Remarks on "Getting away with"

In the above box I wrote of different persons "getting away with" different assertions. This may be a provocative manner of expression. The assertions we "get away with" are not some exceptional few whose impermissibility is contrasted with the great majority of the assertions we make. Rather, most of the assertions we make we "get away with" -- and it is unusual to be called to task on an assertion. However, my manner of expression is most deliberate also. Few, and most likely none, of the assertions we make are sufficiently determined by nonconventional elements of their truth. I have somewhat run together truth ascriptions and assertions themselves, but I believe this is of little matter because making an assertion is itself a manner of ascribing truth to it. The ascription may not go much further than out of a speaker's mouth, and may even be withdrawn by the speaker in short order, but for whatever moment it lasts the assertion is an ascription of truth. This should be clear enough; we cannot say, 'X, though "X" is not true.' (e.g. 'Snow is white, although "Snow is white" is not true').

Assertions or truth ascriptions are underdetermined by both realist and pragmatist nonconventional conditions. The evidence ever at hand decides uniquely neither how words determinately apply to the world nor which assertions will progress us toward the greatest, or even any, useful effects. This underdetermination exists at many levels: we may be plainly wrong in all our assertions or their purposes because we are fooled by a Cartesian demon; or we may be wrong at the more particular level at which ordinary perceptual mistakes occur; it may be that our perceptual or cognitive systems are just not designed to deal with the assertion at issue; we may have an erroneous background assumption distorting our assertions in an area; and failing all these short-fallings all the evidence we can possibly

have available underdetermines the choice between materially contradictory theories (see Putnam for mathematical proof of this). However, even though we are never epistemically, or otherwise nonconventionally, justified in making any assertion, we nonetheless usually pretend to be.

Our pretense of being justified is part of what is institutionally/conventionally required of us in order to not be taken to point on our assertions, and in order to have our assertions lauded as true. In a sense I shall discuss below the institutional bridge which fills the gap between absent justification and actual assertion is immanently retractable; it is contingent exactly in that it is conventional. We continue to "get away with" underdetermined assertions precisely because the authority of convention "permits" us to.

Part of the connotation of "getting away with" is a sense of unease over being "caught in the act." There is a sense in which this kind of unease exists whenever we carry out a conventional procedure, which somehow could be disallowed if most people decided not to allow it. We can only "get away with" conventional acts, or acts which pose as conventional. Where our acts are mediated nonconventionally we may not "get away with" them or fail to, but only succeed or fail. No one "gets away with" nonconventionally mediated acts because nature does not make exceptions. If useful effects are produced in nature it is solely because nature operates according to the laws it does; no such effects are ever produced contrary to the laws by which nature operates. Societies are otherwise. They may operate according to some general laws; and yet we may contravene these laws and still succeed, or follow these laws precisely and fail -- where both

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success and failure are defined by the social reactions we obtain.

Still, we rarely feel any unease in a genuinely psychological sense over the endurance of a conventional procedure during our performance of it -- certainly no more psychological unease than we feel over the continuation of natural phenomena according to our expectations. However, there is a genuinely different modality involved in the possibility of conventions changing "under our feet" and that of natural laws changing. This difference in modality is rather complex, especially since our actual evidence for natural laws may be much scarcer than our evidence for conventions. An autobiographical example will serve here. I myself have nearly no evidence that the tides will continue according to the pattern determined by natural laws; I have never visited the same sea shore more than a handful of times, and the times of visit have been entirely unsystematic. The only evidence I have for the regularity of the tides is the force of (epistemic) authority. However, I have a great deal of personal evidence that, for example, a handshake is an fitting ritual in certain fairly sharply defined social circumstances. Still, the regularity with which a handshake is performed could change tomorrow -- it is even quite easy to imagine causes for such a change (e.g. the discovery that a rather nasty disease is transmitted this way). The tides could not change tomorrow. I feel confident in writing this even though I have no particular idea how the tides are today.

