Obscurantism in Academic Writing: What It Is and Why It Is Bad

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Introduction

The American analytic philosopher John Searle once asked the French postmodernist Michel Foucault the following pointed question: "Why do you write so badly?" Searle respected Foucault as a thinker but thought that his writing was often unclear and occasionally obscure. Foucault responded to the question with candid self-awareness: "In France, you have to have 10 percent incomprehensible. Otherwise, people won't think it's deep; they won't think you're a profound thinker." In other words, the textual obscurity was a deliberate and purposeful choice. Searle was astonished by that answer. He conveyed his astonishment to another difficult Frenchman and friend of his, the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Could it really be true that Parisian academics were injecting some significant amount of jargon, vagueness, ambiguity, and misdirection into their prose for the sake of bamboozling their readers? Bourdieu's answer could hardly be misunderstood: "It's worse than 10 percent—more like 20 percent."[1]

To say that a piece of writing is obscure is not necessarily to accuse its author of *obscurantism*, defined by Viktor Ivanković (2016, 531) as "the deliberate exercise of making one's text opaque for the purposes of deceiving the readership in various ways." The obscurantist "abuses the reader's natural sense of curiosity and interpretive charity" by "setting up a game of verbal smoke and mirrors to suggest depth and insight where none exists" (Buekens and Boudry 2014, 126). This is the charge to which, if Searle's story is true, Foucault ought to plead guilty.[2] In addition to such willful artifice, obscure writing may also be the result of carelessness and perhaps even an unconscious unwillingness to expose one's ideas to criticism and possible refutation—after all, only arguments that are clearly stated can be clearly refuted. I will get back to this point.

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[1] Searle recounts this story in different places. My reference here is an audio recording from a lecture of his (2012).

[2] Incidentally, the story illustrates that obscurantism is not an all-or-nothing deal. According to Searle, real insight shone through and frequently dissipated Foucault's conceptual smokescreen. I tend to agree with that assessment.

As a reader, it is good to develop an eye for needlessly difficult writing so that one does not waste one's time on, for example, the psychoanalytic verbiage of Jacques Lacan. As a writer, it is good to develop a sense of what makes for obscure writing so that one can work to avoid it. However, when one looks up how to recognize such writing, one is given only limited help. Among the telltale signs are supposed to be the following: *Lots of jargon*—but jargon is essential to many academic disciplines. *A lack of clarity*—but how would one know that the problem is not with one's own ability to comprehend the material? *A lack of any actual argument*—but how does one distinguish a merely apparent from an actual argument? There are better tips out there, such as to be wary of texts that seem assertive rather than argumentative and to look out for equivocating uses of language. But even these tips can be hard to translate into reading practice. I will therefore use this short article to lay out what I believe to be five typical and *recognizable* characteristics of obscure—and especially of obscurantist—writing.

I do not claim any expertise in diagnosing obscurantism, if it is possible to envision an expertise of this kind. I claim only to have spent some significant time and effort slogging through difficult texts that ultimately do not repay the reader's interest. But the reader of this piece should not be made to rely blindly on my conclusions, so I will also attempt to explain what it is about the particular characteristics I identify that makes for obscure writing. In doing so, I will draw on arguments and examples by other exasperated interpreters. Their entries in the reference list below will double as suggestions for further reading on this topic.

Five characteristics of obscure writing

1: *The truistic/radical shuffle.* Let us return to Searle and his weariness with certain Parisian intellectuals. In an essay on what he takes to be some common misunderstandings in literary theory, Searle takes Derrida to task for the following sophistical maneuver: "In deconstructionist writing in general and in Derrida in particular," he claims, there is

> a certain straining of the prose, an urge to achieve a rhetorical effect which might be described as the move from the exciting to the banal and back again. The way it works is this: Derrida advances some astounding thesis, for example, writing came before speaking, nothing exists outside of texts, meanings are undecidable. When challenged, he says "You have misunderstood me, I only meant such and such," where such-and-such is some well-known platitude. Then when the platitude is acknowledged, he assumes that its acknowledgement constitutes an acceptance of the original exciting thesis … [An] example … is his claim that nothing exists outside of texts. "*Il n'y a pas*

de hors-texte." Here is what he now says about it: "'*Il n'y a pas de hors-texte*' means nothing else: there is nothing outside contexts" (LI 136). So the original preposterous thesis that there is nothing outside of texts is now converted into the banality that everything exists in some context or other. (1994, 664–665)

