

Fashionable Nonsense: A Socratic Dialogue

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Abstract

Researchers, implicitly or explicitly, ground their work in concepts of inquiry. Understanding and critique of another's work may be limited by commitments to opposing epistemologies. Researchers who assume that reality is a concrete structure may find it difficult to appreciate the work of researchers who assume that reality is a projection of human imagination, and vice versa. This paper reviews an historical discourse, centered on an incident known as "Sokal's Hoax" that critiques the domain of 'science' from multiple perspectives. The central themes in Sokal's concept of science, and parody of another's concept of science are presented as a Socratic dialogue. Analytical frameworks are suggested that may assist in surfacing epistemic commitments, and identifying the nature of dialogue marked by different attitudes towards different worlds of knowledge.

Keywords

Multiple perspectives, systemic intervention, competing values

1. INTRODUCTION

At the millennial moment (Harre 2000), members of the information systems discipline, like their colleagues in the social sciences, were engaged in a debate about the philosophic basis of their discipline. On occasion the debate became polarised and polarising, and brought more heat than light. Sokal and Bricmont (1999) report on a publishing hoax, whereby an article that Sokal deliberately intended as non-sense (Sokal 1996) was accepted as a serious argument based on a cognitive version of cultural relativism - that physical 'reality' no less than social 'reality' is at bottom a social and linguistic construct. In Wilber (2000), the author states that over-enthusiasm for pluralistic relativism prevented him from using words, such as 'development', 'hierarchy', 'transcendental' and 'universal', that are at the core of the present research. It is instructive to quote Wilber (2000), pages vi and vii, on this point:

"(In the 1990's) the politically correct were policing the types of serious discourse that could, and could not, be uttered in academe. Pluralistic relativism was the only acceptable worldview. It claimed that all truth is culturally situated (except its own truth, which is true for all cultures); it claimed that there are no transcendental truths (except for its own pronouncements, which transcend specific contexts); it claimed that all hierarchies or value ratings are oppressive and marginalizing (except for its own value ranking, which is superior to the alternatives); it claimed that there are no universal truths (except its own pluralism, which is universally true for all peoples)."

2. CENTRAL THEMES IN SOKAL'S CONCEPT OF SCIENCE

(Based on *Intellectual Impostures* Chapter 4; section III of the review by Thomas Nagel entitled *The Sleep of Reason*)

Q1: What is the central theme in Sokal's concept of science?

A1: Critical realism. Sokal believes that there is an objective reality out there that can best be understood by a critical reading of the record of science.

Q2: How does this ontological/epistemological stance square with Sokal's description of what scientists do (viz, their theoretical perspectives, methodologies and methods)?

A2: "For us, the scientific method is not radically different from the rational attitude in everyday life or in other domains of human knowledge. Historians, detectives and plumbers – indeed all human beings – use the same basic methods of induction, deduction and assessment of evidence." (*Intellectual Impostures* page 54)

Q3: Does Sokal identify and describe a 'typical' investigation so that readers not trained in the subject matter may still understand the nature of scientific enquiry?

A3: Yes, that of a criminal investigation.

Q4: Does not this lack of necessary *a priori* connection between hunches and actions, belief and experience, theory and evidence, values and outcomes lead to a complex web of validity claims that are impossible to validate or falsify in any *simple* way?

A4: Yes, but not in a *complex* way. Sceptical methods of enquiry are used that tend to weed out error so that, over time, the scientific record becomes more reliable. While some cutting-edge science is speculative, science progresses via subjecting beliefs to critical appraisal. This happens in periods that Kuhn calls 'normal science' as well as periods that Kuhn would call 'revolutionary science'. Kuhn's arguments do not imply that progress is impossible due to scientists' subjectivist nature and their irrational beliefs in fixed and possibly incommensurate paradigms. "Nature" will out.

Q5: Does adherence to a detailed and universal set of *a priori* epistemological principles guarantee success?

