Rational Reconstruction and the Construction of an Interlocutor

The Harvard community has made this article openly available. **Please share** how this access benefits you. Your story matters.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Citation</th>
<th>Prescott-Couch, Alexander. 2015. Rational Reconstruction and the Construction of an Interlocutor. Doctoral dissertation, Harvard University, Graduate School of Arts &amp; Sciences.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Citable link</td>
<td><a href="http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:23845505">http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:23845505</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terms of Use</td>
<td>This article was downloaded from Harvard University’s DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Other Posted Material, as set forth at <a href="http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:dash.current.terms-of-use#LAA">http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:dash.current.terms-of-use#LAA</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
RATIONAL RECONSTRUCTION AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF AN INTERLOCUTOR

A dissertation presented
by
Alexander Prescott-Couch
to
The Harvard Department of Philosophy
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in the subject of Philosophy

Harvard University
Cambridge, Massachusetts
September 2015
RATIONAL RECONSTRUCTION AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF AN INTERLOCUTOR

Abstract

There has been much recent work in philosophy of science on idealization – the way inaccurate representations can be used to understand a target system. My dissertation concerns a particular sort of idealization that is familiar but often overlooked: rational reconstruction. Rational reconstructions are “cleaned-up” – more coherent and accurate – versions of an individual’s or a group’s attitudes. They are the kind of idealized model that facilitates a crucial aim of the interpretive sciences, the understanding of another’s point of view. I provide an account of rational reconstruction and argue that such an account can help us make sense of many intellectual projects in the humanities and the interpretive social sciences. I then argue that this account can also be used to resolve a problem in democratic theory: how deliberative institutions can facilitate understanding and discursive engagement with “inchoate” points of view. A theory of rational reconstruction thus elucidates an important way that the humanities and interpretive social sciences can be politically significant.
# Table of Contents

**Acknowledgments**

**Introduction** 1

**Chapter 1 On Understanding a Point of View** 15

**Chapter 2 Rational Reconstruction: Understanding Others Through Misrepresentation** 37

**Chapter 3 Group Attitudes Without Group Agents** 78

**Chapter 4 Deliberation Through Misrepresentation: Integrating Inchoate Speech Into Democratic Discussion** 120

**Conclusion** 160
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Writing a dissertation can be a lonely business. But with the right advisors, friends, and family, a single name on the title page can mask a collective accomplishment. I'm happy to report that this dissertation has many hidden authors.

I'd like to start by thanking my dissertation committee. Ned Hall has been an incredible dissertation chair. As my primary guide through graduate school, Ned read countless chapter drafts and spent hours – I don't even want to think how many hours – talking through these ideas. One could not construct a better interlocutor. I count myself extremely fortunate to have been able to work so closely with Philip Pettit. Anyone familiar with Philip’s work will know that his contributions to analytic philosophy are informed by engagement with contemporary social science as well as encyclopedic knowledge of history and European social thought. This knowledge by itself would have made him an ideal advisor for this project. But what might not be evident from his works alone is the amount of warmth and generosity he shows to his students and the curiosity with which he approaches their ideas. We’ve spent time together on three continents, and hopefully fortune will permit us to pick up a fourth or a fifth. Selim Berker was enormously helpful both in developing some broad themes of the project and in making many of the big-picture ideas more precise. I spent many hours studying the scribbled notes that filled the margins in all the chapter drafts he returned. Those notes – supplemented by long discussions – helped put determinate form on my initially inchoate ideas. Tommie Shelby has been a continual source of encouragement and constructive criticism. Tommie helped me clearly articulate some of the most crucial elements of the background picture motivating the dissertation project. Like an academic psychoanalyst, he engaged not only with the project’s manifest
content but also attended to the underlying drives and world picture directing my work from the background.

Behind the official dissertation committee was the “shadow committee.” Sally Haslanger was a constant conversation partner and source of inspiration. Bernhard Nickel helped me work through many of the key ideas on long walks through Harvard Yard. Eric Beerbohm gave very helpful feedback and encouraged my pursuit of philosophy of social science. Tim Scanlon gave helpful commentary on two chapters, and Susanna Siegel gave me great advice about predecessors to this project. Outside of Cambridge, I received help from Bryce Huebner, Martha Nussbaum, Julia Staffel, Michael Strevens, Nicholas Southwood, and Christopher Zurn.

I was also fortunate to receive fantastic support from many of my fellow graduate students. Micha Glaeser read multiple chapter drafts and patiently listened to numerous versions of the same presentation. Johann Frick gave me many incisive comments. The dissertation was vastly improved from discussions with Sharon Berry, Elizabeth Miller, Nathan Pensler, and Jake Zuehl. There were also the many helpful questions and criticisms I received during presentations at the Harvard Metaphysics and Epistemology Workshop, the Harvard Moral and Political Philosophy Workshop, the Safra Center Graduate Workshop, and the ANU Philsoc seminar.

I’d also like to acknowledge the broader intellectual support I’ve received from friends and fellow philosophers in Berlin. In particular, I’d like to thank Daniel James, Heiner Koch, Annina Loets, and other members of the Berlin discussion groups I attended over the years. No individual project stands apart from the community that nourishes it, and I’ve benefited immensely from being part of a growing network of young philosophers.
interested in connecting analytic philosophy with European social thought. To all of you, my love and solidarity.

Not all help for an academic project is academic. I’d like to give special thanks to my parents, Paul Couch and Vicki Prescott, who have been unwaveringly supportive of my decision to enter academia. Pursuing philosophy is not what many consider to be a practical choice of life-path, but I’ve never received anything but full-fledged encouragement to go my own way. Freedom from fear of pursuing one’s own projects is one of the most precious gifts parents can give. More concretely, I’d also like to thank my parents for pouring over final drafts of many of these chapters, catching all the errors that somehow eluded my advisors and me.

Finally, I’d like to thank my partner, Carly Knight. Carly and I have been discussing issues in the interpretive social sciences since we met in 2009. As my roommate for many years, she has been my constant companion and interlocutor, someone whose influence is felt throughout the dissertation. I’m fortunate to have someone as a partner who is fun, caring, irreverent, skeptical, forgiving, playful, loving, and serious without being self-serious. I’m looking forward to new places and projects in our life together.
INTRODUCTION

“...I cannot see that there is anything of general interest to be said about what historians should be doing” – Quentin Skinner, *Liberty Before Liberalism*

Imagine you are in charge of a large international media corporation. Your employees live in different countries, hail from a diversity of backgrounds, and have a variety of points of view. You recently decided that you would like to improve communication and discussion within the company. In particular, you would like to invest in some software add-ons to your email system to enhance the exchange of ideas among employees. This software-based strategy involves a few steps.

Your first step in improving communication is to purchase *translation* software. This software takes sentences from an email and transforms those sentences into sentences with equivalent meanings in a different language. Moreover, recent impressive innovations in translation technology – developed by Davidson, Inc. – enable the software to provide translations of sentences in languages for which there is no prefabricated translation manual. This feature – *radical* translation – uses information about the context in which the email was written, as well as the sentences in other emails and their context of writing, to determine the meanings of the sentences. By determining the meaning of foreign sentences, translation software enables those speaking different languages to understand one another. It thus removes one roadblock to deliberation and communication within the company: that an employee might not be able to decipher the propositional content of another employee’s sentences.
However, the inability to decipher sentences’ propositional content is not the only roadblock to deliberation and communication within the firm. Even when individuals are skilled at determining an email’s semantic content, they often have difficulty grasping what is being implied by the sender. Fortunately, there is an additional software program – sold by Grice, Inc. – that provides a remedy. This program – a pragmatics program – enriches the semantic content delivered by the translation, informing employees not only about the meanings of an email’s sentences but also what those sentences imply given certain contexts and cultural conventions.

Nevertheless, even with the purchase of Grice Inc software, you predict that communication problems will persist. The company is full of “creative types,” who have a tendency to compose long, rambling emails. Besides failing to get to the point, these emails often contain inconsistent contents, which makes it difficult to figure out what the sender “really thinks” about some company issue. Moreover, part of what makes these emails so rambling is that employees have a tendency to express their thoughts indirectly using jokes, poems, lyrics from company artists, and tag lines from past advertising slogans.

Now you are facing a decision about whether to try to combat these problems by investing in a final, additional software package. There are three options. One option is to purchase what is called “Ideal Type” software. Developed by Weber Inc., this software provides a small set of simplified templates that can be used to understand particular emails by showing how they are deviations from a common template.1 These common templates are sometimes improvements on the particular emails, but not always. Unfortunately, the software often maps complex arguments onto simplistic versions that are easier to grasp. For

---

1 See Weber 2002.
this reason, the Ideal Type software does not seem to be a great choice for facilitating deliberation, communication, and mutual understanding.²

A second option is to purchase “Constructive Interpretation” software. Developed by Dworkin Inc., constructive interpretation software aims to construct a better version of an email. It works by taking the sentences in an email, figuring out the genre to which they belong, and constructing a new version of the email that makes it a better version of its kind.³ But this software also seems unsuitable for your purposes. Due to the fact that constructive interpretation software starts by detecting an email’s genre, whenever somebody in the company sends e.g. a poem, the constructive interpretation software recognizes that poem as a poem, and tries to improve on its poetic qualities. This is an undesired result from your perspective, since for the purposes of making company decisions you want to distill the views and arguments in the poem, not obscure them by improving the poem’s literary quality.

Fortunately, there is a new kind of software called “Rational Reconstruction” software. This software takes an email, distills its contents to the most important parts, and then produces a “cleaned up” version that resolves inconsistencies, corrects minor inaccuracies, and makes the logical relations among the various claims easier to grasp. The software then includes this transformed version along with the original email as an attachment. The attachment can be used as a guide for understanding the original email. But it can also be used on its own, and, for many purposes, it can serve as a replacement for the original email.

² Since the arguments contained in the templates are often easy to dismiss, employees with differing points of view rarely change their views in light of their interlocuters’ arguments. They also have difficulty grasping why those with different points of view might believe the things they do. Moreover, employees find the templates insulting, as the templates omit important information and arguments, making their points of view look silly and themselves stupid. They therefore have a particular aversion to such software.
³ See Dworkin 1986 and Dworkin 2011.
In deciding whether to invest in the reconstruction software, there are some questions you want answered. How does the software exactly work? What benefits does it precisely provide? And are the benefits of the software worth the cost of implementing it?

There is no reconstruction software. However, there is a practice of rational reconstruction, a practice that one finds in the interpretive social sciences, the deliberative institutions of the public sphere, and even everyday interaction. This dissertation provides an account of this practice and considers its significance for the social sciences and politics.

The dissertation is written not as a single monograph but as a set of individual papers that combine to tell a story. The story is roughly this:

The interpretive sciences – history, anthropology, (most) qualitative sociology and political science – have a distinctive fundamental epistemic aim: providing understanding of another’s point of view by making rational sense of it. This aim of making rational sense of another’s point of view is crucially connected to the practical aim of co-reasoning. In order to effectively achieve these aims, theorists must often go beyond mere description of others’ mental states. They must construct a view from those states with which we can rationally engage. But these constructions cannot be any old construction. They must answer to standards that make it a potential object of rational comprehension and worthy of the subject’s ratification. Such constructions can be employed not only for understanding individuals but also for making rational sense of the ideologies of groups.
This activity of constructing a view which one can rationally engage is of crucial importance in the context of deliberative politics. Many groups that seek political voice – such as social movements – are composed of individuals who share certain commitments but lack the institutional structure to turn those commitments into a clear comprehensive view. Here, the practice of reconstruction can help. Just as academic research in the sciences (plus engineers) are crucial for providing information to aid us in taking means to achieve our ends, interpretive social science (plus journalism) provides information that enables us to stand in a discursive relationship with others, even those who are unable to explicitly formulate arguments or comprehensive views. Therefore, interpretive science plays a crucial role in democratic politics: promoting rational understanding, discussion, and criticism of inchoately expressed points of view.

The individual papers explain and defend these theses in detail. Here, I focus on the significance of the broader picture that emerges out of their combination.

What this picture amounts to is a conception of the nature and political importance of the social sciences that is at odds with a very influential conception of these disciplines held by many of their most famous practitioners. Let me explain.

If you look at the social sciences today, you will notice certain important trends. New technologies are generating increasing quantities of diverse, high-quality data, replacing previous reliance on a limited number of sparse data sets. New statistical methods have been developed to analyze this data, enabling researchers to better discover robust correlational patterns useful for predicting outcomes and identifying important causal patterns. These statistical methods are being combined with the use of more sophisticated formal
computational and mathematical models to yield more accurate predictions, reliable causal identifications, and a clearer picture of how many social processes work. These changes in the sophistication of methods has increased the prestige of the social sciences and altered the role of social scientific research in policy circles so that many social scientists are engaged not only in scholarly pursuits but also have increasing real-world impact. They have gone hand-in-hand with a shift in the social organization of social science — there has been a move away from the paradigm of the isolated researcher to large-scale interdisciplinary teams.4

These changes in data, methods, policy impact, and social organization have influenced the conceptions of many social scientists of their discipline. In particular, it has led many to think of social science as more like a science and less like the humanities. For example, Gary King, one of the most influential political scientists in the world today, writes in “Restructuring the Social Sciences” that “The social sciences are in the midst of an historic change, with large parts moving from the humanities to the sciences in terms of research style, infrastructural needs, data availability, empirical methods, substantive understanding, and the ability to make swift and dramatic progress” (3).

However, there is much work in the social sciences that does not fit these trends. The interpretive social sciences such as anthropology, cultural sociology, and qualitative domains of political science have not undergone the same changes in data availability, methodological precision, and social organization. Moreover, while the prestige and political influence of the social sciences has generally risen, the prestige of these interpretive disciplines has waned, and such work commands little attention from policy-makers. These

4 For discussion of these changes, see Abbott 1998, Sampson et al. 2013, Huber 2013, and King 2014.
differences in trajectories among social science sub-disciplines raise questions about the research aims, methods, and practical relevance of the interpretive social sciences.

One response to these differences – one often suggested by more quantitatively inclined researchers – is that interpretivists need to reframe their research questions so as to identify more clearly the causal hypotheses that their data support. Such a reframing would facilitate integrating interpretive research with non-interpretive research, clarify the relation between theory and evidence in interpretive projects, and provide a clear path for practical application of interpretivist insights. Moreover, making these changes would help interpretive approaches more clearly meet standards that qualify them as social science, which distinguishes itself from various kinds of social commentary by using transparent and reliable methods to provide causal explanations. A direct expression of this general view is found in one of the most widely used social scientific methodology textbooks, *Designing Social Inquiry*:

Our main goal is to connect the traditions of what are conventionally denoted “quantitative” and “qualitative” research by applying a unified logic of inference to both. The two traditions appear quite different; indeed they sometimes seem to be at war. Our view is that these differences are mainly ones of style and specific technique. The same underlying logic provides the framework for each research approach. This logic tends to be explicated and formalized clearly in discussions of quantitative research methods. (3)

The first chapter of this textbook, from which this quotation is drawn, is entitled “The Science of Social Science” (italics in the original).

The broader story that emerges from my dissertation is that such a response is deeply misguided. Projects in the interpretive sciences are not projects whose primary aim is to
propose and evaluate causal hypotheses, distinguishing themselves from non-interpretive projects by doing so in stylistically idiosyncratic and methodologically haphazard ways. Rather, interpretive research has a distinct epistemic aim: making sense of others’ points of view. Moreover, its practical value resides not in providing information useful for prediction and control but rather in rendering other subjects conversable. So the fact that this research is not employed by politicians to manipulate social outcomes via policy intervention does not show that it lacks practical application. It simply shows that a broader notion of “practical application” is required in order to appreciate its significance.

This dispute about the interpretive social sciences has broad philosophical significance. It concerns what form our practices of systematic inquiry should take so as to give us information we have reason to want about other human beings. In particular, it concerns whether these practices should take the same form when investigating human beings as they take when investigating mere objects. This dissertation argues that investigation should not invariably take the same form. Of course, human beings are part of the nexus of causal forces, so one can systematically investigate the causes of their thoughts and behavior. But human beings are also agents with the ability to reflect on the reasons for their beliefs and behavior. This ability gives us reason to privilege influencing with them in a particular way: through their recognition of reasons for their beliefs and actions. And it is our interest in interacting with one another on this basis that gives us a reason to organize systematic inquiry into other human beings differently from inquiry into the natural world.

This is not to deny that interpretivists often make causal claims about the social world (how could they avoid doing so?), and that, when they do, such claims should be subjected to critical scrutiny. The point is that their projects are generally not structured around proving such claims, and missing their fundamental epistemic and practical importance will often lead to wrong-headed advice regarding how these fields should progress.
The thesis that there is an important difference between systematic social inquiry and natural scientific inquiry has a long history, going back practically to the birth of the “sciences of man” in the nineteenth century. The most canonical statement of this thesis is Dilthey’s (1989) claim that the social sciences aim at *Verstehen* (“understanding”) while the natural sciences aim at *Erklären* (“explanation”). For this reason, philosophers and social scientists who suppose there are distinctive aims and methods in the interpretive sciences are often considered part of a “*Verstehen* tradition” in the social sciences.