This move—advancing a strong claim, and then substituting a weaker one at opportune times—is sometimes called a "motte-and-bailey fallacy."[3] I prefer instead the term "truistic/radical shuffle," which was coined for the same phenomenon by the literary scholar Joseph Carroll. As explained by him, it involves

> the blending of or shifting back and forth between statements that are, on the one hand radically absurd and, on the other hand, blandly truistic. By finding a level of generality in which the two kinds of statement merge into each other, rhetoricians can use radical absurdity to invest truism with the delusory appearance of substantive argument and can use truism to invest radical absurdity with that of cogency. (1995, 56)

Here is a typical case: A theorist declares that scientific findings are "socially constructed," and the idea seems to be that scientists are in the business not of discovering facts about the world but of making them up. Such a radical claim is bound to be challenged. When challenged, and especially when presented with a scientific finding that seems agreeable, the theorist will retreat to a platitude. This platitude may be that scientists choose to investigate certain things and not others, or that they sometimes come up with new ways of categorizing things, or that they could have chosen

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[3] A similar charge was leveled against Derrida when in 1992 he was about to receive a special recognition by the University of Cambridge. Twenty prominent philosophers and other academics signed off on the following complaint: "Many have been willing to give … Derrida the benefit of the doubt, insisting that language of such depth and difficulty of interpretation must hide deep and subtle thoughts indeed. When the effort is made to penetrate it, however, then it becomes clear, to us at least, that, where coherent assertions are being made at all, *these are either false or trivial*" (quoted by Davis 2020, 37; emphasis added).

It is remarkable how many thinkers have noted something like this pattern in obscurantists (e.g., Kukla 2000, x). Here is Karl Popper: "What I called the cardinal sin above … is simply talking hot air, professing a wisdom we do not possess. The recipe is: tautologies and trivialities seasoned with paradoxical nonsense. Another recipe is: write down some scarcely comprehensible pomposity and add trivialities from time to time" (1996, 86). Consider also Daniel Dennett's introduction of the term *deepity*, which names "a proposition that seems both important and true—and profound—but that achieves this effect by being ambiguous" (2013, 56).

some other standard of measurement than the one that they actually used. Some such truism is then invoked as the real sense in which scientific facts are "socially constructed."[4]

An infamous example of this particular kind of truistic/radical shuffle was the philosopher of science Bruno Latour's dismissal of the claim, attributed to French scientists in the 1970s, that pharaoh Ramses II died of tuberculosis. How, asked Latour, could the ancient pharaoh have died of a bacillus that was only discovered thousands of years later—in 1882, to be exact? This claim "should strike us as an anachronism of the same caliber as if we had diagnosed his death as having been caused by a Marxist upheaval, or a machine gun, or a Wall Street crash" (2000, 248). Did it not imply, astonishingly, that "Koch's bacillus may travel in time" (2000, 249)? The way to answer Latour's searching questions, of course, is to draw a distinction between a discovery and an invention: Koch discovered, but did not invent (or "construct"), tuberculosis. Something can well exist and work in the world without having been previously discovered.

I want to be fair to Latour. He was certainly smart enough to anticipate this objection although he failed plainly to address it. What he really meant to say, as one might also infer from some of his other work, was something like this: *We should not assume that what it is and what it means to suffer from tuberculosis in the world of modern science is anything like what it was and what it meant in ancient Egypt.* This point, however, is not very deep or difficult to grasp. To remedy these intellectual shortcomings of the point, Latour dressed it up in such a way that the resulting discussion, as Sokal and Bricmont (1999, 97) point out, "oscillates between extreme banalities and blatant falsehoods." He is therefore far from innocent of any subsequent "misunderstanding."

