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The legacy of pragmatism: implications for knowledge organization in a pluralistic universe

Abstract: Although postmodernist philosophy is frequently characterized as unconstrained relativism and radical skepticism, it shares with pragmatism a strong antipathy to modernity's separation of mind and body, of subject and object, of the human and the material. The criticisms raised by postmodernism have significant implications for current understandings of classification theory and practice. The critical tenets of pragmatism provide an epistemological framework for the development of classificatory structures that will address current failings and respond to the demands of an increasingly interdisciplinary store of knowledge.

1. Introduction

There are said to be certain Buddhists whose ascetic practices enable them to see a whole landscape in a bean (Barthes, 1974).

This passage from Barthes captures the mocking incredulity that often characterizes postmodern criticisms of modernist philosophy. Although such criticisms are variously characterized as deconstructionist, poststructuralist or postmodernist, they share in common a strong antipathy to the rationality, objectivity and the separation of mind and body that have characterized humanist epistemology since the Enlightenment. Those who reject the basic premises and tenets of postmodernism1 are frequently heated in their reactions, attacking what they perceive as the skeptical relativism or "irrationality, intellectual dishonesty, and wrongfulness" (Ross 1997) of these approaches. But the objections raised by these so-called radical philosophies are not new. Indeed, many of the postmodern arguments against modernity were raised nearly one hundred years ago by the American pragmatists.

The beginnings of modernity are generally traced back to the mid-eighteenth century and the historical movement now known as the Enlightenment. The philosophers of the Enlightenment espoused a fundamental dichotomy between subject and object, between mind and body, between man and the external world of phenomena. They argued that, because the rational mind existed outside the primal reality of phenomena, man could apply logic and reason to gain objective knowledge of universal truths about the material world. The Enlightenment rejected traditional philosophy and political and religious authority, placing its faith, instead, in the ability of rational science to uncover the underlying laws of cause and effect that drove the external world -- the grand narratives that would reveal and explain the universality of reality and assure mankind's steady progression toward perfection.

Tarnas (1991) points out that modern Western society has grounded its superiority in the possession of quantitatively more knowledge than earlier societies. But it is important to note that the central precept of modernity rested ultimately with the establishment and perpetuation of stability through the creation of increasing levels of order: "The assumption [was] that creating more rationality is conducive to creating more order, and that the more ordered a society is, the better it will function" (Klages 1997). Even more important,
perhaps, is the foundation on which that order was premised: the assumption of a single, universal pattern of reality that could be known through application of the rational methods of empirical science.

The description and dissemination of the modernist's scientific knowledge would require a rational language -- a transparent representational language that would create correspondence between an observation in the real world and the *signifier* used to represent that observation. Thus the assumption of a single, universal pattern of reality mandated a unitary (Bakhtin 1981) or well-constructed representational language (Foucault 1970) where each linguistic term -- each signifier -- would point to one and only one concept and each concept would be represented by one and only one term. Foucault asserts that a language can be characterized as well-constructed "if its descriptive exactitude makes every proposition into an invariable pattern of reality (if one can always *attribute* to the representation what is *articulated* in it) and if the *designation* of each being indicates clearly the place it occupies in the general *arrangement* of the whole" (1970, p. 159; emphasis in original). Thus a well-constructed language is one that both defines and orders. The traditional classification scheme is just such a well-constructed language in that each class is defined by a set of attributes and/or properties which are shared by all members of that class; and order is created as an inclusive hierarchy of genus-species relationships between classes. Such a scheme supports the effective representation and organization of knowledge by establishing a standardized and invariant pattern of universal reality.

2. The Postmodernist Critique

Although *postmodernism* is sometimes used to indicate a fundamental disillusionment with the complexities of modern society, the term generally carries a pejorative connotation. This is particularly true when it is used to refer to those philosophers who openly attack modernity's reverence for science and its continued support for the duality of the rational and the material, of subject and object, of society and nature. For many postmodernists, the failure of the modernist agenda can be attributed to its contention that the discovery of knowledge is only possible through the application of scientific methods to the objective [rational] study of material reality. For others, the failure is grounded in the inherent opacity of language, in the ultimate failure of representation and in the bankruptcy of metanarratives.

