Death and Furniture:
The rhetoric, politics and theology of bottom line arguments against relativism

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In this version pages are counted according to the published numbers with breaks following the published version.

Bang! (Indeterminate, yet sharply delineated noise; perhaps of gunshot or fist thumping table or boot contacting stone; or the sound of one hand clapping; or...)

I refute it thus. (Dr. Samuel Johnson, kicking a stone; rejecting Bishop George Berkeley's idealist philosophy. From Boswell's Life of Johnson.)

Mr Berkeley's breath smells of mothballs. I can only assume he thinks he is a chest of drawers. (Iain Banks, The Bridge)

He pities the plumage but forgets the dying bird.
(Tom Paine, The Rights of Man; on Edmund Burke's lack of sympathy for the masses)

Shopkeeper: No, no sir, it's not dead. It's resting.
Customer: Resting?
Shopkeeper: Yeah, remarkable bird the Norwegian   Blue, beautiful plumage, innit?
Customer: The plumage don't enter into it -- it's stone dead.
(Graham Chapman et al., Monty Python's Flying Circus)

"Death" and "Furniture" are emblems for two very common (predictable, even) objections to relativism. When relativists[1] talk about the social construction of reality, truth, cognition, scientific knowledge, technical capacity, social structure, and so on, their realist[2] opponents sooner or later start hitting the furniture, invoking the Holocaust, talking about rocks, guns, killings, human misery, tables and chairs. The force of these objections is to introduce a bottom line, a bedrock of reality that places limits on what may be treated as epistemologically constructed or deconstructible.[3] There are two related kinds of moves: Furniture (tables, rocks, stones, etc. -- the reality that *cannot* be denied), and Death (misery, genocide, poverty, power -- the reality that *should not* be denied). Our aim is to show how these "but surely not this" gestures and arguments work, how they trade off each other, and how unconvincing they are, on examination, as refutations of relativism.[4]

Invocations of Furniture and Death are the stock in trade, not, in practice, of "naive realists", who, being universally recognized as persons made of straw, are unable to indulge, but of those sophisticated realists or moderate relativists for whom there has to be a bottom line, beyond which they refuse to go. Death and Furniture serve as arguments against taking relativism *to extremes*, and their force is such that "relativism-as-such" is often disavowed even by its advocates. Suddenly, as with naive realism, none of us are *vulgar* relativists (the self-refuters who don't-know-and-don't-care, for whom anything goes and commitment never comes). No, no, we are *methodological* relativists, *moderate* constructivists, *pragmatic* pragmatists.

FURNITURE

No matter what the debate, whatever its content or its medium (text or talk), there is likely to be some furniture around. While we talk about things and events, principles and abstractions, cognition and reality, or read about construction and objectivity, we do so in chairs and in rooms, at desks and tables, or even out in the open, where the rocks and trees are. The appeal of these things is that they are external to the talk, available to show that it is just talk, that there is a another world beyond, that there are limits to the flexibility of descriptions. Hitting the furniture also works as a non-verbal act, offering the advantage of getting outside of language; its force is that it avoids the rhetorical danger of appealing to non-verbal reality by putting it into words. But words will generally do; we can talk about tables and rocks, and invoke their external existence verbally, almost as convincingly as physically pointing to or hitting them. The furniture argument invokes the objective world as given, as distinct from processes of representation; as directly apprehended, independent of any particular description.

THE REALIST'S DILEMMA

Of course, the hitting is not just a slapping; not only words signify. The table thumping does its work as meaningful action, not mere behaviour. All the pointings to, demonstrations of, and descriptions of brute reality are inevitably semiotically mediated and communicated. Rocks, trees and furniture are not already rebuttals of relativism, but become so precisely at the moment, and for the moment, of their invocation. We term this *the realist's dilemma*. The very act of producing a non-represented, unconstructed external world is inevitably representational, threatening as soon as it is produced, to turn around upon and counter the very position it is meant to demonstrate. Furniture "arguments"[5] perform categorization and relevance via semiosis. Bruno Latour also notes how realists like "to be able to thump on a table that solidly resists and proves itself not to be a dream or a social construction" (1989: 106).

The very ease with which furniture (etc.) is apprehended – its 'obvious' solidity and out-there-ness – makes it a hard for relativist deconstruction[6] and, therefore, a sort case for a realist defence. The solidity and out-there-ness of furniture (etc.) makes it a hard case for relativists to deconstruct. Furniture arguments are realism working on its chosen soft ground. However, there is a cost for realism in this strategy. For in resorting to these cases, realists appear to be setting aside, conceding even, a huge amount of more contentious stuff to relativism – language, madness, the social order, cognition, even science. And it is generally disputation about these sorts of things that ends in table-thumping, the point of such gestures being to bolster a realist defence of something more contestable. In the rhetorical situation we are describing, the relativists may be winning the Epistemological Wars, but are in danger of losing the final battle. The forces of relativism are gathered about the last and most well-defended castle of realism (Fortress Furniture), laying siege to it and in the process suffering a blistering bombardment – Bang! Bang! Bang!

UNDENIABILITY DEVICES

The Furniture argument, as the argument of no argument, purports to be the one that ends the rhetoric, is above rhetoric, and that demonstrates its limits: it is "the naked truth" (Latour, 1989), unconstructed, unsupported, unclothed, needing no allies. The counter to this is to name it as a device, a rhetorical construct, occasioned and deployed. For example, we can place it amongst a set of similar devices for constructing the obvious. In discourse, the furniture device shares features with other rhetorical ploys that, difficult to undermine in themselves, are deployed as shields behind which some rather more vulnerable entity is placed. Thus positioned, they lend their robustness to some more contentious issue. Examples of such devices include stating the obvious, using tautologies (Sacks,

1989: 277), claiming self-evidence (Douglas, 1975), quoting idioms (Drew and Holt, 1988), and articulating rhetorical commonplaces (Billig, 1987).

One notable rhetorical effect of the use of such "undeniability devices" is the creation of a difficult rhetorical situation for those not wishing to agree. Responses to arguments in which they are deployed – this paper is an excellent example – suffer from being seen as long-winded and over-elaborate in comparison to the compactness and brevity of the devices themselves: most obviously, and paradigmatically, the Furniture argument ("bang!").

