

Incommensurability and Commensurability

A Response to Chapter 8
“Microdynamics of Incommensurability”
of Barbara Herrnstein Smith’s
Belief and Resistance

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Note to readers: These notes were prepared to be delivered to a group that had been meeting together for a year, and so assume a considerable shared context. They are far from being in a state ready for public consumption.

I. Introduction

A. Preface

1. It has been a pleasure to have a chance to re-read Barbara’s *Belief and Resistance*, the final chapter of which is our assigned paper—not only (i) because its theme of intellectual controversy is so acutely relevant to our experience here in New Beginnings, but also (ii) because of the grace, eloquence, and insight with which she writes about these complexly entangled issues.
2. It may also be surprising, given the seemingly implacable divergence—yes, even outright incommensurability—between her and my views (many of which we have encountered over the course of this year—particularly as regards issues of truth, objectivity, and reality), how thoroughly I agree with many of her claims.
3. Indeed, a number of the themes she emphasises strike me not only as important in and of themselves, but as essential prerequisites to any adequate approach to epistemological and ontological theory.
4. My main goal, this afternoon—in a spirit of collaboration—will be to interpret her position, from my own, and to identify some of my own views, and thereby, by opening up a space delineated by our differences, catalyse dialogue and discussion.
5. First, though, I want to identify some of the items of convergence. Given limited time, I cannot enumerate them all. So let me briefly list just...sixteen.

B. Points of convergence

1. I will break this list on three rough groupings.
2. The first set of issues, at something like the “object level” of epistemological inquiry, are directly relevant to Barbara’s own (preferred) constructivist approach:
 - #1 The extraordinary (almost ultimate) importance—and explanatory priority—of what is local, particular, and contextual.
 - #2 The ineradicable messiness, noisiness—or, in her phrase, “irreducible scrappiness”—of all this local, particular, concrete detail (detail of that which she might call “things,” I might call “the world”).

- #3 The profound consequences of the contingency, variability, and relentless instability that this messy particularity for (explanatorily subsequent) projects of *generalisation, categorization, theorization, and evaluation*—and other attempts to establish long-distance (non-local) stability.
 - #4 The cost, and general ill-advisedness, of framing debates in terms of absolute, black-and-white binarisms or dichotomies, with no room made for intermediate cases, indeterminateness, or (perhaps most importantly) intervening texture—e.g.: between “might” and “right”; between rationalist objectivity and vapid, nihilistic “anything goes” relativism; etc. (especially the ills of being committed, *in advance*, to an approach that requires, for example in the name of “clarity” or “precision,” that worthy intellectual analyses take this dualistic form).
 - #5 The inadequacy, impossibly, and even undesirability of *total stabilisation*: “formal ontology,” absolute categorisation, ultimate resolution of debates, etc.—or other forms of what in the end can come to seem (once one opens oneself to such a viewpoint) to be deathly quiet.
 - #6 The deep interconnectedness of such traditionally epistemic norms as *truth, reason, and objectivity* with other norms traditionally held to be “pragmatic”: discursive efficacy, political cost, practical consequence, etc.
 - #7 The importance of grounding philosophical positions in empirical science—primarily biology and evolutionary epistemology, in her case; more cognitive science, computer science, and physics, for me.
3. A second set of issues, at a reflective level, are especially important in discussions of incommensurability:
- #8 A profound appreciation of the *reflexivity* intrinsic to epistemology: the fact that one’s views about belief (about epistemic warrant, about the nature of content, etc.) are inevitably recursively recruited in—and can have a profound affect on the formulation of—what (at the meta level) one *believes* about beliefs, how one assesses other people’s epistemic proposals, etc.
 - #9 A recognition that divergent epistemologies go “all the way down”: “how one speaks” inevitably arises from *within* one’s epistemological approach; there is no way to speak “from the outside,” no “common place” to which all parties to epistemic dispute can repair so as to engage in perspective-free assessment. (More seriously: that presupposing or recommending such a “neutral ground for assessment” can be an unfair move, that, wittingly or unwittingly, imposes the recommender’s epistemological theory at the meta level, potentially leading to unfairly biased *assessments* of competing epistemological proposals.)
 - #10 Never, in spite of the tremendous importance of reflexivity, ever confusing reflexivity for *self-transparency*: recognising, for example, the considerable difference between *arguing logically*, and *theorizing what logicity comes to*. (Thus two people might agree, in a particular circumstance, that one of them is arguing logically—but disagree as to what makes that exegesis logical.)