Finally, Fredric Jameson declares that "the visual is *essentially* pornographic." That seems wrong: I can look at things with interests other than sexual pleasure in mind. But Jameson goes on in an apparent attempt to clarify matters:

> [this] is to say that it has its end in rapt, mindless fascination; thinking about its attributes becomes an adjunct to that, if it is unwilling to betray its object; while the most austere films necessarily draw their energy from the attempt to repress their own excess (rather than from the more thankless effort to discipline the viewer).

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[4] A measured and generally forthright version of such constructivism appears in Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962). However, even Kuhn occasionally makes statements of the sort I am criticizing here, especially in the form of several claims to the effect that new scientific outlooks, or "paradigms," make it so that the scientists who adopt them "live in a different world." There is a figurative sense in which this statement is true (scientists' view of a phenomenon changes) and a literal sense in which it is false (the phenomenon itself changes). Kuhn could be clearer about which sense he has in mind.

> Pornographic films are thus only the potentiation of films in general, which ask us to stare at the world as though it were a naked body. (2011, 1)

The statement is really about films, then. To the extent that this explication holds any meaning, it seems to suggest that films in general are *like* pornography in that they provide certain sensuous pleasures. Sure they do: striking compositions, beautiful vistas, heart-pounding stunts. But that basic observation is a far cry from the radical claim that all films are "*essentially*" pornographic.

Look out for the truistic/radical shuffle and other equivocating uses of language, and always ask yourself whether seemingly radical claims are advanced in a forthright and consistent way. If not, there may be no need to take them very seriously.

2: *False paradox*. Depending on whom you ask, the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus was either obscurely profound or profoundly obscure. One important reason for his apparent obscurity, or profundity, was his fondness of paradoxical aphorisms, such as "the road up and down is the same," and "into the same river we step and do not step," and "sea is the purest and most polluted water." Paradoxical statements like these are in a sense inherently thought provoking. They challenge the reader to find some way of interpreting or contextualizing the statement that resolves the paradox.[5] Or they suggest that one of our most basic rules of inference—that contradiction is a sign of error—may be deeply misguided. In some Christian thought, the claim that God is both a Unity and a Trinity is supposed to be a profound truth of revelation rather than a logical mishap.

Since Heraclitus, many philosophers and mystics have found it useful to pose deep questions or characterize fundamental existence in terms of a paradox. William Blake, for example, asks how one and the same god could possibly have created both the gentle lamb and the fearsome "Tyger" (2008, 38). There is nothing necessarily wrong with making such paradoxical observations, especially in the name of poetic license. The world really can seem significantly self-contradictory. However, paradoxical profundity is often bought too cheaply. It can be made to present factual trivialities as deep insights. Consider the observation that certain tropes that originated in horror fiction and film can now also be found in other kinds of popular culture. The horror scholar Matt Hills makes this fact out as an italics-emphasized logical paradox: "*the horror genre is not where it is*" (2005, 6). In truth, however, there is nothing remotely paradoxical about cultural and fictional borrowings. If there were, no fictional genre known to me would be where it is.

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[5] Heraclitus actually resolved the last of the three quoted paradoxes. He did so by means of a relativistic interpretation: Sea water is simultaneously pure and polluted because it is "*for fish* drinkable and healthy, *for men* undrinkable and harmful" (Graham 2021; emphasis added).

Commonly, the false paradox shows up in verbal and argumentative tangles that imply that there is some significant way of resolving the paradox (which, for whatever reason, the author does not bother to spell out). Emilia Angelova tells us that "the transcendental subject" in Immanuel Kant's philosophy "is not at all the identity of a personal consciousness, as Deleuze wants to suggest, but rather the prototypical transcendental object = X—the differential limit through which the field and its quasi-cause—the Thing (here, homologous with the real)—is constituted and regulated in the repetition of a difference *that is not identical with itself*" (2006, 199; emphasis added). In this sentence, it is difficult enough to discern what the cited "difference" could amount to without the suggestion that it is somehow different from itself. The purported paradox remains unresolved, and it seems fair to conclude that it is a meaningless contrivance.

