By way of an Introduction: These pages contain individual chapters from my 1990 book, Postmodern Sophistications. I have obtained the rights to the essays am making them available separately. The entire text of the book is also available on Research Gate.

The underlying aim of this collection of essays was to question the opposition between the Sophists and Plato. That classic dispute has been the model for many discussions of tensions within our society:: on the one hand you have the clever manipulative salesmen who care nothing about truth. On the other hand the rigorous scientific investigation that never quite makes contact with politics. Rootless nihilism vs. naturally grounded values. Anarchy vs. Rules.

In this book I developed a pragmatic middleground, using themes from Heidegger and Dewey; in later writings I rely more on Hegel. But the point remains the same: don't listen to the Straussians and others who try to force on our politics or art or philosophy a simple opposition between truth-loving traditionalists (Socrates) and flaky relativistic postmoderns (the Sophists). It was not so simple in Greece and it's not so simple today.

Part of the book deals with postmodern critiques of rational knowledge, with Lyotard and Habermas on center stage. Their opposition between postmodern and modern views remains relevant, although post-1990 developments in deconstruction and critical theory have widened and deepened the debate. The points made in these essays remain useful, if not complete.

The second part of the book deals with architecture. The word postmodern has gone out of fashion in architecture. But the earlier use of the term for an attempt to bring substantive content into formal modernity retains important.

My conclusions about postmodern architecture's failute to escape modern distance from history also remain true, as does my argument that that proclaimed modern distance from history is itself an illusion, that we are more embedded in history than the moderns wanted to think, although that embodiment is not as total and restrictive as we have imagined true of our ancestors.

If you find any of these ideas useful, true, provocative, let me know. If you find them absurd or useless airy nothings, I'd still be delighted to

learn from your reactions.

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This essay wonders about the division between traditional and modern ways of thought.

Chapter 7. Life in a Balloon

Here is a thought-experiment; deciding whether it is really possible may lead to questioning our notion of the pre-modern. Imagine that in exploring New Guinea, or Mars, we discover a tribe of people who have all the correct equations engraved in shining gold on the walls of their temple. They have better equations than we do. Using these equations they can explain and predict phenomena with amazing accuracy. They employ this power to control the local environment for successful agriculture and a quiet, serene life. They have wonderful machines and when the machines break down the people go to the temple, where there is a great Book. The Book contains the equations, plans for the machines, and directions for repairing them. Everyone is free to consult the book, though there are hereditary experts who know where to find particular sorts of advice. Tribe members are happy and prosperous.

In the neighboring valleys are other groups who worship a variety of gods and use a variety of techniques to control nature. They slash and burn; they recite spells; they use machines of their own, with varying results. When we ask members of the tribe about those neighbors, they say "those people are not us; they do not have the Book; our ways were given to us alone."

If we ask tribe members why they rely on their particular equations and machines, they reply "because these equations and machines are in the Book!" They give the same answer when we ask them why the equations and the machines are so successful. If we ask where the Book itself comes from, they say "it has always been here with us." When pressed on the matter they recite stories, in many variants, about how the Book was handed to their first ancestors in the morning of the world, or how it is a description of God's intentions, or of God herself. If we ask them why they believe in the book they look askance at us as if they do not fully understand the question. "It has always been like this," they say, "we and the Book, together."

Pre-Modern Ancestors

This tribe has what we want: the equations and the techniques. They have what we often claim separates us from our ignorant ancestors: they have the truth about nature. It seems that they have more truth than we do. Yet they are not like us. While we would be glad to copy their equations, perhaps we would not wish to live their lives. Somehow they seem more like our ancestors than like us, even though they have the truth.

Perhaps something is wrong or incomplete about the standard divisions between us and our premodern ancestors. According to the easiest version of that division we are modern, scientific; we have literal, clear, full truth (or pieces of it, or at least the ideal of literal truth), while our ancestors had analogous, metaphorical, unconscious, disguised, partial truth. This contrast and its convenient two-stage theory of history have been popular since the Enlightenment. Our ancestors had myths and fables, with their distorted figurative truths. Their myths can be studied in many ways; they can be sociologized, structuralized, psychoanalyzed, and so on, but in all of these there appears the same contrast: we are the ones who make the distinctions; we can distinguish psychology from physics, and nature from society, but our ancestors muddled them together. Even when writers delve into old myths for analogues of current ideas, finding the Big Bang in the Hindu scriptures or quantum mechanics in Buddhism, there is still the old division of us from them. We extract our truth from their myths.