DRAWING THE LINE

What counts as Furniture-like varies. For example, according to Richard Rorty's reading of him, Umberto Eco draws a line between semiotic phenomena (signs, texts) and physical objects such as "rocks and trees and quarks" (Rorty, 1992: 99); though in Eco's own reading, his texts become more rock-like, constraining interpretation (Eco, 1992). Rorty is monistically pragmatic: "what we do is to react to stimuli by emitting sentences containing marks and noises such as 'rock', 'quark', 'mark', 'noise', 'sentence', 'text', 'metaphor' and so on" (ibid.: 100). The sociologist of technology Rob Kling distinguishes "linguistic constructs [including] scientific terms like quark" from "physical objects like guns and roses [which] have some capabilities that are not only arbitrarily derived from the talk about them" (Kling, 1992a: 362). And the sociologist of scientific knowledge, Harry Collins seems to place (one of) his line(s) between cultural phenomena like language, science (quarks), and technology (guns, tables) – everything that is human-made – on the one hand, and "natural" phenomena like roses and rocks – everything that is not – on the other: "rocks provide causal constraints on our physical movements...we do not have to *decide* not to walk through it.... A rock instructs everyone equally...without needing to be recognized" (Collins, 1990: 50).[7]

The homogeneous category of Furniture, as opposed to Words,

> Sticks and stones
> May break my bones
> But words will never hurt me

breaks down. Let us explore some of these variants, starting with the simplest and softest: furniture Furniture – the table itself.

STICKS...

The realist thumps the table. What a loud noise! Much louder than talk. Much more gritty. Much more real. And yet we insist that this noise, being produced in

this place, at *this* time, in the course of *this* argument, *is* an argument, *is* talk. As an argument, it takes the form of a demonstration:

> "This (bang!) is real. This (bang!) is no mere social construction. Talk cannot change that it is or what it is. See how its reality constrains my hand (bang!), forcing it to stop in its tracks. Hear the inevitable result (bang!) of the collision of two solid physical objects. Need I say more?"

All this is addressed of course to the relativist, the unbeliever, the heretic. And what is being asked of this unfortunate soul? Preferably, to recant (lack of response will, generously, be taken as a form of recantation). Failing this, the table thumping argument becomes a challenge:

> "Show us (the challenger and the assumed audience-of-fellow-realists) how we are wrong. Show us the contingent, could-be-otherwise, socially constructed, really-not-real character of this table – if you can!"

Let us then accept the challenge. It is surprisingly easy and even reasonable to question the table's given reality. It does not take long, in looking closer, at wood grain and molecule, before you are no longer looking at a "table". Indeed, physicists might wish to point out that, at a certain level of analysis, there is nothing at all "solid" there, down at the (most basic?) levels of particles, strings and the contested organization of sub-atomic space. Its solidity is then, ineluctably, a perceptual category, a matter of what tables seem to be like to us, in the scale of human perception and bodily action.8 Reality takes on an intrinsically human dimension, and the most that can be claimed for it is an "experiential realism" (Lakoff, 1987).

So let us remain at the human scale. When the table is assaulted it is not the whole of it that gets thumped, but only a bit of it under the fist or hand or fingers, or tips of (some of) the fingers. What exactly is warranted by this -- just the bits hit? What makes it a bit of a *table*? And for whom? How does the rest of the table get included as solid and real? And how does even that part that is hit, get demonstrated as real for anybody but the hitter? And how exactly is this demonstration, here and now, supposed to stand for the table's continuing existence, then and later, and for all the other tables, walls, rocks, ad infinitum, universally and generally? A lot is being taken on trust here, however "reasonably".

This deconstructive nit-picking may look pedantic and unreasonable. But realism does not achieve its aim without all this detail. Instead, it relies upon it, but in the background, as method and assumption, stage set, props and procedures, rather than as topic. Relativists choose to topicalize it, or at least to understand it as topicalizable in this way. Realism deploys but disguises all this on-trust stuff, asks us to take the table-hitting as an existence proof for tables-as-such (and much more), while relying on the audience's co-operation in commonsensically ignoring how it is done: letting bits of tables stand for wholes

(metonymy), instances stand for categories (this is a "table"), one experience (and one person's) stand for many (and acknowledged by everybody). What we have, on closer examination, is not so much a demonstration of out-there reality, but of the workings of consensual commonsense. For relativists, consensual commonsense is an interesting topic. It can be examined for its workings, rather than wielded as a bludgeon against inquiry.

... AND STONES

It might be argued that furniture is an unfortunate category of objects for the purposes of realist demonstrations, compared, say, to rocks and stones, on the grounds that tables are cultural artefacts, and rocks are not. It is not so easy to point to furniture as just existing, independently of human practices and categorizations. A realist might counter that this misses the point. It is its status as a physical object, not as 'furniture' that matters. Anything would do; any actual table can be thumped just like a rock. And furniture offers the clear advantage that realist participants in these discussions do not have to take everyone outside to find rocks to hit, nor carry them around in their pockets for the purpose. But then, rocks are cultural too, in that they are thus categorized, included in the definition of the natural world, classified into sedimentary and igneous, divided into grains of sand, pieces of gravel, pebbles, stones, rocks, boulders, mountains, domesticated in parks and ornamental gardens, protected in wildernesses, cut, bought, used and displayed as "precious stones", and include as a sub-category "girls' best friends"; not to mention coolant for vodka!
　　　Nevertheless, rocks are a useful emblem of natural reality, even for a relativist like Harry Collins, whose example of unvarnished reality is of what happens "as we stumble against a rock" (Collins 1990: 50). It is an unintentional act, a physical event, in which "our actions are caused directly by the rock rather than by our interpretations of what the rock is" (ibid.). It is easy to overlook what we are dealing with here: Collins's description, rather than simply a bit of reality. Imagine this as a witnessed event, rather than having to take the description as merely real. We see somebody stumble over a rock. Is that something we can "see"? Is that the only description we could offer for the event? And what if its accidental quality were considered as part of how it is displayed (as in slapstick)? But in Collins's example it is *we ourselves* who do the stumbling, so maybe we know the event directly rather than via a report. Does this make a difference? The only way it can is for intentional states to logically precede the real status of rocks, and for introspection, self-consciousness and memory to be accepted as reliable kinds of bases on which to report events, such that reality is thereby assured. Those assumptions may be perfectly reasonable as a way of going about one's business in the world, but they go well beyond any claim for the external reality of the rock and the stumbling.