Perhaps the most common variant of the false paradox splits the difference with the truistic/radical shuffle. It takes the form of confident pronouncements that may not be fully paradoxical, but that are so counterintuitive that they still call out for some special and believable interpretation, which the reader is then left to supply: "Truth," declares Lacan, "has the structure of fiction" (1992, 12). And, "*Woman* does not exist" (1999, 7). And, "There's no such thing as a sexual relationship" (quoted by Reinhard 2017, xi). Also, "There is *no* woman who *is not* castrated" (quoted by Reinhard 2017, xiii). Such characteristic statements certainly seem expressive of an elusive significance. Consequently, bewildered Lacanians try to make sense of their master's verbiage rather than what they should be doing, which is to make sense of the world.[6] Consider the opening sentences, by one such bewildered theorist, in an academic article on Lacanian literary interpretation:

> "Every truth has the *structure* of fiction," Lacan argued in his *Seminar on the Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (*Book VII* 12). The name Lacan gave to that which joins the structure of truth—i.e., the real—to fiction is the *lettre*, playing on the link in the French language between *l'être* (being) and *lettre* (letter). By examining what Lacan meant by the word "structure" in this axiom, we can arrive at a clearer understanding of what he meant by the *lettre*, a concept of importance for literary studies. (Ragland 2011, 31)

This is fetishism. No one should care this much about what Lacan meant by this "axiom," or by the word "structure" in it, or by the related concept of *lettre*. If he could not himself make these ideas make sense, then chances are they were not very good ideas to begin with.

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[6] For a revealing account of how this has actually happened, by someone to whom it happened, see Evans (2005).

Incidentally, Lacan's *lettre* exemplifies another obscurantist device: puns that invoke some unspecific connection between words with similar spellings or pronunciations. Lacan loved these, which has caused many a headache for his English translators. Another case is his three-way pun of *père-version*, a term that is supposed to mark some clinically significant truth about sexual *perversions*, which involve an orientation to different *versions* of (the psychoanalytic concept of) the father (*père*) (see Wright 2013). At least something like that is the point.

How do Lacanians defend all of these word games, which they will freely admit to include "more or less untranslatable puns and neologisms, obscure references, and ambiguous grammar" (Reinhard 2017, x)?

> The theoretical basis of such playing with words is found in Lacan's dictum that "the unconscious is structured like a language." In his playful punning this claim is concretized, embodied. The unconscious can speak truthfully, revealing the identity of the logically unrelated, cognitively distorted, affectively confused experiences (Leavy 1983, 13).

This imaginative defense fails to distinguish the question of *what exists* from the question of *how we can know about what exists*. Even if it is true that the unconscious human mind is "structured like" a punning and fanciful language—and that is a big "if"—it does not follow that the *study* of that structure should be punning and otherwise linguistically fanciful. Must one also draw blood in studying human aggression?

3: *A lack of examples*. Illustrating one's ideas with examples makes for clear writing, while avoiding examples makes for difficult and oftentimes obscure prose. This is because examples are inherently concretizing. They give you a sense of what the truth of some idea, or the operation of some process, might look like in the real world. Consider the following passage by the physicist Brian Greene, which describes a mathematical challenge to the Big Bang theory of the universe with remarkable concreteness:

> Scientists were aware that the big-bang theory suffered from a significant shortcoming. Of all things, it leaves out the bang. Einstein's equations do a wonderful job of describing how the universe evolved from a split second after the bang, but the equations break down (similar to the error message returned by a calculator when you try to divide 1 by 0) when applied to the extreme environment of the universe's earliest

moment. The big bang thus provides no insight into what might have powered the bang itself. (2012)

There is, of course, complicated math behind all of this. But Greene's aim with the passage, as the linguist Steven Pinker points out, is to give the reader a sense of what that math actually means:

> We appreciate the abstruse concept of equations breaking down through an example, division by zero, which we can understand for ourselves in either of two ways. We can think it through: What could dividing a number into zero parts actually mean? Or we can punch the numbers into our calculators and see the error message ourselves. (2014, 32)