A crucial upshot of the dissertation is a defense of certain broad themes within this *Verstehen* tradition. However, the particular theses being defended and the strategy of defense differ in marked ways from those of others who have worked on similar themes (e.g. Davies and Stone 1995; Kögl and Stueber 2000). I will briefly outline what I take to be distinctive in my approach and how it connects to current views in philosophy of science.

First, I take what distinguishes achieving *Verstehen* from achieving the kind of understanding that we seek in the sciences is the kind of dependence structure we grasp in achieving it. This differs from *Verstehen* conceived as e.g. some kind of affective projection into the other’s situation. In setting up the difference between *Verstehen* and scientific understanding in this way, I adopt a framework common in current philosophy of science that analyzes “understanding” in terms of knowledge of some special kind of information,

---

6 See particularly Apel 1987
7 For an overview of the *Verstehen* tradition, see Bourgeois 1976, Apel 1982, and Martin 2000.
8 As a terminological matter, I prefer to say that both natural science and interpretive science aim at understanding, but they aim at understanding of different kinds. This is in keeping with recent focus on understanding in the philosophy of science (see de Regt et al. 2009, Strevens 2013, Khalifa 2011, Khalifa 2012, and Khalifa 2013). However, these “kinds” of understanding that I discuss correspond roughly to the distinction that social theorists draw between *Verstehen* and *Erklären*.
9 For discussion of what such projection might amount to, see my “Adam Smith on Seeing Oneself from Another Perspective.”
usually dependence information. In particular, I hold that the kind of information important for *Verstehen* is epistemic support structure information rather than causal or metaphysical dependence structure. Moreover, I focus on the sets of interconnected relations of epistemic support among mental states rather than e.g. singular relations. This focus allows me to draw analogies between the analysis of complex causal structures and the analysis of complicated worldviews.

Second, I put substantial weight on the connection between our epistemic interest in *Verstehen* and our practical interest in effective discursive interaction with others. I argue that one can elucidate and vindicate the projects in the interpretive sciences by showing how the kind of information targeted by those projects generally has “practical” value. In doing so, I am expanding on work in recent philosophy of science that aims to elucidate and vindicate our interest in causal explanation by considering the way that causal information facilitates our manipulative control of nature. While the motivating idea behind this work – that our epistemic aims can be elucidated and vindicated by connecting them to our practical aims – contains an important insight, I believe the work focuses on an overly narrow set of “practical aims.” A more capacious conception of practical aims – one that includes not only predicting and controlling others but discursively engaging with them – enables us to identify, elucidate, and vindicate epistemic aims beyond that of causal explanation. Moreover, this connection enables us to draw clear lessons about the political relevance of the interpretive sciences. Although these sciences do not often provide clear directions for effective policy intervention, they do facilitate mutual understanding and discursive engagement among citizens with distinct points of view, a crucial desideratum for a healthy polity.

---

10 Actually, there is discussion of which epistemic relation is relevant for understanding. Here, for the sake of simplicity, I assume the relation is knowledge. For discussion, see Chapter 1.
Third, and most importantly, the dissertation explores themes in the *Verstehen* tradition by examining the principles governing *idealization* in the interpretive sciences. There has been a flurry of recent work on the epistemic and practical functions of idealization – the use of inaccurate representation– in the natural sciences and economics. Much of this work has highlighted the use of idealization in clarifying causal structure and simplifying prediction. My dissertation explores a quite distinct function for idealization found in the interpretive sciences: the reconstruction of a point of view so as to make it a possible object of rational comprehension. In exploring this distinctive reason for employing idealization, the dissertation directs our attention to the underlying epistemic and practical aims being promoted by idealizing in this way. Concrete attention to the practice of idealization can thus be used as a wedge for considering broader features of the interpretive sciences.

Putting these differences together, the results are a new way of considering central themes in the *Verstehen* tradition that connects those themes to current discussions in the philosophy of science and political philosophy.

I do not expect everyone working within the interpretivist tradition to be happy with these results. The dissertation emphasizes the interpretive importance of abstracting and idealizing to achieve rational grasp of a system of thought, a grasp that enables one to more effectively engage with another as a potential conversational partner.

But not everyone in the interpretivist tradition thinks of interpretive understanding as improved by extracting a set of thoughts from their context, and many are suspicious of metaphors of dialogue with the authors of texts, particularly when those texts were written in periods of great historical remove. Moreover, the kind of idealization I consider – rational
reconstruction – has within it a tendency towards assimilating the other’s thought to the opinion of the interpreter, something that might be considered at odds with appreciating the potential alterity of that thought. Such features of my account might make it the target of criticism from those who think that it is crucial to our understanding of others that we see how their thought is embedded in a broader intellectual and political context, particularly when that context differs from our own.\textsuperscript{11}

I believe the best answer to such a contextualist challenge is a positive account of the value of an intellectual project of the kind I am suggesting. However, there is one criticism that I believe is worth answering here. Sometimes contextualists suggest that an interpretive approach that focuses on extracting arguments and points of view from a context must be motivated by a kind of instrumental engagement with others’ thought. For instance, in *Liberty Before Liberalism*, Quentin Skinner writes that when he was in graduate school,

> It was widely assumed that, if the historical study of morality or political theory is to have any point, this will have to take the form of extracting from the classic texts whatever insights they may be capable of offering us about general questions of society and politics at the present time. They are to be appropriated and put to work.

(102)

Skinner seems to think that anti-contextual approaches see historical texts as instruments for discovering arguments and insights that have the potential to be endorsed today.

However, as my account of rational reconstruction makes clear, I think this is quite wrong. There are a number of reasons that an abstracted and idealized version of the

\textsuperscript{11} I am thinking particularly of so-called “Cambridge contextualists” such as Quentin Skinner and John Dunn. See e.g. Skinner 2002, Skinner 2012, Dunn 1996, and Dunn 2005.
thoughts of an individual or group might be valuable: providing a clear and compelling target for criticism, articulating an alternative to conventional thinking, deepening our understanding of our own view by considering a distinct view, etc. Moreover, besides the value in possessing such an abstract and idealized version, there is value in the activity of constructing such a version. Such an activity involves conjoining our common rational capacities, thereby recognizing those capacities in another. And this is a value that cannot be realized simply by having the product of such an activity delivered to us, even by a perfect computer program that could do so efficiently. So while humanistic inquiry has instrumental benefits, it also has final value in relating us to each other in our capacity as rational creatures.

References


1. ON UNDERSTANDING A POINT OF VIEW

People who lean on logic and philosophy and rational exposition end by starving the best part of the mind. - Yeats

Summary: A crucial aim of the interpretive social sciences is to provide understanding of a point of view. I provide an account of what it is to understand a point of view in terms of knowledge of epistemic support structure. I contrast this account with alternative accounts in the Verstehen tradition and argue that this kind of understanding is suited to enhancing discursive interaction with others.

Readers of American literature will be familiar with Melville’s “Bartleby, the Scrivener,” the story of an inscrutable copyist at a small legal practice in 19th century New York. Bartleby, a “pallidly neat, pitiably respectable” young man, is hired to copy and proofread business documents by the narrator, a comfortable lawyer with a stable practice drawing up bonds and mortgages (10). An initially productive and inoffensive employee, Bartleby one day refuses to proofread a copied document with no explanation except an enigmatic “I would prefer not to.” As the story progresses, Bartleby “prefers not” to perform an increasing number of his professional duties. The narrator tries to reason with him, but Bartleby answers all demands for explanation with a simple “I would prefer not to.” Increasingly exasperated and helpless in the face of Bartleby’s intransigence, the narrator decides to relocate the firm, and the police must eventually be summoned to remove Bartleby from his former office. Bartleby dies in prison.

The narrator describes Bartleby as “a scrivener the strangest I ever saw or heard of” (1), and it is easy to see why. The narrator does not understand Bartleby, and Melville refuses to provide information that would lift the veil of mystery surrounding him. But what kind of information is this?
Imagine the story of Bartleby had a different ending. Imagine that, in the midst of Bartleby’s intransigence, a mysterious stranger appears and tells the narrator the following: “I can see you’re frustrated. Work is piling up, and you need to get Bartleby to start copying again. I have just the information you need. Notice that lamp in the corner of the adjacent room? If you adjust its illumination, Bartleby will start to write. What’s more, his productivity will vary directly with the degree of illumination provided by the lamp.” Desperate for copying help, the narrator decides to put the theory to the test. Strikingly, it works. Upon increasing the flame, Bartleby copies faster; constricting the gas makes Bartleby’s work slow down to a stop.

Now consider a second ending. In this case, a stranger comes and reveals that he is a neuroscientist from a faraway land with a sophisticated device for the prediction and control of behavior. Moreover, he reveals that he has implanted the device in Bartleby’s head. The device uses information about Bartleby’s various physical states to make a prediction regarding his future behavior, a prediction that has been known to be accurate. The neuroscientist then uses the device to intervene on Bartleby’s neurophysiology, causing Bartleby to act in the way the device predicted he would have acted absent intervention.

These two endings provide us with different kinds of information about Bartleby. The first ending gives us information about the causal relations between Bartleby’s environment and his behavior; it gives us information about how Bartleby’s behavior depends on certain features of the environment. The second ending gives us information about causal connections between Bartleby’s neurophysiological states and his behavior; it gives us information about a set of conditions that are causally sufficient to bring about Bartleby’s behavior.
According to certain doctrines in contemporary philosophy of science, the information provided in these endings should resolve the mystery of Bartleby. In the first ending, the stranger has provided information about a crucial causal difference-maker to Bartleby's writing, one that could be exploited to change Bartleby's behavior. This information enables us to answer a number of “what-if-things-would-have-been-different” questions about Bartleby’s writing (see Woodward 2003). In the second ending, the stranger has provided information about an important regularity: whenever the device says Bartleby will behave in a certain fashion, he in fact behaves in that way. Moreover, this regularity is a causal regularity since the device’s prediction is one of the causes of Bartleby’s behavior. However, I invite you to join me in judging that neither of these endings would rescue the narrator (or, for that matter, the reader) from his epistemic predicament. They do not solve the mystery of Bartleby.

By contrast, consider a third ending. In this ending, a stranger comes and reveals that Bartleby belongs to a radical political group. The group believes the system of private enterprise to be unjust and covertly coercive, and it has devised a plan. Its members will infiltrate small law offices around the country and bring the copying of business documents to a halt. Without the ability to copy documents, businesses will be unable to function, and private enterprise will collapse. Of course, since the group objects to the coercive element of private enterprise, it would be unjustified (in its view) to employ coercive methods to bring an end to document-copying. They must be peaceful. Its members will join these copying firms and work just long enough to gain the trust of their employers. Then they will start to refuse to perform their duties. They will be peaceful but firm. Their slogan: “I would prefer not to.”
This ending does not give us information enabling us to answer many “what-if-things-had-been-different questions” with great precision. Nor does it provide us with information about causal regularities. However, it does give us information about the rational structure of the system of thought guiding Bartleby’s behavior. It gives us understanding of what I will call Bartleby’s “point of view.”

The question this paper asks is what kind of understanding this is, how it is connected to scientific understanding, and why we should care about it. These questions are important because, I will argue, providing understanding of others’ points of view is one of the fundamental epistemic aims of the interpretive social sciences. Thus, exploring the nature of this aim enables us to answer the classic question of whether the interpretive social sciences have fundamental epistemic aims distinct from those of the natural sciences. Moreover, considering why we care about this aim will, I argue, suggest an account of the practical value of the interpretive social sciences. While information about Bartleby’s point of view is not as useful for predicting and controlling his behavior as some alternative kinds of information, it is crucial for a particular mode of responding to him: reasoning with him.

The paper will proceed as follows. I start by considering a general framework for structuring our investigation into the kind of understanding the interpretive social sciences aim to provide. Drawing on recent discussions of scientific understanding, I argue that understanding should be analyzed as a cognitive achievement of standing in a certain epistemic relation to a particular kind of information. Moreover, in considering why a particular kind of information satisfies our desire for understanding, we should consider how information of that kind is of systematic practical importance (§1). I then provide an account of what it is to understand a point of view and illustrate how this kind of understanding aids
discursive engagement with another subject (§2). After providing this account, I examine how it relates to the common and historically important view that Verstehen involves emotional projection into another’s situation (§3). The conclusion (§4) briefly touches on the implications of the discussion for social scientific methodology.

The discussion will be mostly programmatic. I aim to provide an account of understanding a point of view that connects central themes in the Verstehen tradition of social science to work in contemporary philosophy. I do not, however, aim to defend this account against all possible objections.

1. Varieties of Understanding

Philosophers of science generally agree that science has grander ambitions than merely providing us with knowledge of particular matters of fact and knowledge of generalizations. Chief among these grander ambitions is “understanding” the world.

The interpretive sciences – history, anthropology, cultural sociology, and qualitative parts of political science – also aim to provide “understanding” of other individuals, cultures, and historical situations. However, there is a long-running dispute whether “understanding” in these contexts denotes the same kind cognitive achievement as understanding in the natural sciences. Many have held that there is a distinct “kind” of understanding that is the object of interpretive enquiry, a kind of understanding commonly labeled “Verstehen.” This section considers how work from recent philosophy of science can be used to put structure on this debate and provide a means for resolving it.

12 For the history of this dispute, see Apel 1982 and Martin 2000.
In contemporary philosophy of science, “scientific understanding” is taken to be a cognitive achievement typically analyzed in terms of (i) standing in a particular *epistemic relation* to (ii) a certain *kind of information*.\(^\text{13}\) There is disagreement about which epistemic relation and what kind of information matter. Regarding the epistemic relation, is it knowledge, justified belief, “grasping,” or something else?\(^\text{14}\) Regarding the special kind of information, is it information about laws of nature, essences of objects, metaphysical grounds, causal relations, or something else?

These disagreements typical assume that scientific understanding is unified and thus that there is a single answer to these questions. However, if scientific understanding is not unified – if it comes in different “kinds” – then one should expect those kinds to differ according to at least one of these characteristics. In particular, if one holds, as I do, that there is a distinctive kind of understanding that the interpretive social sciences aim to achieve, one should ask: is this kind distinct according to the epistemic relation, the kind of information, or both?

These questions can be used to taxonomize different positions regarding what is distinctive about the kind of understanding provided by the interpretive sciences. On the one hand, there are those who hold that the human sciences are importantly different from the natural sciences because there is a particular kind of epistemic relation – a special kind of knowledge – that one can bear to others’ minds or actions that one cannot bear to other parts of nature. For instance, one can understand another’s mind “from the inside.”\(^\text{15}\) On


\(^{15}\) See, for instance, Collingwood 1993. Certain simulationists (e.g. Heal 2003) also seem to hold that one bears a special kind of relation to other’s mental states in coming to understand another’s mind. By contrast, other simulationists (e.g. Goldman 2006) seem to think of simulation as a *method* of coming to bear the same kind of epistemic relation to another’s mind that one could, in principle, come to by other means. The difference here
the other hand, there are those who believe that the humanistic social sciences are concerned with a special kind of information. For instance, the humanistic sciences are concerned with reasons or rationalizing causes.\(^{16}\)

My own suggestion will follow the second of these approaches. Like other approaches in this vein, I emphasize that the interpretive social sciences are concerned with a normative relation. However, my view will diverge from certain other accounts in this tradition by identifying the key relation as that of *epistemic support*, and by focusing on the support *structure* of a system of thought rather than on the rationalizing explanation of a singular action. (I will assume that the relevant epistemic relation is knowledge, but nothing will hinge on this choice.)

One might wonder why understanding in the interpretive sciences comes in this form, and why it should come in distinct forms at all. Here, we can draw on work in the philosophy of science regarding the relationship between our epistemic and practical interests. Recent philosophy of science has begun to direct more attention to the question of why our epistemic interests – particularly our interest in causal explanation – take the form that they do. For instance, why should our desire for scientific understanding be satisfied by causal information but not correlational information? Of recent philosophers of science who have recognized this question, most have tended to assume that a particular kind of answer is required: an answer that appeals to the role that knowledge of the properties or relations constitutive of the epistemic goals can play in certain *practical* contexts. For example, in *Making Things Happen*, James Woodward argues that the reason our interest in understanding

---

\(^{16}\) There are other strands as well of course. For example, there is tradition of thinking that the human sciences – particularly history – are concerned with token events rather than generalities (e.g. Dilthey 1989).
the world is satisfied by causal information is that knowledge of causal information facilitates manipulative control of our environment.\(^{17}\)

One might despair that an approach of this kind could vindicate the distinctive kind of understanding that is the object of interpretive social scientific investigation. As we have seen, the information the knowledge of which constitutes this understanding is not particularly useful for prediction and control, especially when compared to potential scientifically well-established alternatives.

However, I believe that such an approach can in fact be employed to elucidate the kind of understanding the interpretive social sciences aim to achieve.\(^{18}\) The crucial step is to recognize that “practical interests” must be understood in a more capacious way that encompasses interests beyond prediction and control. So while recent philosophers of science are right, in my view, to show an interest in the way practical interests elucidate the nature of understanding, the scope of their investigation has been too narrow: they focus exclusively on causal explanation and the goals of prediction and control. But the practical

---

\(^{17}\) Woodward’s answer to why we should care about causal information is actually not completely straightforward. We are sometimes interested in the causal explanation of singular events, and if the event in question is truly one-of-a-kind, then knowledge of the explanation will not be useful for actual manipulation. Information about why French peasants succeeded in storming the Bastille may be of little relevance for future prison security. Similarly, we are often interested in types of events that – although arising repeatedly – we have no way to actually manipulate. It is therefore crucial to the manipulationist account of the rationale of our explanatory practice that the kinds of relations that the practice targets are typically repeatable and arise in circumstances in which we have the ability to exercise control. We are – of course – interested in the explanation of events that do not conform to these strictures, but these cases are more the exception than the rule. For discussion of related points, see Woodward 2003 and Woodward 2014.

