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Commentary on William Rehg's "Snow's Argument Cultures: From clashing contexts to heterogeneous solidarity"

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1. INTRODUCTION

There are occasions in scholarly life where a controversy is initiated that endures for generations. "The Two Cultures" by C. P. Snow published in 1959, extended subsequently by the author to include yet a third, mediating culture of "social historians,"¹ constitutes such a foray. William Rehg has visited this exchange to examine Snow's contextual presuppositions found in distinguishing scientific from literary cultures. He observes that the making of public argument is "conditioned by the culture context" in which positions are advanced, understood, criticized and defended. This insight extends Snow to the study of argument cultures. Importantly, Professor Rehg draws attention to the relationships between these scientific and literary constellations as well as their differences. Indeed, in Rehg's view, Snow's most important contribution is to recognize the need "for greater communication between the two cultures," as well as to investigate the "affective and evaluative aspects of argument cultures that undermine such communication." Thus, "Two Cultures" invites communicative repair work into uncertain relationships between science and technological practice on the one side, and literary production and critical ambitions on the other. Hope is restored when a path is fashioned from disrespect between the cultures to a productive state of "heterogeneous solidarity."

2. EXPLICATING CULTURES OF ARGUMENT

In Rehg's reading, Snow's cultures are a two-sided coin offering a space for "intellectual development" and "a way of life" shared in "social practices."² A culture is a social body that may be understood anthropologically in its production of common ways of reasoning and exchange. At the same time an argument culture can be regarded normatively as putting at stake claims bound-by-context—that invite thinking both within and against its

¹ Snow, C. P. (2008). *The Two Cultures*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,

² Rehg, p. 1.

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boundaries. Thus, Snow's two cultures are differentiated by characteristic styles, "culture-specific emotional attitudes, assumptions about the human condition, and visions of the good society." An argument culture is a coalesced, practice-embedded aesthetic, axiological, and ethical communicative space where what are offered as supported, or even interesting, reason-validated claims are called to account. These do indeed appear the categories from which Snow is working out of his experiences as an author and involvement with organizing scientific personnel during the Second World War. Whether they are necessary and sufficient categories to identify and distinguish between science and literature as cultures generally or argument cultures overall is an issue that remains to be addressed. Nevertheless, the recognition that an argument culture is a multi-dimensional communicative space is important.

3. WHAT WE HAVE HERE IS A FAILURE TO COMMUNICATE

The contextual study of communication appears to me to be compatible with the idea of bounded communicative rationality. Bounded rationality is a human condition which admits to our imperfect abilities to master all relevant information when coming to a judgment, decision, or verdict.³ Individually limited, humans sometimes turn to assemble communities of knowledge acquisition and use. Such cultures are constituted in bounded communication practices. Argument

cultures depend upon social-institutional sites, whether these are formally institutionalized or merely informal gathering places, where members can come together and sustain their identi[ty] as members of the culture in question,

Rehg observes.⁴ Intersubjective understandings are acquired and developed within the context of institutional identifications for and within which specialists train, network, develop, and practice.

The boundaries of a culture are distinguished by domains of attractive problems and tasty solutions. Snow's preference appears to be for the sweet parsimony of a scientific endeavour, well-directed by a controlled solution to a nettling problem. An aesthetic of moving from reserved anticipation, to the excitement of discovery, to the equanimity of testing results and tracking further inference is a quiet drama that reinforces progressive cultural projects. In contrast, the unsettling styles of literary authorship leave little but dissatisfactions in their wake. Romantic replies to the industrial revolution spread dissatisfaction that slows progress down, when it but needs to be speeded up. Modernist indwelling on literary form shakes the world loose further from its practical bearings. In either case, practices of literary culture slip from social-institutional bearings and fail to inform of anything other than the egotism of the artist, at least according to Snow.

The combination of work and reward, in Rehg's view, explains why Snow's essay drives toward competing visions of the good society. Roughly, Snow appears to draw from science in the era of classical economics where solutions to social ills resided in scientifically discovered, technological enabled collective capacities to overcome nature's

³ Simon, H. (1991). Bounded rationality and organizational learning. *Organizational Science*, 2, 125-134.

⁴ Rehg, p. 6

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stingy boundaries. The overall longevity of life and swelling populations enhanced by scientific discovery and technological application, underscores Snow's point even if the master narrative of progress is no longer powerful. If the benefits of science are not shared, however, it may not be the fault of those who expand nature's cornucopia Snow could reply. Still, science and technology must make investments in research and link findings to clinical practice and social development. If literature can but celebrate its own aesthetic practices and engage in critical flailing, then the humanities cannot offer to science and technology insight or guidance on its choices.

The responsibility for absence of such a language, in Snow's judgment, is clearly one way. Snow cannot resist condemning twentieth century writers as not only "politically silly, but politically wicked." He cannot answer in the negative the question of whether "the influence of all they represent br[ought] Auschwitz that much nearer?"⁵ He does not come close to mentioning Hiroshima or Nagasaki that ushered in a Cold War of progressively greater terror embedded in the science of cybernetics and the practice of game theory. Instead, Snow invokes the abstract formula of nuclear fission as having potential for evil or for good.⁶ At the same time, he is aware that with such growing power, the risks of bad scientific advice among possible choices could have disastrous consequences, and that "decision-makers" have no capacity or reliable cultural methods to test whether scientific advice "is good or bad."⁷ Indeed, his own lack of balance in judging twentieth century science and literature appears to reflect the very "little fellow feeling" and outright "hostility" of which he warns.⁸ Indeed, his belated recognition of a place at all for a third culture, the social sciences speaks to the absence of a full discussion of the development of a mediating position between the two.