We are the people who live by the literal truth instead of by superstition and myth. The tribe has more truth, yet they "possess" it differently. They treat it as we imagine our ancestors treated their myths. They seem to lack something which sets us off from our ancestors, something which is not just truth as opposed to myth.

What is it that we have that the tribe lacks? Perhaps they are too placid? They have the information to enable an aggressive expansion; they could have come exploring to us, but they do not care to expand. We like to think that our truth comes from our acquisitive inquisitive attitude towards nature, but it seems possible that the truth could be possessed more serenely.

Perhaps they lack Research, the drive to know more and still more? But they already have the equations; why should they want to do research as an end in itself?

Perhaps they should be curious about the origin of the Book? But they know that it has been there with them forever, part of their identity as a people. Imagine that it was left behind by alien astronauts, if you want; it is not the factual origin that bothers us but their unthinking trust. Shouldn't the people worry about the Book's origin?

Shouldn't they keep testing it to see if it might be mistaken? But suppose that for thousands of years there has never been any evidence of mistakes; why should they bother with fruitless tests?

Yet this last suggestion does indicate what bothers us. It is hard to speak of the tribe members having a reason for believing in the Book. They don't "believe in" the Book; they just live defined by it. Their relation to the Book is not the result of inquiry and justification. But does this matter? Isn't the goal of inquiry to get the truth? And in the knowledge of nature do we have any more basic criterion than pragmatic success? They have the success, so why inquire?

We feel that if we had such a Book we would believe in it because we had reasons to believe in it. We would not believe just because it had always been part of our identity as a people. Our own Book can't claim that role any more. If we had their Book we would trust it because it works, but we would keep the option not to believe, even as we had a reason to believe. We would hold that the Book was *true*, not just that it was *ours*. We would test the limits; we would distance ourselves a little from the Book and believe in it because doing so fit with our criteria, and with our purposes and desires.

The tribe inhabits their truth simply and neatly. We would like to see a little more distance there. We would prefer that the tribe have a sense of its identity separate from the Book, and use the Book as a tool. Then there would be space for research and distrust, even if these were never needed. Tribe members would be more self-conscious about their stance toward the truth, and they would make a distinction between accepting some belief because it is part of their ancient identity, and accepting it because there were reasons for doing so. They could distinguish, in Habermas's terms, between reproducing their lifeworld and justifying their beliefs. If the tribe members had more distance from their traditional identity, they, like us, could explore the joys of epistemology, and come to describe their own beliefs and their neighbors' beliefs in more complex ways than by opposing their own identity to that of the other peoples.

Then they would have found their identity in something else than their Book's description of the world. That seems to be what we moderns do: we find our identity not in any definite set of beliefs but in our inquiring attitude toward beliefs. Habermas seems right when he argues that part of the modern self-definition is our refusal to be simply defined by any of our beliefs. Yet he does refer to an ideal community that finds all of its beliefs completely justified according to any standards it can imagine. Why couldn't that community be this tribe? What kind of distance would they have to

introduce?

I created this thought-experiment in order to separate our conception of pre-modern simple inhabitation of the world from questions of truth and falsity. Our notion of pre-modern life is not just a matter of them knowing less. It is *how* they know what they know. I modeled the tribe on what Hegel says when he discusses the Greeks of the heroic age (Hegel 1952, chapter 6). He pictures an individual like Achilles as having no distance from his social roles. Achilles becomes who he is by embodying given duties and roles; there is no secret inner self that is calculating the utility of those roles. Modern persons have become separate individuals who judge roles and values. That change began with the Greeks, when the Sophists began to teach a rhetoric which involved distance from the traditional beliefs combined with a manipulative attitude towards them. The change was complete in the modern world of democratic governments, free markets, and romantic subjectivity. Hegel does not regard this change as altogether happy, and he suggests that history finally comes to incorporate the best features of both stages while avoiding their limitations.

