#6 See review of last page for general comments Eric V. Snow

Eric V. Snow November 6, 1991 HST 803 Critique of "The New Cultural History"

"Nothing in man--not even his body--is sufficiently stable to serve as the basis for self-recognition or for understanding other men," (p. 35). Here Foucault's statement exemplifies the tendencies of the "New Cultural History" towards an extreme skepticism and subjectivism. While the "New Cultural History" (which is not to be seen as a homogenous movement by any means) contains valuable insights about how symbols and language affect people's views of reality, much of its philosophical base, which leans indirectly upon the radical skepticism of David Hume and Friedrich Nietzche, can be questioned. If the traditional Western paradigm of objectivity, foundationalism in knowledge, and belief in an orderly universe governed by scientific laws which can be discovered by human investigators basically holds, then the "New Cultural History" is going too far in assuming the former is false.

Yes, but it's not!

For instance, Foucault (p. 44) presents a cultural history which denies the law of cause and effect, but says only beginnings occur. No doubt such skepticism is based on David Hume's critique of the law of cause and effect in An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding, which maintained humans can't ever prove one event or entity caused a succeeding event to change or be effected. This analysis of Hume's, however, shouldn't be taken for granted![1] It assumes that the law of identity ("A is A"--everything is equal to itself, thus no contradictions can exist) doesn't exist over time, which is false. For what an entity does is necessarily dependent on what it IS (i.e. its essence). For instance, if I dropped a basketball and a bowling ball onto onto the same floor at the same time, ceteris paribus, of necessity the basketball will bounce differently compared to the bowling ball because the properties of the two are different. As the psychologist Nathaniel Branden put it: "(T)hat a seed can grow into a flower but a stone cannot--that a bird can fly, but a

It is this "essentialism" - the supposition that people act because the way they do - that Foucault rejects.

[1]For instance, see Ayn Rand, Atlas Shrugged (New York: New American Library, 1957), p. 926; Nathaniel Branden, The Psychology of Self-Esteem (New York: Bantam Books, 1969), p. 58; R.C. Sproul, John Gerstner, and Arthur Lindsley, Classical Apologetics (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1984), p. 82-85.

building cannot--that electricity can run a motor, but tears . . . cannot--that actions consistent with their nature are possible to entities, but contradictions are not."[2] Thus the laws of logic provide the epistemological basis for the law of cause and effect.[3]

Another hoary philosophical chesnut raises its head in the writings of White and LaCapra, which is the problem of universals. This problem deals with how concepts (words symbolize concepts) signify the outside real world. What justifies using the single concept "man" to subsume in its meaning (which includes or is its referent objects in the outside real world) many highly varied individuals who may differ in weight, height, skin color, intelligence, personality, etc? When La Capra cities the Derridean criticism (see p. 112-113; also note p. 117, 127) against tight categorization, it should be realized he is raising a very old issue that goes right back to the ancient Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle.

While it is presumptuous to say the problem of universals has been solved once and forever, the approach Ayn Rand[4] has worked out in this area seems to be the most fruitful. The mind can know what objects are to be under a given concept based on three main elements: 1. A common attribute needs to be picked out of the objects we sense, which is: 2. an attribute which simultaneously distinguishes these objects (or an attribute of them) for other objects (and/or their attributes) we sense and: 3. the objects' common attribute must exist in some quantity but can exist in any quantity if it was measured.[5] This last element is crucial, since it allows us to group the same universal objects which are not absolutely identical in their common attributes so far as our senses can tell. For example, the concept

[2]Branden, Ibid.

[3]Quantum mechanics would seem to pose a serious problem here for such an assertion. However, this view can be limited to average, everyday situations involving higher order systems. Also, quantum mechanic's noncausal theories be questioned, for Bohr and Heisenberg assumed that something that can't be measured precisely couldn't take place precisely. See Stanley Jaki, The Savior of Science (Washington, D.C.: Regenery Gateway, 1988), p. 111. See also Sproul, et al., op. cit., p. 110-113.

[4]Ayn Rand, Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology (New York: New American Library, 1967). Her relationship to mainstream philosophy is ironically. like Foucault's to history,

"plank" is applied to boards three feet, five feet, and ten feet in length, which, nonetheless, have the common characteristics of being wood shaped into a rectangular shape.

As for the problem of drawing lines between closely related objects, such as where in the spectrum do you draw the line between blue and violet, this choice is not wholely arbitrary. The objective needs and abilities of the human mind in being able to process usefully different concepts puts a limit to many concepts of color are necessary. "Concepts are not to be multiplied beyond necessity . . . nor are they to be integrated in disregard of necessity."[6] This means that since the human mind can handle only so many "mental units" (informational units) at a time, which is why there aren't 10,000 different concepts of "color" as used in everyday conversations. The real problem instead is once having drawn the line (i.e. made a definition) is to consistently use it in the future to avoid equivocation, which is relatively easily solved compared to the problems caused by saying concepts are arbitrary. Concepts (universals) are epistemologically relative to the level of knowledge human beings have about the entities in question, which means with new discoveries the "lines" (definitions) we use may change, but the objects in the real world metaphysically don't change with them. Thus, if concepts aren't fundamentally arbitrary, then Foucault's approach, which seems to run various categories and concepts together concerning cultural entities by a sort of free association ("discourses") is fundamentally flawed, then a significant part of his program is undermined. The philosophical reason why many mainstream historians believe his work is flawed methodologically and in scholarship is that the (although this is sensed only implicitly) undermining of the objectivity of concepts inevitably affects his work.[8] While in the short term it may seem objectivity is a needless paradigm for solid scholarship and methodology, in the long run it isn't. Ideas have consequences.

