is the move from *experiencing* one's own cognitive activities and their conceptual and discursive products (that is, one's own thought, beliefs, and linguistic usages) as self-evident or intuitively right to *positing and claiming* them as prior, autonomous, transcendentally presupposed, and (properly) universal.

It appears (on the evidence of, among other things, alternative introspections) that ideas such as "inescapable presuppositions," "intuitive preunderstandings," and "truth absolute" are neither universal nor inescapable. On the contrary, it is possible to believe—as I do, myself—that such concepts and the sense of their inherent meanings and deep interconnectedness are, rather, the products and effects of rigorous instruction and routine participation in a particular conceptual tradition and its related idiom. It is also possible to believe, accordingly, that instruction (more or less rigorous) in some other conceptual tradition, and familiarity with its idiom, would yield other conceptions and descriptions of "the fundamental nature" of "thought itself" and of what is "presupposed" by "the very act of assertion." Or—as I would myself be more inclined to say, in the alternative idiom of one such alternative tradition—a different personal intellectual/professional history would make other descriptions and accounts of the operations of human cognition and communication more cognitively comfortable and congenial.[21]

I pursue these points further below. First, however, a brief trip to the theater and to school, which are, in this neighborhood, not too far apart.

Theaters of Instruction

Foiled, exposed, and rejected, the devil in the old morality play exits stage left, muttering curses. The evocation of theater is not irrelevant here. The archetypal, exemplary self-refutation, *Theaetetus*, is, of course, dramatically scripted, and theatricality remains central to its re-productions. The dramatis personae are certainly among the most compelling in cultural history: the callow, showy,

21. Disciplinary instruction is not, of course, simply determinative. All education is complexly interactive and the effects of formal/professional education are always diversely mediated by personal temperament as well as by other aspects of personal history.

scoffing, hubristic truth-denier; the seasoned, gently ironic, ultimately martyred truth-deliverer; plus, as crucial parties to the scene, the mixed chorus of disciples and occasional interlocutors and, not insignificantly, the audience itself, motley representatives of the community at large.[22] The self-refuting skeptic recalls other self-deluded, self-destroying heroes and villains: Oedipus unwittingly condemning himself in his sentence on the killer of Laius; Rosencrantz and Gildenstern "hoist with their own petard"; [23] Satan, self-corrupted and self-damned, his engines of unholy warfare recoiling upon himself.

The structural principle of self-refutation is turnabout, reversal—in logic, *peritrope*. It is the counterpart of *peripeteia*, the turn of fortune that Aristotle thought most conducive to the effects of tragedy: fear, pity, catharsis. The emotional effects of both—classical tragedy and classic self-refutation—are complex: anxiety and satisfaction, as fear yields to pity and terror to relief; the pleasure of formal symmetry (revenge and justice coincide, the punishment both fits and mirrors the crime) joined with knowledge of a threat averted, an outlaw brought to book, order restored, orthodoxy vindicated. There is in self-refutation the satisfaction, too, of cognitive and pragmatic economy: the exposure and defeat of an adversary accomplished neatly, at his own cost. And, certainly, the frequency of suicides and self-mutilations in tragedy indicates that *self*-destruction has, as such, a certain frisson.

Self-refutation dramas—like all great artworks, or so we are told—can be experienced repeatedly without satiety. The effects are endlessly renewable here, perhaps, because the threat involved is itself so strong and ineradicable. Every orthodoxy is to some extent unstable, vulnerable. And the skeptic's denial or countertruth is appalling: "All is flux," "It is as each man perceives it," "No knowledge is certain," "God is dead," "There is nothing outside of the text." A thrill of horror: What if it's *right?* Everything would be lost—rational argument, objective knowledge, truth itself, *and my life's work for naught.* But also, perhaps, another thrill, closer to desire: What if it's *right?* Everything would be permitted—anarchy, murder, mayhem, *and I, free at last of my life's work.*

The full tragic effect, it has been said, requires the spectator's identification with the hubristic hero: at least a moment of sympathy with him—or her—in opposition to all those gods, seers, kings, courtiers, and choruses of the orthodox. It may be that, among the audiences of self-refutation dramas, even among the disciples themselves, there are flashes of identification with the skeptic, even,

22. We may recall, in *Theaetetus*, the figures Theodorus, senior mathematician and occasional participant in the dialogue, and Eucleides (142a–143c), its continuous witness and scrupulous recorder.