Collins's rock-event is best understood as not an actual, but a *prototypical* one (cf. Rosch, 1975; Lakoff, 1987). The rock and the stumbling are offered as just the obvious, common or garden (where the rocks and trees are), bog standard, ordinary and typical kinds; not the fuzzy, borderline, silly example kinds like Ayers Rock, crumbly chalk or diamonds. They are idealizations, prototypes, not actual cases; which weakens somewhat their status as bottom line exemplars of Reality. Not only are they prototypes rather than actual instances, but it is this very *unreality* that, ironically, permits their rhetorical use. They work by deploying semantic prototypes to represent an idealized and realistic general knowledge (which is contentious enough: cf. Edwards, 1991), and by having these representations masquerade as what everyone would have to agree to say about a specific event. Once again, as for furniture thumping, the rhetoric of realism, of a reality beyond constructive description, requires for its effect a studied lack of attention to particular instances. In Collins's example it is language itself that provides the structures and tools for constructing a reality beyond words.

Once we accept that Collins is offering us not reality but a short story, the only grounds for accepting the story as merely real is because we are told to. It is how the story is given to us, not *as a story* at all, but transparently, as reality itself. The reality-producing trick is to switch one's footing[9] surreptitiously and deftly (without stumbling!) between two characters: the narrator, and the person stumbling against the rock. The rock has a given reality *for the stumbler*, and *according to the text*. But what, in the world beyond words, is a "rock", a "stumbling", an "accident"? And what, definitively, are the limits of such a rock's effects and constraints? Collins's position is a strange one for a sociologist of scientific knowledge (if not for a practitioner of "knowledge science").[10] Gravity waves have to be constructed as discoveries, but rocks are just there (for characters called stumblers; though presumably not for characters called geologists, miners, jewellers, or mountaineers[11]). It is a kind of trickery when writers introduce reality in the form of specific descriptions of it, and then kick away the textual ladder and ask us to consider the thus-described reality as out-there. It is exactly what scientists do when they deploy the empiricist repertoire (Gilbert and Mulkay, 1984), build facts through the process of "splitting and inversion" (Woolgar, 1988a), and what sociologists do when unreflexively they do the same (Ashmore, 1989).

...BUT WORDS?

Realists sometimes claim that constructionists also have a bottom-line reality -- the text, interpretation, the definitive reading; even the claim that we can spot a realist argument when we see one.[12] This seems a strange argument, perhaps best understood as being put forward in a spirit of solidarity: "though we may not agree on the *content* of our bottom lines, at least we all *have* one." But texts are

quite as disputable as furniture -- indeed more obviously so. We do not claim that texts have an out-there meaning, any more than furniture has. We agree with Rorty's description: "the coherence of the text is not something it has before it is described" (Rorty, 1992: 97). Unfortunately, this point is frequently misconstrued by critics (of discourse analysis, for example) who, seeing a given interpretation, take it as evidence that the analyst is thereby making a claim for its unique adequacy (Collins, 1983; for a rebuttal, see Potter, 1988). It is not that texts are more real, more singularly described than the rest of the world; but rather, that the rest of the world is like text. It *all* has to be represented and interpreted.

Umberto Eco's recent (1992) entry into the lists against relativism is an appeal for some realistic limits to be placed upon the kind of reader-oriented construction of textual meaning that he has previously championed (Eco, 1979). The problem with the idea of objective limits on textual readings, or on descriptions of physical events, is that it is impossible to say in advance of discussion what exactly they are, outside of the circularity of taking the author's word for it, or appealing as Eco does to what other readers will find "preposterous". But that is unfortunate too, since what people in general find preposterous is patently a matter of social judgment and consensus, and no more a guarantee of truth or reality than it is when later judgments declare everyone to have got it all wrong.[13] We suggest that there is no option but to engage with consensus and argument, that it *makes no additional sense beyond that*, except as a familiar part of such arguments, to place the object of that consensus out into the world or into the objective text. Even relativists can argue and agree about things, as we will shortly argue in an attempt to secure your agreement.

DEATH

Alongside Furniture, another "hard case" for relativism is Death, our emblem for the invocation of important values and morality that, while arguably variable across cultural time and space, are often shared by realist and relativist alike, as co-members of Feyerabend's "tribe of Western intellectuals" (1987: 73). Part, indeed, of the force of both Death and Furniture arguments, is their ability to appeal to *all* participants in epistemological disputes, as members of a common culture, for whom they operate as icons of a transcendent truth beyond (de)construction. One way that Death arguments differ is in the kind of politico-moral realities they invoke: the obvious and good things that relativists have no business undermining, or the obvious and bad things they have no business making moral room for (Smith, 1988: 218). The many examples of the latter include, "wife beating, bride burning, clitoridectomy.... The added piquancy of examples in which the victims are female can hardly be missed"

(ibid.). But not only women victims are used; recruited also are the poor and oppressed, the dead and dying, the victims of murder, massacre and genocide.

Interestingly, we have come across few examples of the former kind, the Good kind, of invoked reality. Perhaps this is because most of our dealings (and our shared concerns and values) are with "critical realists" of the Left. Alternatively, perhaps the reason is that realism, or reality (or just particular bits of it) are themselves doing duty as "the Good that must not be undermined" in Death as well as in Furniture arguments. Thus, to use an example we will come back to, though *the fact that* "the Holocaust took place" is, historically, an obvious, indeed iconic, Bad-that-should-not-be-justified, *the statement* "the Holocaust took place" is, rhetorically, a Good-that-should-not-be-denied.

There are two related forms of the Death argument, each of which point to relativism's alleged moral bankruptcy. One points to death, misery, tragedy, disaster, as undeniable, except by a scoundrel or a fool. This is the *ontological* version, the one linked most directly to Furniture. The other, *siren* version takes the form of the dire warning that relativism actually *produces* death and misery – that this way the Holocaust lies. The two versions are linked in a causal story: ontological denial will lead to a dropping of guards, the road to Hell, paved by the good intentions of ostrich-like relativists. This second, *siren* form of the Death argument rests on the assumption that only objectivist thought can 'bar the gate to the polis and keep the night, the jungle and the jackals at bay' (Smith, 1988: 154). Smith responds that these things happen anyway, all too obviously, despite objectivism's dominance, and that claims to have captured unvarnished reality (through having God on their side) are made on both sides of the overwhelming majority of the world's politico-moral disputes conducted exclusively by realists.

Here are two examples of Death arguments taken from reviews of relativist work which show the subtle linkages between the ontological and siren forms:[14]

> "We are creators of meanings, appropriate to the occasion, like dramatists, novelists and ordinary speakers" [Mulkay 1985: 167].
>
> On one level, I have no problem in accepting this; on another it seems thoroughly irresponsible. As I write this, an area of Tripoli has been laid waste by a number of aircraft currently (I hope) sitting on the ground a few miles down the road from my Ivory Tower. Some 100 people (not very many by modern standards) have been killed. They were not killed by words neither are they dead because the rest of the world decides to call them dead. Their death was brought about by the employment of a disproportionately immense amount of scientific and technical knowledge. If we can only see this knowledge as just another story, then we too deserve to fall victim to it. (Craib, 1986)
>
> As the bombs were going off and as the flesh was being ripped from the bone, I found it hard to stomach this kind of cool dispassionate sociological

analysis of missile systems.... Constructivism refuses to take a stand....
[It displays] indifference to (technically embodied) features of the
human condition -- in this case, human suffering. (Winner, 1992).

