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Truth and Falsity in Postmodernism (2)

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Whenever “values” form part of the object of study the dialectic between method, conception and fact is complicated considerably. As values are not things, but rather mental constructions, their nature is debatable. Values are both formations and formulations in the sense that they are crystallizations of attitudes retained as “principled” guides to thought and behavior. Whether as ideals or norms, values are ideas held consciously or unconsciously and result from a conscious or unconscious process. The ambiguity of the notion of value is exemplified by the fact that the word “value” is used as a noun, a verb, an adjective or an adverb. A brief consultation of a good dictionary is enough to realize the intractability of the term.

In a large sense, values are points of agreement typical of a particular society. They form congruent perspectives, and determine the accepted objectives of social behavior, in contrast to “norms”, which are the accepted guidelines of behavior (although the boundaries between values and norms are also far from distinct). Values are prejudgments, which, once they have been constituted, influence the formation of perceptions. But because “judgments of value” are estimations of worth, we must recognize that values (prejudgments) and value (estimations of worth) are two different things, which are inextricably linked.

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We must especially be careful not to “reify” values — thinking of them as things, which govern, direct or control human processes, whether those processes are seen in human behavior, cognition or a text of any kind. As stated in Boudon and Bourricaud's *Dictionnaire critique de la sociologie*: “There is no reason to treat values like platonic ideas that, supposedly, govern earthly institutions. […] Values are nothing but collective preferences and, in line with the way they are created, contribute to the regulation of this institutional context.” (p. 602) Although this definition is necessarily reductionistic, it has the virtue of demystifying an undeniably complex set of relationships.

Regulating but not governing, and as “collective preferences”, values are a primary obstacle to scientific understanding (or any understanding), as Thomas Kuhn explains so well in his *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* [1962]. Generations of social researchers have been frustrated by the famous “fact-value dichotomy”, mainly because most recognize (with the exception of the more dogmatic positivists) that the determination of a fact is inextricable from value formations. Aspects of the investigatory process compromise “Objectivity” — the very essence of scientific endeavor and ambition. A variety of factors render objectivity more or less chimerical in the human sciences, such as residual “common sense” (ideas accepted without reflection), a necessarily limited perceptual field, prior expectations, personal experiences and ambitions.

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These limitations potentially discourage any quest for “truth”, and they even call into question the dichotomy that is too easily drawn between truth and falsity. The binary oppositions often explained as being characteristic of “modernist” thought processes are in fact rooted in Judeo-Christian culture (although not specific to it). Good versus

evil, truth equated with “enlightenment”, with the implication that obscurity or darkness is falsehood or even evil — these are notions, not to say “values”, that have been challenged in recent years by those disabused of the very notion of truth or at least of the idea that social science can contribute towards an understanding of it (François Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard have perhaps been the most influential in this regard). More than mere “epistemological modesty”, the methodological foundations of Western science have been questioned to the point that the “search for truth” is avoided in explanation of any academic endeavor. For many of the necessarily ill-defined legions of “postmodernists”, even the relative philosophical flexibility aspired to by twentieth-century phenomenology (such as Karl Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phénoménologie de la perception*, and Jean-Paul Sartre's *Critique de la raison dialectique*) is considered too infused with the ambition to achieve philosophic insight with respect to reality. Our era is truly one of “deconstruction”, in the sense that the tendency is for the application of reason and method to the weakening of existing conceptual certainties, or even apprehensions, and far less to the construction of heuristic vantage points.

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Truth, lies and moral masturbation

What is often forgotten or ignored is that, if the notion of truth as an absolute can always be epistemologically challenged, truth as the object of inquiry and as a principle of practical action — whether scientific or socio-political — can, on the one hand, be defined as a complex of human values and practices and can, on the other hand, be understood as the operative principle in social-scientific investigation.

From this point of view of what might be called the praxis of truth (combining ultimate objective and methodological practice), an excellent example of how truth as a value has been incorporated into social science lies in the work of Jean Piaget.