\(^{18}\) Alternatively, one might try to deny that this question about why our epistemic interests take the form they do needs to be answered or deny that the answer need take the form that Woodward suggests. In fact, both of these alternative strategies have some degree of plausibility. First, one might therefore simply deny that the question can and needs to be answered. Explanation of value has to stop somewhere. Why should it not stop at the brute fact that we care about understanding? Second, one might try to show that scientific understanding serves some further epistemic aim. For example, in “Why Justification Matters,” Declan Smithies writes that “A constraint on the adequacy on a theory of any epistemic property is that it should explain and vindicate the role that our concept plays in epistemic evaluation” (3; emphasis mine). However, this strategy threatens not to answer the question at issue as much as push it back one step. Won’t the question simply arise again with respect to the further epistemic aim?
interests at stake in the context of our relations to others are broader than those at stake in our interaction with mere objects.¹⁹

What is the practical interest that explains why understanding in the interpretive sciences takes the form that it does? Consider the case of Bartleby. Notice that the information that satisfies our desire for understanding in this case is also information that is useful for a particular kind of interaction: reasoning with Bartleby. And although Bartleby’s behavior is idiosyncratic, this general situation of needing to converse and reason with others – i.e. to think through some problem using considerations that can be commonly acknowledged as bearing on it – is not. I suggest we feel like we lack an understanding of Bartleby because we feel like we don’t know how we could reason with him.

This idea that the epistemic aims of the human sciences are integrally connected to the practical context of discursive interaction is often voiced by practitioners. For example, in The Interpretation of Cultures, Geertz writes that the purpose of studying culture using the semiotic approach is “to aid us in gaining access to the conceptual world in which our subjects live so that we can, in some extended sense of the term, converse with them” (24). On this view, anthropology provides understanding in virtue of rendering subjects conversable. Moreover, there is a longer history of holding that there is an intimate connection between humanistic inquiry and conversation. Consider Machiavelli’s famous description of his evenings spent in his study engaging with the ancients:

At the threshold, I take off my work-day clothes, filled with dust and mud, and don royal and curial garments. Worthily dressed, I enter into the ancient courts of the men of antiquity, where, warmly received, I feed on that which is my only food and

¹⁹ Habermas 1968 and Habermas 1981 take up similar themes within the continental tradition.
which was meant for me. I am not ashamed to speak with them and ask them the reasons of their actions, and they, because of their humanity, answer me. Four hours can pass, and I feel no weariness; my troubles forgotten, I neither fear poverty nor dread death. I give myself over entirely to them. And since Dante says that there can be no science without retaining what has been understood, I have noted down the chief things in their conversation (italics mine)

In engaging with ancient texts, one is enacting a hypothetical conversation. Moreover, this conversation involves reasoning with those ancients about subject matters of common human concern. It is hypothetical conversation of this kind that Machiavelli thinks has significant value.

Drawing on this connection between epistemic and practical aims, we are now in the position to propose a principled answer to the question of why one should expect there to be a distinct form of understanding in the interpretive sciences. The reason is that we have information needs when dealings with other agents that we do not have when dealing with mere objects. And the reason understanding in the interpretive sciences takes the particular form that it does is that we need a particular kind of information for a particularly important way of dealing with one another: co-reasoning. The next sections consider in more detail what kind of information this is.

20 Letter to Francesco Vettori.
2. Understanding a Point of View as Knowledge of Epistemic Support Structure

My approach to identifying the kind of information we aim to know in understanding a point of view starts from the idea that our interest in knowing another’s point of view is connected to our practical interest in reasoning with that person. Let us therefore start by considering the context of co-reasoning.

Say you are interested in rationally engaging with Bartleby. The basic conditions of co-reasoning are in place: Bartleby is attentive, not angry, looking to rationally respond to argument, etc. What kind of information about Bartleby would you need to most effectively discursively engage with him?

First, you would need information about the set of Bartleby’s mental states, the attitudes and experiences that are the objects of rational assessment and the starting point of reasoning. For instance, you might need to know that Bartleby believes that refusing to copy legal documents will bring about the collapse of private enterprise and that the collapse of private enterprise would increase human freedom.

However, effective discursive engagement requires more than knowledge of Bartleby’s mental states. It requires information about the relations among those states. If you want to reason with Bartleby about whether he is obligated to refuse to copy legal documents, you need to recognize that this belief depends on certain other beliefs: e.g. that his belief that he is obligated to refuse to copy legal documents depends on his beliefs that he is obligated to increase human freedom and that human freedom can be achieved by refusing to copy legal documents. Moreover, the kind of dependence that matters in the discursive situation is not causal but epistemic. When you ask Bartleby why he believes he should refuse to copy legal documents, what you asking for is not mere causal explanation. Rather, you
want some consideration that contributes to the justification of his belief. That is, you are interested in a particular normative relationship among mental states, a relationship regarding what states Bartleby should have given other mental states.

This kind of relationship among mental states is often referred to as “epistemic support,” “epistemic dependence,” or “rational dependence.” (I will employ the term “epistemic support” in what follows.) A precise account of epistemic dependence among mental states – and how such dependence is connected to relations among attitude contents – will not matter for our purposes. What does matter is the way that knowledge of epistemic support and knowledge of causal dependence can come apart. First, consider a case in which you have knowledge of epistemic support without knowledge of causal dependence:

*Wishful Thinking:* You are talking to someone, who gives you a valid deductive argument for some conclusion. You can easily follow the reasoning in the argument, and you know your interlocutor believes all the argument’s claims. However, you suspect that he only believes the premises because he is committed to the conclusion. In this case, you grasp the entailment relation between the arguments premises and conclusion. You thereby know facts about the relations of epistemic support among that attitudes corresponding to the claims of the argument. However, you are unsure about what attitudes explain what attitudes. So, knowledge of causal-explanatory structure among the agent’s attitudes is not necessary for understanding the epistemic dependence structure among the attitudes corresponding to the steps in the argument.

Conversely, knowledge of causal-explanatory structure is not sufficient for understanding the epistemic dependence structure among attitudes corresponding to claims in an argument. Consider the following case:
Esoteric Report: Your friend tells you she believes $p$ because she believes $q$. You have very good evidence that she is accurately reporting her attitudes (she has been very reliable in the past). As a matter of fact, $q$ supports $p$, but you do not grasp any rational relation between $p$ and $q$.

Because you know your friend is accurately reporting her attitudes, you know her belief in $q$ explains her belief in $p$. However, you do not know that $q$ epistemically supports $p$. So knowing causal organization does not entail knowing epistemic organization.

To say that knowledge of epistemic support structure and knowledge of causal structure can come apart is not to say that they are unconnected. When dealing with a reasons-responsive agent, these two kinds of structure are in fact closely intertwined. If an agent grasps the rational structure of his system of thought and rationally responds, we can expect that the psychological state of grasping the considerations that support an action or attitude will cause her to form that attitude or perform that action. Consequently, delineating and drawing an agent’s attention to this structure can be a means of influencing her behavior and thought. Note however that this means of influence has a particularly privileged place in our interaction: it is influence through the other’s use of her own reflective capacities. And it is exactly this kind of influence that we typically seek to exert in the context of co-reasoning.

This suggests a preliminary analysis for the achievement of understanding a point of view. Consider a person $B$ (say, Bartleby) who has a set of attitudes $A$. Person $N$ (say, the narrator) is trying to understand $B$’s point of view with respect to some subject matter $S$ (say, working as a scrivener). $N$ doesn’t care about all of $B$’s attitudes, just the subset that is relevant to $S$. Call this subset $A_S$. Call $E_{AS}$ the set of epistemic support relations that hold
among the elements of $A_S$. We can now define what it is for a person $P$ to completely understand $O$’s point of view regarding $S$.

*Understanding a Point of View:* Person $N$ completely understands person $B$’s point of view with respect to $S$ iff and because

(i) $N$ knows that $O$ has the attitudes contained in $A_S$

(ii) $N$ knows the set of support relations $E_{AS}$ that obtain among the elements of $A_S$

However, this analysis leaves something out. One of the reasons that it is important to know the components and relations that compose a system of thought is that it is important to know certain properties of the structure as a whole as well know what role various attitudes play within that structure. For instance, one can increase one’s understanding of a point of view by knowing it has a foundational structure rather than a holistic structure or by knowing that certain attitudes are more central than others.²¹ Moreover, knowledge of properties of the structure as a whole and of facts about the roles of various attitudes informs our discursive interaction in a number of ways. First, we often need knowledge of which attitudes are foundational or central to know where to direct our argumentative attention. Second, knowledge of broader patterns of structural support helps us judge

---

²¹ A system of thought has a foundational structure when there a privileged set of unsupported attitudes that provide support for the rest of the attitudes. It is structured like an argument, where unsupported are like premises that support a conclusion. A holistic structure is like a “web,” allowing circles of support. For an account of how the circles of support in holistic structures need not be vicious, see Berker (forthcoming). For an account of various measures of “centrality” in graphical networks, see chapter 5 of Wasserman and Faust 1994.
whether particular arguments for or against a claim are question-begging.\textsuperscript{22} Third, knowledge of certain structural properties such as overall coherence is crucial for rational criticism.\textsuperscript{23}

Call the set of properties of the structure as a whole that are relevant to understanding and discursive interaction \( W \) (for properties of the \textit{whole} structure). Call \( R \) the set of the properties regarding the roles of individual attitudes in \( A_s \). I will not provide an exhaustive list of the properties that fall in these sets. Hopefully the examples above will indicate the kinds of properties are likely to be found in there. \( W \) will include facts about overall coherence and structure; \( R \) will include facts about comparative and absolute centrality of various attitudes. For our purposes, the important points are (i) that knowledge of such properties is important for understanding and discursive engagement but (ii) this knowledge is not entailed by knowledge of the elements of the structures. Even if facts about the elements of \( W \) and \( R \) hold in virtue of facts regarding \( <A_s, E_{AS}> \), \( N \) might know B’s attitudes and the support relations among them yet not have computed facts about the structure as a whole or the roles of the elements within it. Consequently, an analysis of understanding a point of view should add knowledge of \( W \) and \( R \) as separate elements. So we can amend our analysis like so:

\textsuperscript{22} Question-begging arguments take as premises claims that would be disputed by one’s interlocutor, and the network of epistemic dependence relations indicates would be under dispute in a particular context.

\textsuperscript{23} Moreover, grasp of the role of certain attitudes enables us to make accurate judgments about the overall coherence of the other’s mental states as well as determine whether instances of conflict among such states amount to “deep” or easily resolvable tension. Intuitively, a tension is deep if that tension holds between states that play particular roles in an epistemic structure: the states are comparatively central. So we can analyze “deep” tension by appealing to the concepts of tension and centrality.
**Understanding a Point of View**: Person N completely understands person B’s point of view with respect to S iff and because

(i) N knows that O has the attitudes contained in $A_S$

(ii) N knows the set of support relations $E_{AS}$ that obtain among the elements of $A_S$

(iii) N knows properties $W$ of $<A_S, E_{AS}>$

(iv) N knows role properties $R$ of the attitudes in $A_S$

This analysis is of complete understanding of another’s point of view. Of course, it is rare that one person completely understands another’s point of view. Understanding is sadly often partial. Nevertheless, we can use an analysis of complete understanding to give an analysis of partial understanding. Partial understanding of another’s point of view is just knowledge of some – but not all – of the information in $A_S$, $E_{AS}$, $W$ and $R$.

3. Understanding a Point of View and the Emotions

Many authors have held that the interpretive social sciences engage not only the intellect but also the emotions. This intuitive idea has been one of the primary motivations for thinking that *Verstehen* was constituted by a kind of emotional projection, a feeling into the other’s perspective (*einfühlen*). By contrast, the account I have offered – that *Verstehen* is constituted by knowledge of rational structure – might be thought implausibly bloodless. It

---

24 The idea that there is a kind of understanding of others that is tied to a kind of affective connection has a long intellectual history in reflection on the human sciences. For example, the idea that the re-experiencing another’s feelings was essential to a distinctive mode of understanding in the human sciences is a view typically ascribed to Dilthey 1989. For discussion of Dilthey, see Apel 1987. For discussion of the *Verstehen* tradition generally, see Martin 1969, Martin 2000, Bourgeois 1976, and Haussmann 1991.
might be thought to leave out what is essential to engagement with others as subjects of humanistic inquiry rather than as objects of scientistic comprehension.  

Unsurprisingly, I do not believe this is so. It is true that my view leaves open the way in which affect and emotion are involved in understanding a point of view. However, my view is naturally combined with popular and plausible theses about reason and emotion to yield an important role for affective and motivational states in such understanding.

Let me give three examples. First, one might hold that affective and motivational states are integrally intertwined with grasping certain facts about value and obligation. This general idea can be adapted to provide a role for emotion in my account of an understanding of a point of view. For instance, take the fact that the proposition that torture is painful supports the proposition that torture is wrong. One might hold that in order to count as \textit{knowing} that such a support relations holds, one would need to be disposed to certain emotions and motivations in particular circumstances, e.g. be disposed to think feel indignation at someone who inflicted tortuous pain on an innocent person for no reason.

Second, when considering another subject’s emotional life, we often feel certain emotions when we know that other individuals are in certain psychological states. For instance, we might be disposed to feel sympathy for a person who is in pain. Third, an understanding of another’s point of view may give us reason to revise our understanding of the facts in the world to which that point of view is responsive. This revision in our view

\[25\] Here, one could also argue that there are different \textit{kinds of Verstehen}, one of which is clearly tied to the emotions and another of which is not. For instance, Weber adopts this view in \textit{Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft}, and Haussmann 1991 also discusses this possibility (see pg. 136-137). I ignore this point for the purpose of present discussion as I am concerned with the role of emotion and affect in grasping the information that constitutes a point of view, as I conceive it. However, in other work, I consider an activity that I call “perspective-taking,” which might also be thought to warrant the designation of \textit{Verstehen} (see Prescott-Couch (ms)). So I do not think it implausible that there are different activities and states that might appropriately lay claim to this designation in different contexts. The important point is not to mistake these distinct activities and states for one another.
about how the world is may warrant an emotional response. For instance, imagine you are someone with proudly unsophisticated culinary tastes who regards fine cooking as frivolous. Your friend aspires to be a chef but has recently been rejected from culinary school, something he finds disappointing but you think is for the best. In coming to understand your friend’s point of view regarding the value of fine cooking, you might come to share some of your friend’s views about the value of being a chef, thus coming to share your friend’s disappointment at being rejected from culinary school. Here, your change in emotion is due to your change in judgment about the value of cooking not to a change in judgment about your friend’s psychology.26

I do not aim to defend any of these theses about the emotions. I mention them only to indicate some potential ways that emotional response might be connected to understanding another’s point of view, as I conceive it.

Nevertheless, however plausible these and related theses are, it is important to recognize that combining them with my account yields a result that is quite different from an analysis of understanding as successful emotional projection. And this is a good thing because it is implausible that understanding another’s point of view is directly tied to emotional projection. Consider the proposed third ending to the Bartleby story. This ending provides us with the relevant kind of understanding (Verstehen) of Bartleby. However, this ending does not provide much in the way of information that enables emotional projection. Of course, one might oneself feel differently about Bartleby after receiving this information – one might be less frustrated and angry at his apparent groundless unreasonableness – but

26 For discussion of some of these theses, see Nussbaum 2001.
these emotions are not simulations of Bartleby’s emotions. Nevertheless, I argue, Verstehen has been achieved in this case. So emotional projection is not necessary for Verstehen.

4. Conclusion

In “From a Native Point of View: On the Nature of Anthropological Understanding,” Clifford Geertz asks:

…if anthropological understanding does not stem, as we have been taught to believe, from some sort of extraordinary sensibility, an almost preternatural capacity to think, feel, and perceive like a native…, then how is anthropological knowledge of the way natives think, feel, and perceive possible?…. If we are going to cling – as in my opinion, we should – to the injunction to see things from the native’s point of view, what is our position when we can no longer claim some unique form of psychological closeness, a sort of transcultural identification, with our subjects? What happens to verstehen when einfühlen disappears? (27-8)

This essay has provided an answer to this question. Anthropological understanding – understanding a point of view or Verstehen – consists in a grasp of the epistemic dependence structure, a kind of structure the grasp of which facilitates discursive engagement with another subject.

According to this answer, understanding in the human sciences bears an important analogy to understanding in the natural sciences: it consists of knowledge of dependence structure. Moreover, the same formal tools that are used to represent causal dependencies – and potentially other dependencies (see Schaffer 2015) – can be used to represent this
dependence structure. However, the kind of dependence at issue is crucially distinct. It is epistemic rather than causal dependence.