- #11 The *seeming* absoluteness in character, when examined introspectively, at least to those who hold them, of deep-seated epistemological views, to which (those people's) introspection provides no intelligible sense of alternative.
- #12 The self-affirming character of many arguments (on both sides) across major epistemic divides—including (not incidentally) those between (i) orthodox rationalists/realists and (ii) more revisionist or constructivist epistemologists—the latter sort exemplified in various parts of science-studies, and of course by BHS herself.
- #13 A recognition that this symmetrical structure of such typically *asymmetric*, self-privileging assessments of the adequacy of one's own epistemological vantage point, and of the inadequacy of others' epistemological proposals may be virtually endemic—even necessary—to human inquiry. That is: that the forms of stabilisation that bring coherence and stability to a world-view, and the forms of stabilisation that block understanding or communication of others' epistemological proposals, may ultimately be the same.
- Thus she writes: "The cognitive processes that, on occasion, lead us (or is it only *them?*) astray and confine our thinking to circles of self-affirmation appear to be the *same* processes that give coherence to our individual beliefs, sustain and stabilize all scientific knowledge as such, and lead us to what we sometimes call *truth*." [147/1/-6]¹
- #14 The importance of personal and professional alliances, institutional relations, structures of power, and other "political" factors—even in *understanding* the content or merit of a view (let alone in judging its merit).
4. Finally, third, I not only agree with—but also want specifically to applaud—two facts about Barbara's specific approach in this paper:
- #15 Taking as *interesting*, and worthy of explanation, these debates, charges, counter-charges, etc., of incommensurability, and the dynamic structure of the moves, patterns, licensing conceptual frameworks, etc.—rather than merely engaging in more self-doubling, self-affirming circular defense and/or mud-slinging.
- #16 The admirable way, in doing this, without succumbing to the unobtainable fantasy of stepping *outside* disagreement, she nevertheless manifests quite extraordinary *detachment*, and *helpful evenness*, in describing what incommensurability looks like.
- i. It is not irrelevant, I believe (more on this later) that Barbara's committed, non-self-denying, dispassion achieves, in a much preferable way, in my view, something for which objectivity, in orthodox hands, is lionized: namely, of not plastering one's own particular view so thoroughly over the debate as to defeat generality and helpfulness.

¹References are of the form n/m/p, meaning line p in paragraph m on page n (paragraph 1 is the first paragraph that starts on the page in question; non-full paragraphs spilling over from a previous page are numbered 0; negative numbers mean counting from the end).

- ii. That is: although Barbara (i) excels in emphasising how one cannot avoid speaking from within an epistemological vantage point, and thus (ii) (correctly) denies the possibility of reaching a “neutral” point from which to provide “objective” assessment of competing views [#9, above], and, consequently, (iii) owns up at numerous points to the particular viewpoint from which she is writing—in spite of all these things, she nevertheless manifests greater detachment and open-mindedness, in her writing, than is typical of writers who inveigh on the Science Wars and such related disputes.
5. And so on. As I say, these are just 16 points of agreement. In my notes there are dozens more.
- c. Discussion
1. Why have I rehearsed these points here? Not just because I agree with them (or her). Rather, they seem important for three reasons:
 - a. They give a general picture of the world view she is sympathetic with;
 - b. They are important to understand, in order to appreciate not only the substance, but also the detachment and egalitarian stance, she exhibits in the final chapter that was assigned for today; and
 - c. More pointedly, because they provide a striking example of how deeply two people (she and I) can agree on so much, and yet remain committed (as we have seen all year) to such profoundly divergent ultimate viewpoints.
 2. Regarding the last point, I find it striking that this much convergence is compatible with this much divergence—or, as it would perhaps be better to say, that the depth of divergence between us is compatible with this much substantial convergence.
 3. Indeed, the structure of the relation between our views, and the form of the disputes and discussions we have had over the course of the last year, is of course an example of exactly her topic: the dynamics of incommensurability.
 4. What is special, however, about our particular disagreement—a “specialness” that the list of 16 points of agreements is intended to underscore—is that it is a “closer” case of incommensurability than some of those she speaks of in the chapter (i.e., closer than that between traditional rationalist orthodoxies, on the one hand, and science studies, revisionist, or constructivist programs, on the other).
 5. This “deep but close divergence”—to put a label on it—raises interesting issues, I believe, about the nature of incommensurability itself.
 6. This interest almost led me to call these comments: “The Dynamics of Micro-Incommensurability.” If I am right, these remarks will illuminate our differences at two levels: partly, at the object level, by spelling out where it is that our deepest differences lie, and partly at the reflective level, in applying to how it is that Barbara herself will interpret these very remarks.

II. Divergence in Backgrounds

- A. My approach today is going to be a little non-standard. I want (i) to introduce the divergence of which I speak, (ii) to raise some challenges regarding it, and (iii) focus some specific critiques on her approach, not by identifying my own view, first, in contrast to hers, but rather by explaining the difference between us. I think this may clarify subsequent points of contestation.
- B. Two facts, for starters
1. I come at these issues—about the nature of reality, objectivity, truth, etc.—primarily as an *engineer*: informally, from having worked as a car mechanic, built houses, been an electrician, carpenter, etc., as well, more formally, as having worked for many years as a programmer, in computer science.
That is, I have come to the points on which we agree primarily through engagement (informally) with *stuff*—not through engaging with *literature*, or even (very much) through interacting with *people*.²
Moreover—and this is point for which BHS herself argues—I believe that this difference in intellectual history affects the views we hold.
 2. Practically, my own approach to incommensurability is, typically, to invite someone over for lunch, or, better, for a weekend—to clean the boats, paint the barn, make dinner, have a drink. These activities, in my experience, more than (or at least in addition to) argument or discussion, are necessary material in terms of which not only to forge agreements, but also to come to understand what the other person is saying—what matters to them, why they are saying what they are saying, what insights they have come to about the world, how their views affect, and are affected by, their way of navigating through life.
- C. Why are these things relevant?
1. Because I find it striking, in Barbara’s account—not only of epistemology, but also of the reasons that people hold to the views they hold—that she primarily describes *epistemic* activities.
 - a. Cf. the first sentence of the preface to the book: it talks about “the play of conviction and scepticism, questioning and the resistance to questioning, in contemporary intellectual debate.” All of these activities are *epistemic*, *discursive* interactions.
 - b. Similarly, she characterises her topic as the “dynamics of *intellectual* controversy and of cognition”
 - c. There is a strikingly (to me!) consistent image, here, that permeates the book: of *discursive* interaction, *discursive* reciprocal engagement.
 2. None of this is to deny that mundane physical activities (chopping down trees, clearing the road, etc.) are epistemically framed, and take their intelligibility in part from our conceptual resources.
 3. Nevertheless, what these somewhat different vantage points entail, I believe, is that

