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There is a concerning development occurring in today's libraries stemming from a complex intellectual history and fed by contemporary identity culture and politics. This is the increasing hold that a class of ideas is having on the underpinnings of librarianship: namely, those ideas commonly styled 'postmodern.' The effect that postmodernist thinking has had on libraries is threefold: It gives the profession a theoretical stance about knowledge that is unfit for accomplishing the emancipatory aims of the library; undermines the pursuance of libraries as a public good; indulges an unreasonable skepticism about authority in general.

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A CRITIQUE OF THE POSTMODERNIST PROJECT IN LIBRARIES

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Suppose we wonder whether we should trust the deliverances of our basic epistemic competences. If those are indeed our basic competences, then in order properly to satisfy our curiosity we will inevitably rely on one or more of them. So, either we squelch our curiosity or we will have to fall into the circularity or regress to which the skeptic objects.¹

-Ernest Sosa

¹ Sosa, E. The Virtue Epistemologist. *3:AM Magazine*. Retrieved from <http://www.3ammagazine.com/3am/the-virtue-epistemologist/>

1.1 Introduction

The linguist J. R. Ross recounts a confrontation that occurred between William James and an old lady immediately after James had given a lecture concerning the structure of the cosmos:

““Your theory that the sun is the center of the solar system, and the earth is a ball which rotates around it has a very convincing ring to it, Mr. James, but it's wrong. I've got a better theory,’ said the little old lady.

‘And what is that, madam?’ Inquired James politely.

‘That we live on a crust of earth which is on the back of a giant turtle,’

Not wishing to demolish this absurd little theory by bringing to bear the masses of scientific evidence he had at his command, James decided to gently dissuade his opponent by making her see some of the inadequacies of her position.

‘If your theory is correct, madam,” he asked, “what does this turtle stand on?’

‘You're a very clever man, Mr. James, and that's a very good question,’ replied the little old lady, ‘but I have an answer to it. And it is this: The first turtle stands on the back of a second, far larger, turtle, who stands directly under him.’

‘But what does this second turtle stand on?’ persisted James patiently.

To this the little old lady crowed triumphantly. ‘It's no use, Mr. James – it's turtles all the way down.’” (Ross 1968).

There is a concerning development occurring in today's libraries stemming from a complex intellectual history and fed by contemporary identity culture and politics. This is the increasing hold that a class of ideas is having on the underpinnings of librarianship: namely, those ideas commonly styled ‘postmodern.’ The effect that postmodernist thinking has had on libraries is threefold: It gives the profession a theoretical stance about knowledge that is unfit for accomplishing the emancipatory aims of the library; undermines the pursuance of libraries as a public good; indulges an unreasonable skepticism about authority in general.

Winnowing down what is meant by the word “postmodern” is a notoriously arduous task. The term is rife with confusing, ambiguous, and often contradictory conceptualizations, thus the usage of the term here deserves some preliminary attention. In addition, there should be no illusion that the definition attempted here is exhaustive of the myriad ways in which the term is employed. With those caveats in mind, we will say that postmodernism is the delegitimization of totalizing concepts through a method of genealogical/archaeological deconstruction. A totalizing concept is one that universally applies, whereas genealogical deconstruction is the taking apart of a concept to show the historical relatedness of that concept. What needs to be said about the postmodernist stance concerning knowledge, at this point, is that it is marked by constructivism and relativism. Postmodernism is constructivist because it views all knowledge as being built from the particular. Postmodernism is relativist because it holds that those generative particulars are truth conditions for that constructed knowledge.

That being said, librarians are often very pragmatic and act in accordance with best practices that are empirically determined. While it would be fair enough to merely parse out and develop their implied theoretical stances to check for internal logical consistency, the result would probably appear alien to librarians and have little to no impact on their professional practice. However, librarians do avail themselves of postmodernist jargon and outcomes. For this reason, it is more effective to consider postmodernism as a project that implies a position, but a project that librarians have picked up for direction and realization of desirable outcomes—outcomes that they believe are necessarily concatenated with this postmodernist position. This paper will try to show that librarians are better served in achieving their goals by abandoning this postmodernist project and

position; not because the outcomes to which they've aspired are not desirable—in fact, they are—but because the positive position of postmodernism cannot support those outcomes. A dedication to the postmodernist project does not support the efforts of librarians that have espoused such dedication, but rather undermines them. This paper will also show that a commitment to the postmodernist project will undermine the idea of libraries as a public good, as well as the futility of any strictly postmodernist rejoinder—as it harbors a hopelessly skeptical attitude towards knowledge.