Disillusionment with metanarrative is frequently identified as a defining feature of postmodernism (e.g., Rosenau 1992; Rorty 1991; Klages 1997). Metanarratives (Lyotard 1984) are the stories that a society creates to legitimize its ideology and to maintain and extend internal order and stability. Because metanarrative presents this ideology as the objective rendering of a universal truth, it "arrests ambiguity and controls the proliferation of meaning by imposing a standard and standpoint of interpretation that is taken to be fixed and independent of the time it represents" (Ashley 1989, p. 263; quoted in Rosenau 1991, p. 85). Furthermore, metanarrative is imminently historical in that it constructs a linear and coherent justification of social theory and structure. The objections that many postmodernists raise against history are therefore applicable to metanarrative as well. They question whether the past is knowable in and relevant to the present; whether any rendering of history is, or can be, objective; whether the past can actually be explained rationally; and whether history serves, or should serve, as a conduit for the transference of culture and knowledge across generations (Rosenau, 1991).

The lack of a well-constructed and transparent language -- a rational language that would support the collection and dissemination of scientific knowledge through an indexical bonding of *signifier* and *signified* -- is even more problematic for many postmodernists. Wittgenstein argues that *signifiers* [words] are used in *language games* to accomplish specific tasks; and these *language games* are associated with *forms of life* -- with the "everyday human activities which make up our lives in a social sense" (Blair 1990, p. 148).
Because communication requires familiarity with a form of life and knowledge of the appropriate use of signifiers to accomplish the task at hand, language is inherently relative: a given signifier is not bound to a particular signified. And, because a signifier may have any number of possible interpretations depending on the form(s) of life with which it is associated, there can be no one representation that is inherently complete. Objective representation is therefore impossible. Furthermore, because language is not transparent -- because the signifier does not point invariably to its counterpart in the material world -- language does not represent reality. Rather, language creates reality. It follows, then, that all knowledge -- all truth -- is necessarily contingent.

But criticisms of representation are not limited to the contingency of language. The postmodernist contends that representation has been clouded by the modernist schism between subject and object, between mind and matter. Foucault (1970) argues that, prior to the Enlightenment, representation was universal, primary and transparent: the word mapped directly to its corresponding object. But when man became both subject and object -- when he was given license to serve simultaneously as knowing subject and known object -- genuine representation was no longer possible. Under the influence of modernist epistemology, representation has become individual, secondary and ultimately opaque.

How relevant are the postmodernist's criticisms for current understandings of classification theory and practice? Williamson (1998) observes that existing classification schemes have not adapted to the demands imposed by the fluid and increasingly interdisciplinary nature of human knowledge -- knowledge that "is characterized by instability, lack of predictability, and spontaneous response to politically, socially and environmentally based issues" (p. 118). They have not been able to overcome the problems endemic to traditional classification precisely because they have failed to address the continuing validity of those basic assumptions upon which traditional classificatory structures have been erected. Furthermore, Hjørland (1997) argues that, because epistemologies can never be truly objective, they have a significant impact on structures of representation and organization. For these reasons, if for no other, it is important to revisit the epistemological assumptions of classification theory in light of the postmodernist critique.

### 3. Postmodernism and Traditional Classification Theory

The postmodernist identifies a major failing of modernity in its adherence to the assumption of a unitary and objective reality that can be discovered through reason -- through the consistent application of the rational methods of empirical science. If there is no universal order, as the postmodernist contends, the implications for classification theory are truly significant. The traditional classification scheme would support effective representation and organization of knowledge by establishing a rigidly inclusive hierarchy of genus-species relationships uniting a set of well-defined classes into a single coherent structure. But such a scheme must necessarily present a patently universal and invariant pattern of reality.

Current sociological and anthropological theories of knowledge, however, including, for example, actor-network theory (Bowker & Star, 1997) and situationism (Haraway, 1991), reject the assumption of an external and objective reality. These theories posit that all knowledge is inherently subjective and created on an as-needed basis to reflect either a specific ideological viewpoint or a particular discourse community. From the perspective of constructivist theory, reality is understood as the meaning [or interpretation] attributed to objects or events by the individuals who actively participate in their perception. From the perspective of contextualist theory, reality is the product of a particular discourse community and can only be understood within that context. In either case, the implications for classification theory are profound: if reality, knowledge and truth are contextual -- if they are situational -- then no one scheme can pretend to accommodate more than one discourse
community. Furthermore, such a scheme can represent that one community at only one point in time.