The rhetorical effect sought in such passages is the induction of guilt. The
writers being reviewed (Mulkay, 1985, and MacKenzie, 1991) are accused of an
irresponsible lack of concern for the realities of death and destruction brought
about by that very "scientific and technical knowledge" that is their topic.
Clearly, it is their relativist epistemology which has let them down: their
stubborn refusal to recognize *any* uninterpreted reality has led them to a gross
and offensive indifference. Their moral bankruptcy in choosing to talk about
talk in cool and dispassionate ways rather than taking a stand, is not only
personally reprehensible, it is publicly damaging. If *we* (the readership of the
reviewed and the reviews) are foolish enough to be persuaded by these
misguided relativists, "then we too deserve to fall victim": a brutal nemesis, it
has to be said, for writers of texts to wish upon one another.[15] The reality we
deny -- and by denying, refuse to oppose -- will assert itself in an act of terror,
beauty and justice. It will kill us. And this apocalypse will be appropriate
punishment for our lack of faith; and yet, as our lives are taken from us, lo, our
faith in reality is restored! Praise the Real (and pass the ammunition)!
        It is pleasant to acknowledge, however, that relativists are seldom
accused of advocating evil. The crime is one of omission, not commission.
They (we) are accused of moral and political quietism, of being frozen in
motion, unable to speak or move or choose, of having no basis for commitment
to values or goals. But this accusation trades upon the objectivist assumption
(Smith, 1988) that rejecting realism is the same thing as rejecting everything
that realists think is real. On a relativist analysis, as we have argued, it is the
realists who are frozen in motion, because as soon as they move, they represent.

TURNING THE MORAL TABLES

The freezing is not only a matter of epistemology, either. Reality can serve as
rhetoric for inaction (*be realistic... face the facts... come off it... you can't walk
through rocks... you can't change reality, human nature, market forces... it's
just the way things are... life isn't fair*).[16] It is a familiar kind of argument
against change, against action, against open-ended potentiality of any kind.
Reality is given, perceived, out-there and constraining. Arguably, it is for
relativists and constructionists that the good life is to be lived and made, as and
in accountable social action including that of social analysis; rather than to be
taken as given, ruled out as impossible or, as disengaged objective analysts,
passively observed and recorded. At the very least, realism has no exclusive
claim upon the pragmatics of making a better world.
        Indeed, the tables are easily turned. It is difficult to see how realists can
be so

sure about moral and political issues. How does ontological realism, allied with empiricism, sit with moral conviction? What are realists doing in possession of something as irrational as conviction? Aren't these the folk who say we should find out the facts, discover whether some race or gender *really* is inferior on some measure, test the hypothesis, check out whether the Holocaust *really did* happen, and so on? And yet when that sort of questioning undermines, or threatens to undermine, a specific consensual version of the world, it is suddenly considered illegitimately relativistic. As Bloor noted when discerning the sacred character of science in its resistance to scientific (a.k.a. relativistic) questioning of itself, "some nerve has been touched" (1976: ix).

More usually, however, in scientific and academic disputes as in other kinds, it is one set of realists arguing with another. Either they already know the world non-empirically, or they have to find out. But then how do they deal with disagreement?

"I'm right and you're wrong."
"No, I'm right and you're wrong."
"No, no, I'm right and you're wrong."

A more sophisticated and useful method is to start questioning the opponent's method, assumptions, or rhetoric; to use, that is, the tools of relativist-constructionist Analysis. Indeed, it is hard to imagine the work of the modern academy proceeding at all in the absence of such methods. But realists use them selectively: only against *opponents*; and only *against*. Conceived exclusively as a method of criticism, Analysis (whether as sociology of knowledge, psychoanalysis, ideological or rhetorical critique, ...) is used to *undermine* that to which it is applied. Relativists insist on the *general* applicability of Analysis. In particular, no self-serving exception can be made on one's own behalf: it has to apply to one's own position too -- relativists are reflexive.[17]

The advantage of relativistic notions of reality as rhetoric is that we *can* take positions and argue. Claims for the unreality of the Holocaust are, like all preposterous claims, like all claims of any sort, examinable for how they are constructed and deployed. Realism is no more secure than relativism in making sure the good guys win, nor even of defining who the good guys are – except according to some specific realist assumptions that place such issues outside of argument. Realism is the rhetoric of no rhetoric, marshalled in favour of one particular claim against another. Realists cannot claim the political and moral high ground, nor the epistemic, if only because they disagree so much about particulars.

Relativists focus analytically on variability and contingency. But they can also *take part in* that variability at least as comfortably as realists can. There is no contradiction between being a relativist and being *some*body, a member of a particular culture, having commitments, beliefs, and a commonsense notion of reality.[18] These are the very things to be argued for, questioned, defended,

decided, without the comfort of just being, already and before thought, real and true. The idea that letting go of realism entails that all these commitments must fall, is no more convincing than the idea that life without God is devoid of meaning and value. Indeed the argument is remarkably similar (cf. Smith, 1988: 162), as is the refutation: the death of God has not made the rest of the world disappear, but has left it for us to make. What we are left with is not a world devoid of meaning and value (or a world of absolute amorality where "everything is permitted", as in the Nietzschian-Dostoyevskian conclusion) but precisely the reverse. It is a foregrounding of meanings and values, to be argued, altered, defended, and invented; including the metavalue that some of these meanings and values may profitably be declared universal and even self-evident ("*We hold* these truths to be self-evident..."). Self-evidence is the outcome rather than the denial of argumentation (cf. Latour, 1987).