23. The appropriateness of Shakespeare's phrase to Protagoras is remarked by Lee, "'Hoist with His Own Petard.'" Lee reads *Theaetetus* as fundamentally comic and, via the supposed punishment-fits-the-crime image of Protagoras reduced to a cabbage-like vegetable, as related in impulse to the *Divine Comedy*.

sometimes, secret hopes for his triumph. Indeed, although the two lead figures described above—truth-denier and truth-deliverer—are familiar, their respective characterizations tend to blur (scoffer and ironist, tragic hero and martyr), and their respective roles can seem as reversible as the self-refuter's own argument. Thus Socrates can be seen as trickster and, perhaps, as the most radical of skeptics.[24]

Nor is it irrelevant here that the drama of self-refutation was originally produced as a pedagogic exercise for the betterment of the young. The "brilliant" (as he is called) but philosophically immature Theaetetus arrives in a state of enthrallment to dubious doctrines. He is delivered to better understanding—if not to the knowledge of knowledge itself—by witnessing and participating in the exposure of the self-refutation of those doctrines, thereby undergoing, through Socrates' midwifely ministrations, his own intellectual rebirth. The model is powerful and itself proves enthralling, the drama still re-produced, more than two millennia later, for the delivery of similarly bright, abashable seventeen- and eighteen-year-olds.[25] Are the doctrines not, after all, still the same, still seductive, and still false? Perhaps. In any case, the classic pedagogic exposure merges, along the way, with other stagings of demonic exposure and spiritual salvation, including exorcism.

As often observed, the enlightenment of the young in formal education operates through a process not dissimilar from other inductions into orthodoxy, from boot camp to monastery: a process of ordeal, alternating public punishment and public reward, that concludes with a welcoming by and incorporation into the special community. Given the institutional conditions under which this commonly occurs, that is, the regular convening in a theater of instruction of young men and women[26] in quasi-familial and semi-erotic relationships to—and rivalry with—both each other and the supervising master or mistress of the mysteries, it is not surprising that public humiliation has emerged as a favored technique. Moreover, in a company where status is measured by the development of intellectual prowess, there is probably no instrument of instruction more effective in that respect than the demonstration that one has unwittingly *refuted oneself*—the counterpart, no doubt, of the exposure, in other companies (athletic or military, for example), of more bodily self-disablings or self-foulings. It is no wonder, then,

24. The irony in *Theaetetus* is exceedingly complex. Commentators note that it concludes with its ostensible central question—what is knowledge?—unanswered. Desjardins *(Rational Enterprise*, 85–90) goes further, reading Socrates/Plato as ultimately endorsing the Protagorean thesis, appropriately interpreted.

25. See Hadley Arkes, *First Things: An Inquiry into the First Principles of Morals and Justice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 78–80, for an unself-conscious report of triumphs along these lines by a professor of philosophy at a small, elite college.

26. Mostly young men, of course, in disciplinary philosophy. For original and instructive discussions of the significance of that bias, see Michele Le Doeuff, *The Philosophical Imaginary* (London: Athlone Press; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989), and Andrea Nye, *Words of Power: A Feminist Reading of the History of Logic* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

that the effects of such exposures (however gently, subtly, wittily, or ironically administered) remain, for those who receive or witness them, so powerful and profound, or that fear of a charge of relativism can haunt the spirits and buckle the knees of grown men and women, even the most sophisticated of them, even the most otherwise unorthodox of them.

Dreams of Reason

Like the devil, the skeptic is never finally vanquished or finally triumphant. No matter how decisively her self-refutation is demonstrated, she does not acknowledge or indeed believe that she has refuted herself. Nor does the orthodox believer regard the skeptic's evasion of his charge as proper, or acknowledge the justice of her countercharge that he has begged all the questions.[27] Alternatively, of course, it could be said that skepticism triumphant *is* orthodoxy.

But the question may still be asked: If orthodoxy is that which is manifestly true, self-evidently right, and intuitively and universally preunderstood, then how is it that its truth and rightness elude the skeptic? The orthodox answer to this question is familiar: profound defects and deficiencies of intellect and character—an innate incapacity for logical thinking, unregenerate corruption by false (or French) doctrine, domination by personal resentment and political ideology, or unfamiliarity with the best work on the subject in analytic philosophy.

The explanatory asymmetry here—that is, the orthodox believer's conviction that he believes what he does because it is true while skeptics and heretics believe what they do because there is something the matter with them—is a general feature of defenses of orthodoxy: political, aesthetic, and scientific as well as philosophical (or religious). Its recurrence seems to reflect the cognitive tendencies alluded to above: that is, the tendency to experience one's own beliefs as self-evident and, sometimes, to posit them as prior, necessary, and properly universal. The failure to believe what is self-evident is self-evidently folly; the failure to believe what is necessarily presupposed is necessarily irrational—or perverse.