The tribe of my thought-experiment relates to their cognitive beliefs in the way Hegel imagined the heroic Greeks relating to their social roles. There is no reflective or critical distance, just immediate identity. But what may be different in the cognitive case is that it is not so clear that distance is still needed once the truth is attained. A simple identity with social roles and values feels to us like a restriction on our freedom, even if we sometimes yearn for such definiteness and security. But does a simple identity with the complete science seem restrictive in the same way?

In creating the tribe I also had an eye on C. S. Peirce and Wilfrid Sellars, who claim that science moves toward a final state of complete predictive success and social agreement; Habermas incorporates a version of this ideal. My tribe has the success and agreement, but without any distance from themselves. Is such distance only a condition of the journey and not of the goal? If we could abandon self-awareness about our cognitive state once we had the truth, would something be missing? Or is something missing in the description of the pre-moderns as lacking self-aware distance?

The Problem of Simple Inhabitation

We can study our relation to the truth by looking at some suggestions for describing the difference between us and our ancestors. The first suggestion is straightforward: we have the truth and they did not. We are the simple inhabitants of the truth while our ancestors were simple inhabitants of error or figurative truth. But if

this were the case we would be like the tribe, and we are not.

So we have the second suggestion: we are the self-conscious ones. We are conscious of how we relate to beliefs; we make distinctions between literal and figurative truth, between our beliefs and our identity and believers. We apply criteria and make judgments. It is likely that we have more truth than our ancestors, but what is crucial is our self-reflective distance. This distance is more basic than our commitment to any program of research or inquiry; it is what makes such commitment possible. Other institutions of ours also embody this distance. Nowhere do we plant our feet and stand as our ancestors did.

This picture, too, is oversimplified. It makes us completely critical while our ancestors were completely credulous. It makes of us creatures of distance unable to rest in any beliefs but only in our own relation to them. According to this picture we have a purely instrumental relation to all frameworks of belief.

So we might propose a third model combining the distanced self with the simple believer. This resembles Habermas's interplay of the accepted lifeworld and critical reflection. It is tempting to see us as having added a layer of self-reflection to some persisting ancestral simple inhabitation. This model has several versions. Sometimes we think of science as the distanced critic whose purified view corrects a childish simple believer that persists in each of us. The simple believer is swayed by rhetoric; the keen-eyed critic knows philosophy or science or semiotics.

On the other hand sometimes we think of science itself as part of the simple belief, subject to ironic comments from a distanced self-awareness that acknowledges no home. Popular culture tends to the first of these versions, literary and philosophical culture to the second. Education is sometimes viewed as transferring people from the popular to the literary version. "Growing up" then means, for the individual as for the group, finding distance, refusing to find one's identity in a Book (even a scientific book), learning ironic distance, correcting the child-self.

Many see this inner split between the simple believer and the distanced critic as our modern plight, and they try to absorb one side of the split into the other, telling us we can win peace through returning to simple faith, or that we can win freedom by becoming totally critical or ironic. Others look for a simple but deep inhabitation in some region of the self prior to the split. Still others tell us to stop fighting the split, since it is ultimate, in the name of Freud, or Weber, or Carnap, or Derrida, or the two halves of the brain.

The first suggestion pictured our ancestors as living simply in error, while we live simply in the truth. The second suggestion produced wholly credulous ancestors

and wholly critical moderns. The third suggestion has distinguished one-piece ancestors from split moderns who combine a simple inhabitant and a detached critic. Science gets assigned to one or the other side of this split; what remains constant is the division.

There is something to all these models, but the diagnosis is mistaken. The distinction between a simple believer and a distanced critic is wrong whether applied across time or within the individual. No one, premodern or modern, stands simply inside any framework, nor simply outside. All the models proposed so far are wrong: simple inhabitation, pure distance, and their combination. They are all wrong for the same reason; *they imagine that distance is first created by an act of reflection added to some framework of life or beliefs which is simply accepted.*

Part of the problem lies in the use of spatial metaphors like "distance" and "split." These images are dangerous because they can express only a few kinds of external relations. Play for a moment with my image of "simple inhabitation"; it suggests that we are in our beliefs or our language the way we could be in France or Belgium. Were we at Paris we would be surrounded by French territory and its faraway borders. The internal landscape of France would fill our horizon. Over there, beyond the borders but invisible from within, would be Belgium. Truth here, myth there, and foreign relations. Transport across the border would be possible. Although some currencies of belief have to be left behind, others could be brought across and exchanged, at a slight loss. One nation is more advanced and regards what is deemed essential in Belgium as only local color to be noted for its similarity to French ways. On this model the relation between truth and myth is external. No changes in Belgium would affect France, though they might hinder the importation of curios.