Smith (1988: 150) notes the following objection to relativism: however much it may be justifiable epistemologically, it is impossible to live by. This is ironic, because it is relativists who are noted for treating Truth (and other capitalized Absolutes) a*s a practical matter*; on this issue, it is realists who idealize. Relativists have no problem with reality as the practical and commonplace ground for everyday living; that is exactly the point, and exactly the place to begin dealing with it analytically. Indeed, some of us have argued elsewhere that the practical utility of reality-definitions tends to undermine, rather than bolster, realism, in that it introduces a kind of motivation for, or interestedness in, any particular version of reality that, on any particular occasion, may be offered.[19]

DEATH DEATH

Look closer at the commonsense conception of Death and, like the table, it starts to disappear: resurrection, the afterlife, survival of the spirit, the non-simultaneous criteria of brain death, the point when life support might as well be switched off, cryogenic suspension, the precise (how precise?) moment of death. There is "natural" death, with its images of peace, fulfilment and old age ("a little life, rounded with a sleep"), and "unnatural" death (Death death), connoting violence, pain, waste and loss. There is murder (and its degrees), manslaughter, capital punishment, killing in war, justifiable homicide, crime passionel, accident, suicide: as everyone knows, these are categories which are as constructed as can be. Whole professions (lawyers, assassins, weapons manufacturers, detectives, novelists, criminologists) are dedicated to the assignment of events to one or other category and to the delineation and ramification of the categorical system as a whole. Death is never simple. We have far too much interest in it for that.[20]

Let us take (what appears to be) a simple case, courtesy of Keith Grint and Steve Woolgar (1992: 374-78). They pose the question of the constructed character of "evident fact" in the starkest manner. Their text is the following,

nicely undeniable, statement from their opponent in argument, Rob Kling[21]: "It is much harder to kill a platoon of soldiers with a dozen roses than with well-placed, high-speed bullets" (Kling, 1992: 362). Conceiving this as a statement built on a certain definitive version of the differential (and asocial) technical capacity of guns and roses, Grint and Woolgar attempt a deconstruction of this bottom-line, technical-core argument. They propose that every successive attempt to reach a final, uninterpretable "effect" (hole in head, falling body, wound, pain, death) from a determinate "cause" (pointed gun, loaded bullet, pulled trigger) can, with enough stubbornness, counterintuition and effort, be construed as (yet another) social construction. But since nobody here is denying that people get killed, why bother with this sort of deconstruction? What is the point? "The point is that.... What counts as technical is precisely a reflection of the effort needed to show it to be social" (Grint and Woolgar, 1992: 376, 378).

The point is academic. In everyday parlance, "academic" implies pointless, empty, inconsequential. But *we are* academics, for whom it is proper, essential even, to care about the epistemic and ontological status of claims to knowledge. And it is far from inconsequential. If even ostensibly bottom-line instances of brute reality are demonstrably social accomplishments, then academics are dealing with some powerful machinery; the possibility of critique, denial, deconstruction, argument, for any kind of truth, fact, assumption, regime or philosophy – for anything at all. Relativism is the quintessentially academic position, where all truths are to-be-established.

IT'S A KIND OF MAGIC

The idea of Death and Furniture as things per se fails to resist scrutiny. There is no per se. Objectivists therefore need a device for introducing reality, and having it stand as a per se refutation of relativism. They need to render the acts of construction, of categorization, and of rhetoric invisible. They need to be able to put those things in place and then, quickly and invisibly, snatch away (or distract us from) the representational props and supports. They need a quick and dirty, commonsense version of science's empiricist repertoire,[22] to produce reality as merely out there, with no visible means of support; the signified without the signifier.

The classic domain for this sort of device is stage magic, although scientific demonstrations are also, if less obviously, a case in point.[23] To argue that realism is a kind of magic inverts the usual assumption, since magic is the very antithesis of science and objectivist common sense, which are in turn the realist's claims to validity. Relativists are the ones normally thought in need of magic. Somebody hits the furniture, or cites some bit of brute reality, the hammering of a nail into a wall, or whatever. How do we reply?

Oh for a bit of magic! If I could just click my fingers and it's gone, the nail sinks into the wall unhammered, the table disappears, the assistant's been cut in half and joined together again. That'd show 'em.

But wait, maybe it can be done. I mean, all these commonsensical folk who know about tables, aren't they just the ones who may also read horoscopes, perceive spoons bending, believe in the supernatural, pray to God? Let alone what the Azande do, other cultures, medieval Europeans and all that; are brute reality and mere fantasy so obviously distinct?

So I whip the table away, pick it up and put it out of sight in the next room, walk back in, and say "what table?" Triumphant. And they say, "come off it, you just took it away!" But what if I could do it faster, or when they weren't looking, or if I could distract them while I did it, and do it skilfully, or with an unseen assistant, so that they could not see how I did it. Now I'm a stage magician, a James Randi, or even a Uri Geller. But have I won the argument?

They retort, "Come off it, what did you do? Where's the table? How did you do that? This is a set up... Do it again when we're watching. Do it under controlled conditions..." Reality is restored and irrefutable. Exceptions are dismissed as unreal; as trickery, non-cases, not proper exceptions at all.[24]

Uri Geller's spoon bending is dismissed by stage magician James Randi as trickery, prestidigitation. Spoons are spoons. Spoons are like furniture, indeed are a class of Furniture for our purposes, serving as brute, obvious, domestic reality. Geller's demonstration relies upon this simple reality of spoons; it is precisely because we know spoons don't bend like that, that he is seen as doing something extraordinary. Both Randi and Geller require this conception of spoons. The same goes for science and the supernatural. Science needs procedures (and constructionist, contingent arguments) for dismissing unreality. The supernatural needs the natural; poltergeists move the furniture around, and zombies are the walking un-dead. If it was not for the common sense reality of death and furniture there would be nothing remarkable.

But realism does not rely *only* upon a category of the unreal, against which to define reality. It relies also upon procedures which establish things as real per se. This is Method, a part of both Furniture demonstrations and scientific experiments, and it works like stage magic. Method is offered as transparent, as unconstructive, as merely revealing (in experimental reports its place is the Method section, not the Results section). Examining how Results are substantially produced by Method is to criticize them as artefactual. It is like claiming that the Relativist moved the table, or that Geller cheats. In science and magic, the procedures are displaced from their effects, designed to be transparent, unnoticed, while the findings are left to reveal the world.

Now, the Furniture argument should be seen as operating in a manner which combines stage magic's invisibility of Method and science's minimization of its productive role. Slap the table and, act over, hand gone, the table is merely there, "look, no hands!" -- brute reality. Its design is to leave reality floating there, like the magician's levitated assistant, without visible support. And just as one would enquire into how the magic was done, so we should ask the same of the Furniture argument. Indeed, this is the crucial point. What relativism claims is that there is no reality-producing act, Furniture demonstrations included, that cannot be

examined for how it is produced, that does not rely on Method, that cannot be deconstructed, that does not attend rhetorically to an otherwise possible truth. A convincing demonstration, even hitting a table, is required in just that essentially *persuasive* sense (convincing, demonstration), so that the table is not counted as an illusion (*Is this a table that I see before me*?), a hologram, or whatever.