I do not claim that this difference exhausts the distinctions between humanistic and scientific understanding. Nevertheless, there is reason to concentrate on the difference between these two kinds of dependence structure. One reason is that this difference in aims might offer an explanation for differences in methods between humanistic and other varieties of social science. While this question was put to the side in our investigation, there is something to the idea that reflection and thinking from one's own perspective is crucial for humanistic understanding. Why should this be so? One answer, offered by early simulationists, was that such reflection is a good guide to the causal structure of another’s system of thought. But there is another answer. The kind of information that one aims to know when aiming at Verstehen is the kind of information that can only be known through our own reflection on the subject matter at issue. For when one is considering what supports what, one is considering not just what someone will believe on the basis of some other attitudes but what anyone should believe on the basis of taking the world to be as those attitudes describe. It is for this reason, I believe, that one can use one’s own mind to project into the mind of the other. That is, even when one aims to understand a system of thought, even an alien system of thought, one is presupposing a common rational humanity.

References


27 See Goldman 2006.


Hall, N. “Explanation” (ms).


Prescott-Couch, A. “Adam Smith on Seeing Oneself from Another Perspective” (ms).


2. Rational Reconstruction: Understanding Others Through Misrepresentation

In order to understand someone, one must first of all be cleverer than he, then just as clever, and then also just as stupid. It is not enough that one understand the actual sense of a confused work better than the author understood it. One must also oneself be able to know, to characterize, and even construe the confusion even down to its very principles – Schlegel

Summary: This paper considers how we can increase our understanding of others’ points of view by “rationally reconstructing” their attitudes. Rational reconstructions are constructions of “cleaned-up” – more coherent and plausible – versions of an individual’s or a group’s view of a subject matter. An account of rational reconstruction shows how “making sense” of others often requires misrepresenting them. After providing an account of rational reconstruction, I consider why the activity of making rational sense of one another is valuable, arguing that the activity of reconstructing involves the recognition of others as rational subjects.

A friend of mine likes to tell a story about the Internationale Ferienkurse für Neue Musik, a summer workshop in the small German town of Darmstadt. The workshop serves as a forum for leaders of the European musical avant-garde to discuss the important developments in contemporary music, and, given the international audience, the sessions often require interpreters to translate from the spoken language into English. These interpreters are – of course – hardly the center of attention. It was therefore notable that during a break after one session a few years back, all anyone could talk about was the previous session’s interpreter. The session consisted in a conversation in German with Beat Furrer about his music and aesthetic vision, and Furrer’s answers had been … difficult to follow. There were stories about various friends, something about nature and parks, at one point prison was involved. No one could really grasp what Furrer was trying to get at. Until, that is, they heard the interpreter’s “translation,” which invariably presented a perfectly cogent line of reasoning in which the relevance of each anecdote was immediately clear. By the middle of the event, most of the native German speakers – even the ones with little
command of English – had stopped listening to the speaker and just paid attention to the English translation.

What the interpreter was doing was not simply rendering Furrer’s German sentences into their English equivalents. He was not just interpreting. Rather, he was distilling, amending, and elaborating on what Furrer was saying. In so doing, he was, in certain crucial respects, misrepresenting what Furrer was saying. Misrepresentation of this kind – overly charitable interpretation – is what I will call “rational reconstruction.” This paper provides a theory of rational reconstruction – an account of how it can facilitate understanding and discursive engagement with others.

There is a puzzle about how misrepresentation can aid understanding. Misrepresentation of an agent’s attitudes typically serves to obscure that agent’s view. For instance, if Furrer were to say that he hates Puccini, and the translator were to say that Furrer loves Puccini, the translator would obscure Furrer’s view of good and bad opera. But in my friend’s anecdote, misrepresentation functioned to reveal rather than obscure Furrer’s view. The puzzle is how misrepresentation could do this. After all, one might think that to grasp Furrer’s view is to grasp Furrer’s actual speech or attitude contents, which is made more difficult when that speech is misrepresented.

This paper aims to solve this puzzle and show how misrepresentation can increase our understanding of others’ arguments and thoughts. But it also hopes to do more. It aims to show that an account of how misrepresentation can increase our understanding of others’ thought is crucial for an account of a central aim of many intellectual projects in the humanities and interpretive social sciences: “making sense” of others’ reasoning and systems of thought.
The paper will proceed as follows. I begin by providing some examples from philosophy in which one seeks to better understand an argument by considering various alternative reconstructions of that argument (§1). I then provide examples of reconstructions employed in philosophy, history, and the interpretive social sciences that serve to facilitate understanding of an individual or group's system of thought (§2). These examples should serve as “data” for our thinking about the nature of rational reconstruction. I then sketch a theory of rational reconstruction according to which a reconstruction is a kind of idealized model that facilitates a grasp of the rational organization of an argument or system of thought (§3). The next section (§4) works out that theory for arguments. It provides an account of how rational reconstructions can facilitate our understanding of arguments by reorganizing, abstracting, and idealizing. What differentiates rational reconstructions from other kinds of models is that these models best fulfill their aim of providing understanding when they are “better versions” of their targets (in a way that I will explain). I then extend the account to cover not only arguments but systems of thought (§5). After providing this account, I explain how grasping a better version of an argument or system of thought can help us understand the actual version (§6) as well as how such idealizations aids our discursive with others (§7). The last section (§8) considers why the activity of making sense of one another is valuable. I argue that the activity of reconstructing has final value because it expresses the recognition of others as rational subjects.

1. Reconstruction and Misrepresentation in Philosophical Argument

The first step in resolving the puzzle of misrepresentation is recognizing that there is even a puzzle to be resolved. Here, some attention to the practice of philosophy can help. I'll
briefly discuss the use of reconstruction in the work of David Lewis and Alan Hájek. The point is not to consider their work in detail but simply to note certain features of their reconstructions and the way these features raise a puzzle about how misrepresentation can provide understanding.

Let’s start with Lewis’s paper “Anselm and Actuality.” Lewis is reconstructing the argument of a famous passage from Anselm’s Proslogion. Here is the original passage:

O Lord, you who give understanding to faith, so far as you know it to be beneficial, give me to understand that you are just as we believe, and that you are what we believe.

We certainly believe that you are something than which nothing greater can be conceived.

But is there any such nature, since “the fool has said in his heart: God is not”?

However, when this very same fool hears what I say, when he hears of "something than which nothing greater can be conceived," he certainly understands what he hears.

What he understands stands in relation to his understanding (esse in intellectu), even if he does not understand that it exists. For it is one thing for a thing to stand in relation to our understanding; it is another thing for us to understand that it really exists. For instance, when a painter imagines what he is about to paint, he has it in relation to his understanding. However, he does not yet understand that it exists, because he has not yet made it. After he paints it, then he both has it in relation to his understanding and understands that it exists. Therefore, even the fool is convinced that "something than which nothing greater can be conceived" at least stands in relation to his understanding, because when he hears of it he understands it, and whatever he understands stands in relation to his understanding.

And certainly that than which a greater cannot be conceived cannot stand only in relation to the understanding. For if it stands at least in relation to the understanding, it can be conceived to be also in reality, and this is something greater. Therefore, if "that than which a greater cannot be conceived" only stood in relation to the understanding, then “that than which nothing greater can be conceived” would be something than which a greater can be conceived. But this is certainly impossible.

Therefore, something than which a greater cannot be conceived undoubtedly both stands in relation to the understanding and exists in reality.

Out of this passage, Lewis distills the following argument:

(1) Whatever exists in the understanding can be conceived to exist in reality.

(2) Whatever exists in the understanding would be greater if it existed in reality than if it did not.
(3) Something exists in the understanding, than which nothing greater can be conceived.

Conclusion: Something exists in reality, than which nothing greater can be conceived.

Lewis then goes on to consider distinct variants of the third premise, each of which yield distinct arguments.\(^{28}\)

Lewis is, of course, not interested in facilitating understanding of Anselm’s original passage. He is just interested in whether some argument of this general kind can succeed. Nevertheless, I submit, using these reconstructions as a guide when reading the original passage does – as a matter of fact – increase one’s understanding of the original. The question is how this is possible.

Let’s consider another case. In “Waging War on Pascal’s Wager,” Alan Hájek provides a reconstruction of Pascal’s famous argument from Pensées §233. Here is the original passage that serves as the basis for reconstruction:

“God is, or He is not.” But to which side shall we incline? Reason can decide nothing here. There is an infinite chaos which separated us. A game is being played at the extremity of this infinite distance where heads or tails will turn up... Which will you choose then? Let us see. Since you must choose, let us see which interests you least. You have two things to lose, the true and the good; and two things to stake, your reason and your will, your knowledge and your happiness; and your nature has two things to shun, error and misery. Your reason is no more shocked in choosing one rather than the other, since you must of necessity choose... But your happiness? Let us weigh the gain and the loss in wagering that God is... If you gain, you gain all; if you lose, you lose nothing. Wager, then, without hesitation that He is.

Let us see. Since there is an equal risk of gain and of loss, if you had only to gain two lives, instead of one, you might still wager. But if there were three lives to gain, you would have to play (since you are under the necessity of playing), and you would be imprudent, when you are forced to play, not to chance your life to gain three at a game where there is an equal risk of loss and gain. But there is an eternity of life and happiness.

---

\(^{28}\) That is, Lewis provides multiple reconstructions. Why providing multiple reconstructions for a single text might increase one’s understanding will be considered below (see pg. 61).
But there is an eternity of life and happiness. And this being so, if there were an infinity of chances, of which one only would be for you, you would still be right in wagering one to win two, and you would act stupidly, being obliged to play, by refusing to stake one life against three at a game in which out of an infinity of chances there is one for you, if there were an infinity of an infinitely happy life to gain. But there is here an infinity of an infinitely happy life to gain, a chance of gain against a finite number of chances of loss, and what you stake is finite. It is all divided; wherever the infinite is and there is not an infinity of chances of loss against that of gain, there is no time to hesitate, you must give all...

From this passage, Hájek distills the following argument:

(1) Rationality requires you to give positive probability to God’s existence

(2) The decision matrix is as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>God exists</th>
<th>God does not exist</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wager for God</td>
<td>$\infty$</td>
<td>$f_2$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wager against God</td>
<td>$f_1$</td>
<td>$f_3$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Where $f_1$, $f_2$, and $f_3$ are finite utility values that need not be further specified.

(3) Rationality requires you to perform the act of maximum expected utility (when there is one).

Conclusion: Rationality requires you to wager for God.

Hájek argues that this argument is invalid and goes on to “search for reformulations of the original argument that are valid, while upholding its spirit” (27). These reformulations primarily concern replacing $\infty$ with some other mathematical object in order to yield a valid argument. Ultimately, Hájek concludes that there is no alternative mathematical object that can be substituted for $\infty$ to yield a valid argument that also has properties important to Pascal for theological reasons (e.g. reflexivity under addition).

Like Lewis, Hájek is not primarily concerned to provide understanding of Pascal’s original passage (even though he does aim to “uphold the spirit” of the argument). However, reading the original passage in light of these alternative reconstructions does provide you with
a better understanding of them. But why exactly should this be, especially if many of these variants explicitly introduce distinctions that would be unavailable to Pascal (and are therefore not plausible candidates for the actual meaning of the claims in the passage)?

2. The Reconstruction of a System of Thought

Philosophers are chiefly concerned with arguments, but they are not only concerned with arguments. Sometimes they aim to elucidate something grander, a whole system of thought. For instance, consider G. A. Cohen’s classic account of Marx’s social theory in Karl Marx’s Theory of History: A Defense. The ultimate aim of Cohen’s book is not to reconstruct any particular argument (although there are plenty of reconstructed arguments in the book). The aim is to provide a reconstruction of Marx’s entire theory and to illustrate how various parts of the theory hang together. He is also concerned to show that parts of the theory can be modified to eliminate dubious components (particularly, the labor theory of value) without much change to the overall view. Showing that such modifications can be made demonstrates that the “spirit” of the theory does not depend on these dubious elements.

Cohen’s text is obviously not a translation of Marx’s texts (there are plenty of those). It is rather a reconstruction of the theory contained in Marx’s texts. Like the above schematic arguments, it abstracts from many features of the original text. But it also does more. It renders certain objectively indeterminate passages determinate and introduces claims not present in the original. It is therefore more than a mere summary. It is like a modified version of

---

29 A note about these examples: although the reconstructions are charitable, the ultimate aim of both of these papers is to show that neither argument of the relevant type succeeds. That is, the ultimate aim is critical although the means to achieving that aim is charitable reconstruction. This point is important when considering the use of reconstruction in political contexts.
the original view. And when construed as an interpretation of Marx’s view, it is in certain aspects a misrepresentation of Marx’s actual thought. And yet it provides understanding – in fact, quite a bit of understanding – despite and often because of these differences between it and the original. As paradoxical as it sounds, misrepresenting Marx’s thinking seems to provide understanding of it.

Like Cohen, many in the humanities and social sciences are interested in systems of thought. These systems of thought go under many names such as an individual or group’s “ideology,” “mentality,” “culture,” “imagination,” “imaginary,” “theory,” or “point of view.” Sometimes the subject matter of a system of thought is how the world is generally and fundamentally, i.e. the system of thought is a Weltanschauung. For instance, historians might be interested in the Nazi imagination (Confino 2014), New England mind (Miller 1953), or the ideology of the American revolutionaries (Bailyn 1967; Wood 1966; Wood 2011). But often the systems of thought of interest in the interpretive sciences have a more restricted subject domain. For example, American historians might be interested in Calhoun’s system of thought about slavery or the Jacksonian conception of democracy (Hofstadter 1989). Similarly, interpretive sociologists might be interested in how views of childrearing differ by social stratum (Lareau 2011), how evangelicals understand sex (DeRogartis 2014), how female executives conceive of the importance of work and motherhood (Blair-Loy 2003), or how poor urban black men regard stratification and inequality (Young Jr. 2004).

Just as Cohen develops a schematic representation of Marx’s social theory, many in the humanities and social sciences employ schematic representations to understand

---

30 Sometimes social scientists are interested in systems of thought that are relatively untethered from what individuals or groups think. For instance, B. R. Myer’s *The Cleanest Race* aims to lay out the system of thought embodied in North Korean propaganda. Myers believes that many citizens believe many of the claims of the propaganda, which explains the stability of regime. However, his main aim is to show that there is a way of making rational sense not of the propaganda itself rather than those individuals’ thoughts.
individuals’ and groups’ systems of thought. To take just one instance, Mary Blair-Loy presents two idealized “schemas” regarding work and family life in *Competing Devotions*. These schemas, which she dubs the “devotion to work schema” and the “devotion to family schema,” are idealized representations of systems of interconnected attitudes regarding work and family life. According to the “devotion to work schema” (for example), one’s career is a calling, those who work hard succeed, firms deserves allegiance, and success in the private sphere gives meaning and purpose to life. The use of such idealized “models” of systems of thought is common in the interpretive social sciences.31

When thinking about what such schematic models of systems of thought are meant to provide us with understanding of, the answer is not as straightforward as when we have some text (or set of texts) to compare the models against. There is in fact no unitary answer. Some models aim to elucidate individuals’ explicit belief. For example, when intellectual historians consider the points of view of philosophers, they are often interested in points of view in which the attitudes in question are (more or less) easily accessible to the agent’s conscious reflection.32 In other cases, the schematic models aim to elucidate something implicit, as when one aims to grasp the set of background assumptions that structure an agent’s actions and response to evidence.33 Still other projects are interested in making explicit and elucidating some set of claims that are accepted as part of the common ground without being objects of belief at all.34 Most projects are interested in some mix of explicit belief, implicit belief, and acceptance within the common ground.35 But whatever exactly the

31 Similarly, Lareau 2011 presents two models of systems of thought about childrearing she dubs “concerted cultivation” and “natural growth.”
32 This is often the case when one uses interview-based methods.
33 Projects that employ participant observation are often interested in implicit belief.
34 Studies employing participant observation are often interested in such aspects as well.
35 Moreover, the evidence base is often quite heterogeneous: texts are analyzed, behavior is observed, and individuals are consulted. In the interpretive sciences, projects often proceed by conducting long, sometimes
objects of investigation, it is often the case that when trying to make sense of these objects, historians and social scientists use schematic models that do not always seek to accurately capture them in their messy particularity.  

3. Rational Reconstruction as a Model: The Basic Idea

Why should trying to "make rational sense" of something require misrepresentation? The reason is that when trying to understand an argument or a system of thought, there are roadblocks to understanding that go beyond merely failing to grasp individual constituent thoughts. Because of such roadblocks, when we try to make rational sense of an argument or a system of thought, we often need to take not only the interpretive stance but also the reconstructive stance towards it.

Let's consider a simple case to see why this might be so. Imagine you are reading the first draft of your advisee's senior thesis. Sadly the paper is horrible. While you understand all the individual sentences, there is no clear thesis, the main points are hazy, and the argumentative structure of the thesis is unclear. The paper consists of a set of thoughts seemingly linked to one another by only a vague thematic association.

You have a problem: while you grasp the meanings of the various sentences in the paper, you don't understand the paper. Imagine that you hunker down and try to figure out

---

unstructured interviews. The responses of subjects to various questions are often like the responses to students to questions on paper topics. That is, they are often unclear, rambling, and patchy. It is usually not obvious how the various responses that subjects give support one another. Out of these manifold sources of evidence, the social scientist reconstructs the subject's view on a subject matter.

