On the significance of clarity in socio-politics
HSS635 Presentation

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Is Clarity a virtue?

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Typically, philosophers in the analytic or Anglo-American tradition-feminist answer "yes"
And they may also suspect that **continental** philosophers do not always value clarity as they ought to.

These suspicions go back a long way: famously, in 1931 the logical positivist Rudolf Carnap denounced Heidegger for saying that "the nothing noths" (das Nichts nichtet). Heidegger and others working in related traditions grouped together as "continental" were accused of deliberate obscurantism: using arcane terms and phrases of art that were really empty, but whose obscure, portentous sound prevented people.

Analytical clarity vs Continental obscurity

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Yet the very concern to be clear can lead to the creation of precise defniitions and fine distinctions marked with technical terms, resulting into as much as difficulty to access as some continental philosophy.

Analytic clarity vs Continental obscurity

Continental philosophers often use terms of art for the same reasons as analytic philosophers: to mark distinctions, capture unnoticed phenomena, and so on.

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We shall now identify some reasons why continental philosophers are wary of clarity. We shall speak of certain political and ethical concerns, especially through the lens of feminist movement.

(1) Complex, difficult subject matters

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It may be objected, some philosophical theories and concepts
are too complex to be put in everyday language; complex
thought requires complex, diffciult forms of expression. Yet it is
precisely when philosophical theories are most complex that
clarity of expression is needed to provide a pathway into the
complexity.

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What is clarity ?

Clear language is transparent rather than opaque. When writing is opaque it draws attention to words rather to the ideas, while transparent writing is just to the converse

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(2) Oppressive common sense

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Conversely, to be critical of this society we should eschew clarity. By couching our thoughts in diffciult, contorted language, embracing paradox, avoiding neat solutions, we can think against oppressive society.

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In fact the notion of clear thinking is a myth. "Clear" thinking
is merely thinking that fits in with, embodies, and fails to
challenge the hegemonic power relations of the surrounding
society. Such thinking seems "clear" merely because it is
familiar, and this is because it is thinking in which dominant
power relations are naturalized.

(2) Oppressive common sense: The case of feminists

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Thus therefore need to criticize power relations in their existing, oppressive configurations. This feminist concern that individuals should be empowered to criticize and resist oppressive power relations in fact speaks *for* clarity.

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To provide tools of and resources for social critique, theories and concepts (including concepts of *capitalism, hegemony, and oppression*) need to be clarified enough that people can relate them to the social world with which they are pre-theoretically familiar.

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If theories and concepts are not made clear, then there is a risk that intellectual discussion will only reinforce society's broader power relations by becoming exclusive to the initiated.

Unless theorists clarify concepts, then, intellectual discourse becomes closed, and becomes just another social practice that dominates rather than empowers individuals.

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The thought is that describing the world as it really is—not as an aggregate of static items but as an ever-shifting web of relations—calls for unfamiliar, diffciult language.
This diffciulty is inescapable given that everyday language embodies a falsely atomistic ontology. This ontological concern resonates with the feminist philosophical desire to understand persons and things as being thoroughly constituted by the webs of relationships in which they are located.

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(3) False ontological categories: An example

Now as rendered by Nussbaum :

"Marxist accounts, focusing on capital as the central force structuring social relations, depicted the operations of that force as everywhere uniform. By contrast, Althusserian accounts, focusing on power, see the operations of that force as variegated and as shifting over time. "

One change that Nussbaum introduces is reference to a "force" that does things: it structures social relations, operates in uniform or variegated ways. This discrete agency now performs operations on other items.

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In "clarifying" Butler's claims, then, Nussbaum may indeed have translated them into an atomistic ontology.

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Rather than clarifying theory by translating it into ordinary
language and thus connecting it with everyday experience, we
clarify everyday experience by conceptualizing its lineaments,
translating its features into theory.

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(3) False ontological categories

Regarding the concern that clear writing may reinforce a false and atomistic ontology, one way that we can transform that ontology is by subjecting our experience to phenomenological clarifciation. But for this to work, we need to keep our **theoretical categories clear enough that their connection with experience is clear** in the first place. Thus the concern about false ontological assumptions tells *for* as much as against clarity.

Conclusion

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*"Clarity is not the only virtue that philosophical writing can
display, though, and clarity need not override other virtues."*

References

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