Social consent is always contingent; we are never assured in advance that it will be given to our performances. We may be quite confident of winning social consent, but we are never given a guaranty in advance. The unease

here is like that written about by existentialists. We always act brutely --
our acts are conventional only afterwards. Kierkegaard is right, in a way,
to write that we must act out of faith; reason cannot determine action. Still
we always wish for our acts of faith to be the correct ones -- correct both
in nonconventional effects and by conventional consent. We know we have
no assurance of correctness of either sort so we merely hope that we "get
away with" our trespass.

AN ANECDOTE.

Let us imagine speaking beings, beings who <1> on an almost constant basis emit certain sounds. Let us imagine that <2> these sounds are composed of a finite and fixed number of types (though the types themselves may be defined only in opposition to one another), and further that <3> certain sequences of these sounds are met with various kinds of censure while certain (not necessarily distinct) sequences are met with various kinds of rewards. We ourselves are such beings.

Let us also imagine that various regularities exist in the behavior of these beings; for example, perhaps <4> these beings are much more likely to emit strings of sounds whose patterns are generated by a given context free grammar X than other strings. Perhaps <5> various regularities exist as to which patterns of sounds are issued in the presence of which features of their world -- certain short sequences being more likely in some "places" than others, for example (i.e. perhaps <5a> these beings are much more likely to issue the sound pattern "ain't" in a boxing hall than in an opera house). We may be such beings, though we may not be.

Let us further imagine that the regularities which exist in the correspondence between the patterns issued and features of the world are of a particular kind. For example, imagine that <6a> one of these beings, upon hearing the pattern "Gavagai?", will emit the pattern "Yes" if and only if the gestalt features of a rabbit occur within her field of vision. In general, let us notationally abbreviate regularities of this sort as follows <6>: '"s"R[f]' .iff. one of these beings will emit the sound pattern "yes" after hearing the pattern "s" if and only if gestalt feature [f] occurs in her sensory field (it should be noticed that the sound pattern "yes" is not necessarily the same pattern as the English word "yes" -- we must understand that the symbol "yes" ranges over every possible sound pattern). We almost certainly are not such beings, though we may be interestingly similar to such beings. A somewhat "fuzzier" version of <6> is <6'> '"s"R'[f]' .iff. the probability of one of these beings emitting the sound pattern "yes" after hearing the pattern "s" is increased by the presence of gestalt feature [f] in her sensory field. We may be beings who obey regularities of type <6'>.

Before we imagine any further possibilities, let us give some more familiar names to some of these possibilities. The claim that possibility <2> is true of us humans is the claim of Roman Jakobson's universal phonetics. A behaviorist would claim that if these beings share our physiology, then any differences between the sounds they issue and those we issue are accounted for by the details of <3>. Possibility <3> itself is clearly true of us, though the systematicity of the correspondence is empirically open. Possibility <4> is probably claimed by transformational grammatitions to apply to us. Possibility <5> is the possibility that some socio-linguistic regularities exist among these beings; if 'socio-linguistic regularities' can be read as including "physio-linguistic" regularities, including but not limited to referentiality. Possibility <5a> is a particular socio-linguistic regularity which probably applies to American English speakers. Another might be that <5b> these beings are more likely to issue "Please toss me that apple" when in a room having both another person and an apple than in other circumstances.[3]

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3. Donald Campbell, at a conference I attended, said this particular utterance to Steve Woolgar in order to refute the latter's assumption of irreferentiality. Steve Woolgar, as expected, handed over the apple. I'll leave it to the reader to decide what this shows about referentiality; though the demonstration itself was most striking. Don Campbell's view on the matter is, incidentally, one with which I feel great sympathy. It is actually quite similar to that of the great soviet semiotician Valentin Voloshinov. Campbell believes that our words are generally referential, at least those referring to "medium sized dry goods", but that we cannot refer just any way we choose. Rather, the way refer is tied up with the way we move around in and interact with the world (for a Marxist, our mode of production) -- so for example, Campbell claims that we might have a word for a cup and one for a saucer, or we might have a single word for cup-and-saucer, but we most certainly will not have a word for cup-and-one-half-inch-into-the-saucer. The reason for this is the structure of our activity when we have to wash the dishes. The way we refer must cut up the world in a way compatible with the way get on in the world. We may be able to separate the negative claim from the positive one in this. The positive claim might be that since we do, for example, wash dishes we must refer to some things which structure this activity. The negative claim is merely that since we do wash dishes, if we refer at all to the objects involved it is to objects as they structure the activity.