²For example, I command nothing remotely like BHS’s scholarship, which is humbling.

her appreciation of the subtleties of *discursive* interaction outstrip her appreciation of the subtleties of *physical engagement*. And again (as her own account predicts)—and as I want to suggest—this “discursive rather than direct engagement” attitude affects the substance of her theory.³

- D. That difference in backgrounds, I believe, goes at least some distance towards explaining the disagreements I have—and the specific challenges, questions, and points of non-agreement, that I want to raise.

III. Truth, reference, reality, & the “constraining power of nature”

- A. There are three specific points that I want to raise.
- B. The first and primary challenge is intelligible, I believe, in terms of this different history of engagement. But whether it stems from these experiences or not is not ultimately important. What does matter is that it is primarily an *ontological*, rather than *epistemological*, challenge.
- C. Introduction: polarisation and dualisms
1. In many cases—e.g., as regards the kinds of stability that can be achieved—BHS is commendably *non-absolutist* [#4 in the list, above]. Correctly, in my view, she recognises a vastly richer space of possibilities—signaled (in the stability case) with such terms as *relatively stable*, or *stable enough*, or *stable in particular circumstances, for specific purposes*, etc.
 2. Not only does she *allow* such vastly richer non-limit cases; she recognises them as providing many more resources for accounting for the particular details of given cases. This non-absolute-dualism is a deep part of her positive view.
 3. That is not to say that she is against dualisms or polarizations, or that she eschews such terms in her analysis. As she says throughout her book, the dynamics of (intellectual and political) polarization *are part of her subject matter* (e.g., in accounting for the recurrent and perhaps inevitable structure of epistemic debates)
 4. Nevertheless, as regards distinctions and notions that figure in the positive (constructivist) epistemic views she advocates, she is—in general—commendably non-absolutist, non-binaristic.
- D. Reality
1. There is, however, a striking place where this non-dualism escapes her. It has to do with the nature of reality.
 2. Throughout, she (correctly) points out that classical or orthodox rationalist epistemology (her term) assumes an *autonomous* external world: one that it *independent* of the epistemic (political) projects of subjects.
 3. Where she falls down, in my view, is in seemingly *agreeing* with these classicists’ claim: that in order to exist—in order for *reality* to be a useful analytic category—

³It is notable—but not surprising—that when these remarks were given, Barbara vehemently denied this claim: though whether this was because she was not prepared to countenance there being any salient difference in our experience, or because she did not believe that such experientially different histories could account for theoretical divergence, I do not know.

reality must be entirely independent of (for example) the variable discursive practices of its investigators.

4. Not surprisingly, this is a position that leads her to reject notions of reality, reference, and truth as useful theoretical categories. Or to put it in her normative language, what she denies is that they are *useful, effective, commendable notions in the range of circumstances in which she travels and works*.
 5. It is not, note—as she would be the first to insist—that the “doesn’t think that reality exists,” or that she claims that “no statements are true.” She would deny both charges (correctly—in the sense that it is consistent with her view to deny them), because they are both framed in language that accepts the viability of the predicates they use (reality and truth), and then both make negative claims in their terms. What Barbara is arguing against is deeper: it is the (theoretical) utility of the predicates’ viability that she is disparaging.
 6. Note, too, that the notion of ‘reference’ is also discarded, as not being a useful notion in terms of which to understand language (at least any sense of “reference to an external world”). From my point of view, setting aside reference as a necessary aspect of the theoretical analysis of language, in this way, constitutes such a drastic “changing of the subject” as to undermine the resulting analysis’ claim on being an account of *language*, at all. But more on this presently.
- E. My view
1. So far, I have tried to paint Barbara’s and my views in as similar terms as possible.
 2. However, one the strongest substantive theses of my own work in this arena runs counter to her, here. It has to do with realism, reference, and the existence of an “external” world.
 3. In particular, it is not only a *mistake*, I believe, but, more strongly, is *precisely the kind of error for which Barbara correctly condemns classical epistemology*, to assume that *separation* requires *independence*. More particularly, it is a radical mistake to presume that the coherence of the idea that there is a “real world” *different from* or *separate from* the act of utterance requires that that world be *independent* of the speaker or act of utterance.
 4. By analogy, think about separating from one’s parents—a task of every teenager. It would be *pathological* to take separation to require outright independence, of the purist, limit sort of which orthodox epistemology dreams. Rather, “mature” psychological separation—mature establishment of “boundaries” in adult social life—is different in character. It is (among other things) *partial*—though of course saying that doesn’t do justice to the specific ways in which it has a distinctive texture, between outright dependence and pathological separateness.
 5. It is this sort of conception of separation, I believe—partial and distinctively textured—that we need to employ, in order to understand our relation to the world.
- F. Recalcitrance
1. To make this concrete, consider the “recalcitrance” of interaction with the world that underwrites classical views of truth, evidence, objectivity, etc.
 2. Does a durable, useful notion of recalcitrance require autonomy—require *absolute*

independence from the subject?