1.2 Literature Review

Understanding postmodernism, and what taking it on as a project in libraries might mean, requires this paper constructs a genealogy of its own; one that deconstructs postmodernism itself and reveals its dialogical roots. Postmodernism develops from dissatisfaction with the physicalism that dominates the western mind for much of the twentieth century. However, what is it that postmodernism denies? Modernism, yes, but the Cartesian dualism (that there is a real distinction between the mind and body) that held for much of the modern period breaks apart by the twentieth century - no doubt due to the development of monistic metaphysics (that there is only one substance), but most expressly due to the rise of physicalism (that there is only one substance and it is physical), which is fueled by the great progresses of science during this period.

The French philosopher and mathematician René Descartes is notably responsible for developing analytic geometry at the beginning of the modern period. Analytic geometry expresses material space mechanically in the mathematics of coordinate planes. This trend is indelibly modernist as it seeks a reductive explanation of reality. Descartes fears a solipsistic skepticism though, and he draws a sharp separation between physical space and the mind to effectively inoculate against this hyperbolic skepticism. The mind, Descartes says, is an irreducible substance, incorrigible and inexplicable via reduction. What he created was a mystery about what the mind is, if it is not connected to the physical world (Descartes 1996). David Hume, the Scottish philosopher, is notably

responsible for ushering in a skepticism concerning the status of human knowledge in these “substantial” considerations. Hume did this by drawing a distinction between “matters of fact” and “relations of ideas”. Matters of fact are empirical and unable to be verified until an observer looks at the world. Alternatively, relations of ideas are true by definition and require no observation (Hume 2014). German philosopher Immanuel Kant articulates this further, and more recognizably labels, the distinction as between the *a priori* (analytic) and *a posteriori* (synthetic). The world is mediated through the experience that each individual has. Objective reality only impinges itself upon the individual *qua* these constructed experiences or is only objective insofar as it provides a benchmark against which to judge the accuracy of those experiences (Kant 2007).

By the time that twentieth century physicalism arises its viability becomes an enquiry into the metaphysics of the mind. In other words, the greatest challenge to the physicalist project is whether it can account for human mentation. Ryle’s *The Concept of Mind* rings in the physicalist coup d’état with a reverberating denouncement of dualism as the “myth of the ghost in the machine” (Ryle 1949). What is known as philosophical behaviorism results: the view that mental states can be exhaustively explained solely in behavioral terms - or at least, dispositional criteria to behave in such and such a way. The inability of philosophical behaviorism to actually provide complete indefeasible sets of behavioral criteria for any single mental state, and the lack of predictive power it has within the fledgling cognitive sciences, motivates twentieth century physicalism to seek an expression with stronger applicability to these burgeoning sciences of the brain.

Armstrong, Place, and Smart advance a type of reductive physicalism that numerically or causally identifies mental states with brain states, which allows for the scientification of

the mind (Armstrong 1981; Place 1956; and Smart 1959). Even though identity or causal theories of mind sidestep many objections, especially since it only makes *a posteriori* claims about relationships between mental states and brain states rather than *a priori* ones, it has the issue of not being generalizable to functionally similar, but non-identical, brains (e.g., the identity theorist's claim that pain just is the firing of c-fibers in the brain will exclude any functionally similar, but non-identical "brains" from possibly being in pain - despite how much these unfortunate creatures' behaviors might indicate that they are indeed experiencing pain!). The functionalists, taking inspiration from computer science, provide an escape from this last objection by the tokenization of mental states, so that any sort of matter that has the right functional state - or nests of functional states - can be ascribed the corresponding mental state (Lycan 1987). The brain is the hardware on which the mind operates like software—moving from one functional state to the next. Functionalism has both the advantageous and problematic characteristic of being dedicated to functional questions. It is beneficial because much is learned by the study of functional states in brains and their correlations to mental states. It is problematic because functional questions do not exhaust all the questions there are concerning the mind. An explanation of *qualia*, or what Thomas Nagel calls "what it is like," is inexplicable via functional inquiry alone (Nagel 1974). Also open to this criticism are the eliminative materialists, like Paul and Patricia Churchland, who argue for the elimination of the mental altogether, or at least, the elimination of mental concepts originating from "folk psychologies" (Churchland 1981; Churchland 1989; Feyerabend 1963; Stich 1983). The postmodernist sees this inability, or refusal, to give a "complete" account of the