It might be that W.V.O.Quine would take the existence of regularities of type <6>, or <6'>, to show that these beings spoke in referential ways. Or failing this, the inclusion of some subset of <1> – <5> might prompt him to this conclusion. <6a> is clearly just an example borrowed from Quine's Word and Object. It is important to notice here that <1> – <5> do not in any way entail <6'>, let alone <6>. That is, there could be beings for whom possibilities <1> – <5> apply, without any regularities of type <6'>, or any other "referential regularities" including those discussed below, applying. Of course, the relations R and R' occurring in <6> and <6'> are regularities which fall under <5>, so if R or R' are ever fulfilled then <5> sometimes applies. These beings might have an enormously rich and complex language, but it seems we would have to say it was an irreferential one. These beings' speech might even be tied to the world in ways such as <5a>. (what about <5b>?)

It may be useful to think of Quine's radical translation problem here. Let us suppose that the beings of whom some subset of <1> – <6> apply are not ones we merely imagine but ones we meet. Quine's familiar approach assumes off the bat that these beings have a referential language; his problem is only to figure out what they are referring to, not if they are referring at all. I propose that we really must determine if they are referential at all (and if so, about what) before we can carry out Quine's radical translation. These beings are, after all, radically alien. Let me mention one argument which really cannot past muster here. Someone might claim that these beings simply must be referential to have survived the process of natural selection. This claim is an argument actually used to prove various things about the way our own language works, including its referentiality. Let me be curt. Cockroaches (for example) have survived a lot longer than we have, and will probably be surviving a lot longer, without ever referring to anything.

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By now it should be clear that I am not really writing about some radical aliens, either imaginary or stumbled upon. Really I am writing about us real flesh-and-blood human beings -- if you like, about us English speaking Americans living in late 20th century capitalism. Maybe someone could muster some Cartesian or Kantian arguments that some subset of ⟨1⟩ - ⟨6⟩ really does apply to herself. This is insignificant. The question is how everyone else is behaving -- do they obey some subset of ⟨1⟩ - ⟨6⟩? Are there other such regularities they obey? *The whole point is that the only way to answer these questions is by watching and listening to people!* It may seem obvious to us that various of these regularities hold of us, but a lot of fundamentally misguided notions seem obvious to us too -- or have to our predecessors. I hate to keep harping on this, but we just might be wrong about some of these regularities. In particular, I really do suspect that the relation in ⟨6'⟩, and the other "referential regularities" to be discussed, do not apply nearly so broadly as we normally suppose.

What about reference? The occasional satisfaction of the relation in ⟨6⟩, or that in ⟨6'⟩, may be a necessary condition for calling our beings referential; but few of us would consider it sufficient (probably not even Quine). Given that we are still overtly thinking about radical aliens (though covertly I am claiming we ourselves should be thought of in the same way), any evidence for their referentiality must be found in their behavior. To put it in a figure of Analytic philosophy, even though these beings may be homophonically interpretable as speaking genuine American English we can not count as evidence of their referentiality an issuance of a sound pattern like "I am speaking referentially" -- because the homophonic interpretation may not be a very good one. In other word, any "referential regularity" we might find in these beings will be of the same general nature as ⟨1⟩ - ⟨6⟩; in particular it will probably be a specific case of ⟨5⟩. Let us proceed with some possible regularities.

These two regularities are familiar enough, even if usually expressed somewhat differently. They might also be called "the redundancy theory of truth" and "the principle of charity." I do not specifically claim that these regularities must apply for us to consider these beings referential -- nor do I believe that there are not other regularities which must apply for us to make this judgement. All I wish to do here is point out the general flavor, and especially the contingency, of "referential regularities."