A special kind of illustrative exemplification comes in the form of philosophical thought experiments. Many famous philosophical thought experiments work by proposing a simple and vivid *counterexample* to an abstract philosophical thesis. They thereby aim to show that the thesis in question fails to accommodate some significant fact about the world or our experience of it. Judith J. Thomson imagines the following counterexample to utilitarianism (the thesis that morality is all about increasing happiness and decreasing suffering):

> Imagine yourself to be a surgeon … Among other things you do, you transplant organs … At the moment you have five patients who need organs. Two need one lung each, two need a kidney each, and the fifth needs a heart. If they do not get those organs today, they will all die; if you find organs for them today, you can transplant the organs and they will all live. But where to find the lungs, the kidneys, and the heart? The time is almost up when a report is brought to you that a young man who has just come into your clinic for his yearly check-up has exactly the right blood-type, and is in excellent health … (1985, 1396)

You can probably tell where this is going. Should you put the man to sleep and harvest his organs for the other patients—that is, should you kill one person to save five? A consistent utilitarian, it seems, will have to say "yes." Thomson, following Philippa Foot (1978), believes that the intuitive wrongness of this answer puts the lie to utilitarianism. Importantly, the argument that Thompson uses this simple thought experiment to make is actually highly abstract. It is an argument to the effect that the rights of individuals may sometimes take precedence over the common good. But

the argument is pitched at the level of a choice between two concrete alternatives, and this concreteness helps to illustrate the structure of the argument and to make its force felt.

Prose that never descends from the realm of abstraction—of concepts about other concepts—is often needlessly difficult because no attempt is made to engage the reader's powers of visualization and cause-and-effect reasoning about actual things and happenings in the world. Obscurantists exploit such language to ensure that their shallow or incoherent ideas do not make evaluable contact with reality. Consider the following monument to abstraction by the phenomenological theorist D. G. Leahy:

> *Total presence breaks on the univocal predication of the exterior absolute the absolute existent* (of that of which it is not possible to univocally predicate an outside, while the equivocal predication of the outside of the absolute exterior is possible of that of which the reality so predicated is not the reality, viz., of the dark/of the self, the identity of which is not outside the absolute identity of the outside, which is to say that the equivocal predication of identity is possible of the self-identity which is not identity, while identity is univocally predicated of the limit to the darkness, of the limit of the reality of the self). (1996, 238–239)

It just goes on like that. The author professes to tell us something about the human experience in the modern world, but he certainly does not speak to my experience. And the quoted material is not an isolated example. The book's very first sentence reads: "The difference between fact and reflection or appearance and essence is, even now, overcome by the saying terminating in the essential priority of existence itself to being" (5).

Someone might defend writing like this by pointing out that the ideas of which it treats are very abstract and difficult *in themselves*. However, that would be an argument for using more rather than fewer examples, analogies, and other illustrative devices since the whole point of such language is to make writing less difficult and abstract. As long as we are not dealing with mathematical or logical formalisms directly, there really is no excuse not to try for some concreteness.

4: *Zombie nouns.* "Academics love them; so do lawyers, bureaucrats, and business writers." This is how the writing expert Helen Sword (2012) introduces the topic of *zombie nouns*, which is her term for abstract nouns formed out of verbs, adjectives, or other parts of speech. For example, to *form*

becomes *formation*, *literal* becomes *literality*, and *animal* becomes *animality*. Such nominalizations[7] have their time and place. In particular, they can pack a complex idea into a single word, which can sometimes be helpful. But Sword explains that they also have real downsides. "I call them 'zombie nouns' because they cannibalize active verbs, suck the lifeblood from adjectives, and substitute abstract entities for human beings." So, where the giving of examples tends to make prose less difficult and abstract, zombie nouns do the opposite by turning agents, actions, things, and qualities into intangible concepts. To illustrate this point, Sword points out that the sentence, "The proliferation of nominalizations in a discursive formation may be an indication of a tendency toward pomposity and abstraction" can at no loss of meaning be rewritten as, "Writers who overload their sentences with nominalizations tend to sound pompous and abstract."