Professor Rehg diagnoses three causes of ill-will between argument cultures and offers correctives that promise to open collaborative spaces among argument cultures. Drawing from Snow, these appear to be communicative spaces where an ethos is cultivated among members, educated into a practice, who interact in a social or institutional setting by deploying elements of reasoning, exchange and debate according to standards of cogency developed within a vision of a good society—an argument culture.

4. CORRECTING HUBRIS

Science breeds confidence, but excessive optimism is not a good in itself—especially when accompanied by an outlook that demeans other, independent communities of reasoning.

The affective aspect of a cultural ethos makes it understandable that members could tend to develop a particular conception of the common good for a whole society, in which their contribution would play the central or most necessary role,

⁵ Snow, C. P., p. 9.

⁶ Snow, p. 67.

⁷ Snow, p. 98.

⁸ Snow, p. 61.

Rehg concludes.⁹ If this premise is true, then literature can and should provide a corrective that makes articulate the unanticipated consequences of what appears to be good within a technical boundary.

Such depictions constitute contexts for evaluating scientists' claims about the benefits of some proposed technology, or claims about the importance of a line of research. They bring abstract scientific arguments and statistics down to the earth of concrete human experience,

he writes.¹⁰

I would add that the critical imaginary need not create only a language within which the past is remembered or the present rendered articulate. The literary imaginary can reach to conditions not yet realized, thereby creating a spur to scientists and engineers to research, invent, and produce new work. Katherine Hayles dwells on the link between literary constructions of worlds yet real and the directions of cybernetics and the communication revolutions of the 21st century.¹¹ Indeed, with human bodies intersecting with information systems and technologies, it becomes increasingly difficult to sort out two cultures, even as critical literary efforts can imagine the tensions that abide and pull in the choices to become (post)human.

5. ISSUES OF TRANSLATION

The benefits of science cannot be presupposed to flow robustly from theory to discovery to technology and into clinical practice, even though such transferral may generate optimal effects for individual and collective uses. Rehg requests that cultures be brought into dialogue so that each understands the capacity and limits of the other. The need for such a project in medicine is recognized by the National Institute of Health in the United States. The gaps between growth in technical capabilities, clinical practices, and public knowledge should be repaired by attention to translation duties among different levels of judgment and expertise. Clinical practices are evolving as panels of experts assemble and translate arguments into evaluative spaces for judgment on the part of physicians and participation by patients. Milos Jenick and David Hitchcock have been at work developing evidence-based practices of medicine.¹² While it is well that two-cultures retain some distance, the discovery of practices through translation of context-bounded knowledge resulting in collaborative communication and informed judgment appears to be promising.¹³

⁹ Rehg, p. 19.

¹⁰ Rehg, p. 13.

¹¹ Hayles, N. K. (1999). *How We Became Posthuman*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

¹² Jenick, M. (2003). *Foundations of evidence-based medicine*. Informa Health Care; Jenicek, M. and D. Hitchcock (2005). *Evidence-based practice: logic and critical thinking in medicine*. AMA Press.

¹³ Translation study has been limited to medicine. It would be useful to figure for each modern field and its argument culture strategies for creating communicative competence among various levels of practice within the field and across fields that intersect on routine questions.

6. COSTS OF COLLABORATION

Finally, Rehg turns his attention to transforming clashes among cultures to the power of “multidisciplinary advisory committee” structures which themselves could found a heterogeneous argument culture. Such groups could engage in regulatory work that would set common standards across subspecialties of the sciences. The ideal of consensus and respect for science may produce incentives. However, such groups would be characterized by common cause more than common ground. New argument cultures raise questions of trust and legitimacy, over and against the social institutions that train, credential, and reward participation within social structures that reward specialization of practice and expert knowledge. Indeed, collaboration itself is a risky business in so far as pressures to find workable solutions may obscure the costs of error and the distribution of benefits. Greater power in triangulated interests does not necessarily result in better visions of a common good. Collaboration is one way of overcoming the antipathy that characterizes two cultures, but its risks and rewards need to be plumbed further.

7. ARGUMENT CULTURES AND THE OTHER

In the spirit of Rehg’s extension from “Two Cultures” to an understanding of argument cultures more generally, I offer an addition. In its most fundamental sense, an argument culture is a productive, architectonic, social and intellectual space for reasoned assertion and exchange. Yet, part of the culture’s project includes the imagination and positioning of spaces that do not reside within its own enlightened boundaries. More, such distancing is internalized by participants who remember how far the culture has come since its inception and think about how far it has yet to go. Thus, each argument culture is defined by its outlooks for self and for others. The other to the culture consist of (1) individuals or groups relevant to but not credential by the culture, and (2) generations whose work is held not be within the scope of present best practices. Snow’s contribution was to recognize the danger in leaving attitudes toward the other unaccounted; Rehg’s reading leads to reflection on repair work among cultural relationships by taking into account the benefits of hospitality, translation, and collaboration across cultures. I would add that communicative engagement with the other, not of the culture, constitutes a reflective space within each culture (whether fully reflected upon or simply taken for granted), including

- (i) that which is reasonably beyond the boundaries of a participant culture
 - (ii) communication which enables and limits understanding of risk and uncertainty between cultures,
 - (iii) those situations which invite collaboration in the translation of overlapping work or prompt contestation for competing grants of legitimacy
 - (iv) dialectical tensions within the culture that call for strengthening boundaries
- or
opening routes of exchange across topics and situations.

Further, the other of an argument culture may be placed in the continuity and discontinuity among past, present, and future spaces within a culture when standards of

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reason, evidence, debate, and claim change through controversy. Snow's "Two Cultures" illustrates how post war science imagined literature and pre war literature imagined science, to the great loss of both.

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