Of course, the interpretive sciences are not only interested in systems of thought. And even when they are, they are often interested not only in clearly articulating the content and interconnections among the elements of those systems but also in answering other descriptive and explanatory questions. For example, these projects are often interested in comparing systems of thought, tracing relations of intellectual influence, identifying material conditions that gave rise to them, and explaining their functional role in social and political life.
what the paper is *trying to get at*. In doing this, what are you trying to do? You’re dealing with an analytic philosophy paper, so you’re looking for an *argument*. But the paper presents no clear argument, at least on its face. You have to *reconstruct* an argument *from* the paper. The paper is some cluttered mess, and you’re trying to *clear away the clutter and fill out* an intelligible argument that “stands behind” what seem to be the main claims of the paper. In constructing this argument, you aim to *approximate* the claims of the original paper but with various subtractions, additions, and corrections. You make these changes so as to yield a *plausible* argument.

But how exactly can we increase our understanding of the paper by coming up with a schematic argument of this kind? Particularly, how can such a schematic argument increase our understanding of the paper by *misrepresenting* the claims that it makes?

I think a clue about how to answer this puzzle is to consider another context in which misrepresentation is used to increase our understanding: scientific modeling. In the sciences, it is common to use simple models to understand complex systems. When employed to understand a particular target system, models *abstract* — omit detail about that system — and *idealize* — misrepresent certain features of that system. And it is uncontroversial that models can be used to provide understanding of their target systems despite *and even because of* these abstractions and idealizations. Of course a rational reconstruction will be different from typical scientific models because of a difference in subject matter, i.e. a difference in the kind of “system” modeled. But the comparison to scientific models is, I believe, illuminating because a rational reconstruction – like a scientific model – is a construct that can be used to engage with a system in an indirect manner.

While there are various stories about how models in the sciences work (for an
overview, see Weisberg 2013), one important way of thinking about how they work is that they employ abstraction and idealization for the purposes of putting on display the dependence structure of some system when certain kinds of “noise” are eliminated. This way of thinking about models is useful for our purposes. Like a model used in this way, a rational reconstruction also helps you understand and practically engage with a system by putting clearly on display a kind of dependence structure characterizing that system when various kinds of “noise” are eliminated. But there are important differences between a rational reconstruction and a typical scientific model. These differences concern the kind of dependence that one seeks to put on display and the kind of practical engagement one seeks to facilitate. These differences have implications for the kind of “noise” that one seeks to eliminate when idealizing, and therefore how idealization increases understanding.

In the sciences, models often aim to help you grasp causal dependences and aid your practical engagement with a system by providing information useful for predicting and controlling how a system will evolve. When such models misrepresent a system, they often do so with the aim of idealizing away certain kinds of “noise” characterized causally. That is, various interfering conditions are imagined away, and a model makes clear how the system’s parts are causally connected absent various kinds of causal interference.

By contrast, a rational reconstruction aims to help you grasp rational dependences and so helps you see how a set of claims rationally interrelate. Having this information — while sometimes useful for prediction — has its paradigmatic use in reasoning together with an agent about an argument or view. For instance, when you reconstruct the argument of the inchoate paper, you aim to clearly articulate the basic argument in a way that makes it easy to
grasp which claims the paper’s conclusions rationally depend on. With dependency information of this kind, you could focus discussion with the student on the claims that make a difference to the argument, i.e. those that make a difference for whether the student should believe the conclusion of his paper.

In this case, the kind of “noise” that needs to be eliminated to make rational structure clear is not causally but normatively characterized. You’re trying to eliminate sources of confusion and error that obscure the plausibility and rational organization of the argument. So various mistakes and omissions are imagined away, allowing the model to clearly depict how the claims of the argument are connected absent various kinds of mistakes, that is, how the argument would be if it were well-formulated and to the point.

One can summarize these differences using the following chart:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Causal Model</th>
<th>Rational Reconstruction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kind of Dependence</td>
<td>Causal</td>
<td>Rational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mode of Practical Engagement</td>
<td>Prediction and control</td>
<td>Reasoning together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kind of “Noise” Eliminated</td>
<td>Causal noise</td>
<td>Noise characterized normatively</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Understanding how rational reconstruction provides us with understanding requires cashing out this metaphor of “noise.”

When we consider how rational reconstruction increases understanding by “noise removal,” we should distinguish three kinds of noise that are important roadblocks to understanding. These are disorganization, clutter, and mistakes. Correspondingly, there are three important ways that a rational reconstruction might differ from the original set of claims that

---

A model of this kind does not reveal how an agent’s attitudes will change under various changes of other attitudes but rather how they are rationally required to change.
enable the model to facilitate understanding the original. First, the model might reorganize the original claims. Second, it might abstract away irrelevant claims. Third, it might normatively idealize, i.e. clean up the mistakes.

Table 2: How Rational Reconstruction Improves Understanding By Eliminating “Noise”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kind of Noise</th>
<th>Ways of Improving Understanding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Disorganization</td>
<td>Reorganize</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clutter</td>
<td>Abstract</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mistakes</td>
<td>Normatively idealize</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Seeing how these tasks can improve our understanding will help us to see how reconstruction can improve our understanding.

4. The Rational Reconstruction of an Argument

So a rational reconstruction of a philosophy paper should be understood as a particular kind of idealized model that can be used to comprehend and rationally engage with the paper. Particularly, it is a kind of model I will call “RAIC models,” a reorganized, abstract, idealization of content model of the paper. This section explains the nature of such models and how they provide understanding. One can think of such models as constructions that are the product of four different activities: interpreting the sentences by identifying propositions expressed by them, reorganizing those propositions, abstracting to omit unnecessary propositions, and idealizing away trivial mistakes.39

38 Here, abstraction is understood as the removal of detail.
39 I will discuss RAIC models as if they are generated by a certain procedure. But this is simply for the purposes of exposition. What makes an RAIC model good is not that it is generated by a particular procedure but that it bears a particular kind of relation to the target system.
4.1 Interpretation of Propositional Content

Before we consider what kind of model a rational reconstruction is (and how it relates to its target system), we need to consider the nature of the target system that is being modeled. The paper is an ordered collection of sentences $S_1, S_2, ..., S_n$. However, the target system of a rational reconstruction is not a set of sentences but rather a set of contents of those sentences. This content can be described by a set of propositions $P_1, P_2, ..., P_n$. Exactly how we map sentences onto propositions – and the principles that make such interpretations good – will not concern us here.\(^{40}\) For our purposes, the point is simply to distinguish the activity of interpreting a set of sentences by identifying the claims they are making from the primary locus of concern in this paper, which is how we can better understand a set of claims by reconstructing them.

4.2 Reorganization

The first step in making rational sense of some set of contents is to try to organize those contents in a way that enables us to easily grasp important relations that hold among them (what these important relations are, we will get to in a moment).

To see how reorganizing information may provide understanding, consider an example.\(^{41}\) Take the following sequence of numbers: 1, 1, 2, 3, 2, 5, 4, 5, 7, 8, 7, 9, 16, 11, 11, 32, 13, 13, 64, 17, .... If you do not understand the relations among these numbers, you are not alone. Rewriting the numbers may help:

---

\(^{40}\) For example, maybe some of the content is derived from the literal meaning of the sentences, while other parts of the informational content is determined by pragmatics. Maybe we need to employ a set of interesting principles – such the principle of charity or the principle of humanity – to perform this mapping (or, even more extremely, perhaps those principle play a role in determining what it is for a mapping to be correct). Such questions will not concern us.

\(^{41}\) This example is due to Ned Hall.
The sequence is now easy to understand: it is an interleaving of odd numbers, squares, and prime numbers. Reorganizing the sequences of numbers increases your understanding of them by revealing the pattern behind the sequence.

Now consider your advisee’s paper with the sequence sentences $S_1, S_2 \ldots S_n$. Say we interpret these sentences, and we end up with the following list of propositions:

$$p, w, q \lor v, a, p \Rightarrow q, \sim w \Rightarrow v, z \Rightarrow \sim (q \lor v), b, q, \sim v, \sim z, c$$

Even if you can grasp each of these claims individually, the structure of paper – and therefore the paper’s argument – is difficult to understand. However, consider what happens when we reorganize by creating a new row after each fourth claim. (So, we’re going to take claims 1-4, leave them up top, move claims 5-8 under them to create a second row, and move claims 9-12 below those to create a third row).

$$p, \sim w, q \lor v, a, \mid p \Rightarrow q, \sim w \Rightarrow v, z \Rightarrow \sim (q \lor v), b, \mid q, \sim v, \sim z, c$$

Here is what we end up with:
This is still a little complicated, but we can definitely see some structure. Particularly, we can see that the first three columns each contain logically interconnected elements.\textsuperscript{42} (There is a problem in the second column, but we'll come back to that later.) So mere reorganization can facilitate understanding the student's paper by revealing an “organizing pattern” in the paper.\textsuperscript{43}

4.3 Abstraction to Isolate Difference-Makers

But even with this reorganization, the paper is still cluttered. There are claims that are irrelevant to the paper’s basic argument. And all this extra clutter makes grasping the basic logical structure of the paper difficult. When this is the case, we can increase our understanding by abstracting, i.e. omitting detail about the paper’s claims. A good

\begin{tabular}{|c|c|c|}
\hline
$p$ & $\sim w$ & $q, \sim v$ \\
$p \supset q$ & $\sim w \supset v$ & $z \supset (q, \sim v)$ \\
$q$ & $\sim v$ & $\sim z$ \\
\hline
\end{tabular}

\textsuperscript{42} Why this structure should be of particular importance to us, we will come to below (particularly in §7). For the moment, it is enough to simply note that this kind of structure is quite different from some potential alternatives. For example, consider an alternative organizational scheme in which we aim to make clear not the logical dependences among the contents of the student’s paper, but the explanatory dependencies among the student’s attitudes that have those contents (assuming the student believes what he wrote in the paper). Say that the student has engaged in motivated reasoning and accepts the premises of the paper’s argument only because he wants to believe the paper’s conclusion. In this case, the explanatory dependence relations among the attitudes diverge from the logical dependence relations among the contents of the attitudes. However, if we want to understand the argument, we need to grasp the logical rather than explanatory relations.

\textsuperscript{43} Some interpreters have claimed that Carnap thought reorganization is all there is to rational reconstruction. For example, in considering the history of the concept of “rational reconstruction,” Beaney 2013 writes that “[a] rational reconstruction of a (purported) body of knowledge of conceptual scheme or set of events is a redescription and reorganization of that body or scheme that exhibits the logical (or rational) relations between its elements” (253).
abstraction pairs down the paper’s claims to just the claims that make a *difference* to the conclusion that is most important.\(^{44}\)

For example, consider the last column in our reorganized set of the paper’s claims:

\[
\begin{array}{ccc}
  p & \sim w & q, \sim v \\
  p \supset q & \sim w \supset v & \sim v \\
  q & \sim v & \sim z \\
\end{array}
\]

Notice that \(a\), \(b\), and \(c\) do not bear any logical relationship to one another, nor to any other claims in the paper. Since these claims do not make a difference to the paper’s argument, we can get a clearer sense of the paper’s argument by eliminating them like so:

\[
\begin{array}{ccc}
  p & \sim w & q, \sim v \\
  p \supset q & \sim w \supset v & \sim v \\
  q & \sim v & \sim z \\
\end{array}
\]

So we’ve now isolated the main claims of the paper.\(^{45}\) (Compare this to the way that Lewis

---

\(^{44}\) One might distinguish two aspects that are being pared away in abstraction. First, all non-propositional information is abstracted away (e.g. rhetorical flourishes, etc.). Second, propositions that are not difference-makers are abstracted away.

\(^{45}\) One might imagine an abstraction procedure that operates à la Strevens (2008) in which one *starts* by identifying the conclusion that is to be reached (as one starts by identifying what needs to be explained), and then employs an abstraction procedure that eliminates claims that are not crucial to reaching this conclusion. One concern with going this way is that this procedure requires that we have an independent grasp on what the
and Hájek distill the argument from the passages of Anselm and Pascal.)

4.4 Mistakes and Normative Idealization

Once we’ve isolated the main claims of the paper, then we may need to idealize for the purposes of improving comprehension. As we have noted, the need for idealization in this context is as a response to the set of claims containing “noise” normatively characterized, i.e. mistakes. So this idealization is a kind of normative idealization.

Particularly, there are three kinds of mistakes that inhibit our understanding of the structure of an argument: validity, inaccuracy (under which I include imprecise claims), and what I will call “patchiness.” By “patchiness,” I mean failure to draw obvious implications, recognize obvious sources of support, and include intermediary steps in reasoning.

An idealization that corrects for these mistakes is one that clarifies – i.e. corrects for invalidity and reduces inaccuracy – and makes comprehensive – i.e. reduces patchiness – of inchoate speech. So to the extent that an inchoate view contains defects of invalidity, inaccuracy, and patchiness, a good reconstruction exhibits validity, “accuracy to the world,”

46 and comprehensiveness. But while idealization aims to correct for these mistakes, it tries to do so without deviating too sharply from the actual claims of what is being reconstructed. If an alternative model were extremely different from its target system, it would – after all – give us no epistemic and practical aid. So a good reconstruction should be similar to its target system.

paper’s conclusion is. However, a reconstruction might itself aim to make this clear (and/or the reconstruction might modify it).

46 I’ve picked this term to distinguish the accuracy of the model’s claims about the world from how accurately the model depicts the original inchoate speech. It is the former that concerns us.
Table 3: Values Guiding Normative Idealization

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mistakes in Inchoate Speech</th>
<th>Values Guiding Idealization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Invalidity</td>
<td>Validity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inaccuracy</td>
<td>Accuracy to the world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patchiness</td>
<td>Comprehensiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Similarity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These are the values that guide normative idealization in a rational reconstruction. Consequently, they are values that one should take into account when assessing alternative potential ways of idealizing the original argument in the paper.

Remember again what you are doing when trying to figure out what a paper is trying to achieve. You are thinking of variants on the original inchoate speech in order to find a variant that “fits.” We now have a more precise way of saying what it is you are doing in this case.

You’re starting with a set of possible alternatives to the paper’s claims that are sufficiently close to valid and sufficiently similar to the paper’s claims to count as potential reconstructions.47 (Here, the idea is that there are some side constraints on a reconstruction: the reconstruction itself should be close to valid, and it needs to be sufficiently similar to the original.) So we’re going to give a name to the set of all possible sets of claims that meet those side constraints: call it V (for variants on the original claims).

We can now think of the question of which idealization to choose as having the structure of an optimization problem, where the best reconstruction is the one that optimizes over the four values mentioned above.48 The problem is to choose a

47 Here and below, I appeal to the notion of “closeness to validity.” (This is a gradable notion that is the analog of coherence.)

48 I’m going to talk as if there is a unique best reconstruction. I’m not actually committed to that assumption — in fact I think it is often false — but it will simplify things to assume that is true. I will also ignore additional complications such as what weight these different values should be given.
reconstruction $R$ from within $V$ using the values of coherence, accuracy to the world, comprehensiveness, and similarity as optimization parameters.

**Rational Reconstruction (Argument):** A set of claims $R$ is the best rational reconstruction of a set of claims $O$ iff $R$ is the member of $V$ that optimizes over the following four values:

1. Accuracy to the world
2. Closeness to validity
3. Comprehensiveness
4. Similarity to $O$

Consider the student’s paper. When you try to reconstruct it, you consider various possible arguments and assess those possibilities along a number of dimensions: whether the argument is valid, whether the premises are accurate, whether the argument is filled out enough to see how the premises support the conclusion, and whether the argument seems to match the claims of the paper. My suggestion is that the best reconstruction is the argument that does best according to these criteria.\(^9\)

Exactly how to weigh these criteria against each other is a context-sensitive matter. For instance, how much weight one should give to similarity when picking a reconstruction might depend on how long much time the student has to revise his thesis draft. So, if we’re being more precise, we can think of the various members of $V$ being assigned a “rational

---

\(^9\) One might be concerned that there will never be a unique reconstruction because one can always trade off between closeness to validity and accuracy to world by taking inferences and pushing them into premises as conditionals or turning conditional premises into inferences. Let us grant that variants arrived at using these methods would be equally good from the perspective of idealization. It does not follow that they would be equally good from the perspective of organization of information. So when considering what is the best RAIC model, such variants will not be equally good.
reconstruction score” Rat(x) according to the following formula:

\[ \text{Rat}(x) = w_1 \text{Acc}(x) + w_2 \text{Cl}(x) + w_3 \text{Com}(x) + w_4 \text{Sim}(x) \]

where Acc(x) measures the accuracy-to-the-world of the claims in x, Cl(x) measures the closeness to validity of x, Com(x) measures the comprehensiveness of x, Sim(x) measures the similarity between O and x, and where \( w_1, w_2, w_3, \) and \( w_4 \) are contextually-determined weights.\(^{50}\) The best rational reconstruction is the member of V that receives the highest score.

For example, in our reorganized set of claims from the student’s paper, consider the middle set of three claims:

\[
\begin{array}{ccc}
\neg w & & \neg v \\
\neg w & \Rightarrow & v \\
\neg v & & \neg z \\
\end{array}
\]

Here, we have three claims that are jointly inconsistent. Say we want to eliminate this inconsistency. There are multiple ways to do so. We could change \( \neg w \) to \( w \), change \( \neg v \) to \( v \), or change the conditional. Which should we choose?