In my experience, zombie nouns often infest writing that is obscure without being deliberately obscurantist. Theorists who are used to thinking about their topics abstractly forget that it is possible to state their ideas in plainer language. As a result, they end up making everything seem more complicated and less intuitive than it really is. This may be true of the following sentence by Judith Butler, which won the *Journal of Philosophy and Literature*'s annual Bad Writing Contest in 1998:

> The move from a structuralist account in which capital is understood to structure social relations in relatively homologous ways to a view of hegemony in which power relations are subject to repetition, convergence, and rearticulation brought the question of temporality into the thinking of structure, and marked a shift from a form of Althusserian theory that takes structural totalities as theoretical objects to one in which the insights into the contingent possibility of structure inaugurate a renewed conception of hegemony as bound up with the contingent sites and strategies of the rearticulation of power. (1997, 13)

Yes, that is one sentence. It can and has been masochistically parsed. It seems to mean something like, "We now recognize that power structures in society change over time."

Here is another example, in the form of a concluding sentence from the literary scholar Paul Fry's analysis of the ending of Jean-Luc Godard's film *Contempt* from 1963: "It is the moment of non-construction, disclosing the absentation of actuality from the concept in part through its

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[7] Technically, nominalization describes the turning into a noun of some other part of speech. The turning of (an) *animal* into *animality* would therefore not qualify, as both are nouns. However, Sword's "zombie nouns," which she frequently describes as nominalizations, also include nouns made out of other nouns. Many abstract "-isms" are formed in this way: *capitalism*, *humanism*, *cronyism*, *identitarianism*.

invitation to emphasize, in reading, the helplessness—rather than the will to power—of its fall into conceptuality" (1995, 23). The many zombie nouns of this passage work to ensure the "fall into conceptuality" not of Godard's ending, but of the author's argument.

Zombie nouns and other unnecessary abstractions are also common in scientific writing, where they can make relatively simple research into what people do and believe seem very technical and abstruse. I will now quote a one-sentence summary of a classical study in media psychology by the author of that study. As you read it, try to imagine what the experiment consisted in.

> It has been demonstrated recently (Zillmann, 1971) that residual excitation, deriving from exposure to sexual stimuli interpolated between an individual's aggressive instigation and his opportunity to retaliate against his tormentor, can greatly facilitate aggressive responses; such a facilitation had been predicted. (Zillmann, Katcher, and Milavsky 1972, 247)

What do you think actually happened? The abstract language makes it impossible to tell. I have read the referenced study, and this is my attempt at a rewrite: "A recent study (Zillmann 1971) found that when college students were given the chance to deliver an electric shock to someone who had previously shocked them, they increased the intensity of the shock if they had been sexually aroused by watching an erotic video shortly before delivering it." This alternative sentence is not very fancy, but it is more readable and much more *precise* than the original. And precision is surely a scientific virtue.

5: *Metalinguistic insistencies*. By this phrase I have in mind authors who insist about their highly abstract and difficult writing that it is actually plain and simple. Such insistencies rarely make for obscurantist writing, but they often expose it. They do so because there are very few reasons why a writer who actually tries to be clear would need to convince the reader of that.[8]

Lacan's prose is rife with examples. "In simple terms," he declares, "in a universe of discourse nothing contains everything" (1970, 193). And, it is apparently "*clear* that genital libido operates by blindly going beyond the individual for the sake of the species and that its sublimating effects in the Oedipal crisis are at the root of the whole process of man's cultural subordination" (2007, 96; emphasis added). Also, "it is *obvious* that nothing is, if not insofar as it is said that it is" (1999, 37; emphasis added). Elsewhere, in analyzing the psychoanalytic significance of Edgar Allan Poe's

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[8] To be sure, one can write something like "let me be clear" before attempting to state one's position on some topic as plainly as possible. But no competent writer needs to insist about some argument of theirs that certainly appears difficult that it is actually plain and simple.

short story "The Purloined Letter," Lacan dismisses a possible objection to his notion that some different characters, or "subjects," should be seen as in some obscure way sharing the same mind, or "subjectivity":

> The fact that we have here a plurality of subjects can, *of course*, in no way constitute an objection to those who are long accustomed to the perspectives summarized by my formulation: *the unconscious is the Other's discourse*. I will not remind you now what the notion of the *inmixing of subjects*, recently introduced in my reanalysis of the dream of Irma's injection, adds here. (2007, 10; emphasis added to "of course")

In other words: "Go figure out how I'm right."