If the French were in the truth the way they are in France, they would be much like my imagined tribe. If we were to translate the other suggestions into spatial metaphors we would put the modern critic in a balloon, surveying all and distant from all. But this is too rarefied and detached, so we tie the balloon to the people below. The critic in the balloon now functions as a spotter for the others on the ground. The critic is pure and unsullied by the prejudices that come from being on one ground as opposed to another. The balloonist can see clearly. That vision tells what ways can be taken, and where they lead. The balloonist's sight does not show which way should or must be taken; for that the balloonist and the people on the ground must confer, joining their desires to the balloonist's vision of possibilities and consequences. The balloonist may not be able to explain precisely what he sees to his earth-bound colleagues, so he may have to use a kind of persuasive rhetoric, under scientific control, in a good cause.

This picture renders some ideas of Max Weber which provide a sophisticated example of what I called the popular version of the modern split. Science is the neutral critic above, providing clear views of the facts and consequences, while the simple inhabitants provide the motivating values and desires. We are not our ancestors because we have found how to elevate the balloon and we know it for what it is.

But this picture purchases the purity of the balloonist's view at the expense of affirming a matching simple inhabitation below in desires and values. Weber thought science could rise to objective vision, but values could not be rationally criticized. Opposing this, perhaps we could imagine the elevated critic to have some values implicit in that very elevation and the universality of the view from above. This would be to go beyond Weber to Kant and Habermas. But there has always been the question whether Kantian formal principles really recommend particular paths of action and overcome the fact/value distinction. Analogous problems remain in Habermas's scheme. The critical self still does not have its feet on the ground.

Spacious Systems

We need to understand what it means to be in a tradition or a place, and how self-discernment and self-criticism do not need to be added from outside. One way to approach this issue is to ask whether my tribe could have their book include social sciences as well as physical. They might be able to use physics and run machines without modern self-distance, but could they use sociology and run polls?

It would be possible; imagine that the Book of the tribe contained information on the society, blueprints for how it should be organized, even a plan for some changes. Tribe members could carry out surveys to determine which social equations to apply, could criticize current events according to the standards of the Book, could intervene in society according to the directions in the Book, without thereby creating the typical inner distance which we value so much.

This shows that our distance is more than having information about one's social role or intervening in society according to a vision of its structure. Priests and nobles and traders have been knowing and doing these things for a long time; the Book would just let them be done more efficiently.

In fact, even if the Book contained a self-referential account of the tribe's way of living according to the Book, the tribe members would not automatically become modern distanced selves. Tribe members are already aware of how they depend on various physical laws; why should they not take various social laws in a similar accepting spirit?

The tribe members are not thereby *required* to stand at a reflective distance from their own identity and way of life, which may seem all the more complete for including such self-information. Members need not adopt a new identity as free inquirers or choosers among ways of life. Information alone would not constitute a change of identity. What would be required would be new ways of interacting, a set of social institutions that would make living new roles possible. The mere possession of self-referential descriptions does not create new forms of life.

We find it hard to imagine that social knowledge could come about except through self-reflective distance. Yet our ancestors and we ourselves have developed such an impure social inquiry; we have called it "history." In many of its styles the telling of history has resisted the typical modern dichotomies that the social sciences have accepted. History's circles can both undermine and deepen our social identity without turning us into pure detached observers.

This suggests that the modern form of distance is not so essential as it might seem. Many of the activities we think of as modern might be carried out in a very different spirit. There are, perhaps, other kinds of distance than modern self-reflection. Again, what does it mean to be *in* a tradition or a place?