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[6] Emphasis removed, Ayn Rand, Objectivist Epistemology, p. 96.

[7] A statement of relations between entities ("relativity") isn't necessarily subjective. That I weigh fewer pounds than the earth is an objective truth.

[8] Perry Anderson in his article "Witchcraft" points out the same issue concerning the problem with Ginzberg's reliance on Wittgenstein's idea of family resemblances. ". . . So at the level of the morphology there is no point at which the associations need ever stop--falsifications never feature."

Another fundamental concept of post-modernism (which is an idea also found in the "New Cultural History") is the questioning and/or repudiation of the possibility of a single worldview or foundation of knowledge. (For instance, see LaCapra's views on p. 102-3, and Foucault's on p. 33-34). The best way for a (chastened) objectivist to reply to such critiques is to point out that while all (100%) of the facts[9] may not favor a single worldview, there could well be enough that faith (commitment and confidence) to an overarching philosophy or religion is not irrational, even if some loose ends may exist. Few of the things we do have 100% certainty, including thinking we'll survive the drive to work. But there could be enough evidence to bear that we could assert this or that worldview to be demonstrably false (such as Satanism) or that some view is true, even if reason won't give us 100% certainty. Also, to say several worldviews could be true at the same time would be to say a contradiction could exist if any of their tenets conflicted. The incommeasurability issue (such as between different paradigms in science) is seriously overblown, for "translations" between different worldviews are surely easier than translations between Chinese and Hebrew.[10]

Also, extreme anti-foundationalism (the view there is no epistemological base for knowledge to start from) runs into the problem of self-refutation when it attacks axiomatic concepts. For instance, if someone denies an external real world exists, they always must use some fact from it to deny it. To say all that we see is a dream presupposes there are such things as "sleep" and human beings actually exist who undergo such a state. Likewise, if a person denies that he exists, Descartes' "I think therefore I am" refutes him, for if a person doesn't exist, he couldn't be doing any thinking to begin with, including the statement, "I don't exist." Likewise, to say there are no absolutes argues that there <u>really is</u> an absolute: namely, there are never any possible absolute truths in any possible situation. We simply have to face the fact that irreducible primaries do exist. Thus, anti-

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[9]Admittedly, this word is controversial. Let's take it to mean knowledge that is easily empirically verified and which has almost all or all the members of a "community of competence" find indisputable. For instance, the Flat Earth

foundationalism, opposition to an "Archimedes point" epistemologically, and denials of an overarching worldview being possible should not be taken for granted. (Here I am drawing freely upon Rand).

Also, the view that language effects our view of reality shouldn't be pushed too far.[11] While the vocabulary or syntax of a language may help push people to think one thought rather than another, there are seldom any absolute blocks to innovation in worldviews due to language itself. For instance, the many words the Eskimos supposedly[12] have for snow compared to English still could be translated into English, albeit clumsily. Even if one points out that the ancient Greek of St. Paul or Aristophanes couldn't express the ideas of quantum mechanics, the fact remains languages do change--that new thoughts can exist, causing new words to be invented--and Greek today can express such concepts. Also, the syntax of languages need not be insurmountable to new thoughts and worldviews. For instance, in Whorf's famous discussion of the Hopi conception of time compared to the English language's view, he still manages to get the basic allegedly[13] different ideas of time from Hopi into English, albeit imperfectly. And, Noam Chomsky and his followers maintain syntax (which is the issue in controversy concerning the Hopi conception of time, not vocabulary) is not a part of the "deep structure" that governs all languages, which means the differences between Hopi and English aren't really all that great (assuming they are right). Incommensurability isn't really a serious problem then, including for the ideas used in different scientific paradigms of the same entities.

You miss the point (or at least a point) of discussing the theory — V. 12.? that language often subverts the intended uses to which it is put.

When skepticism itself is subjected to skepticism, much of the epistemology the "New Cultural History" assumes crumbles. By no means does this make all its insights invalid concerning how language itself effects our view of reality. But it's easy to push this idea and the skepticism it inevitably generates too far. Thus, a chastened objectivism is still a workable paradigm for historical scholarship.

[10] See Michael Devitt and Kim Sterenlny, Language & Reality An Introduction to the Philosophy of Language (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1987), p. 179-183, 203-206.

[11] Ibid., p. 172-178.

[12] Jerry Adler with Niko Price, "The Melting of a Mighty Myth Guess What: Eskimos don't Have 23 Words For Snow," Newsweek, July 22, 1991, p. 63.