3. Well, *yes*—if you are an orthodox classicist. But *no*, if you are me—or, I of course believe, if you are *correct*.
4. There are many reasons why recalcitrance in particular—and separation and distinction in general—don't require such absolute independence.
 - a. First, it doesn't even make *sense* to say that the world is fully independent of us, since we are part of the world—and parts are not independent of the wholes of which they are part (my arm is not independent of my body—except in gruesome circumstances).
 - b. But the reasons go deeper. In my own work, for example, I argue that all ontology—every way we conceive the world, all ways we take the world to be—derive in part (for very compelling physical and computational reasons) from processes of abstraction, which are grounded in turn in our on-going, inescapable, normative life-processes.
 - c. But such details don't matter here. What does matter is that an *independent* world is not a requirement for a tough, durable, serviceable notion of recalcitrance, world, truth—even objectivity.
5. More seriously, to be absolutely clear on this:
 - a. Nothing about the existence of the recalcitrance of the world—of objects, events, etc.—requires that the world be *independent* of us.
 - b. Nothing in the *work* that “recalcitrance” needs to do, in order to underwrite a sense of reality—to provide grounding, to underwrite a radically reconstituted sense of object, reference, world, reality, even truth and objectivity—requires the limit case of independence that Barbara correctly notes that that traditional views (self-validatingly) claim.
 - c. The only reason to *think* that reality does require such independence is to subscribe to the sorts of absolute binarisms that neither Barbara nor I like.
 - d. All that is really required is that the world not *be* us; that there be *more* to it than to us (or to our ideas, hypotheses, etc.).
6. And so (this in a way is my point):
 - a. With respect to objects, reference, reality, objectivity, the world, etc., I feel as if I can offer Barbara—by way of “friendly amendment,” as it were—an elaboration of the ontological consequences of the overarchingly “constructivist” metaphysics we share.
 - b. This deepening of the ontological dimension, I believe, could complement and fill out her acute social, discursive, and epistemological observations.
- g. Reaction
 - i. But—no surprise—I doubt that (certainly my experience is that) these ontological elaborations will not be to her liking.
 - a. Indeed, I suspect that she will feel that I am guilty of that of which she accuses Kitcher, and numerous other “middle-roaders”: that I am surreptitiously rehabilitating (rather than radically reconceiving) the old, bad, view. I.e., as she charges Kitcher, she will probably charge my proposal with the indictment that

it is liable “to rehabilitate and ultimately to reaffirm the established account in all its crucial elements.” [126/-1/-2]

- b. But then I will point out how she herself doesn’t—to take a non-incidentally example—eschew *evaluation*. On the contrary, as her previous book amply demonstrates, people evaluate constantly; that much, at least, is endemic. Rather, what she eschews is the *way normativity is classically conceived*: as requiring non-empirical, transcendental, absolutist credentials.
- c. So that is what I suggest to her:
 - i. To make the same move (a move that she should find legitimate, for the same reasons): of eschewing the world as classically conceived, of reality as classically conceived, of truth as classically conceived, but
 - ii. To do so without needing to discard world, truth, reality, etc., (i.e., without needing to discard *notions* of world, truth, reality, reference, etc.) altogether.

H. Analysis

- 1. So we have a higher-order contestation, of how to conceive of this difference: as friendly amendment or recidivist failure.
- 2. We differ, too, I bet, on whose reconstruction is more radical.
- 3. I believe that Barbara is not radical enough. I want to “see her, and raise her one.” More indictingly, I believe that she is still defined in opposition towards that which she wants to replace—and that she ends up espousing a weaker position, because of that definition in opposition. More strongly yet, I believe that her definition in opposition violates her own strictures against absolute binarisms; I am accusing her, as it were—in this critical case—of falling prey to exactly the sorts of polarization she quite rightly disparages.
- 4. I am confident, however, that she thinks the same of me—that *I* am the one who is not radical enough. In fact I know this, because she said as much, in reviewing my book.
 - a. I consider something like the following to be the central accomplishment of that book: showing how, if one is radical enough, one need not discard *either* what matters most to the realist (about a recalcitrant world that transcends the subject’s mind, projects, and discursive community), or what matters to the constructivist (about the implication of people’s epistemic practices in the constitutive character of ontology), but instead, in concert with common sense, sufficiently clarified, that one can embrace a position that is so radical that it can incorporate both insights (as well as solving numerous other unsolved problems in epistemology)
 - b. In her review, however, Barbara discards the main thing that I believe I accomplished, ending her review with the sentence that I “had not gone far enough.” In fact, however, I believe that it is exactly that I have gone *further* than she, further than the place she is pointing towards—to genuine freedom from the hegemony of traditionalist epistemology, rather than being stuck defining myself in opposition to it, or needing to bury what is right about it, along with what is wrong.