> Truths are illusions one has forgotten are such, metaphors which are habitual and have lost their sensory force... precisely because of this unconsciousness and this forgetting, [man] arrives at a feeling of truth. (Nietzsche, 1873: 182; cited in Forrester, 1989: 145).

ETHICS, THEOLOGY AND QUIETISM

A common objection to relativism is that it must treat everyone's views as equally valid; that it offers no grounds for caring one way or another, on anything moral, political or factual. Linked to this objection is the argument that relativism therefore contradicts itself (cf. Billig, 1991: 22-6), being caught in a relativist's dilemma that is the equal and opposite of what we have called the realist's dilemma. While realists shoot themselves in the foot as soon as they represent, relativists do so as soon as they argue. To argue for something is to care, to be positioned, which is immediately non-relativist.

But if objective truth and validity are renounced in favour of social process and practical reasoning, then so also must any notion of a commitment to "*equal* validity." Far from ruling out the possibility of justification of a particular view, relativism *insists upon it*. As Smith puts it, "The idea that relativism makes one's moral or political life easy is an especially absurd fantasy of objectivist thought" (Smith, 1988: 166).

Rather than merely defending relativism against accusations of moral dissolution, we assert its *moral and political strength*. Relativism offers an ever available lever of resistance.[25] It is potentially liberating, dangerous, unsettling, with an appeal that is enduringly radical: nothing ever *has to be* taken as merely, obviously, objectively, unconstructedly, true. Reality can only ever be reality-as-known, and therefore, however counterintuitive it may seem, produced by, not prior to, inquiry. For what *counts as* reality is, for any particular item, at least potentially a matter of consensus and disputation. It is *not* obvious exactly where the line should be drawn, between the objectively and the constructedly real, between rocks and quarks, furniture and fascism. A principled questioning of *all truths as claims* is the only assurance; whatever is simply real, if that means anything, will surely survive scrutiny. And those whose major interest in life appears to be the denial of such warmly clothed truths as the ontology of the Holocaust[26] make themselves available, as all describers of the world do, for counter constructions of interest and motive; which in this case, are not difficult to produce.

Those who maintain that their truths are best preserved by protecting them from inquiry are followers of a religious ethic, not a scientific one. Truths become sacred objects, unfit for profane and corrosive inquiry, to be celebrated by incantation and propagated by conversion to the faith. The realists' bottom-line arguments are both forms of incantation and attempts at conversion. They are presented as the points beyond which *inquiry will not be permitted*. We, the "amoral" relativists, are the ones who insist upon the right to inquire and who are thus (*arguably*, of course) the true keepers of the flame of the ethic of science. Realists, as religious conservatives, want inquiry, disputation, argument, contention to ... finally ... CEASE ...

> *... peace ... how peaceful ... how quiet. Now we have won. Much better. All those voices ... stilled. What were all those endless arguments about? We can hardly remember. Now everyone agrees; everyone knows the truth. Which is ... we can hardly remember. It doesn't matter anymore. Nothing seems to matter much anymore. So quiet. Nobody talks - what is there to talk about? Nobody writes - who for? what for? We all agree, we see. We just live our lives and doze and die. And that at least, we all agree, is REAL.*

IMPASSE, DENIAL, ARGUMENT

We have suggested that while realists are, supposedly, compromised by the necessity for representation, relativists are, arguably, equally compromised by the need for argument. Each side effectively rules the other out of court at the outset, and the debate is at an impasse. However (we're in luck!), showing the realism/relativism debate as a kind of tautological impasse is a lot more comfortable for the (frequently negative-istic) relativist than for the (always positive-istic) realist. Relativism can be championed as a foundational critique, a kind of scepticism, a denial of realism, rather than as a positive theory that intends an alternative reality.[27] An impasse could thus be seen as a kind of victory. Though perhaps the realist can claim a similarly Phyrric-seeming "victory" here too; if the critique fails to conquer, why bother with it? A case for bothering can be made by arguing for the positive value of relativism's negativity.

Thus, one relativist move "out of" the impasse is to treat our own "ism" as a purely negative (non)position. Relativists have various ways of dealing with the idea that what we are offering is bogus, being either realism in disguise (the reality of the text, or the objectivity of the social) or else self-refuting (the *tu quoque*: Ashmore, 1989). Rorty's move is to declare himself a "pragmatist" and to resist the "traditional epithet" of "relativist" that objectivists place upon him. Pragmatism is offered not as a positive, alternative account, but as a "purely negative point" (Rorty, 1985: 6). Rorty's move can be understood as a rhetorical effort to escape the self-refutation critique, by denying that he is making any positive

claim. Similarly, Feyerabend's relativistic pronouncements are offered as rhetorical

> ...statements which I, as one member of the tribe of Western intellectuals, present to the rest of the tribe (together with appropriate arguments) to make them doubt the objectivity and, in some forms, also the feasibility of objective truth. (Feyerabend, 1987: 73)

Feyerabend is not shy about this:

> I may use the wrong principles; I may draw the wrong conclusions from them; but I intend to use them as *rhetorical devices*, not as objective foundations of knowledge and argument. (op. cit: 79, emphasis added)

Smith (1988: 150ff) offers a semantic route away from the impasse based on the suggestion that for relativists and realists, the same basic terms (e.g. *reality*) mean different things. She notes that the "relativism" under discussion is frequently not one of her own definition, but an invention of objectivists. Objectivists treat all relativistic statements as inversions of their own position; as denials of reality, leading to the kind of ontological and moral anarchy that on*ly their own assumptions about reality and order would predict*. In other words, anti-relativist critiques tend to be circular. Phoney versions of relativism include "anything goes" (purportedly a mischievous mis-reading of Feyerabend, 1975) and "total subjectivism" (which Smith calls a "sophomorean" version of relativism). Other versions include, as we have noisily stressed, moral/political "quietism": as if analysing how your cake is made means you can't still eat it: or, taking us back to stage magic, as if 'exposing how the thing is done is to suggest that, like the lady sawn in half, it isn't done at all' (Geertz, 1988: 2).

Latour's way out of the impasse is to dissolve the distinction between human and non-human actants. Things can speak for themselves, or be counted as doing so, while persons can speak for others, or be spoken for. Note how Latour's move flirts with another kind of magic, animism, dissolving the basic categories of existence, letting things speak and take part in society.[28] Latour's impasse is not strictly between realists and relativists -- he defends relativism as strongly as he defends realism -- but between realists and "social relativists" like Collins (really social realists) for whom almost every sort of thing is socially constructed *except the processes of social construction* and, on occasion, some bottom-line categories like rocks.