The Tarski regularity. Assume that "s"R'[f] and "r"R'[g] apply to these beings. Let us assume that there is a sound pattern "is" (not necessarily the English word "is") which occurs fairly commonly in these beings' speech; and let us refer to this pattern as 'the copula'. It may be that <7> these beings only issue the pattern "s is r" where gestalt feature [f] only occurs in the co-presence of gestalt feature [g]. Or failing <7>, it may be that <7'> the probability of these beings issuing "s is r" is greater for cases where [f] always co-occurs with [g] than in other cases.

The Davidson regularity. It may be that <8> if these beings regularly produce the pattern "s is r" then, generally, there exist [f],[g] such that "s"R'[f], "r"R'[g], and [f] always co-occurs with [g].

Purposes.

The purpose of this paper has already been named in several ways. I have written of wishing to explore an external perspective on truth, of replacing philosophical/conceptual questions with positive/empirical ones, and of giving causal rather than justificatory answers to questions of truth ascription. Each of these expressions differs slightly as to the problem at stake. Let me give still another name for the

Antirealist materialism

The position I will take might be described as antirealist materialism. To many ears this will sound like an impossible combination. Hence I owe an explanation of what this means. I would characterize realism and materialism as follows. Materialism is the position that the world is exclusively composed of matter, and is not affected by our beliefs or desires in any but a material way. Its opposite is

problem at issue; I believe that there is no "epistemic subject" —— that is, no autonomous human knower. I will try to say in a few words what I believe a denial of an epistemic subject to amount to. The broader personal program in which I would like to fit this denial involves a for-swearing of all talk of intentionality in general. However, a denial of an epistemic subject does not go as far as all this. What is involved in the specific denial of an epistemic subject is firstly a denial of any internal perspective on truth. We may be able to give some external definition of truth, but it will be entirely a matter of patterns of citation (such as described by Bruno Latour) or something similar. To my mind the human agent completely drops out of the picture; and (regarding the above "theory of utterance") as put by Jean Lyotard in a charming little aphorism "speakers are merely the posts through which utterances pass."

Let us consider Hobbesian materialism for a moment. According to Hobbes, beliefs are (if anything) merely motions in the head.

idealism, which is the position that the physical world is either illusory, or is determined by or composed of ideas. Realism is the position that sentences are determinately true or false, regardless of the state of our beliefs, knowledge, or desires. Its opposite is antirealism, which claims either that the truth or falsity of a sentence depends on our beliefs, knowledge or desires (in this sense, Putnam's "internal realism" and Lakoff's "exper-iential realism", and possibly even Quine's "ontological relativity," are antirealist positions), or that sentences are not in general meaningfully true or false.

My own belief is antirealist in the latter sense; namely, sentences are not, in general, the sorts of things which can be true or false under meanings traditionally given these words. Nonetheless, this does not force me away from materialism. The world is determinately (and materially) as it is, without regard to human belief, knowledge, or desires —— it merely is not representable by sentences. This is illustrated by the "anecdote" above. If we

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A traditional epistemic definition is 'knowledge is justified true belief'. Some modern epistemologists of a logical bent may wish to make some addenda to this definition, but in general it is un-reflectively accepted. However, if Hobbes is to believed this makes little sense. A motion in the head is not the right sort of thing to be justified; not in the epis-temologists' sense of "warranted" -- we may well justify a motion in the head in the sense of explaining it in a hostile court or elsewhere. Therefore, knowledge is not 'justified belief'. Never mind about whether motions in the head can be true. I shall later consider "truth" and "knowledge" as words whose usages play very similar parts in the same "language game." That is, truths are basically just things which can be known; if one lacks an "internal" perspective so does the other.

Since the traditional epistemic definition fails, we have two choices. We may either claim that our words 'knowledge' and 'truth', and cognates, do not mean anything, or claim that they mean

are beings who speak in a manner characterized by <1> - <5> but not in a manner characterized by <6> - <8>, then our sentences do not represent the world. The stuff which composes the world is not affected by whether our language games are characterizable by <6> - <8>.