A5: No. Adherence to the epistemological principles of a Hume, Popper, Kuhn, Feyerabend, or Quine do not provide as much guidance as paying attention to the particular problem. A lot of unscrupulous opportunism is required (ibid page 58).

Q6: But does not the 'strong programme' in the sociology of science explain the *content of scientific theories* in sociological terms? (ibid page 79)

A6: No, it only explains how some of the twists and turns in the argument are influenced by sociological factors. Over time, 'Nature' will out. Those of you with a prior commitment to sociological explanations and epistemic relativism may wish to test the effect of gravity on your bodies from the window of my 16th floor apartment.

Q7: But aren't systems of belief often determined by social forces/situated cognition?

A7: Yes, but *theories* about systems of belief cannot be determined by social forces/ cultural and cognitive relativism otherwise they would have no explanatory power. The denial of objective truth on the ground that all systems of belief are determined by social forces is self-refuting if we take it seriously, since it appeals to a sociological or historical claim which would not establish the conclusion unless it was objectively correct.

3. CENTRAL THEMES IN SOKAL'S PARODY OF SCIENCE

See the introduction to *Intellectual Impostures* for the page references below. See also sections I and II of the review by Thomas Nagel entitled *The Sleep of Reason*.

Disclosure: The questions and the answers were provided by the current reviewer. The Q&A format is a literary device. Neither Sokal nor Nagel answered the questions.

Q1: What was the nature of the hoax?

A1: Publishing a parody of the scientific record as a journal article. The ontological assumptions were social constructivist. An extreme form of cognitive relativism was asserted – that physical 'reality' no less than social 'reality' is at bottom a social and linguistic construct (*Intellectual Impostures* page 2). The article was 'brimming with absurdities and blatant non sequiturs' (ibid page 1) as it 'explained' the *content of scientific theories* in relativistic, sociological terms. The topic? Transgressing the boundaries imposed by a scientific elite via advocacy for a transformative hermeneutics of quantum gravity.

Q2: Why did you do it?

A2: The parody is similar to many published accounts that explain the content of science in relativistic and sociological terms. Yet our article was designed to be incoherent and therefore meaningless (ibid page 1). We wanted to test whether the journal editors and their readership could distinguish our parody from their regular articles.

Q3: Is your goal to unmask the incoherence of research that explains the content of science in relativistic and sociological terms?

A3: Yes, we see this as abuse of science. Incoherence takes many forms (see page 4). In *Intellectual Impostures* we give examples of incoherent research (from Lacan, Kristeva, Irigaray, Latour, Baudrillard, Virilio) and explain why they are meaningless.

Q4: But aren't there valid objections to your unorthodox experiment?

A4: One obvious way to rebut our argument is to show that the articles we criticize are coherent. Almost no-one has tried to defend them. Another way is to argue that social constructivism provides a better understanding of science than critical realism.

Q5: But your hoax and your criticisms of Lacan et al appear negative and indirect.

A5: The method maybe, but not the objective. There is no direct way to refute a fogbank (Nagel page 3). The results of our work will be positive if it has the effect of making readers question the meaningfulness of articles like those we criticised. The results of our work will be positive if the editors who accept such articles become 'as rare as deaf music critics' (Nagel, page 1).

Q6: Yes, but...

A6: Before proceeding any further, let us answer some of the objections that will no doubt occur to the reader (*Intellectual Impostures* pages 6-14)

Q7: Yes, but your work does not assist the reader to understand the social context of science. You do not explain how to make science truly emancipatory, to transgress the boundaries of critical realism, to obtain an authentically subjective, personally liberating experience of quantum gravity. "Liberating Quantum Gravity" would make a great theme for a post modern dance...

A7: Yes, especially from the 16th floor. Allow me to open the window....

4. A FRAMEWORK FOR EPISTEMIC ANALYSIS

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5. A FRAMEWORK FOR DIALOGICAL ANALYSIS

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6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

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7. REFERENCES

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