Analysts like Rorty, Feyerabend, Smith, Latour (and Edwards, Ashmore, Potter) prefer to present relativism as a non-position, as critique or scepticism, not as a positive statement opposed to realism. Relativism is offered as a meta-level (or one more step back) epistemology that can include and analyse realism and relativism alike, viewed as *rhetorical practices*.

The idea that relativism is not a positive statement can be tied to the *primacy of*

denial, and of argument. All positive statements orientate to the otherwise possible nature of things. Assertions are denials and *vice versa.* Denial is not an upsetting of reality, a "things fall apart" threat to any possibility of order, but an essential feature of knowledge's orderliness. People do not go around asserting things that are not, or could not be, in doubt; except when they do so rhetorically, as in the case of occasioned appeals to the undeniable, like Death and Furniture arguments. Much of the rhetorical effectiveness of these reality-asserting gestures stems from the implication that relativism, the rhetorical opposition, denies them. The relativist is placed in the absurd position of one who denies the obvious, who has refused to denounce wickedness, who has tripped over the furniture, been made a fool of. We are positioned theatrically like the dupe fooled in the stage magic act, refuted thus, by slapstick (by thumptable), without recourse to argument. But we insist that there is always, or can always be, an argument (cf. Billig, 1987). This text is our argument, dropped, as it were, on the table in response.

CONCLUSION: SHORTHAND, IGNORANCE, RHETORIC

Hitting tables and invoking death are, at best, shorthand; at worst, ignorance; at least, rhetoric. *Shorthand* because they subsume the rhetoric and semiosis of situated actions. *Ignorance* because the way they are deployed against relativism is to deny that subsumed process while relying directly upon it. *Rhetoric* because not only are they rhetorically constructed and deployed, but they remain useful even after deconstruction, as devices that stand emblematically for the whole range of "oh come now" appeals to obviousness and straightforward, unvarnished truth and necessity that all rhetoricians, or so we are told, enjoy. Though realism is excellent rhetoric, maybe the best, in a purely technical or instrumental sense, that cannot be an adequate reason to accept it as a serious intellectual position. In its tropes of Death and Furniture we see a *rhetoric* that refuses to acknowledge its own existence; a *politics* that can claim a critical-radical credibility only by the selective use of its opponents' analytic tools; and a *theology* which is deeply conservative and seeks nothing less than the death of disruptive, disturbing inquiry. While tedium, good taste, political and moral sensibility will properly determine what sorts of given realities are thought worthy of inquiry, those considerations are no grounds for promoting a realist ontology for social science, nor any other science, nor for rejecting relativism. On the contrary, relativism is social science *par excellence*. Its pursuit is a thoroughly edifying contribution to the society which has spawned it.

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[1] "Relativists" is our catch-all term for a variety of labels, some self-ascribed, most not, including (social) constructionists and constructivists, deconstructionists, pragmatists, postmodernists, epistemological (cognitive, epistemic) relativists, subjectivists, sceptics, interpretivists, reflexivists, and, especially, radical or thoroughgoing or extreme versions of any-of-the-above. The family resemblance is a determined (or stubborn) anti-realism.

[2] The "realist" includes the commonsense actor as well as the espouser of a large range of academic realisms from the naive to the sophisticated, and from the Right to the Left; from Eysenck to Bhaskar should sum it up. The objectivist and the rationalist (the latter the favourite target of the sociology of scientific knowledge) are members too. On occasion, some relativists (see note 2) may also occupy this position (see below).

[3] Thus we are dealing with what Collins and Cox call the "commonsense objection" (CSO) to relativism: "It is not so much an 'argument' as a 'psychological obstacle'.... Upholding the relativist view is extremely difficult in the face of day-to-day experience that some things work and others do not, and that there are brute observations about which it does not seem possible to be mistaken.... The CSO is used to outlaw any attempt to push the boundaries of sociological constructivism beyond narrow limits. It ridicules any sociological work which might imply that certain scientific and commonsense facts might be any different, whatever the social scenario" (1976: 431).

[4] For an analysis of some of the other tropes that are used in the rhetorical construction of realism, see Potter (1992).

[5] Since they rely on obviousness and deny the need for discussion, should we call such events "arguments"? Yes, if rhetorical effectivity is a criterion. Like the rhetoric of no rhetoric (Gusfield, 1976) which is used so effectively for writing science, the argument of no argument is also highly persuasive.

[6] See, for versions of the hard case argument in the sociology of scientific knowledge, Ashmore, (1989: 217); Chubin (1982); Collins (1982); Woolgar, (1991).

[7] "Alternation" is the ability to alternate in one's beliefs according to context; an ability which, according to Collins and Yearley (1992), is best developed by a sociological education and is an especially crucial skill of the sociologist of scientific knowledge.

[8] Relativists can pause for a moment here to savour the irony of their recruitment of physics - the high science of matter - on their side. The moment passes, of course, and physics is returned to its proper place as a topic for examination (or deconstruction, if you will), through the exploration of its social processes and rhetorical accomplishments.

[9] We are using footing here in Goffman's (1981) sense, where reports display speakers' participant orientation: showing whether they are the "composer" of the words or merely their "animator", and also whose viewpoint provides the words' origin. This is a participants' practice; there is no obligation. People can opt for confusing these options and there is no epistemological warrant implied by this display.

[10] See, for this new ambition, Collins (1990, 1993).

[11] "Why did you do it, Sir Edmund?" "Because it was there." This form of "thereness" is something quite different from the acultural "thereness" of realism. The mountaineer's remark loads the climbed mountain with enormous cultural significance; it being "there" is a matter of its difference from other mountains, its particular degree of challenge, its importance in mountaineering culture, and so on. Mount Everest is no anonymous piece of rock.

[12]   Some have even claimed that constructionism has mutated into a form of linguistic behaviourism. The definitive readings argument seems to be in the form of a tu quoque (Ashmore, 1989); how can you criticise realism when you have a realist view of texts? Although we have energetically denied this version of of constructionism here and elsewhere, it does have allies in some of the claims of Gilbert and Mulkay (1984; though see Potter and McKinlay, 1989); and some paid up constructionists have made a positive case for discourse as a bottom line reality (Muhlhausler and Harré, 1990).