The tendency to experience one's own thinking as inevitable and to experience its products as prior and autonomous is, in the conceptual traditions and idioms I find congenial and cognitively comfortable, not a foundational intuition to be affirmed but a more or less intriguing phenomenon to be explained. To summarize all too briefly:

27. See James L. Battersby, "Professionalism, Relativism, and Rationality," *PMLA* 107 (January 1992): 63, for the (awkwardly stated) counter-counterargument that "self-refutation" (i.e., presumably, the charge) does not beg the question because it is (i.e., presumably, it appeals to) "a standard" that "belongs to the class of transparadigmatic criteria." Of course this re-begs the question, though at a more elevated level. Similarly, Siegel argues (*Relativism Refuted*, 187) that the charge by epistemological "naturalists" that the "incoherence argument" is question-begging "founders on the confusion . . . between truth and certainty," thus appealing (question-beggingly, as charged) to the classic conception of "truth" at issue.

Certain configurations of perceptual/behavioral tendencies ("beliefs") are strengthened and stabilized by our effective-enough and predictable-enough interactions with our environments (including other people and what they produce, e.g., institutions and discourses). To the extent that this occurs, we (human, social, cultural, verbal organisms) may experience and interpret those configurations reflexively as "referring to" or "being about" specific, determinate features of an autonomous reality: features, that is, seen as (simply) "out there," prior to, quite separate from, and quite independent of, our own interactions, past or current, with our environments. This experience, so interpreted, is not, I would say, either "illusion" or "delusion." Nevertheless, it could be *otherwise*—and, for some purposes, from some perspectives, more usefully, interestingly, coherently, and appropriably—described and interpreted.[28]

We recall that, with some disciplined effort (by, for example, mystics, Buddhists, and deconstructionists), the experience of an autonomous reality may be subjected to reflexive scrutiny and to temporary de-naturalization, de-stabilization, and dis-integration.[29] Descriptions of technologically induced "virtual reality" also make alternative interpretations of the experience easier to entertain. Subjects report that, after a certain amount of interactive feedback from computer-generated sensory stimuli—goggle-generated images that shift their shapes and size as the subject turns her head, glove-induced pressures that vary with the subject's hand motions—these modally diverse sensations will seem suddenly to integrate themselves and to surround the subject as a distinct and autonomous environment.[30] The cognitive dynamics of our ordinary experiences of "real" reality are, perhaps, not too different from the dynamics of such reported experiences of "virtual" reality.[31]

28. Whether or not "it" is the same when otherwise conceived and described is a puzzle of which much has been made. It figures, for example, in the "dualism of [variable] conceptual scheme and [fixed] empirical content" alleged by Donald Davidson to be "essential to"—and thus, perhaps, crucially damaging of—certain views of Kuhn and Feyerabend (Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984], 189). Here as elsewhere, however, part of the issue is what sort of puzzle one thinks it is: whether "essentially" logical, as Davidson's term seems to indicate, or contingently discursive, conceptual, and rhetorical, as it could also be seen (and, accordingly, handled quite differently). Davidson's own position on the question appears ambivalent. It is certainly more elusive than is suggested by recurrent citations of this essay as decisive for debates over the epistemological claims of "conceptual relativism" and "postmodernism" and the implications of the idea of incommensurability (cf. S. P. Mohanty, "Us and Them: On the Philosophical Bases of Political Criticism," *Yale Journal of Criticism* 2 [1989]: 1–31, and Christopher Norris, *What's Wrong with Postmodernism: Critical Theory and the Ends of Philosophy* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990], 186–87).

29. For descriptions of the effort among Buddhists, see Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive Science and Human Experience* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), 59–81.

30. Howard Rheingold, *Virtual Reality* (New York: Summit Books, 1991).

31. It should be stressed that "cognitive" is not confined here to activities above the neck (i.e., the entire organism is involved) and also that the stabilization and naturalization of belief are the product of interacting psychophysiological, social, political, and technological dynamics and practices. For recent discussions, see "Irreductions" in Bruno Latour, *The Pasteurization of France* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), and Andrew Pickering, "The Mangle of Practice: Agency and Emergence in the Sociology of Science" (1993, unpub. ms.).