If sentences are not things which can be true or false, then nothing is such a thing. The effect is to render meaningless the words 'true' and 'false'. In a way this is an effect I would like to cause, but it may be too extreme. Clearly, we do not use the words 'true' and 'false' (and related ones, 'proposition', 'knowledge', etc.) without rhyme or reason. There are regularities in our use, and reasons for the way we use these words. In general, the regularities in our use of these, or other, words are a proper object for the empirical social sciences. More specifically we can say that the words 'true' and 'false' (and related ones) are used to perform certain kinds of acts, or in playing certain sorts of games -- depending on which way of talking we prefer. These acts or games are ones

something other than what epistemologists mean. One notion about meaning is that the meaning of a word is all those predicates we would assert of it. Clearly, even in more mundane cases this causes tension. We often wish to change some of the predicates we apply to a word, without saying the word has therefore "lost its meaning." In these cases, we try to be as conservative as possible about changing the way we use a word. We may have to change some of the ways we talk (to accommodate new evidence or new argument) but we wish to preserve most of the ways we talk. This is what I hope to do. The word 'knowledge' (and the word 'truth') as it is currently used is incoherent. However, there is a basic phenomenon which underlies most of the uses of the word. The best analogy for the situation with 'knowledge' is, as described above, that with 'commodity' before Marx. There was an important phenomenon the political economists were trying to describe by using the word 'commodity' -- it just happened that their use of the word was contradictory in several places -- or at any rate,

concerned primarily with making and justifying assertions. (And there are other sorts of acts and games, contrary to the covert opinion of some Analytic philosophy). Let me comment that I, of course, do not believe that none of our language games are characterizable by $\langle 6 \rangle$ - $\langle 8 \rangle$, and other referential regularities not specifically discussed. Certainly some of our language games do obey some referential regularities, but not all of them do and we should not try to say which do and do not without actually doing the empirical research necessary.

Marx enters here. An understanding of the concrete socio-economic forces which give form to the particular utterances which are made, which determine which are cited, repeated, etc., and which shape the institutional and technological instantiations of "truths" requires the basic framework of historical materialism. As I still cling to the vulgar model of base and superstructure, I believe that these socio-economic factors are, in the last instance, the forces and relations of

it contradicted the empirically observable   production.

situation. Likewise with 'knowledge' and

most epistemologists.

"Knowledge-production."

I believe that the basic phenomenon which underlies our use of the word 'knowledge', and

related words 'truth', et al., can best (and perhaps only) be understood by metaphorical

projection onto production. We shall speak as if knowledge is produced because no other

area of human activity is as well understood by historical materialism or as richly

structured as is production[4].

What does it mean to say the knowledge is produced? Within Marx, production is something

like "the synthesis of labor and natural objects, or objects of past production, into new

objects possessing use-values." In the Capitalist mode of production, of course,

production is the production of commodities; that is, of objects having exchange values

as well as use-values. Baudrillard points out that there is already something ideological

in the definition of "use-value" –– to the ultimate effect, it seems, of reducing production

to an ideological operation. Something is somehow amiss in this conclusion, but the

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4. If I may bastardize Mary Hesse, it may be said that the way to
get a science right is by finding the right metaphors for it. I
am not merely using productive metaphors to understand knowledge
because they are colorful or provocative. I am using them because
I believe that, at present, knowledge cannot be understood directly.
By comparison, the Laplacian universe could not have been understood
originally if it had not been for the Cartesian mechanical metaphor
–– or perhaps Brownian motion without a "billiard ball molecular
theory." This is not to say that we cannot nowadays understand the
Laplacian universe more directly; but if we can it is only because
of its century-long familiarity. Similarly, we may someday be able
to conceive of knowledge directly –– but not at present. The tools
we have at present, such as bibliometrics, are still too crude to
really manipulate what is essential about knowledge.