phenomenal character of mind as a grave indictment of the entire project of twentieth century physicalism.

Postmodernists seize upon the limits of physicalism in an attempt to motivate a general skepticism about the universalizability of large overarching concepts in science (e.g., objectivity). Lyotard has best, and most succinctly, put into words the impetus for the postmodernist position toward knowledge:

“Science has always been in conflict with narratives. Judged by the yardstick of science, the majority of them prove to be fables. But to the extent that science does not restrict itself to stating useful regularities and seeks the truth, it is obliged to legitimate the rules of its own game... Simplifying to the extreme, I define postmodernism as incredulity toward metanarratives. This incredulity is undoubtedly a product of progress in the sciences: but that progress in turn presupposes it” (Lyotard 1984).

Metanarratives are exactly those universal guiding principles of science, and exactly what the postmodernist is suspicious of. The French intellectual Michel Foucault finds through sketching out the historical relatedness of the branches of science how the structures of authority and power, structure people’s lives in a “grid,” as it were, and are responsible for forging their views on the status of knowledge—A person’s “truth claims” are historically explicable and rely on the tools for knowing that are given to them by those authorities in power (Foucault 2003; Hacking 2003). Richard Rorty, an American pragmatist, contends that there are no universal standards for why one should choose one system of knowing over another. Much the same way as Lyotard claims that science must “legitimate the rules of its own game,” Rorty is challenging physicalists on the validity of their epistemic system given that their justificational beliefs are self-supposing (Lyotard 1984; Rorty 1982). Thomas Kuhn, capitalizing on the works of Paul Feyerabend and Michael Polanyi, give the postmodernists their working picture of science, as an

institution continuously undergoing paradigmatic revolutions. Kuhn's contention is that at any point in time science will view its contents through the lens of the dominant paradigm of that time (Kuhn 2012). LeMoine views these postmodernist developments concerning the status of knowledge as something that should be welcomed and adopted by librarians. He claims that the consequences of a postmodern library are plurality, inclusivity, and the eradication of marginalizing dominant narratives (LeMoine 2012).

1.3 Methods

This paper will qualitatively examine the mission statements of libraries to look for indicators that the postmodernist project is adopted by libraries before discussing LeMoine's claim that postmodern libraries are desirable. Logically there will be necessary or sufficient conditions for adoption of the postmodernist project in libraries. A sufficient condition would allow for the granting that adoption has indeed occurred. A necessary condition would allow that the lack of the condition shows a lack of the adoption. Linguistic indicators in the mission statements of libraries will serve as qualitative surrogates for these logical conditions. If indicators are present that are surrogates for sufficient conditions, then the adoption of the postmodernist project will be granted. Otherwise, if they are surrogates for necessary conditions, then the lack of adoption cannot be said. Achieving the decomposition of library mission statements into their basic aspects, which can then be said to be or not to be indicators, requires the study uses textual analysis of the content in mission statements. Furthermore, this kind of analysis will allow flexibility in distinguishing the categorical criteria for these indicators and make it more natural to interpret as such. Since no other persons are involved in this particular analysis of documents, only the author will have a role in conducting the study. The reason for looking at academic research libraries specifically is that the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) keeps a public list of all member institutions, making for a