Human beings appear to have a tendency to protect their particular beliefs from destabilization, even in the face of what strike other people as clearly disconfirming evidence and arguments. I have termed this tendency *cognitive conservatism*.[32] Though it often operates in technically "irrational" ways (as assessed by, say, economists),[33] cognitive conservatism is better regarded, I think, not as a flaw or failing but, rather, as the *ambivalent* (some times/ways good, some times/ways bad) counterpart of an (also endemic and ambivalent) tendency to cognitive flexibility and responsiveness.[34]

For better and for worse, cognitive conservatism yields intellectual stability, consistency, reliability, and predictability; it also yields, for better and for worse, powerfully self-immuring, self-perpetuating systems of political and religious belief. At its extreme, when played out in specifically theoretical domains, it can become *absolute epistemic self-privileging*: that is, the conviction that one's convictions are undeniable, that one's assumptions are established facts or necessary presuppositions, that the entities one invokes are unproblematically real, that the terms one uses are transparent and the senses in which one uses them inherent in the terms themselves, and, ultimately, that no alternative conceptualizations or formulations are possible at all, at least no "adequate," "coherent," or "meaningful" ones—at least not for beings claiming to be "rational." Cognitive conservatism is an endemic tendency and a mixed blessing. Its hypertrophic development, epistemic self-privileging, is a human frailty, common among common folk—but, in rationalist philosophy, honed to a fine art.

For those well instructed in traditional foundational epistemology, everything—each concept, each opposition, each link, and each move—hangs together, comfortably and, it seems, self-evidently. It hangs together in part because, perhaps, that's the way human cognition works, but also because the major project and achievement of foundational epistemology is the maintenance, monitoring, and justification of precisely that interdependency: the rigorous interorganization of everything that fits and the vigorous rejection (and "refutation") of everything that doesn't. Indeed, disciplinary philosophy *as such* (I do not say every philosopher or every philosophical work) can be seen as the cultural counterpart and institutional extension of individual cognitive conservatism—again, for better and for worse.

The routines—rituals, habits—of rigorously taught, strenuously learned conceptual production and performance come to operate virtually automatically, to be experienced as necessary and autonomous, and, sometimes, to be posited

32. Cf. Smith, "Belief and Resistance: A Symmetrical Account," *Critical Inquiry* 18 (Autumn 1991): 125–39.

33. Cf. Daniel Kahneman, Paul Slovic, and Amos Tversky, eds., *Judgment Under Uncertainty: Heuristics, and Biases* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

34. Cf. Joan S. Lockard and Delroy L. Paulus, eds., *Self-Deception: An Adaptive Mechanism?* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1988).

as prior to and independent of the activities of any mortal human agent.[35] The resulting coherence and interdependency of concepts, connections, distinctions, and moves is what Derrida and others speak of, with regard to the history of Western philosophy, as "the closure of metaphysics."[36] It is not, however (as such theorists commonly stress), altogether closed, nor could any conceptual system ever be. Both individually and culturally, there is always noise and uncontrollable play in the system. Individually, our beliefs are heterogeneous and, though more or less effective and coordinated ad hoc, not globally coherent and always potentially conflicting. Moreover, there are always glitches in cultural transmission. We never learn our lessons perfectly. The rigorous training is never rigorous enough. There is always someone who missed class that day, or got distracted, or came from somewhere else, or heard something else that she liked better first, or just didn't care: the class misfit—outlaw, heretic, devil, skeptic, spoiler.

None of this is to say that the postmodern skeptic has "discovered the objective truth of the inherent wrongness" of traditional epistemology. To an epistemological traditionalist, any skeptic who claimed that would refute herself on the spot. To a postmodernist, any postmodernist who claimed such a thing would be a pretty problematic postmodernist.

The postmodern skeptic does not say or think that traditional epistemology is inherently wrong, an error, or a delusion. She observes and believes that the conceptual systems it sustains operate well enough for a good many people. Nevertheless, she also knows that those systems and that epistemology do not operate as well for her as other conceptual systems and theories of knowledge. That does not make them, in her eyes, all "equally valid" or "equally invalid." All are, and will be, measured and judged by, among other things, their applicability, connectibility, and stability. By such measures, different epistemologies and conceptual systems are found, and will be found, better or worse or, sometimes, congruent enough. But the measurements themselves, taken under differing conditions, interpreted from different perspectives, will vary. Equivalence and disparity, like commensurability and incommensurability, are, in her view, not absolute but contingent matters. As Protagoras might have put it, man is the measure of all the measures that man has.

The postmodern skeptic thinks that the interest and utility of all theoretical formulations are contingent. She is not disturbed, however, by the idea that, in order to be self-consistent, she must "concede" the "merely" contingent

35. Cf. Brian Rotman, *Ad Infinitum: The Ghost in Turing's Machine—Taking God out of Mathematics and Putting the Body Back In* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993).