Postmodernist criticisms of metanarrative serve to indict the conceptual utility of traditional classification schemes. Because a scheme is a fixed structure of classes and relations between classes, it reflects the state of knowledge at that precise point in time when the structure was created. Furthermore, such a scheme is itself a metanarrative in that it controls reality by establishing a universal standard for representation. It attempts to eliminate ambiguity by constructing a coherent and ostensibly objective presentation of reality, but in so doing it freezes knowledge outside time.

While traditional classification schemes are susceptible to criticism for their dependence on a single pattern of reality, criticisms regarding the opacity of language might not seem appropriate. It is true that a classification scheme exists (or should exist) as a well-constructed and transparent language -- a rational language that facilitates effective organization and dissemination of knowledge through the indexical bonding of signifier and signified. If Wittgenstein's theories are accepted, however, this well-constructed language cannot be universal in that it must necessarily privilege the players of one language game while marginalizing all others. Indeed, if the relevance of his theories is accepted, the very fact that language is inherently contingent -- that a signifier may attract numerous possible interpretations depending on the form(s) of life with which it is associated -- ensures that no classification scheme can ever be objective. Foucault's (1970) criticism of the role that the subject/object duality plays in undermining representation is similarly applicable to classification schemes. Because genuine representation is not possible when the subject and the object are one, the classificationist-as-subject cannot step out of time and space: his perception of reality-as-object is necessarily shaped by personal knowledge. Ultimately, the duality of subject and object prohibits all attempts at effective representation.

4. A Pragmatic Framework

If we take the arguments of the postmodernists seriously, it is patently obvious that classification theory cannot proceed on the assumption of a single dominating pattern of reality. Rather, it must retreat and begin anew from the observation that the social and experiential origin of "reality" necessarily produces a multiplicity of such patterns. Bernstein (1997) presents five critical themes (antifoundationalism, fallibilism, contingency, pluralism, and the social nature of self and knowledge) that constitute the framework for a pragmatic epistemology -- five themes that not only characterize the pragmatic tradition but also echo the criticisms that postmodernists have leveled against modernist epistemology. Serious consideration of these themes can serve as an effective jumping-off point in the development of a more practicable approach to classification theory.

Like postmodernism, pragmatism is inherently antifoundationalist. Adherence to the notion of antifoundationalism rejects the notion of a universal pattern of reality and posits, instead, a complex multiplicity of co-existing universes, each of which continuously shapes and re-shapes its own reality. Pragmatism contends that there is no absolute reality and thus no absolute knowledge or truth; but it does not rule out the possibility of knowledge per se. The pattern of reality -- the cultural and sociohistorical knowledge/experience embedded in the language of one social community -- is no less valid, no less true, than the pattern of reality embedded in the language of any other social community.

All such languages -- all such patterns of reality -- are fallible: they are plastic and potentially dynamic, ever susceptible to the dialogue that can occur where their boundaries overlap with other cultural, disciplinary or sociohistorical communities. The notion of fallibilism extends the pragmatist's opposition to the imposition of rigid and formalized patterns of reality. Every interpretation of experience -- every expression of knowledge -- is fallible in that it can be modified within competing contexts. As Bernstein observes, "there is
no belief or thesis -- no matter how fundamental -- that is not open to further interpretation and criticism" (Bernstein, 1997, p. 387). Closely related to fallibilism is the theme of contingency. Contingency not only indicates the instability of the universe in which the individual operates but also introduces into the pattern of human existence the pervasive and inescapable role of chance -- of the unforeseen, the unexpected, the unpredictable.

Pragmatism posits that, because there can be no absolute knowledge, the nature of self and knowledge is social. Individual knowledge depends on the "shared social practices" (Bernstein, 1997, p. 387-388) that characterize the immediate sociocultural environment. Froehlich (1989) observes that the individual is "born into a history and a culture that gives us a set of distinctions and interpretations about what it means to be" (p. 308). These sociocultural and historical constructs constitute a set of "shared meanings ... that reside in and behind language ... in a set of practices" (Froehlich, 1989, p. 309). Neither the individual nor the social community can be accorded primacy, however, for "Each is constituted in and through recurrent practices. The notion of human 'action' presupposes that of 'institution' and vice versa" (Giddens, 1982; quoted in Froehlich, 1989). For the pragmatist, the social construction of individual knowledge necessarily involves interaction within a critical community. Through dialogue and argumentation, individual opinions and beliefs are evaluated and validated against the opinions and beliefs of the community.