For the sake of simplicity, ignore the accuracy and comprehensiveness for a moment. Notice that we get a valid overall argument if we change the conditional to “if \( \neg w \) then \( \neg v \).

\(^{50}\) Treating this step as an actual optimization problem raises a number of worries: e.g. how are we to determine the values of Acc(x), Sim(x), Co(x), and Com(x)? Can we determine them in a way that yields a cardinal number? Moreover, it might be that Rat(x) has no maximum, i.e. that for every x there might be another y such that Rat(y) > Rat(x). I raise these problems in order to set them aside.
For then the conclusions of each of the syllogisms in the first two columns support the conjunction in the first row of the last column. So if we were to change the conditional, then we would greatly increase validity while paying a small price in similarity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>$p$</th>
<th>$\sim w$</th>
<th>$q, \sim v$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>$p \supset q$</td>
<td>$\sim w \supset \sim v$</td>
<td>$z \supset (q, \sim v)$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$q$</td>
<td>$\sim v$</td>
<td>$\sim z$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In more realistic cases, the weighing may be more complicated and differing (mutually inconsistent) reconstructions may receive the same “score.”\(^51\) This is as it should be. First, pre-theoretically, many reconstructive projects explicitly acknowledge that there are multiple reconstructions that are good along different dimensions (consider that Lewis and Hájek provide a set of reconstructions). So to the extent that an account of reconstruction should respect practice, it should allow for multiple, equally good reconstructions. Second, consider an analogy to causal models: for any particular target system, there may not be one single idealized causal model that is best for describing that system. Moreover, different models may conflict in that they ascribe different properties to objects in their respective models that have the same referent in the target system. This does not undermine the project of developing causal models. Third, the possibility of equally valid rational reconstructions makes sense of the truism that there are be multiple, conflicting, but equally valid ways of

\(^{51}\) Note there are two reasons that differing reconstructions might be considered “equally good.” First, there may be a tie for what maximizes $\text{Rat}(x)$ for a given set of values of $w_1$, $w_2$, $w_3$, and $w_4$. Second, which reconstruction receives the highest score might depend on the values of $w_1$, $w_2$, $w_3$, and $w_4$ such that there is no reconstruction that is best independent of context. Since different sorts of projects may wish to assign different weights to these optimization parameters, the best reconstruction might depend on the nature of the project.
making sense of a thinker’s argument.

4.5 Summary

By using reorganization, abstraction, and idealization, we’ve constructed a model of the paper’s claims. Here are the claims in the original paper:

\[ p, w, q, \neg v, a, p \supset q, \neg w \supset v, \neg (q \supset v), b, q, \neg v, \neg z, c. \]

Here is our reconstruction:

\[
\begin{align*}
\quad & p \\
\quad & w \\
\quad & q, \neg v \\
\quad & p \supset q \\
\quad & \neg w \supset \neg v \\
\quad & \neg (q \supset v) \\
\therefore & q \\
\therefore & \neg v \\
\therefore & \neg z
\end{align*}
\]

Out of the mess of claims we have constructed three valid deductive arguments in which the conclusions from the first two arguments deductively support the first premise in the third. Such an abstract, reorganized, idealization of contents of the paper’s claims is an “RAIC model.” We can use such a model to understand and rationally engage with the paper.

5. The Rational Reconstruction of a System of Thought

Let’s extend the above account of rational reconstruction to encompass systems of thought. To see how to do this, imagine a slight variation on our student’s thesis paper. Say that rather than attempting to make an argument, the student has decided to draft a manifesto about democracy. Unfortunately, the manifesto, like the thesis, is quite difficult to understand. It is not obvious what attitudes are the student’s core convictions, and which are more peripheral. There are apparent inconsistencies, some implausible and poorly-thought-
out claims, and the logical interconnections among the various statements is often opaque. Even though you understand the manifesto on a sentence-by-sentence level (or at least seem to), you don’t understand it as a whole.

The student manifesto represents an inchoate system of thought about democracy. Like an argument, a system of thought is a set of claims with a logical structure. However, the structure does not take the form of premises that logically support conclusions, and the standards of success do not include validity. Rather, the structure of a system of thought is more holistic. A system of thought is a set of logically interconnected claims in which there are central and peripheral claims, and whose standards of success include coherence rather than validity.\(^{52}\)

However, our account of the rational reconstruction of arguments can be easily amended to take account of these differences. You start by considering a set \(V\) of systems of thought that are sufficiently coherent and sufficiently similar to the paper’s claims to count as potential reconstructions. We then choose a reconstruction \(R\) from within \(V\) using the values of coherence, accuracy to the world, comprehensiveness, and similarity as optimization parameters.

\textit{Rational Reconstruction (System of Thought):} A set of claims \(R\) is the best rational reconstruction of a set of claims \(O\) iff \(R\) is the member of \(V\) that optimizes over the following four values:

1. Accuracy to the world
2. Coherence

\(^{52}\) The analysis of “coherence” is a vexed question about which I will not take a stand here. There are two main approaches. First, there is a probabilistic approach, on which the coherence of a set of beliefs is a property of the probabilistic relations among the contents of those beliefs (see Olsson 2008). Second, there is a weighted sum view, according to the coherence of a function of coherence-increasing factors and coherence-decreasing factors. There is also a graphical approach to coherence recently proposed by Berker (forthcoming).
3. Comprehensiveness
4. Similarity to O

When you try to reconstruct the student’s manifesto, you consider various potential
manifestos and pick the best by weighing similarity against coherence, accuracy-to-the-world,
and comprehensiveness.\textsuperscript{53}

I believe this is roughly what theorists are doing in the interpretive sciences when they
seek to make sense of the systems of thought of individuals or groups: they are trying to
construct the best manifesto for the individual or group about a subject matter. This process
can be difficult business since individuals and groups rarely provide draft manifestos that can
serve as direct bases for reconstruction.\textsuperscript{54} Rather, interpretation and aggregation are required
to get the raw materials on the table. But once those materials are on the table, the theorist
aims to provide a reconstruction that makes the best sense out of them.

A reconstruction of a system of thought is like a “normative map” – a structure that
can be used to orient yourself in an interaction with a being that is reasons-responsive. The
map tells you where a certain chain of thoughts “leads” and informs you as to what claims
the agent would be rationally required to modify were she to make particular targeted
changes. It charts out the possible positions that one could take around an issue subject to
certain constraints of the agent’s situation. Moreover, it is the sort of map that is useful when
you’re engaged in particular kinds of interaction, most obviously a conversation.

\textsuperscript{53} To make explicit that these factors can be assigned different weights depending on context, we can think of
the various members of \( \mathbf{V} \) as being assigned a “rational reconstruction score” \( R(x) \) according to the following
formula:

\[ R(x) = w_1 \text{Acc}(x) + w_2 \text{Coh}(x) + w_3 \text{Com}(x) + w_4 \text{Sim}(x) \]

where \( \text{Acc}(x) \) measures the accuracy-to-the-world of the claims in \( x \), \( \text{Coh}(x) \) measures the coherence of \( x \),
\( \text{Com}(x) \) measures the comprehensiveness of \( x \), \( \text{Sim}(x) \) measures the similarity between \( \mathbf{O} \) and \( x \), and where \( w_1 \),
\( w_2 \), \( w_3 \), and \( w_4 \) are contextually-determined weights. The best rational reconstruction is the member of \( \mathbf{V} \) that
receives the highest score.

\textsuperscript{54} Although they sometimes do. For instance, see Anderson 2012.
6. How Rational Reconstruction Aids Understanding

This section considers how a rational reconstruction enables us to better understand an actual argument. (The same account should apply to a system of thought.) To anticipate: a rational reconstruction is a normative ideal of a rational argument, and the actual argument can be grasped as a deviation from this normative ideal.

Imagine there is a Platonic Heaven full of arguments. To get into Platonic Heaven, an argument has to be “pretty good.” Arguments can be pretty good without being sound and even without being valid. But if an argument is invalid, it needs to be comprehensive and have plausible premises. The source of invalidity should be subtle. Intuitively, an argument in Platonic Heaven is the best version of an argument of its kind. One can think of rationally reconstructing an argument as attempting to map an actual argument onto a Form of that argument in Platonic Heaven. Like a Form, a rational reconstruction is a perfect version of a type that serves as a normative ideal for the actual (imperfect) arguments that comes under the type.\(^{55}\) Moreover, just as Plato holds that our grasp of the particulars of the sensible world is mediated by our grasp of their Forms, our grasp of an actual (imperfect) argument is mediated by our grasp of the best rational reconstruction. (More on this below.)

I don’t believe in Platonic Heaven. Or rather, to the extent that I do believe in it, I believe it is created in the image of Man. That is, I believe the arguments contained in “Platonic Heaven” are constructions from actual arguments, constructions that are guided by certain important standards. The standards in question are internal standards of the objects of

\(^{55}\) There is a difference between a rational reconstruction and a Form that might be thought to matter here: while there is only one Form of an object, there might be multiple, equally good reconstructions. This difference raises a concern: if there are multiple equally good reconstructions, then are their conflicting normative standards that apply to the argument?
reconstruction. Not every important standard for an argument is an internal standard. All things being equal, an argument might be made better by being made more interesting, original, pithy, or pleasing to the political authorities. However, the standards appealed to in these judgments are not internal standards. They are not standards that apply to arguments and systems of thought just in virtue of being objects of that kind. An argument is good as an argument if it is valid, contains accurate premises, and is comprehensive. Of course, an argument can violate these standards while still being an object of this kind. However, there are violations and violations. If the object is too far off from meeting the standards, then it ceases to be an argument. (The same story applies to systems of thought. A system of thought is good as a system of thought if it is coherent, contains accurate claims, and is comprehensive. A set of thoughts is a not a system of thought if it does not meet minimally meet these standards.)

One might wonder why a version of an argument that better meets the internal standards of argument would be more intrinsically intelligible than a version that falls short of those standards. I believe the reason is that those that meet the constitutive standards are more rationally comprehensible. They are those that one can better grasp using one’s faculties of reason when those faculties operate correctly.

---

56 For discussion, see Ford 2011, Korsgaard 2009, and Korsgaard (ms). For concerns about constitutive standards, see Enoch 2006.
57 Moreover, the internal standards of these objects have a grip on us because we are inquirers, beings that seek understanding. And there are certain standards that the products of inquiry need to meet: accuracy, coherence, and comprehensiveness.
58 Note that soundness is not sufficient for an argument to be good. Otherwise, the following could be classified as a good argument: the premise is <1+1=2> and the conclusion is some arbitrary complex mathematical result.
59 One might draw a further distinction between internal standards that are constitutive of their objects and those that describe the virtues of those objects as the objects they are. For instance, perhaps validity and comprehensiveness are constitutive standards, but accuracy is a virtue of an argument that is tied to its nature as an argument. See Korsgaard (ms). Note that talk of virtues often brings with it the idea that these objects have functions, which may not be obvious.
60 Moreover, there might be challenges to whether this is even true. Couldn’t bad arguments be easier to grasp than their more complex but better variants?
Let’s now consider how a reconstruction can facilitate understanding of an “imperfect” non-reconstructed argument? (How is one’s grasp of particulars mediated by a grasp of the Forms?) Reconstructions aid understanding by providing a normative standard from which deviations can be depicted and explained. Let me elaborate.

Forget rational reconstruction for a moment and consider instead a simple model from astronomy: a model of planetary motion that omits gravitational attraction between the planets. While interplanetary gravitational force clearly makes a difference to the movement of the planets, eliminating it from a planetary model might serve various purposes. I will focus on two. First, the model establishes a sort of baseline approximation of planetary motion from which deviations can be depicted. For example, one might use the model to more efficiently describe the trajectory of the plants – “It is like the simple motion in the models with exceptions A, B, C….” Second, the model might facilitate the understanding by providing a baseline from which deviations require explanation. It is often held that explanatory questions of the form “Why p?” are elliptical for “Why p rather than q?” (Garfinkel 1990; Schaffer 2005). A simple model might provide a principled set of contrasts for a number of explanatory questions. They therefore frame investigation into the actual trajectory of the planets.

Now let us consider the ways in which a rational reconstruction might facilitate understanding an agent’s actual point of view. One important difference between a rational reconstruction and the planetary model above is that the rational reconstruction bears a normative relationship to the target system. It is a better version of the target system, not merely a different version. This normative relation enables us to provide descriptions and explanations of the actual view framed using a particular kind of normative vocabulary. In
the case of description, a particular set of attitudes can be described as a good or bad version of a particular kind of view. In the case of explanation, one can ask questions about why the agent made particular mistakes, where the mistakes in question are not merely ones of accuracy or incoherence but deviation from the best version of a type. And by grasping a confused argument as a defective version of a more accurate, coherent, and comprehensive one, one is better able to see a person making that argument as conversable subject who has made certain mistakes.  

7. How Rational Reconstruction Facilitates Co-Deliberation

Let’s now consider how rational reconstructions can be of practical use. It is common to employ idealized models in making decisions and in facilitating practical engagement with the actual world. In order for analyzing the properties of a model situation to be useful for our practical endeavors, two conditions need to be fulfilled. First, we must know what properties are instantiated in the model situation. Second, we must know that certain properties of the model situation bear a relation to properties of the actual situation, a relation in virtue of which guiding our activity in the actual situation by using the model enables us to effectively achieve our practical purposes.

---

61 Consider a remark made by Schlegel in 1797: “In order to understand someone, one must first of all be cleverer than he, then just as clever, and then also just as stupid. It is not enough that one understand the actual sense of a confused work better than the author understood it. One must also oneself be able to know, to characterize, and even construe the confusion even down to its very principles” (63). (Quoted in Forster (2008)).

62 One might wonder what function normative vocabulary of this kind serves. For instance, one could evaluate the actual attitudes in terms of accuracy and coherence full stop. But here, we’ve introduced a different kind of dimension of evaluation: evaluation relative to a kind of view. I believe the function of this normative vocabulary is to enable us to ask certain normative questions while bracketing others. For instance, you might think that Kantianism is totally bizarre, but if you’re going to go in for that kind of thing, better go for version A rather than that version B. So, this kind of standard enables us to ask comparative questions about alternatives while bracketing certain problematic features that views of that type might possess. Moreover, this feature is crucial for the practical function that these models serve in co-deliberation (to be discussed below). One cannot put up for discussion all aspects of an agent’s view in an instance of deliberative interaction. Rather, co-deliberation is a dynamic process that needs to be guided by an understanding of what could be given up without too much loss.
For example, say we want to predict how the temperature of a real enclosed gas will change under an intervention on the volume of its container. We might do so by considering how the temperature of an ideal gas would change under an intervention on the volume of its container. In order for such a strategy to succeed, two things must be true. First, we need to know how the ideal gas’s temperature would change under the relevant intervention. Here, we can use the ideal gas law. Second, we need to know the relationship between the value of the temperature change of the ideal gas in the model situation and the value of the temperature change of the real gas in the actual situation. Here, we know that these values will be roughly equal by knowing some basic properties of the real gas.

More generally, if our practical aim in using a model is the prediction of the value of some parameter in the actual situation, the relevant relation is the similarity between the value of the parameter in the model and the value that the parameter would have in the actual situation. If our practical aim is to intervene, then the model and actual situation need to be similar with respect to relations of functional dependence under intervention (at least between the parameters we’re interested in using). So which relationships between the model and actual situation are relevant depends on the particular practical aim in question.

The primary practical aims facilitated by rational reconstruction are not prediction or control but rather reasoning with another subject. Here, the way a rational reconstruction

---

63 There are some complications. In particular, there might seem to be some cases in which the relationship between the value of the model parameter and that of the actual parameter need not be one of identity or even similarity. For example, say my son is considering going sledding at a hill around the corner. To determine whether sledding is safe, I might do a back-of-the-envelope calculation to estimate his velocity upon reaching the bottom of the hill. In doing this calculation, I might ignore friction and wind resistance. Since these factors make a substantial difference to velocity, the estimate delivered by my “model” is wildly dissimilar from my son’s velocity at the end of the hill. No matter. I am only interested in whether the velocity is above a certain threshold, and these factors would both decrease the velocity. So as long as my model estimate yields that the velocity is below a certain threshold, then I send my son sledding with a good conscience, despite the fact that my model is wildly inaccurate. Here, one can say that although the value of velocity in the model is not similar to what the value of velocity would be in the actual world, the fact that the velocity is below a certain threshold is the same in the model as it would be in the actual world.
guides engagement is by (1) making clear certain relations among aspects of the model situation (the relations of logical dependence) through effectively organizing information about that structure to make the dependence relations clear, and (2) ensuring that you can use a grasp of the logical dependence structures in the model situation to guide your interaction in the actual situation due to a relation that obtains between the model situation and the actual situation (a relation that was discussed in the previous section).