complete sampling frame to sample from. Only one mission statement found containing these indicators is needed to show adoption, or lack of lack of adoption, of the postmodernist project. Therefore, convenience sampling is the most sensible choice for sampling. Mission statements are reliable sampling units because they are official public documents that a library uses to self-impose values and roles, guide collection, user service, and knowledge management practices, and provide a means for transparency and accountability. Sample units will be taken from the sampling frame by convenience, more specifically, those ARL member libraries that have easily accessible mission statements. Access of the mission statements will be via each sampled ARL member's website. The text of the mission statements will be copied into a simple text document to normalize their formats and prepare them for textual analysis. The convenience sampling used makes a weak case for the representativeness of the sample, even in a narrow community like ARL academic research libraries, but any presence of these indicators will suffice for the purposes of this paper. In addition, since the sampling frame includes only those libraries that are ARL member libraries, the case for generalizability is weak. Moreover, the use of convenience sampling limits the study to those libraries that have made their mission statements readily accessible on their websites. Despite these limitations, the hope is that readers will be able to recognize the applicability to their own practice and experience. Choosing to do a non-invasive study minimizes ethical risks and considerations. Mission statements are public, so issues of privacy and confidentiality are marginal.

1.5 Interpretation

Librarians seem to be striving for diversity, inclusivity, and the eradication of marginalizing dominant narratives in their libraries. These goals indicate the necessary conditions for the adoption of the postmodernist project. This means two things: that these are certainly goals that librarians have articulated for themselves, and that they could be adopting the postmodernist project to strive for these goals. This paper will not be arguing against having these emancipatory goals, as they are, at least, *prima facie* praiseworthy goals for librarians to have for their libraries. However, is Lemoine correct in assuming that the adoption of the postmodernist project will support, or even allow, the realization of these outcomes?

Boghossian's book *Fear of Knowledge* is a sustained critique of the postmodernist view on knowledge. He presents an epistemic dilemma for the postmodernist. Either they are putting forward a view of knowledge that is self-contradictory, or they fall into a series of infinite regresses. Either way, the postmodernist is reasoning fallaciously (Boghossian 2006). This epistemic dilemma can be made clear by considering the following hypothetical case. Imagine Shana, a bright young freshman who has approached the reference desk for research help on a project for her undergraduate history course. She asks the librarian for assistance researching the events of the Second World War. Specifically, she is interested in the Shoah and would like guidance selecting books on

the history of the topic. John the reference librarian, a well-meaning postmodernist, is aware that there are a number of different positions on this history. Believing that there is no historical truth, let alone scientific or mathematical truths, he advises that Shana look at all the various narratives available—including the works of neo-Nazi “Holocaust deniers.” Shana smartly asks John why he would recommend reading the works of neo-Nazis when she wants to look at the various authoritative sources on the subject. John replies that there is no such authority to be had and that he will not censor or exclude the works of neo-Nazis as having just as legitimate of positions as any other concerning the history of the Shoah. He makes the statement he is most proud of making: “Who am I to judge?” Shana asks John why he is skeptical of the inequality in the veracity of these historical positions. John tells Shana that each historical position is completely constructed and relative to the person’s perspective; there are no objective facts in the matter, so he cannot see why one could be true at the expense of any other. “But, then isn’t it an objective fact that relative to any individual perspective that what it constructs as a true historical position is true?” asks Shana. John quickly rejoins, “No, that what each perspective constructs as true is true relative to that perspective would have to be yet again constructed and relative to a perspective.” “And that,” asks Shana, “is that then an objectively true fact.” John has fallen into Boghossian’s epistemic dilemma. He must admit either that some objective fact exists or his explanations will continue to regress *ad infinitum*. This thought experiment is useful for a couple of reasons. First, it shows how the postmodernist’s view about knowledge is hopelessly skeptical. John can never admit to an objective fact. Second, it shows how the emancipatory outcomes aimed at by the adoption of the postmodernist project can actually backfire. John is unable to say why a

neo-Nazi denier of the Shoah is wrong about history, furthering the marginalization of the Jewish people and giving authority and platform to a hate fueled conspiracy. I hope that John is not responsible for collection management.