[13] Ironically, it is not usually the relativist, constructionist or discourse analyst who is to be found entertaining fantastic and impossible descriptions, but the realist, for whom the fear of relativism engenders all sorts of arbitrary descriptive horrors (that do not or did not happen, or which got handled if they did), to be served up as a challenge to relativism. The relativist analyst does not have to deal with inventions such as why a massacre is not called an ice cream factory, or with Jack the Ripper's interpretation of St. Luke (which is Eco's choice), or the much cited ravings of a paranoid schizophrenic, except that somebody is found proclaiming it, whereupon whatever criteria folk (including psychiatrists) have for dealing with preposterous claims will presumably apply. The realists' fantastical descriptions are invented, and/or removed from whatever context of occurrence they would ordinarily be handled in.

[14] We have chosen to concentrate on sociology of scientific knowledge examples to continue a strong theme in our text. However, these sorts of debates are prevalent across the human sciences and especially at the intersection of science, culture and gender studies marked and honoured by "Located Knowledges". Here, for example, is Norris complaining of those foolish postmodernists and literary theorists who have "drifted" into "ultra-relativist" thinking: "Their 'radicalism' has now passed over into a species of disguised apologetics for the socio-political status quo, a persuasion that 'reality' is constituted through and through by meanings, values or discourses that presently compose it, so that nothing could count as effective counter argument.... [It is] a form of extreme epistemological skepticism which reduces everything...to a dead level of suasive or rhetoric effect" (Norris, 1990: 3-4). In a rather similar Death example from social psychology, here is Parker warning of the reactionary dangers of relativism: "The point we need to bear in mind...is that in order to analyse institutions, power and ideology, we need to stop the slide into relativism.... We need some sense of the real to anchor our understanding of the dynamics of discourse. [Those] fascinated by the power of discourse cut loose from any connection with a reality outside texts are becoming the vehicles for the 'radical' expression of a purely pragmatic 'new realism' which has lost any desire to take underlying structures of oppression and resistance seriously" (Parker, 1992: 22, 40-1). For a refreshing argument laying out some of the positive as well as the ambivalent political possibilities of postmodernism, see Hutcheon (1989).

[15] We might, respectfully, term this vengeful impulse 'the Rushdie effect'.

[16]   For an analysis of realism as rhetoric in the context of racist discourse see Wetherell and Potter (1992, ch. 7). "Life isn't fair" is a quotation from Joan Ashmore (Malcolm's mum – personal communication).

[17] For an examination and exemplification of reflexive positions in social science, and particularly the sociology of scientific knowledge, see Ashmore (1989) and Woolgar (1988b).

[18] See Wetherell and Potter (1992, ch. 4).

[19]   This is one of the principal features of a "discursive action" approach to psychological topics such as memory and causal attributional reasoning: see Edwards and Potter (1992, 1993).

[20]   There is a large and varied ethnomethodological and constructionist literature on this topic. Notable examples are Atkinson (1978), Sudnow (1967), Harré (1993) and the Bible.

[21]   Kling, as we have earlier noted, is a self-styled "reconstructive interpretivist" whose brave attempt to go as far down the relativist path as he decently can, is touching (Kling 1992). Hard-hearted Grint and Woolgar, however, see fit to cruelly spurn his noble efforts at rapprochement - and, forced to the point, Kling has no option but to try a bottom-line, Combined-Death-and-Furniture argument. Will Grint and Woolgar respond? Now read on...

[22]   See Gilbert and Mulkay (1984); Potter and Wetherell, (1987).

[23] For a set of analyses of experimental practices in science, see Gooding, Pinch and Schaffer (1989; cf. Pickering, 1992). For a study of the stage-magical character of debunking experimentation (i.e., that designed to show the absence or nonexistence of phenomena), see Ashmore's (1993b) examination of R.W. Wood's social destruction of Blondlot's N-rays. Wood's (1904; Seabrook 1941: 237-9) version of what Blondlot did in demonstrating N-rays is that it was essentially a bit of stage magic, an illusion produced with props; Ashmore's inversion of what Wood did is the same, a bit of theatrical stage magic, placing and removing the props to fool the unwitting dupe, while the audience applauds, having nothing to go on in either case but the unchecked claims of the protagonist/author.

[24] Melvin Pollner, in his analysis of reality disjunctures (1987), has a nicely appropriate example from Milton Rokeach's *The Three Christs of Ypsilanti* (1964):
> Leon... claimed to be able to perform miracles. He had once commanded a table to lift itself off the floor - and it had obeyed. When I expressed disbelief, he volunteered to repeat the miracle for me. He...picked out a massive table...turned his back to it and...commanded it to lift itself.
> > "I don't see the table lifting."
> > "Sir, that is because you do not see cosmic reality."
> (Pollner, 1987: 76, citing Rokeach 1964: 75)

Melvin notes that Leon's reply to Milton sets up two possible forms of reality disjuncture. First, and most "disjunctive" is epistemological incommensurability where each party is the mundane reasoner (or realist) who proposes that the other, who claims to see differently, must be an incompetent see-er. Second, and less problematic is a kind of Schutzian multiple reality version: "[If] Leon is proposing the existence of an extraordinary realm [of cosmic reality] to which Rokeach does not have access, he is also recognizing that the table in the mundane realm is on the ground" (op. cit.: 162).

[25] Cf. Billig (1987); Billig et al. (1988).

[26] As Latour has argued, "If the account 'the Holocaust took place' is in danger of being dismantled, who will defend it best? Those who thump on their table and endlessly repeat that since it has really taken place it cannot be rationally denied by anyone in his right mind? Or those who will look for which resources to bring in, which powers to convoke, maybe which society to rebuild in order for this statement to remain indisputable for a bit longer?... You cannot have truth on one side and the mixed crowd of allies on the other.... Longing for the naked truth is like longing for the purely spiritual: they are both dangerously close to nothingness. I prefer truth warmly clothed, incarnated and strong" (1989: 114-5).

[27] See, for example, the kind of "Socratic reflexivity" advocated by Gouldner: "Not preaching any positive doctrine, the Socratic will not exchange one unexamined life for another, and he therefore subverts both the present and the antipresent. Being the critic of all positive doctrines, searching out their limits, the Socratic is necessarily suspect in the eyes of all who offer (and all who ache for) a positive doctrine. In the end, then, the establishment and those who aspire to succeed it - in other words both the old and young - will accuse him of 'poisoning the mind of the youth.' Thus Socratics are, and are made, outlaws" (1976: xvi).

[28] Cf. Woolgar (1985) on the possibility of a sociology of machines; Johnson (1988) on the work that doors and automatic door closers do; Latour (1992) on something remarkably similar; Ashmore (1993a) on the behaviour modification of a catflap. See also, Ashmore (forthcoming) for a collection of empirical and theoretic accounts of agency and its ascription. For critiques of "panagentism", see Collins and Yearley (1992) and Schaffer (1991).