- c. More seriously, discarding the notion of world, reference, reality, objectivity, etc., in response to their inadequate comprehension in traditional rationalist epistemology is *easy*, I would claim. What is *hard*—the real struggle—is to incorporate them, do justice to them, without falling foul of the errors of traditional rationalist epistemology.
 - d. In fact I believe that unless one does do justice to notions of reference, reality, objectivity, world, etc., one has merely changed the subject, to something like the causal interplay of effective forces in and around and among communities.
 - e. That is, from my point of view, discarding this critical set of notions (world, reference, reality, objectivity, etc.) is changing the subject. I don't see how an analysis that does not deal with them can claim to be an account of language, thinking, epistemology, etc., at all.
5. In sum: incommensurability, all over again—in the way that she (I admit) compellingly describes.
- I. Agreement
- 1. And yet I bet we could (and can) wrest points of agreement, too (without violating the canon in which we both believe: that there is no external perspective-free vantage point from which to consider these things).
 - a. For example: she admits that her view is roughly *coherentist*, rather than *realist*. As I say, she feels that this coherentism is necessitated by giving up of absolutism (context-independence, etc.).
 - b. I agree with the giving up of absolutism (context-independence, etc.), but argue that I can do that in a way that comes to a radically reconceptualised form of something vaguely like realism—i.e., as a leaning-towards realist, rather than coherentist, working out of a non-absolutist, deeply contextualised revisionary alternative.
 - c. Is this where it ends? No. Remember her comments on my paper, last fall: she is appalled by my lack of understanding of the sociality of discursive engagement.
 - d. I in turn am appalled by the lack of prominence given by her account to fixing engines, painting barns, and building things.
 - 2. The point is this: *I can see ways we can learn from each other*—ways I can imagine putting stories together.
 - a. Specifically: I can imagine combining her more epistemological (subject-oriented) focus with my more ontological (object-oriented) focus
 - b. And I can imagine combining them, because one of the things that we *surely* agree on (and are alike, in rejecting classical orthodox metaphysics) is that epistemology and ontology are not, themselves, an absolutist dual: neither is independent of the other.
 - 3. But now we are not talking about incommensurability any more. We are talking about *commensurability*—about progress, about integration, about putting together what is best in both stories, so as to arrive at a place that is better than either alternative on its own.

4. And yet I know that she is not going to feel thrilled at this integrative prospect. In fact, of course, she won't see it as potential commensurability.
- J. Applicability to incommensurability
1. But now—note the irony!—we can recurse once again, and (I say) even explain this difference (that I do, and she does not, see prospects for integrating our divergent views).
 2. The reason has to do with yet another “view-internal” view of mine (of the sort that she describes), a very important consequence, I believe, of my “radically reconstructed realism”—i.e., of my ineliminably-constructivist-but-nevertheless-as-real-as-anything-ever-was-real *reality*. One of the features of my view that I like—that I think *is* a feature—is that it provides us with resources (not a complete “way out”, of course, and especially not an *absolute* way out; those don't exist) for *dealing with this very issue of irreconcilability of incommensurability*.
 3. In particular: remember that my most basic technique for dealing with incommensurability is to invite someone over for the weekend, build a back porch, paint the barn, make dinner, have a drink. That is: I would want to *engage with them in non-discursive activities*, that involve interacting with that recalcitrant-but-not-independent world.
 4. Thing is: the possibility of doing that—more seriously: the conceptual framework that makes it intelligible that that sort of activity would be relevant to partially resolving or bridging conceptual incommensurability—that possibility is only available in my framework.
 5. So maybe Barbara recurses, and her view explains why, to her, my collaborationist strategy isn't going to work, *for her*.
 6. But then I would *really* want a drink.
- K. Access to the world
1. In passing, I want to make a point that is huge, in my estimation, which I believe is derailing communication between us, on which I believe Barbara, along with many other constructivists, are in error.
 2. It is wrong (in my sense of wrong!) to claim, as so many do, that “we have no access to an uninterpreted reality.” We obviously have no *interpreted* access to an uninterpreted reality; there is no way we can *conceive* of an uninterpreted reality. But when my axe strikes the tree, or my plough digs up the ground, or my car drives across the tundra and leaves tracks that will last for 10,000 years, even though, in each case, the *action* I take is undeniably a product, in part, of interpretive schemes in terms of which I (reciprocally) interact with the world, there is a sense in which “that which I interpret as the blow of the axe, or the damage done, or whatever,” because it involves direct engagement of (that which I interpret as) blade and (that which I interpret as) tree, isn't *interpretively mediated*.
 3. Recognising that our actions *aren't* mediated, in a crucial way, by our inevitable discursive schemes, is critical, I believe, not only to realism, and truth, but also to norms—ethics, environmentalism, etc.
 4. This isn't the place to expound on that positive view further.

5. The point, rather, is that there is a vastly complex and rich—just in the kinds of ways that Barbara is so unsurpassingly appreciative of, in the realm of discursive and intellectual debate—to be disentangled and described, in concrete engagement.

L. Discussion

1. Needless to say, these differences—about the nature of the world, and our access to it—open up into an enormous range of issues.
2. Take objectivity, for instance
3. By ‘objective,’ BHS seems to understand “independent of particular historical, cultural, or circumstantial conditions, and independent, also, of the perspectives of particular persons.” I.e., Barbara *understands objectivity as classicists theorize it*. And to be fair, she does recognise that this is what objectivity amounts to in that tradition (i.e., classical ethics and epistemology). It is the same thing that she identifies with “foundationalism.”
4. What I would want to recommend to her is a radical reconceptualisation of the notion of ‘objectivity’—as radical a reunderstanding of that notion as of any in the epistemological or metaphysical landscape. Objectivity, on my view, means (among other things; here comes the ontology once again) that which is a condition on something’s being an “object”: namely, as *existing in the world*—a notion that requires, among other things, that there be a world for the thing to exist within.
5. What stands on this redefinition? A lot. Just about everything, if you ask me.