Informing each of the previous themes -- the themes of antifoundationalism, fallibilism, contingency and the social nature of self and knowledge -- is the theme of pluralism. For the pragmatist, the world is populated by a diverse set of cultural traditions, ideological perspectives, and sociopolitical organizations. However, this pluralism does not lead inevitably to an extreme form of relativism. Rather, through the use of dialogue and argumentation, individuals can identify common ground upon which divergent patterns of reality can "achieve a mutual reciprocal understanding -- an understanding that does not preclude disagreement" (Bernstein, 1997, p. 398). As traditional boundaries are breached in the current atmosphere of crossdisciplinarity, the multiplicity -- the plurality -- of patterns of reality is not diminished but magnified. In this environment, there is, as Bernstein observes, the distinct danger of a "fragmenting pluralism where the centrifugal forces become so strong that we are only able to communicate with the small group that already shares our own biases, and no longer even experience the need to talk with others outside of this circle" (Bernstein, 1997, p. 397; emphasis in original). To comprehend the differences that mark these diverse patterns of reality requires dialogic encounter and interaction, confrontation and argumentation. More importantly, as Rorty points out, it requires "the willingness to talk, to listen to other people, to weigh the consequences of our actions upon other people" (Rorty, 1982, p. 172).

5. The Legacy of Pragmatism

One potential avenue for addressing the problems that confront the development of effective classification schemes -- classification schemes that are dynamic and responsive to the fluctuations in human knowledge -- is to adopt the pragmatic framework as a basis for assessing classification theory and its relationship to postmodernist epistemologies. This framework would necessarily reject the assumption of universality that underlies traditional classification schemes, for the presumption of a single universal pattern of "reality" cannot accommodate the differences in social, cultural, and historical experience that produces a multiplicity of languages and a multiplicity of "realities." If domain knowledge is understood as the product of interpretation within one of many possible experiential or conceptual frameworks, the fallibility and instability of knowledge can be viewed, on a larger scale, as the simple reflection of multiple patterns of organization. To suggest that knowledge is not absolute does not deny the possibility of knowledge. On the contrary, it validates the inherent plurality of knowledge -- the multiplicity of conceptual structures, each
emanating within the framework of a particular domain or discourse community. Positing the existence of multiple patterns of reality accommodates the potential instability of knowledge; the realization that knowledge is malleable and inherently fallible – that it is open to reanalysis, modification and correction within competing contexts – allows for the inconsistencies and modifications that frequently occur where the boundaries of competing domains overlap (Jacob & Albrechtsen, 1999).

Acceptance of the plurality of knowledge supports the generation of multiple, heterogeneous representational structures that will reflect the diversity of sociocultural knowledge; but it need not lead to an extreme relativism precisely because the occurrence of common phenomena, activities, attributes, theories and/or methodologies provides for conceptual convergence across domains. The assumption that reality consists of multiple knowledge structures and competing patterns of organization mandates that we reject the traditional conception of representational structures as fixed and predetermined hierarchies of class relationships. More importantly, perhaps, it points up the immediate need to devise representational structures that can accommodate the potential overlap of phenomena across disciplines – or disciplines across phenomena – that Williamson (1998) finds so problematic.

Notes
1 Critics and philosophers generally discriminate between poststructuralism, deconstruction, and postmodernism. However, such distinctions are not central to the arguments advanced in this paper. Accordingly, the terms postmodernism and postmodernist have been adopted to refer to the complex of philosophies aligned against the philosophy of modernity.
2 Rosenau observes that “There are probably as many forms of post-modernism as there are postmodernists” (1991, p. 15). She distinguishes between skeptical postmodernists and affirmative postmodernists to indicate the extremes of postmodernism. The philosophical and epistemological orientation presented here is characteristic of Rosenau’s affirmative postmodernist.

References