It is worth making sure we do not conflate two different kinds of normative relations a grasp of which is relevant for our practical purposes when employing a reconstruction.\textsuperscript{64} First, there are the normative relations within the model situation (e.g., the relations of deductive, inductive, and abductive support that hold among the various claims in the reconstruction). Second, there is the relation that holds between the model situation (the rational reconstruction) and the actual situation. This is the relation of the model situation being a “better version” of the actual situation. (Call this the “reconstruction relation.”) The second relation is one that grounds one’s deliberative partner having reason to ratify this version as the object to be deliberated about in a context in which that partner has made an inchoate argument. The first set of relations is the set the grasp of which is relevant for evaluating and engaging with that object (the argument or system of thought).

Concretely: say you’re talking to a student, and that the student makes an inchoate argument in the course of conversation. In order for both parties to engage with the argument, there needs to be a common understanding about what is the object that is being engaged with. Say that \( R \) is a reconstruction of the student’s original argument \( O \). The fact

\textsuperscript{64} Why should the relevant relations be normative? Because the kind of engagement we are engaging with presupposes that the individual we are engaging with is sensitive to normative considerations.
that R bears the reconstruction relation to O makes it the case that the student has reason to endorse R as the object of co-reasoning when you suggest R to him as his argument.

Now, in the course of co-reasoning about R, it is the set of normative relations among the elements of R that are relevant for what the different parties have reason to accept. If we are considering the argument R, then if you give the student reasons to reject the premises of R, you have given the student reason to reject or suspend judgment on the conclusion (absent some additional arguments in support of the conclusion). Note that having a grasp of the rational organization of R is crucial for efficiently targeting the parts of the argument that make a difference. Say that the student makes some claims with which you disagree. Absent a more holistic understanding of the argument within which those claims are embedded, you will not know whether your disagreement really matters (since you don’t know the role of those claims in the argument). You also don’t know whether your potential criticisms might be question-begging because you are unsure as to whether the grounds you provide for rejecting those claims are themselves under dispute.

One can increase the sophistication of co-reasoning by having access to the interconnections between arguments and systems of thought. Say that you have a reconstruction of the student’s system of thought S. This is the system of thought from which O takes its premises. Say that you offer some reasons to reject some of the premises of the student’s argument. Are these reasons that the student should accept? This depends on the features of S. Of course, whether the student should accept various features of S will itself depend on a set of arguments relevant to parts of S (as well as the compatibility of various parts of S with each other).
8. The Activity of Reconstructing and Our Relations to Others

Our discussion so far has considered the epistemic and practical value of possessing a certain kind of model, a rational reconstruction. When we consider the value of the activity of constructing a model of this kind, one source of this value is that this activity is a means to possessing a product that has these epistemic and practical benefits. However, the value of the activity of reconstructing another’s view is not exhausted by the value of the product it generates.\(^65\) The activity itself can also have final value.\(^66\) Specifically, the activity can have final value by establishing a particular relation between the individual doing the reconstructing and the individual or group whose argument or system of thought is being reconstructed, a relationship that I will call “deliberative union.” Deliberative union is a relationship you enter into with another when you reason together about a subject matter while taking as a constraint certain attitudes of another person regarding that subject matter. It is a valuable relationship because reasoning about the contents of another’s attitudes in this way involves recognition of that other as another rational subject.

When acting in order to arrive at a good reconstruction of a set of thoughts, there are a variety of methods you could use: ask a friend, pray for divine inspiration, randomly generate alternatives using a computer program, etc.\(^67\) But a very natural method would be to reflect on the set of thoughts and aim at coming up with a good reconstruction. In aiming to come up with a good reconstruction, you guide your reflection on the set of thoughts using the four values that are relevant for assessing whether a variant is a good reconstruction:

\(^65\) There might be other sources of value for the activity as well. For instance, it might be intellectually pleasurable, or it might help you get a job. However, I will concentrate on an aspect of the activity’s value that is constitutively connected to it.

\(^66\) For discussion of the notion of “final value,” see Korsgaard 1983.

\(^67\) Similarly, the best way to arrive at happiness may not be to aim at happiness.
coherence, comprehensiveness, accuracy-to-the-world, and similarity. \(^68\) This kind of reflective activity bears an important similarity to the method of reflective equilibrium, reflection that aims at generating your own coherent and comprehensive view on a subject matter. Considering this similarity can help bring out what sort of relationship is established between “reconstructers” and “reconstructees” in the activity of reconstruction.

As Scanlon 2003 notes, there are two quite different interpretations of reflective equilibrium. On the one hand, reflective equilibrium may be thought of as a process for arriving at a description of a moral conception held by a person or group. On the other hand, it may be thought of as a method for deliberating, i.e. for figuring out what to believe about some subject matter. It is this latter interpretation that is most at home when considering your own attitudes, since you consider your own attitudes from the first-person point of view. To attempt to merely describe your moral sensibility would be seemingly to engage in a project of self-alienated auto-anthropology, an attempt to determine what you think while bracketing whether what you think is true (see Moran 2001).

While the descriptive conception of reflective equilibrium is inappropriate to yourself, you might think that it is the version of reflective equilibrium most suitable for considering the attitudes of others. However, like in the case of applying the descriptive approach to oneself, applying a purely descriptive approach to others involves a sort of alienation from them. To use a grammatical metaphor, taking a descriptive approach to the understanding of another’s attitudes is to take a “third-personal” approach to them. It involves seeing what

\(^{68}\) It is, of course, not preordained that the best procedure for generating a good reconstruction will be to employ the standards for a good reconstruction in your reflection. Just as directly pursuing pleasure may not be the best means for achieving it, directly pursuing a good reconstruction may not be the best means for arriving at it. The point of this section is that there is a reason to pursue reconstruction by employing the standards of good reconstruction in reflection, even if this is not the most efficacious way to construct useful reconstructions.
attitudes they actually possess (and which actually explain their behavior) in a way that is neutral with respect to the truth of those attitudes.\textsuperscript{69}

However, reflection guided by the values relevant for assessing a reconstruction offers an alternative. On this approach to another’s attitudes, you are not deliberating yourself about a subject matter. Nor are you aiming to merely describe the attitudes of another towards it. Rather, you are trying to do something “in between” these two approaches: you are trying to figure out a better version of another agent’s view, a view that is \textit{like} the other’s view, but – at least from your own vantage point – more coherent, comprehensive, and closer to the truth. This “second-personal” stance towards another’s attitudes brings with it recognition of the other as a subject aiming at achieving a coherent, comprehensive, and accurate view.\textsuperscript{70} Moreover, by employing your own judgments about coherence, comprehensiveness, and accuracy, you “interlock” your reason with that of the other. It is this mode of reflection as the interlocking of rational capacities that constitutes a relationship of deliberative union. It is an attempt to “come to an understanding” with another – to bring the other’s view closer to your own without obliterating it.\textsuperscript{71}

\textsuperscript{69} Complications arise when considering the use of the principle of charity in interpretation of the content of other’s attitudes.

\textsuperscript{70} The term “second personal” is typically associated with the work of Stephen Darwall (particularly Darwall 2006). For Darwall, the second person standpoint carves out a set of normative relations that have the feature of being inherently directional, particularly directed towards others as persons. For instance, for Darwall, the paradigmatic second personal relations are those of address and command. In the cases that concern us, one might draw a distinction between talking about another agent’s thoughts and talking to that agent about her thoughts, where the latter is a second personal relation. My account of rational reconstruction suggests a way of saying more about what such “address” involves. Your reflection about an agent’s thought is directed to that agent when that reflection starts from the agent’s thought and considers modifications guided by norms that the agent is committed to as a rational being: accuracy, coherence, comprehensiveness. On this view, address involves a particular “mode of thinking” one that has its paradigmatic use in a situation of face-to-face address. However, it is clear on this view how the notion of “address” can be extended to other contexts in which actual communicative interaction an individual is impossible (e.g. say when the individual in question is dead).

\textsuperscript{71} In this paper, I have focused on two-person cases in which there is a single individual reconstructs the view of another single individual. There is an interesting question about how to extend this analysis to cases in which there are three parties: A reconstructs B’s point of view for C. As Tommie Shelby pointed out in conversation, such cases are common. For instance, consider the Supreme Court’s reconstruction of view of the founders for
This sort of relationship – deliberative union – is most at home in face-to-face co-
reasoning, the kind of discussion that has animated the self-image of philosophy since
antiquity. It is also one that I believe animates many teachers in the discipline today. For
instance, in a recent defense of the humanities against attempts to reorient university
education towards better preparing students for the modern economy, Talbot Brewer writes,
“If I ask myself why I recoil from the arguments canvassed above [that the humanities are
valuable because they prepare students for the economy or train them as citizens], it’s
because they so thoroughly miss the appeal of the form of thought and life that I seek to
share with my students… To tie the worth of what I do to my role in preparing young minds
for these pursuits would be to betray the impulse that drew me down the path to this
profession, and to turn my back on the special bonds of friendship I think I’ve established
with those few students I believe I’ve really ‘reached’” (14). These “special bonds of
friendship” with one’s students are, I believe, the product of a particular kind of interaction,
an interaction aimed at helping others come to be better understanding of their own thought
using one’s own powers of reason. It is a kind of relationship that is constituted by
interlocking your reason with that of the other with the aim of making that other
comprehensible and conversable.

This same impulse to establish a connection with those who one is reconstructing
arises in the context of the human sciences, which often aim to render individuals or groups
potential discursive partners. For instance, in The Interpretation of Cultures, Geertz writes that

---

the current American citizens. The Supreme Court may want to propose a reconstruction that is worthy of
ratification not by the founders but by contemporaries. Further reflection and discussion would be required to
extend the framework proposed here to these cases.

72 This kind of relationship is also available in a more attenuated way when we reconstruct those in distant
countries and past time periods. A friend of mine once told me that he asked a retired German professor – a
specialist in German Idealism – whether the professor “liked” Kant and Hegel. The professor’s supposed reply
was, “I’m not sure I like them. But they are like old friends.”

73
the purpose of studying culture using the semiotic approach is "to aid us in gaining access to
the conceptual world in which our subjects live so that we can, in some extended sense of
the term, converse with them" (24). On this view, anthropology provides understanding in
virtue of rendering subjects conversable.

So we see that there is a certain value not only in possessing a reconstruction that
meets certain standards but also in producing a reconstruction via directing one’s reflection on
another’s view according to the standards that give a reconstruction value. This final value of
reconstructing is rooted in the fact that the objects of knowledge in the human sciences are
persons, beings to whom you can stand in relations of recognition.

9. Conclusion

This paper has considered how one can come to better understand another’s
argument or system of thought by misrepresenting it. The approach has been to reflect on
analogies between a rationally reconstruction and an idealized causal model. Like an idealized
causal model, a rational reconstruction provides a “cleaned up” version of a system’s
dependence structure. This cleaned up version facilitates both understanding and practical
engagement with that system.

However, a reconstruction differs from a causal model in that the understanding it
aims to provide is a grasp of rational dependences, and the practical engagement it facilitates
is reasoning together with another subject. Moreover, these differences point to a further
difference between the activity of scientific modeling and the activity of rationally
reconstructing. A scientific model is a mere instrument to comprehension of and effective
practical engagement with nature, and the activity of developing such models has value only in virtue of this instrumental use (and the scientists’ intellectual pleasure in this activity). By contrast, the activity of rationally reconstructing another – of making sense of the other – has value beyond that of generating particular objects, rational reconstructions. It is an activity that constitutes entering into a particular relationship between subjects. This difference between models and reconstructions points to an important characteristic of the human sciences. Acting to achieve the characteristic epistemic and practical aims of these sciences creates a connection to others by recognizing those others as rational subjects.

References


Oxford University Press.


———. (ms). “How to Be an Aristotelian Kantian Constitutivist.”


3. GROUP ATTITUDES WITHOUT GROUP AGENTS

**Summary:** A number of philosophers have argued that some group attitude ascriptions cannot be analyzed as generalizations about attitudes of individual group members (List and Pettit 2013; Gilbert 2013). In such cases, group attitude ascriptions are thought to describe the attitudes of a singular collective entity such as a “corporate agent” or “plural subject.” I argue that there are cases of group attitude ascription that function neither as generalizations about individual member attitudes nor as descriptions of the attitudes of a singular collective entity. I then provide an account of these cases using the concept of a “rational reconstruction.” The basic idea is that group attitudes in these contexts are idealized constructions that seek to render coherent, accurate, and comprehensive some set of commitments made by authorities within the group. After providing this account, I consider the purposes of such attitude ascriptions.

1. Introduction

Lukács opens his *Critique of Fascist Ideology* with a chapter asking whether there even is such a thing as a “fascist ideology.” He begins by outlining some reasons for skepticism:

At first glance, one is tempted to answer this question [is there such thing as a fascist ideology?] with a decisive ‘no.’ When one reads both the theoretical manifestos and the practical propaganda pieces of the fascists, one finds abstruse and nebulous gibberish, a barren heap of confusions, a menagerie of conflicting “thoughts.” It is difficult to allow oneself to bestow on this demagogical chaos the title of a *Weltanschauung* (41; translation mine).

Nebulous and rife with internal conflict, fascist thinking appears to lack sufficient cognitive structure to qualify as a “worldview.” And, as Lukács goes on to note, this nebulosity and internal conflict presents a challenge to the potential critic. Critique of the relevant sort requires an object with a sufficient degree of rational coherence.\(^{73}\) However, fascism was a

---

\(^{73}\) A critique of ideology takes as its object a *system* of thought, which has been variously described as a “network of beliefs” (Shelby 2003, 159), a “world picture” (Geuss 1981, 9), or an “interpretation of the world, nature, and history as a whole” (Habermas 1973, 391; translation mine). It is crucial that the object of critique...
heterogeneous political movement whose leaders opportunistically made conflicting promises and espoused incompatible doctrines to differing constituencies. It is therefore unclear how a critique of fascism can get off the ground.

This challenge faced by Lukács is an instance of a more general problem we often face when seeking to rationally engage with groups in the context of deliberative politics. Take, for instance, the Tea Party movement. While certain commonalities unite Tea Party members, these commonalities tend to take the form of agreement about vague slogans rather than clearly delineated positions. To the extent that there has been agreement about more concrete policies, it is unclear how these policy positions are interconnected or if they are even compatible.74 It is difficult to see how one could rationally engage in any sophisticated way with such a set of claims.

Yet despite such vagueness and internal conflict, there has been robust public discussion of the Tea Party’s views. Moreover, this discussion that has often proceeded on the assumption that there is a more comprehensive Tea Party worldview with which one can deliberatively engage and of which these various slogans and policy positions are parts.75 This assumption figures prominently in the self-understanding and self-presentation of the movement itself,76 and even those who consider this worldview “delusional” (Adodie 2011) would be a system of thought because one aim of critique is to show how errors in a set of beliefs are deeply interconnected (see Geertz 1973; Geuss 1981; Shelby 2003).

74 For instance, Tea Party organizations have called both for less intrusive government and more discretionary police power and abortion clinic regulation; they have expressed concern about the national debt but strongly opposed cuts to Social Security and expensive entitlement programs.

75 Consider that there has been intense discussion concerning the relationship between Tea Party ideology and that of the Republican establishment, which aspects of its platform represented the Tea Party’s “core” convictions, what racist assumptions—if any—are embedded in its outlook, and whether particular polices are compatible with the movement’s “spirit” (e.g., Sargent 2014a; Sargent 2014b; Chait 2011b; Chait 2011c; Walsh 2011; Delingpole 2014; Pilkington 2010).

76 For example, radio talk show host and Tea Party activist Laurie Roth declared that opposition to the Obama presidency went beyond mere policy disputes: “This is a worldview clash. We are seeing a worldview clash with our White House” (quoted in Parker 2013, 2).
or “extreme” (Sargent 2014b) often take it to exemplify at least a fair degree of comprehensiveness and coherence. And it is not only journalists: high-quality social science research on the Tea Party likewise approaches it in this way.

But such talk of the “Tea Party’s worldview” is puzzling. It is natural to treat it as an attempt to describe some attitudinal profile of which the protest’s slogans and demands are manifestations. However, it is not clear whose profile it could be. It is not obvious that any individual Tea Party member—let alone a large number of members—possesses a set of attitudes as comprehensive and coherent as those that are taken to characterize the Tea Party’s view. For example, the Tea Party believes that the Fed should be audited (Meckler and Martin 2012, 58), but—plausibly—few self-identified Tea Party members have even considered this issue. Perhaps then the “Tea Party worldview” is not a profile of the attitudes of Tea Party members but of the Tea Party, where “the Tea Party” is understood as a group entity capable of having attitudes distinct from its members. But even if we grant the existence of such a group entity, it is unclear how and why it should have attitudes that diverge from the attitudes of the individuals that make it up.

This puzzle is—of course—not specific to the Tea Party. Journalists, social scientists, and historians regularly speak of the “spirit” of social movements (e.g., Gitlin 2012), the perspectives of economic classes (e.g., Field 1990), the framework of temporally-extended intellectual traditions (e.g., Buchanan 1986), and—perhaps a bit grandly—the worldviews of periods (henceforth, “views”) (e.g., Dewitt 2011). In all these cases, what is posited is not a

---

77 For example, Jonathan Chait wrote in *The New Republic* that the religious right’s view “has evolved into a more full-fledged worldview with coherent positions on economics and foreign policy that often motivate its believers just as strongly.” (See Chait 2011a.)