M. Summary

1. Here is the bottom line.
2. Because she (uncritically) accepts traditional epistemology’s conception of reality, objectivity, etc., as requiring a kind of absolute independence—exactly the kind of absolute independence she, in other situations, recognises as untenable—Barbara ends up, in my estimation, arguing for a view that suffers from a number of fatal errors:
 - a. It is too much defined in opposition with the traditional epistemology she wants to reject;
 - b. It is therefore unable to account for notions as world, objectivity, reference, reality, etc.
 - c. Because of that, it is unable (in my view) to be an account of language, thought, epistemology, etc., at all.
3. None of these properties, I believe, are required by her basic constructivist urge. Recall the list of 16 points of agreement. *Every one of them is compatible*, as I have been trying to argue (here in these remarks, all semester in our dialogue, and also in my book), with what I take to be a much *more* radical alternative, in which notions of world, objectivity, reference, reality, etc., are *all reclaimed—in radically reconceptualised form*.

IV. Naturalism / causal reductionism

A. Intro

1. Preface

a. Well, that disagreement, about the nature of the world, and about the utility of such analytic concepts as ‘world,’ ‘reference,’ ‘objectivity,’ etc., was just one of three points of divergence.

b. We haven’t much time left, so let me just mention the other two briefly.

2. The second is actually quite ironic

a. You might think, from my ontological focus and background in the sciences, as contrasted to Barbara’s more epistemological focus and at least more background in literature and the humanities, that if either of us was more committed to causal explanation, naturalism, and the bluntly empirical, it would be me.

b. But in fact the opposite is true.

3. As Barbara herself says (141//2) she tends to be disposed towards “thoroughly empirical and naturalistic approaches.” And indeed, those are the ones that she largely cites, in showing (i) that normative epistemologies and objectivist/rationalist theories of mind are not only not the only game in town, but also (ii) that current cognitive science and biological and evolutionary approaches are rallying around quite a different set of alternatives.

4. In spite of the fact that Barbara’s current intellectual identification lies largely within the humanities, that is, including epistemology; and also in spite of the fact that (as observed earlier) she tends to subordinate all sorts of reciprocal interaction with the world to the case she seems to me to understand best: namely epistemic practices; nevertheless, the way she talks about such things—as “patterns of reciprocal efficacy,” for example (54) sound to me, to my way of thinking, as perilously close to *causal reductionism*.

5. And it is *me* that finds this alarming—not at all convivial.

6. In fact—as I have said in earlier NB sessions, including the one we had about science studies last fall—I am *extremely uneasy* about the seeming blithe acceptance of causal or effective phenomena (things that I see as the unfortunate legacy of a largely mechanist science) by people I would otherwise feel to be convivial intellectual companions.

B. Causal

1. In particular, this focus on the causal, on the effective, on the what-can-be-captured-in-a-video-tape strikes me as unwarranted, distracting, and a kind of changing-the-subject that, in less hospitable moods, feels to me like a form of question-begging all the interesting issues.

2. For example, approaching language, thought, mind, etc., *as if they were causal phenomena*, or *as if they were amenable to causal explication* seems so wrong-headed to me that I find it difficult to accept that it is really *language, thought, mind*, etc., that such theorists are studying.

3. Note: I recognise that this is all the rage in cognitive science—from virtually all sides, including (much more, I believe, that Barbara seems to realize) the rationalist/objectivist/symbol-manipulating quarters, as well as from the networked, dynamic, interactionist alternatives.

c. Example

1. For another example of the same thing, consider the first chapter of Latour's *Pandora's Hope*.
2. After close ethnomethodological observation of the acquisition of soil samples from the savannahs of South America, Latour says that he “sees no reference anywhere.”
3. But of *course* he couldn't *see* any referential relations.
4. Reference, interpretation, etc., are (in my experience, and this is what I have spent most of my life studying) exactly *non-causal* relations—and therefore exactly the sorts of things that one cannot (in principle) *see*. That is: they are *non-causal* on any conception of reference that I understand to do even a modicum of justice to that phenomenon.
5. So: his observation that “there was no reference to be seen” seems to me to miss the point, entirely.

d. Computing

1. I say these things in part from my life-long project of trying to understand computing.
2. Just such an “empirical and naturalistic”, and ultimately causal, approach to computing is absolutely endemic throughout computer science
3. My own conclusion is that it is *doomed*: that computing is an interesting concrete phenomenon exactly because it is interpreted, referential, normative—exactly all the things that are at stake in accounts of epistemology.
4. Note, of course (cf. above), that in saying that it is interpreted, referential, normative, etc., I am not saying—and do not want imply or suggest—that it is interpreted, referential, normative *in the way that classical orthodoxies understand those things*. Exactly *not*. In fact I take computing to be a site worthy of life-long investigation exactly because, as I hope to demonstrate, they are paradigmatic instances of something different.

e. Summary

1. For now, let me just say this: *nothing, again, in the long list of 16 points on which I agree with Barbara* is opposed to—or even, in my view, suggests any reason to oppose—taking *non-causal* relations as part of the constituting, determining, complex of contingent relations that figure in what computation is.
2. On the contrary, including non-causal, non-effective, long-distance relational (and other non-effective) properties and phenomena in our accounts is the “what is right” that we should extract from the rationalist/objectivist positions we are trying to replace.
3. To discard the non-causal, in the way that Barbara suggests, ends up with a kind of “causalism” or even shade of causal reductionism that I believe is as deeply

wrong as anything troubling with classical epistemology. Though carried out in urbane post-structuralist dress, in the end it amounts to replacing absolutist epistemology with “naught but mere mechanism.”