36. Cf. Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 6–7, 13, 22. For relevant discussion of the idea, see Arkady Plotnitsky, *Reconfigurations: Critical Theory and General Economy* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1992), 194–211.

interest and utility of her own theoretical formulations. Nor is she embarrassed by her similar "obligation" to "concede" the historicity—and thus instability and eventual replacement—of the systems and idioms that she finds preferable to traditional epistemology and that she would, and does, recommend to other people. She is not disturbed or embarrassed—or, to her own way of thinking, self-refuted—by these things because she believes, in comfortable accord with the conceptual systems and idioms she prefers, that that's the way all disciplinary knowledge—science, philosophy, literary studies, and so forth—evolves. And she also believes that, all told (as she tallies such matters), that's not a bad way for it to happen.

Although the postmodern skeptic is not affirming (self-contradictorily) "the (objective) truth of the (inherent) wrongness" of traditional epistemology, a traditionalist may hear her affirming it, just as if those words were coming right out of her mouth. That is because, by his logic, that is just what it means for someone to *deny* something. Thus, he hears her contradicting (and, in his terms, refuting) herself. By the postmodern skeptic's own logic, the traditionalist is mistaken. The traditionalist will not see his mistake *as* one so long as he remains a traditionalist. He may, however, become a postmodern skeptic himself—or, of course, the skeptic a born-again believer.[37]

This last point is significant: not the conversion (or corruption) of the believer (or the skeptic) per se, but, despite the reciprocal impasses indicated here, the general possibility of the transformation of belief. Nothing said here implies a permanent structure of deadlock.[38] On the contrary, what has been said explicitly and implied throughout is that no orthodoxy—or skepticism—can be totally stable, no theoretical closure complete, no incommensurability absolute.

By the same token, one cannot *interact* with a theoretical closure and remain totally "outside" of it, even if the interaction is skeptical or adversarial. Thus one disputes "logic" with logic (or logic with "logic"), neither identical but

37. "Traditionalism" and "postmodernism" (each of which comes in a variety of sizes and colors, not all represented here) are not, to be sure, the only stances possible. Numerous transcendences and via medias have been proposed (e.g., Richard J. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983]; Hilary Putnam, *Realism with a Human Face* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990]; Joseph Margolis, *The Truth About Relativism* [Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1991])—and one must not forget the multitudes of people who lead rich, full lives without any articulated positions whatsoever on issues of epistemology. It must be added, however, that the psychological and social/political dynamics that operate to stabilize beliefs seem also, under a wide range of conditions, to *polarize* them (cf. Howard Margolis, *Patterns, Thinking, and Cognition: A Theory of Judgment* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987], esp. 274–76, and William E. Connolly, *Identity/Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991]). Also, while some transcendences and via medias are, from the present perspective, more congenial or interesting than others, it seems that most of them strive to hunt with the hounds and run with the fox(es), i.e., to exhibit the solid home virtues of orthodoxy but seek credit for the cosmopolitanism (as it may be seen) of postmodernism. It is no coincidence that the pages in which they are developed are commonly strewn with charges of the "incoherence" and self-refutation of more unambivalently unorthodox positions.

38. Nor is it implied, more generally, by critiques of the traditional idea of ultimate "determinations" of which side is/was ("essentially," "objectively") right ("all along").

each, over time, shaped by the other.[39] The process—that is, skeptical, adversarial interactions with traditional conceptual systems—is both rhetorical and cognitive: played out in public theaters (classrooms, conference halls, the pages of journals) and also in the private theater of the mind, where the "self" takes all the roles—truth-deliverer and truth-denier, master and disciple, chorus of mixed voices and motley audience—and every self-refutation is, simultaneously, the self's triumph and transformation.

39. The quotation marks here distinguish what are commonly seen as the fixed canons of formal logic from what could otherwise be seen as contingently (though very broadly) effective discursive/conceptual practices. The parenthetical reversal acknowledges the claims of each of these logics to priority: "logical" priority for the traditionalist; pragmatic/historical/psychological priority for the postmodern skeptic. Habermas and Karl-Otto Apel, among others, would see in this disputing of logic with "logic" a "performative [self-]contradiction" and, accordingly, validation of the "inescapably presupposed rules of argumentation" (Habermas, "Discourse Ethics: Notes on a Program of Philosophical Justification") and of "reason itself" (Apel, "The Problem of Philosophical Foundations in Light of a Transcendental Pragmatics of Language," in *After Philosophy: End or Transformation?* ed. Kenneth Baynes, James Bohman, and Thomas McCarthy [Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987]). In a sequel to the present essay, I examine (as ["]rationally["] and ["]logically["] as seems necessary, under current conditions, to be persuasive) the questionable logical/rhetorical operations of such arguments.