Most strikingly, in Piaget's *The Moral Judgment of the Child* the first proposition is that there is no inherent need in the individual to tell the truth. On the contrary, the initial years of individual social existence are characterized by recourse to the misrepresentation of reality. For the child, it is immediately imperative to adapt to the social environment. One form of adaptation is misrepresentation — the distortion of perception. If one is uncomfortable in a situation, it is convenient to “see” the situation, or think of it, differently, in a more comfortable way. But this distortion of perception is not falsehood — lying, and it is not a conscious process of distortion. Piaget suggests that the child's translation or adaptation of reality (or adaptation to reality) is a kind of “systematic romancing”; it is part of the formation of “assertive belief”. “Every thought that enters the head of a child of 2-3”, says Piaget, “does so from the first in the form of a belief and not in the form of a hypothesis to be verified.”

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Firstly, the implication of Piaget's work in this area is that “common sense” results from the accumulation of “assertive beliefs”. Lacking a scientific foundation by its very nature, common sense derives from the adaptive process and bears no particular relation to any concept of “truth”. It is not the product of mental reflection and, consequently, is not attributed any relativity. Secondly, Piaget suggests that truth is preeminently a learned value; and to learn it means comprehending the *value* of truth. What the child must learn is to accept the idea of truth as an ideal, which is more compelling than the realism represented by the distortion of perception. In effect, what Piaget discusses is a process of socialization. In learning the value of truth, the individual ceases to be “realistic” and becomes “idealistic”. Or, we could say, the individual becomes attached to principles of conduct such as honesty and this new, ethical, orientation becomes a new kind of “realism”. In the end, it is a process, which leads the individual out of childhood and into adulthood. It is the development, the very definition, of maturity itself. The social-psychoanalytic and, thus, political implications are as obvious as they are important.

Maturity is therefore the gradual passage from a-morality to moral realism and, finally, to moral idealism. For Piaget, this is the passage from the “morality of constraint” to the “morality of cooperation”, which is accomplished when the individual understands that telling the truth contributes to a more harmonious social environment. At this point, moral idealism becomes more practical than moral realism, and mutual respect becomes both a means and an end in the context of social adaptation (socialization). Social consciousness can now be said to exist in that it is believed that social harmony is considered dependant on the internalization of the value of truth. The belief (value) is that mutual respect must transcend individual interests.

From this point of view, truth is a purely social value. In a more institutional context, it corresponds to what we sometimes call “transparency” — an avoidance of secrecy and dissimulation in interpersonal and group relationships. As such, truth has little relevance to research in an academic context. Because it is such highly individualized work, academic research is too often characterized by envy and suspicion — over contested property rights (over “fields of research”), over publishing opportunities or accomplishments (in order to obtain promotions, to advance careers, to overcome feelings of personal inadequacy…). In brief, individual interests have enormous potential to condition scientific research; and truth — no matter how it is defined — quickly becomes a secondary consideration.

It is tempting to conclude that the notion of truth is essentially metaphysical and thereby cannot constitute an object of study, (although the truth *of a situation* can be an object of study). Truth, as Piaget attempts to demonstrate, is essentially a moral imperative and is (or can be) the object of social action. The act of demonstrating a correspondence between explanation (on the one hand) and existence (on the other hand) is a social act. The quality (or value) of the demonstration lies in its logical coherence — its conceptual clarity and empirical support.

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Far more interesting than truth (as an object of study) or than binary conceptions like truth versus falsehood or good versus evil, is the socio-psychological dynamic of “bad faith” — the inability to distinguish between perceived reality and one's own distortion or dissimulation of it. In effect, bad faith involves the loss of, or failure to achieve, objectivity. And it is here, whenever bad faith as a psychic phenomenon becomes the object of study, that literary criticism has the potential of going far beyond research in the social sciences.

Literature, the imaginative projection of human conflicts rooted in repression, the microscopic examination of civilization and its discontents and the moral dilemmas engendered by the contradictions of human existence, is the textual field in which critics may derive moral lessons. Studying the moral confusion born of multiple, complex frustrations that produce conflicts of values holds out the possibility of transcendence.