Finally, here is an apparent platitude about the representation of gender—note the "of course" toward the end of the sentence—by Luce Irigaray:

> In order to prevent the other—not the inversed *alter ego* of the "masculine" subject or *its* complement, or *its* supplement, but that other, woman—from being caught up again in systems of representation whose goal of teleology is to reduce her within the same, it is of course necessary to interpret *any process of reversal, of overturning,* also as an *attempt to duplicate the exclusion of what exceeds representation*: the other, woman. (1985, 156)

The best way to interpret such insistencies, I believe, is as attempts to forestall criticism and fair questioning. "This statement has real and definite meaning, and if you don't understand it then the trouble is not with my communication but with your comprehension." This can work. As one Lacanian has docilely opined, the master "is, as he himself says, a crystal-clear author" (Milner 1995, 7, as quoted by Sokal and Bricmont 1999, 18).

Conclusion

Why should academics and other writers aim to be clear? The preceding discussion identified some practical difficulties of obscure writing, but it has not explained, in any deep sense, what is wrong with such writing. I will end by saying something about that by drawing on Karl Popper, the prominent 20th-century philosopher of science and society.

Popper believed that nothing is more essential to the human acquisition of knowledge, and therefore to the betterment of our conditions, than that our ideas about the world be open to criticism. This is because rational criticism is our only hope of separating true and useful ideas from

false and destructive ones. There are no certainties: no infallible texts or traditions on which to base our search for knowledge or by the decree of which to end it. Therefore, our human quest for truth should always be guided by the question, "*How can we hope to detect and eliminate error?*" (Popper 1985, 52). Famously, Popper saw science as being so guided. He believed that genuinely scientific theories make definite predictions that could be shown to be false by experiment and observation.

Popper is often mischaracterized as a dogmatic positivist, that is, as a defender of empirical science and as a fervent denouncer of any other epistemic endeavor. In fact, Popper subordinated his laudatory view of science to a comprehensively humanistic philosophy—"critical rationalism"—according to which it is everywhere the interplay of human creativity and rational criticism that allows us to understand the world and our place in it. What we call science is only one manifestation of this process, albeit a remarkably successful one.

This vision may sound very nice and accommodating, to the point that no serious person could be fully against it. But that is not so. In the political realm, Popper identified the enemies of his philosophy with autocrats, traditionalists, and ideologues who would silence their critics (Popper 2002, 2013). In the scientific realm, they were intellectual dogmatists—researchers who held fast to their falsified theories (e.g., Marxists), or who formulated their theories in such a way that any conceivable observation would seem to support them (e.g., Freudians) (Popper 1983). What these antagonists have in common is precisely an unwillingness to countenance criticism of their preferred ideas. Indeed, according to Popper, any person, institution, or practice that deflects or suppresses rational criticism is humanly counterproductive in the deep sense of disrupting our only means of making epistemic and social progress in the world.

This brings me to my answer to the question with which I opened this section. I believe that the best reasons to aim for clarity in academic writing are Popperian reasons. Obscure writers insulate their arguments and theories from criticism—not by forceful suppression or dogmatic insistence, but by the rational and critical impenetrability of their prose. This means that their inevitable errors will remain undetected, and that their promises of insight and utility, *which could only be validated by rational criticism*, will necessarily remain unfulfilled.

Lacan's basic epistemic vice, then, is to communicate allegedly important ideas in terms that make them all but impossible to challenge: Does his obscure contention that "the unconscious is the Other's discourse" affirm anything that he does not simply presuppose? Is his infamous claim that the erect penis is equal to the square root of -1 supposed to represent a fact of mathematics, semiotics, psychology, or perhaps of physiology? Is it a problem for his "mirror stage" of human development that blind babies learn to distinguish between self and other without seeing themselves in a mirror-—or was it only ever an elaborate metaphor? Lacan can always say, and has

frequently said, "You have simply misunderstood me." I hope the reader of this essay would feel entitled to respond, "You have failed to make yourself understood."

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