Well, why does my tribe still seem unreal, even if you grant that all I have said so far might be possible? Perhaps it is because they have no politics and they make no metaphors. We find it hard to imagine that any power arrangements set up by the Book would remain as un-self-conscious and uncontested as I claim their technology and knowledge might remain. I isolated my tribe and made them peaceful, to avoid issues about the relation of knowledge and power, but this is unconvincing. And we find it hard to imagine that any system of meaning would remain as stolid and unchanging as my tribe's beliefs. They could not avoid differences in interpretation, and new ways of using the Book's language. They could not avoid playing around the edges of their language, extending and bending it into novel ways of life and thought.

No one has ever claimed that politics and power struggles, or differences of interpretation and cultural change, are distinctively modern. They seem to be present whenever we are in a tradition and a place. What, then, is the kind of distance that makes it possible to have such struggles, if it is not modern reflection? In an earlier chapter I suggested it had something to do with the ability to envision alternatives. Robin Horton's analysis of static societies, accepted by Habermas, says in effect that any dispute or self- criticism or change is already an anticipation of modern reflective distance. But need this be so?

The root mistake in these matters is the idea that distance is created by adding

movement to something that is already solidly present. This immediately present something might be social roles and values, economic distinctions, beliefs and desires, or personal identity, or maybe even scientific results. In my thought-experiment I tried to push simple identity as far as it would go; the results should make us unhappy with that whole way of thinking.

If we accept simple identity and simple inhabitation, we have to posit some activity into which they are inserted. If we imagine some pure tidy structure of belief or values that is simply present, even if we allow history to fuzz it up later, we find ourselves imagining some formless and empty process waiting for this solid content. That process might be thought, or reflection or communal self-criticism, but we are left with the duality of empty process and immediate content. Any distance and reflection is added by the process. On this model our ancestors did not realize their own inherent flexibility and so identified too simply with the simple identities that gave their activity its definite content.

If identity and inhabitation has its own motion and a kind of distance built in, then we will not need the opposed elements in the model. What if nothing is simply given, if there is no neat system (or compact self) for activity and reflection to add space to? What if beliefs and selves already contain their own spaciousness?

Define some notation consisting of a few symbols in contrast with one another, and specify some rules that say how to combine them in "grammatical" ways. Then look again and see how the symbols persist in suggesting ways of going beyond the rules you have set up (cf. Caputo 1987, chapter 5). New contrasts and illicit combinations are suggested just by the differences of the symbols. You do not have to bring in some external force to create the space to envision alternatives. Nor is there any wall you can build which will stop the possibility of new combinations. You can declare them ungrammatical, but you cannot declare them unusable; they can be taken into or create new contexts.

Your walls around the system become new items within the play of oppositions and combinations. Even though the possibilities the system generates are qualitatively limited, there is always already room to play and to extend the system by what I will later call metaphorical moves. The play of contrast and combination was in motion from the moment the system was set up. What makes systems of meaning and belief possible also keeps them from ever being the precisely delimited and simply identical wholes we imagine our ancestors possessing.

As soon as we have anything (a word, an act) which might be meaningful we have differences and instabilities. The power of reflection does not need to be added

from the outside; no system of meaning is closed and rigid except by being embedded in a form of life or social practice that keeps it so by constant pruning, and that social practice cannot wall itself off in perfect rigidity, without invoking a yet more comprehensive practice, and so on.

What I say in this chapter does not directly address changes in meaning that proceed not through extension but through wholesale replacement of one language by another which is incommensurable with the first and not defined by any relation of filiation or opposition to it. Do such changes exist? To settle that dispute would take a good deal of argument in the history and philosophy of science, and the objections raised by Donald Davidson and others would have to be addressed. Whatever the result for questions of language and knowledge, the parallel question for art and architecture would remain.

Habermas's communicative dialogue is meant perhaps as an outermost sphere of meaningful practice, kept solid and identical by its inner framework of necessary formal rules and values. I wondered in the last chapter if the rigid form is not too separated from the material it is supposed to judge; now I wonder whether, if it can make that contact, the inner framework of rules can maintain its own firmness. Or will it too show differences and extensions?

Science was described by the logical positivists as having a simple identity. Some have since read Kuhn as picturing scientists as simply inhabiting a normal science paradigm, then in times of crisis frantically sending up balloons in all directions, which provide views but no norms for decision.