V. What is right about what is wrong

- A. This brings me to my third and last point. It has to do with how one should (yes, I mean this normatively, though not absolutely) understand the views of those with whom one is engaged in these (yes, among other things) discursive practices of discussion, contestation, and debate.
- B. Background
 1. Something that matters a great deal to me—something I try to forefront, in my own research, and on which I spend a great deal of time, in teaching—is that, if one is proposing major revisions or reconceptualisations of one’s subject matter, one should not quit, in criticising the “other’s” views, until one is confident (in one’s own invariably contingent, located way, of course) not only that one can say what is *wrong* the positions one aims to revise or replace, but also say, cogently and consequentially, *in the language of one’s new formulation, what it is that was right about the old*.
 2. What this comes to, in the present circumstance, of course, is whether, from a roughly constructivist viewpoint, one can see what was compelling about objectivist, rationalist projects. And if so, what one should do about it—how one should handle those positive virtues of the traditional approach.
 3. This emphasis on *listening*—on hearing what is right about a view that one feels needs to be replaced—is again something that is in no way *incompatible* with BHS’s project. Nevertheless, I don’t feel that her proposals support or even forefront it.
 4. More strongly, appropriate listening it seems to me (without invoking Hegelian synthesis) to *play a critical role in the negotiation* of incommensurability, contestation, etc.
 5. Again: not that incommensurable viewpoints can ever be *absolutely resolved*. That, as we both agree, is somewhere between sentimental and imperialist fiction. But—and this, too, I believe is important—*concord*, too, is always unstable, dynamic, contextualised and contingent, in need of constant reformulation, maintenance, and repair. But that doesn’t mean that it isn’t *real*, or worth striving for.
 6. In fact that is one way to put the present point:
 - a. I believe that understanding *commensurability* and *concord* is as important to an adequate epistemology as understanding incommensurability and discord.
 - b. A failure to do so—by placing undue emphasis on one or the other—not only ends up as biased, but in the process disappears that which is fundamental to understand.
 7. This last point leads to the title I have, in the end, chosen. In order to understand the dynamics of intellectual interaction—and in order to understand the dynamics of intentional interaction in generally—we must come to understand *both* com-

mensurability and incommensurability, symmetrically. Privileging either will ultimately lead to a biased assessment. For it is as consequential and miraculous that we agree, in part—in contested, particular, messy ways—as that we disagree. In fact, once opened up in this way, it is surely evident that it is the whole middle texture of commensurability and incommensurability that forms the field of epistemic interaction. To emphasize just one case is (once again) to fall prey to the lure of polarizing oppositions—one of the positions that both BHS and I have foresworn.

c. Approach

1. One way I have found instructive, in order to listen, is to understand what the view that one opposes is *afraid of*—what it is trying to keep out, what it is taking a stand against, etc. For if Barbara is right (as I believe she is) that there is an endemic tendency, in human intellection, for people to take polarizing stands, to see things in excessively black-and-white perspective, etc., then one should expect that some deeply-held views may be deeply held because of what they were defined in opposition to—even if the view itself, because of its definition-in-opposition formulation, is ultimately untenably framed.
2. So in the present circumstance, an approach to *listening* to objectivity, realism, etc.—finding out what is right about them, what should be accounted for in a successor account—is to understand what they oppose, what ills they are seen as a bastion against.

d. Ingredients

1. The ingredients for this, in the present case, can be found, I believe, littered throughout Barbara's chapter (and book): in her discussions of what it is that objectivists are afraid of.
2. On what objectivists *fear*: there is plenty of evidence on page 77, and elsewhere, about the things that those who pledge allegiance to objectivity fear will be unleashed, if that allegiance is challenged:
 - a. *That all stories are equally valid*
 - b. *That all opinions equally worthwhile* (and therefore argument is impossible)
 - c. *Mere personal, idiosyncratic, narrow subjectivism*
 - d. ... etc.
3. This is all good. In sum, we might dub it (i.e., that to which objectivity is arrayed in opposition) “self-indulgent subjectivism.”
4. What there *isn't*, though, in BHS's book, is any analysis of *how* classical objectivity obtains these virtues, and whether, in the method of their attainment, there is “that which is right” (good, insightful, etc.), from which an alternative epistemology might benefit.
5. That is, you don't get a sense (from BHS) of what *virtues* the classical notions of truth, objectivity, reason, etc., had. You can get such virtues *indirectly*, as indicated above: by her pointing out that many of the things that realists think that constructivists are forced to endorse, or are forced not to be able to resist, are not in fact so forced. That is: you can read her list of merits avoided, and demerits per-

mitted, as in fact constituting some of “what matters” to realists. And sure enough, she argues that those things can matter to a constructivist. But throughout, there is a more powerful and explicit thing that needs to be addressed, which she does not address: of showing *how those concerns* are not only compatible with, but are *actually addressed*—if they are—in her proposed constructivist alternatives (or: constructivist-interactionist).