Descartes shows that, as thinking beings, there is an inability to be skeptical about the fact of having thoughts (Descartes 1996). This inability to step outside of one's thoughts similarly applies to thinking about objective reality, if the criterion of certainty is relaxed from Descartes' religious demand for absolute certainty. Thomas Nagel argues that even though scientific knowledge might be muddled beyond the point of unquestionable certainty, it is impossible for one to think outside of an objective framework (Nagel 1997). Think of how an argument against objective reality would even work. Would the proponent of the position offer up supporting premises that are true? If they are only true from their perspective than communication has broken down. To make an argument there have to be publicly accessible reasons that the audience to the argument can grasp. What can they grasp, if the conclusion of the argument is true? Worse yet, how is the conclusion true—since nothing can actually be true? What is left is at best a series of guttural utterances; no truth or validity to be had from them. The postmodernist will complain that nonetheless an account of the metaphysics of truth will be unobtainable. However, a minimalist account of truth is possible without recourse to Platonic forms or innate ideas. The truth of any particular proposition consists simply in its being the case (Blackburn 2005). Questioning what truth is, in itself, seems to be yet another case of a category mistake. The question seems to be a good one because the form of the question is recognizable and sparks the intuition that it is a legitimate question. However, it is like the foreign student who has been promised that he will be shown the university, but after

seeing the library, residential halls, and classrooms asks where the university is that he been promised to see (Ryle 1949).

It might yet be helpful to consider the notion of objective truth to be like a line. Engineers use lines all of the time in the construction of buildings, but they never see a line. They can only try to get to closer and closer approximations of a line. The soundness of their buildings are improved by better approximations, but they will never achieve a line in its absolute form; they can only remove the perturbations they discover in their attempts to construct buildings with lines. The notion of the line, like the notion of objective truth needn't be obtainable with absolute certainty to remain essential and important to human activities.

Despite concluding that the position implied by the postmodernist project is unfit for the undertaking of the emancipatory aims of libraries, and the ineffectiveness of any stringently postmodernist reply, also the postmodernist position will effectively undermine the notion of libraries as a public good. The notion of the public good comes from liberal political theory. Liberal political theory originates from the rise of post-monarchical democratic politics. Before liberal political theory and after the feudal politics of Europe exists a political space that was dominated by mercantilism. That is, that the monarch's role in politics is that of the benevolent leader of the people. The monarch looks after the good of society through regulation of domestic markets, foreign trade and other national interests. Liberal political theory removes the monarch from this role and places the people in this position. Self-rule by the people of a state though requires that the people are sufficiently informed and that they have been properly educated, so as not to be swayed by political movements that they have not critically

chosen for themselves and on which they vote. A democratic society must provide the means to this end, if a true democracy is to be sustained. For adult citizens this means the open access to libraries that act as branches of the national system of education (D'Angelo 2006). When libraries take on the postmodern project, they are admitting to being unable to adjudicate the quality of knowledge. Indeed, it is easy to re-conceptualize knowledge as merely information that serves no meaningful educational purpose in a democratic society when the postmodernist view on knowledge is taken on fully. A postmodern library will only be able to mirror the expressed needs of its community, and it will not be able to provide for greater collective needs. It also allows for the commodification of information by contemporary capitalist markets. What is lost is a public place for civic engagement in politics; this loss is filled by the reassurance of superficial consumerist commodities.

1.6 Conclusion

This paper has tried to show that librarians are mistaken in taking up the postmodernist project in their libraries, if they are so doing. It gives the profession a theoretical stance about knowledge that is unfit for accomplishing the emancipatory aims of the library; undermines the pursuance of libraries as a public good; indulges an unreasonable skepticism about authority in general. This paper only looked at mission statements and discovered that it cannot be ruled out that at least some libraries are taking on this postmodernist project. However, more work needs to be done. This author suggests that collection management policies be looked at for indicators that are surrogates for the necessary or sufficient conditions of adoption of the postmodernist project. Conducting interviews with librarians would be especially helpful in teasing out the views about knowledge that librarians have, as well as whether they are effectively postmodernist in their nature. This author hopes that this paper will serve as a succinct warning against too easy of an acceptance of the postmodernist project in libraries, as well as a call for further debate by librarians concerning their views about knowledge and the impacts of those views on their professional practice and society at large.

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