I suspect Kuhn may be closer to the way of extending language which I describe later in terms of architectural metaphor. In any case, some have begun describing science as having a certain native spaciousness. Scientific theories, once seen as tight deductive systems hovered over by the detached judging self, are being talked about as looser assemblages of images, metaphors, concepts, and techniques, as well as the important nets of propositions. Scientists find themselves within these historical assemblages, not above them, and the scientists can take advantage of the spaciousness within the theory to extend and question it in many ways. The scientist is not above his theories but amid them, a member of a community which gives and is given space by a loosely defined traditional assemblage. The tradition and the scientists help define each other; there is always already space to move.

Doubting Modern Distance

Who then are we? Are we the simple inhabitants of the truth? The tight self-distanced modern ones? A split-level compromise? All and none of these. If nothing is

simply given, then neither are we. This playing with systems and keeping them open is not something we *do*. We are within it as we are within language and culture, as much products as makers. There is no simple inhabitation.

But even granting that our ancestors were not without play and inquiry, and that our distance and research is less pure than we imagine, there is still something different about us. We have *institutionalized* distance.

Some of our ancestors might have thought as we do; none of them could have lived our lives, for the world was not changed to fit. Our ways of relating to one another are more formal, more flexible. We pay a price; our ways are also more empty, less measured and less in contact with the life beyond and around our reflections.

We find ourselves within new institutions that allow a freer identity, and this is no illusion. The illusion comes when we make this difference something total, when we imagine that our ancestors had no space to move, when we think that our self-reflection is the origin of freedom rather than a development of the motion and difference that was already there. We have roles and interactions that identify us with the process of reflection and choice, while we imagine our ancestors identified with some fixed unreflective structure. Neither identification is correct. They had more space to move; we are not really outside. Habermas is right that our society has new differentiations, but he conceives of the distinct spheres as places of simple inhabitation, which are then to be united by a dialogue which surrounds them from outside.

We are both less and more naive than our ancestors: less naive because we have more distinctions to make, more naive because we reduce our freedom of movement to a few modes of irony and reflection. We take the simplicities that come from our reflection as if they were its basis, projecting back on our ancestors closed systems they never lived, though neither did they live our divisions. Our ancestors moved more freely than we think. Medievals, for example, were no simple inhabitants of their beliefs; they played with them. The huge systems of philosophy and theology had an aspect of play about them, even more so the songs and jokes that parodied sacred things and learned disciplines without the superior ironic tone of so much of our humor. We have trouble achieving friendly parody that does not destroy connection.

Usually, we take the presumed simplicity of our ancestors as a mark of inferiority. Sometimes, though, when choice and inquiry become threatening, we find their imagined naiveté appealing. Then simple inhabitation becomes the ideal we can never return to: immediate awareness, union without question, integrity and fullness of

motive and belief. Then the division between us and our ancestors becomes our own myth of origins, the story of a long-ago beginning of thought when beliefs were whole and innocent, an Eden from which we have been exiled when we ate of the tree of the knowledge of truth and falsehood.

> "It would be enough
> If we were ever, just once, at the middle, fixed
> In This Beautiful World Of Ours and not as now,
> Helplessly at the edge, enough to be
> Complete, because at the middle, if only in sense,
> And in that enormous sense, merely enjoy."
>
> (Wallace Stevens, "The Ultimate Poem is Abstract." Collected Poems 429-30)

If we break away from that modern myth, and see the spaciousness native to any system of meaning, then perhaps modernity, for all its crucial freedoms, can seem a hardening of oppositions and a constriction of movement. It only maintains itself by insisting on splits and levels. If we criticize these splits, Habermas may protest that we seek a nostalgic return to pre-modern un-differentiated life. But it need not be so. We could live in science and myth and art and our attempts to relate them, without demanding that one of these be our true and simple home. We need not give up our reflection, our research, our distance, but we should compromise their purity. To suspect the purity of Habermas's differentiated spheres of culture is not to demand they be melted down into some romantic wholeness.

There is more than one way to be self-aware. Modern reflection, represented variously by Descartes' method and sociological studies, can itself be put in context by an awareness in motion that does not stand off, that sees sideways without the direct fixed stare, that speaks many ways without one official voice. The shifting discourse need not be a meta-language. The realm of language and culture has no center where we could be in secure possession, and no border where we could be in exile. The free-floating balloon still moves with the wind.