6. I.e., I am recommending something like a *compassionate* reading of classical objectivity—a compassionate listening to it. This is something that matters a lot to me (to get at “what is right”) a view with which one disagrees (*both* classical epistemology and Barbara’s view, in my own case).
7. Indeed, by BHS’s own account—from her reflexive vantage point—the *resistances* implicate in any position are as important as the explicitly formulated beliefs. So, by her own lights, the resistances of the objectivist should be constitutive, not just diagnostic, of what it is that the objectivist believes (that is: what, from the constructivist’s point of view, in the sense of in terms of the constructivist’s conception of belief), it is that objectivists believe.

E. Subjectivism

1. It is clear that BHS doesn’t believe that one needs (classical) objectivism in order to resist this self-indulgent subjectivism.
2. What I don’t see, however, are resources in her account, that are strong enough to give one ammunition to resist it. That is not to say that she wouldn’t be able to *describe* the resistance; she is well-equipped for that. But one needs not just the ability to describe resistances in general, but specific tools with which to defeat self-indulgent subjectivism (individual or social). There is some such discussion (e.g., in her discussions of Lyotard). But a full suite of such resources are not given to us.
3. Discussion
 - a. There is something that Barbara does do, in exemplary fashion: show how these fallacies are not implied by the revisionist program
 - b. What I don’t see her providing, however, is something that is also needed, and may in the end be even more serious: a demonstration of how the proposed revisionist approach that she prefers, supplies particular resources for avoiding these pitfalls (or at least those that, from the revisionist program, still appear as pitfalls—which, it is my sense, many do, in BHS’s hands).
4. Digression
 - a. There is an interesting moral here, about the relation between (Western) objectivism and Eastern detachment. Both disciplines, I believe (and both *are* disciplines), are motivated by the same end: to resist this kind of self-indulgent subjectivism.
 - b. At some point, in fact, I would like to write on the relation between these two forms of obtaining dispassion.

F. Discussion

1. This project of sympathetic listening to the prior era’s view—of *doing justice* to the

- views that one is rejecting—ties into issues of reflexive integrity.
2. Specifically, it is an important characteristic of my own approach that the (epistemic, ontic, and metaphysical, but also ethical and political) commitments that people express, in using a word, aren't captured by the meaning of that term—even *the meaning to them*.
 3. BHS is good at giving credit to the fact that things have never worked in the way that the prior discourse (“predecessor” era) claimed. But that means that Barbara should admit that there was more to “objectivist” practice (more that is bad, yes, but also more that is good) than the prior era’s theory of objectivism describes.
 4. I.e., we should *both* agree that there is more to objectivist *practice* than extant (traditional) objectivist *theory*. My brief is that we should incorporate some of those insights.⁴
 5. This positive reclamation of what-is-right-in-what-is-wrong is not something on which BHS excels.

VI. Conclusion

- A. In closing let me bring this all back to the issue I raised at the beginning, and have tried to exemplify throughout: that of *commensurability*
- B. Commensurability
 1. My own tendency, as I have said above (except perhaps in the heat of discussion), with respect to Barbara’s recommended constructivism, is to frame my view as a *friendly amendment*. Indeed, this is not hard; it is natural—is what I have felt all along, since I first read *B&R* several years ago; and have felt all this year, in our NB sessions.
 2. That is, I have wanted to frame my differences from her as something that she doesn’t recognise, but “would accept if she could.”
 3. And yet, as I have indicated, I don’t for a moment think she *will* like it.
 4. But—and this is the serious issue, here—I am not sure what her account would say about this.
 5. Perhaps she will, at least from time to time, have the same reaction to me as I do to her: “How could someone who is so close to saying the right thing nevertheless be so stubbornly wrong?”. It is just this “close” kind of incommensurability in which I am interested.
- C. Maybe, instead, I should say this, by way of conclusion
 1. The discussion Barbara has given us, while unsurpassingly acute with respect to interactions between and among persons and literatures and communities and arguments and discussions, fails to give us an adequate treatment (to my way of

⁴This is what I have meant, historically, by “rehabilitation” (e.g., in my “Rehabilitating Representation” paper)—though of course ‘rehabilitation’ is not a term that she will be happy with. And she may be right; perhaps I should use “reconceptualisation”—except that that isn’t quite right, either. How about ‘reclamation’? Well, there is something right about that, and something wrong or misleading, too.

thinking) of interactions between people and the elements of the non-epistemic world (e.g., dishes, valleys, engines.).

2. This means that her whole positive proposal is (again, to my taste) rendered somewhat flat, two-dimensional.
3. So my tendency is to say “yes” on the “epistemic interaction” part she has described, but to introduce—or rather reclaim—the critical third dimension, of the world: reality, stuff and things, recalcitrance and non-epistemic resistance, digging and building, objectivity and reference and the like.
4. But that is not to say that my desire is to convert her position to mine.
5. On the contrary, one thing she has done, for which I am very grateful, is to help me see (not *convince me*, since I have already been convinced, for many years, but rather make intelligible, in detail) what a much deeper appreciation of the discursive, epistemological, social and cultural side of constructivist metaphysics comes to.
6. That has been remarkably edifying.
7. Whether our *incommensurability* remains as strong as before—that is a question we each, as she quite properly says, will see by our own lights.
8. All I can say is that mine burns brighter, for her contribution.

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