78 For instance: “A well-marked distinction between workers and non-workers—between productive citizens and the freeloaders—is central to the Tea Party worldview and conception of America” (Skocpol and Williamson 2012, 65). For discussion, see their Chapter 2: What They Believe: Ideas and Passions.
mere heap of beliefs but a system of thought, a fairly elaborate set of interconnected attitudes. The philosophical challenge is to clarify what it is for a group to have such a system of thought in a way that displays how this system relates to the thought of the individuals in the group. Given the difficulty of meeting this challenge, you might agree with Raymond Geuss (2001, 5) that it rests on a false presupposition: “No era and no individual has a completely clearly articulated, single consistent world-view. ‘What we all share’ is usually an overlapping jumble of only half-developed and potentially contradictory views.”

I am more optimistic, and in this essay I will seek to explain and vindicate the practice of attempting to comprehend groups as embodying elaborate and coherent systems of thought against such skeptical doubts. I’ll argue that group attitude ascriptions in these contexts involve a distinctive kind of idealization, one of whose primary functions is to enable practical engagement with those groups. When we ask whose attitudes journalists, historians, and social scientists are describing when they talk of “worldviews,” the answer is: no one’s. Such talk should be thought of as construction rather than description. Of course, it is hardly news that historians, social scientists, and everyday people employ idealization in their thinking about the social world. Explicit discussion of the use of idealization goes as far back as Thucydides. What is interesting is exactly what kind of comprehension and practical engagement are facilitated, what relationship the idealized representation bears to its target system, and how a relationship of this kind facilitates the relevant sort of comprehension and practical engagement.

79 In discussing his portrayal of famous speeches in The History of the Peloponnesian War, Thucydides writes “my method has been, while keeping as closely as possible to the general sense of the words that were actually used, to make the speakers say what, in my opinion, was called for in the situation” (47).
In brief: group attitudes in this context should be understood as a kind of idealization that I call a “rational reconstruction.” Intuitively, a rational reconstruction is a systematic clarification and elaboration of some set of attitudes that aims to facilitate rational engagement with the bearer of those attitudes. Such a reconstruction can be thought of in a procedural way: one starts from the actual attitudes of an individual or group concerning some subject matter and constructs from these attitudes a more coherent and elaborated view of that subject. I’ll be using this procedural metaphor of construction throughout the discussion. However, what makes one set of attitudes a rational reconstruction of another is not the genesis of the construction but the relation it stands in to the object reconstructed. The relationship in question is a complicated one, but the basic idea is that a reconstruction should be similar to the object reconstructed, while at the same time being more coherent, accurate, and comprehensive.

An understanding of rational reconstruction is crucial for an understanding of how rational engagement is possible with many groups that seek to enter into deliberative politics, groups that see themselves as sharing a view but that lack the kind of organizational structure required to clarify and elaborate that view for themselves. In this context, a reconstruction of the group’s view is like the construction of an idealized spokesperson for the group, a spokesperson whom we could rationally engage as we would to a real interlocutor in a conversation.

Let me give you a preview of what’s ahead. A reconstruction of group attitudes has two aspects. One aspect is compositional: how are we to compose a group view from a set of individual views? A second aspect is reconstructive: how are we to understand the necessary sort of systematization, clarification, and elaboration? Section 1 discusses composition,
Section 2 discusses reconstruction, and Section 3 considers how composition and reconstruction are to be combined in the construction of group attitudes. With an account of rational reconstruction on the table, I then turn to the role for such idealization in our discursive and critical engagement with groups in the public sphere. Section 4 considers how rational reconstruction facilitates deliberation with groups that seek a voice in deliberative politics by drawing some analogies with the use of reconstruction in interpersonal interaction. Section 5 considers how reconstruction can be used in critique. The conclusion draws together the previous discussion.

2. Composition: Why Not (Always) Simple Summation?

In reconstructing what a group thinks, we need at least a preliminary characterization of what the group’s attitudes are. These attitudes are presumably dependent on the attitudes of the individual members of the group. But how are we to characterize this dependence more precisely?

Start with the ostensible truism that attitudes are always attitudes of some agent. Assuming this, one is tempted to ask which agent’s (or set of agents’) attitudes are being represented when one talks of the “group’s view.” And if we think about the question this way, there seem to be two jointly exhaustive options: group attitudes represent the attitudes of human agents who are members of the group, or they represent the attitudes of a group agent. These two options suggest two potential purposes of our practice of group attitude ascription and—as a consequence of these different purposes—two ways in which group attitudes might depend on individual attitudes. One purpose is to make a generalization about the
attitudes of human agents within some group. By contrast, a second purpose might be to represent the attitudes of some singular group agent.

It is therefore surprising and revealing that some group attitude ascriptions function neither to summarize attitudes of group members nor to describe the attitudes of a group agent. This section considers examples of such ascriptions and provides an account of what they are tracking if neither the attitudes of members nor of a group agent. I will begin by considering a principle that should hold if group attitude ascriptions are simple summaries: a group has some attitude iff some sufficient number of members have the attitude. I then briefly consider two kinds of group entities discussed in the literature for which this principle fails to hold: “plural subjects” and corporate agents. Finally, I present examples that indicate that the principle also fails to apply to groups that are group entities of neither kind. To anticipate: I argue that attitude ascriptions in these contexts track the assembly of the members’ commitments qua group members. A member’s attitude towards \( p \) and commitment towards \( p \) may pull apart if that member defers to someone else in the group with respect to \( p \). Cases will show that our judgments about group attitudes are in fact sensitive to such deference relations, suggesting that such attitude ascriptions are summaries of commitments rather than summaries of attitudes. I will then argue that such commitment-based attitude ascriptions are important in the context of rational reconstruction.

The social world comes populated with all manner of collectives. Individuals may be united by common interests, feelings of solidarity,\(^80\) similar sets of beliefs and values,\(^81\) or a

\(^{80}\) Feinberg 1968 discusses how groups with common interests and solidarity can be collectively responsible.\(^{81}\) Cultural groups are sometimes taken to be groups that share beliefs and values. For instance, Geertz 1973 ascribes this view to Parsons. This view of culture has come under attack from a number of authors. For instance, see Chapter 4 of Appiah 2010. See also Barry 2014; Benhabib 2002; Scheffler 2010.
shared formative context. The groups that will primarily concern us have the potential to represent some kind of view in the context of deliberative politics but lack the organizational structure needed to come to explicit agreement about and express that view. We are interested in such groups because they are the kind for which rational reconstruction is particularly important.

What are the raw materials of reconstruction—the attitudes of the group to be reconstructed—in such cases? An obvious suggestion: the members’ attitudes. If so, one would expect a simple threshold principle to relate individual and group attitudes:

**Attitude Threshold**: A group $G$ has attitude $A$ towards $p$ iff a sufficient number of individuals in $G$ have attitude $A$ towards $p$

For now, consider just the attitude of belief.

**Belief Threshold**: A group $G$ believes $p$ iff a sufficient number of individuals in $G$ believe $p$

Many cases of group attitude ascription are, indeed, perfectly compatible with this principle. For instance, when we say that Americans believe that their country was once a British colony, we are presumably saying that most individuals who are Americans believe that their country was once a British colony.

However, the Belief Threshold principle is widely held to be false for a number of groups, and much recent discussion has focused on types of collectives that can possess attitudes “of their own.” Such collectives are typically taken to be some kind of group agent such as a “plural subject” (Gilbert 2013), “social collective” (Tuomela 1992), or “corporate

---

82 Alan Patten (2011) believes that one should think of cultural groups in this way.
agent” (List and Pettit 2013). Accounts of such group agents fall roughly into two kinds: those concerning groups whose members have particular kinds of interlocking attitudes, and groups with sophisticated institutional structure. Paradigm cases of the former type are small-scale groups such as individuals engaged in collective discussion or joint action, while paradigm cases of the latter are large-scale corporate agents.

As an example of group entities that are constituted by interlocking attitudes, consider Margaret Gilbert’s account of collective belief in her “Modeling Collective Belief”:

Collective Belief: (i) A group $G$ believes that $p$ iff the members of $G$ jointly accept that $p$; and (ii) members of a group $G$ jointly accept that $p$ iff it is common knowledge in $G$ that individual members of $G$ have openly expressed conditional commitment jointly to accept that $p$ together with the other members of $G$ (195).

A group that has collective beliefs of this sort constitutes what Gilbert calls a “plural subject.”

It is easy to see how beliefs of a plural subject might diverge from beliefs of its members. Consider Gilbert’s paradigm case of a discussion group, which—according to Gilbert—may be said to believe $p$ iff each member of the discussion agrees to accept $p$ conditional on all other members accepting $p$. That all members of the discussion group believe $p$ does not entail that a plural subject composed of those members believes $p$. For instance, in a political discussion group in North Korea, all members might privately believe that the Great Leader is not so great after all, but no one has made a conditional commitment to accept that the Great Leader is not great if others do. Moreover, all the members might have the conditional commitment to accept $p$ without any member personally believing $p$. It might be that political discussion in the North Korea reading group proceeds on the joint acceptance of the proposition that the Great Leader is great, even
though no individual in the group believes this to be the case. There is possible divergence between the beliefs of a plural subject and beliefs of the members of a plural subject because conditional acceptance of a proposition does not entail belief in that proposition or vice versa. So, according to Gilbert, when considering the North Korean discussion group, if one asked who believes that the Great Leader is great, the only answer is the group itself. This attitude is the attitude of a plural subject rather than a human individual. The details and merits of this proposal need not concern us. What matters for our purposes is the general strategy of analyzing group attitudes in terms of members’ conditional attitudes.

A second way that a group may have attitudes that diverge from the attitudes of its members is if the group has some complex organizational structure with procedures for specifying its attitudes. If the group has particular procedures for determining its beliefs, then these procedures may yield group belief in $p$ while few or no members of the group believe $p$. To illustrate, imagine that a panel of judges is deciding on a case, and the decision rests on their judgments about two isolated propositions $p$ and $q$. Say that the judges make the following judgments about the two propositions in question$^{83}$:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>$p$</th>
<th>$q$</th>
<th>$p \land q$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Judge A</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judge B</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judge C</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Majority</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There are, of course, a panoply of procedures that the judges could use to determine the group judgment. I’ll consider a simple and common one: employing a majority voting

---

procedure to decide on the conjuncts and then deciding on the conjunction via closure over the conjuncts. Result: the group will count as believing the conjunction although only a minority of individuals believe the conjunction.  

One might wonder what such attitude ascriptions track if not the attitudes of individuals. A prominent answer in the literature is that such attitudes are the attitudes of a corporate agent (List and Pettit 2013). These are groups with complex forms of internal organization that enable them to satisfy requirements of agency such as evidential responsiveness and instrumental rationality. If groups can be agents in their own right, there is a fairly direct story regarding why we should care about their attitudes over and above the attitudes of their members. The story will be largely the same as the reason we care about the attitudes of human agents: those attitudes can be used to predict and explain (group) behavior as well as serve as a basis for valenced agent-directed responses such as praise and blame.

But to see the limitations of the foregoing approaches, just recall the Tea Party: it does not have the kind of interlocking attitudes required for plural subjectivity nor the organizational structure required for corporate agency. So, when journalists, historians, and social scientists are trying to make sense of the Tea Party and its attitudes, are they doing nothing more than aggregating the attitudes of its members? No – as becomes clear with careful attention to their practices.

Start with a simpler case. Say that we are interested in reconstructing the worldview of a particular scientific community. While there are various kinds of organizational structure

---

84 Of course, this case is not a direct counterexample to the Belief Threshold principle, since that principle does not specify the threshold. However, the threshold must be set fairly high if ascriptions of group attitudes are to serve as reliable indicators of what individuals in the group believe.
within the given community (e.g., labs, professional organizations), it is not—as a whole—a single group agent, nor do its members possess the sort of interlocking attitudes of conditional acceptance required to constitute a “plural subject.”

All the same, the Belief Threshold principle does not apply. First, consider the following counterexample:

*Disciplinary Specialization*: Scientific experts on green iguanas believe that the species originated in South America (call this “\(p\)”), and scientific experts on dingoes believe that the species originated in Southeast Asia (call this “\(q\)”). However, no scientist has actually entertained both of these propositions.

Since no individual scientist that has entertained both propositions, no scientist believes their conjunction. However, the *scientific community* believes that iguanas originated in South America and dingoes in Southeast Asia. So the group has a belief that no member of the group has. Consequently, it is not necessary for a group to believe a proposition that there is some adequate number of members who believe that proposition.

Now consider a second counterexample:

*Disciplinary Specialization plus Journalism*: Scientific experts on green iguanas believe that the species originated in South America (call this “\(p\)”). Most scientists have never considered where green iguanas originated. Now, *Slate* runs an article falsely claiming that green iguanas originated in North America rather than South America (\(\sim p\)). This is read by many scientists, who form the false belief that green iguanas originated in North America.
Few scientists believe $p$. Most believe its negation. All the same, the scientific community believes $p$ rather than $\sim p$. Therefore, it is not sufficient for a group to have a belief that many members of the community hold that belief. Of course, the *Slate* article has altered the beliefs of many scientists, but—and this is the point—certain facts about *individual scientists’* beliefs are irrelevant for the question of what the *scientific community* believes.

I have considered the case of belief, but there are analogous cases for comparative valuation. Consider the following case:

*Citation Index:* The scientific community generally employs the *Science Citation Index* to keep track of citations. Say that Professor Said has published an often-cited article in *Physical Review* (call this “A”) and Professor Hawkings has written a hardly-cited article in *Annals of Physics* (call this “B”). But no one in the scientific community has read both articles.

The scientific community values article A over article B. However, no individual values A over B, since no individual has read both articles. So it is not necessary for the group to value A over B that individual members of the group value A over B.

Now consider a similar case:

*Citation Index plus Clique:* The scientific community generally employs the *Science Citation Index* to keep track of citations. Say that Professor Said has published an often-cited article in *Physical Review* (call this “A”) and Professor Hawkings has written a hardly-cited article in *Annals of Physics* (call this “B”). While Professor Hawkings’ article was not very influential, there is a clique of physicists who are devotees of Professor Hawkings’ article (and invariably cite it). Those in this clique
have all read Professor Said’s article (it is a classic), but no scientists not in the clique
have read Professor Hawkings’ article.

Here, of all the people in the group who take any stand on the comparative value of A and B, all of them take Professor Hawkings’ article to be more scientifically important than Professor Said’s article. However, the scientific community believes that Professor Said’s article is more important than Professor Hawkings’ article. Therefore, it is not sufficient for a group to value A over B that some adequate number value A over B.\textsuperscript{85}

These examples show that when it comes to belief and comparative valuation, there are cases in which a scientific community’s attitudes can diverge quite sharply from the attitudes of individual members of that community. Yet a scientific community is not a corporate agent or a plural subject. So what undergirds these attitude ascriptions? I believe what undergirds them is that they are tracking members’ views about who in the group has authority regarding what subject matter. Here is the basic idea: while a scientific community does not have sufficient organization to officially decide what it as a group believes,\textsuperscript{86} it nevertheless possesses a fairly articulated authority structure. There are informal norms within the scientific community regarding which credentials give an individual’s beliefs (with respect to particular issues in a certain domain) authority for the group. The basic contours of this structure are common knowledge. Everyone recognizes that the biologists have authority on issues in biology, chemists with respect to chemistry, and physicists with

\textsuperscript{85} This example obviously runs together valuing an article, reading an article, and citing an article. The conflation is harmless. Just imagine that there is a norm in the scientific community that one cites an article iff one has read and values the article.

\textsuperscript{86} Moreover, the scientific community systematically violates the norm of not holding contradictory beliefs since theories with conflicting implications—and whose conflicting implications are known—are often simultaneously accepted.
respects to physics. “Scientific consensus” does not require consensus amongst all scientists but rather consensus of (recognized) authorities.

That the scientific community has a fairly clear authority structure is why it serves as a clear example. In extending the account to other groups, our intuitions may get cloudier. This is as it should be. Recall that the guiding rationale behind the principles of attitude ascription in these cases is that forms of authority structure create informal “spokespeople” for the group, and it is the views of these spokespeople that matter for the “group view.” So as it becomes increasingly unclear who counts as a spokesperson, it will become increasingly unclear how to compose attitudes in any way except by using straight aggregation. And our judgments do become cloudier as we introduce complexity and contestation regarding authority structure. Consider the extreme case in which we ask a question of the scientific community for which there are no recognized experts. For example, say we ask whether the scientific community believes that for every question about the natural world that has an answer, it can be answered by physics. Here, there is no one in the scientific community who is a recognized authority on the issue at hand. What the scientific community believes on this issue is, therefore, simply what a sufficient number of scientists believe.

Now consider the Tea Party. The Tea Party is a populist movement, many of whose members are suspicious of elites. There has been much written about ideological differences between the members of local organizations and certain establishment groups employing the Tea Party label such as the Tea Party Express. This might naturally lead one to think that the principles relevant for composing the attitudes of the Tea Party will be quite different from

---

87 This depiction is, of course, idealized, and nothing hangs on whether this description of the authority structure of the scientific community is accurate. What matters is that to the extent that we accept the above judgments about these cases, our acceptance is explained by assuming the scientific community has an approximation of such an authority structure.
those of a scientific community, where there is a more clear structure of deference. However, the differences are less stark than they might appear. It is an oft-noted fact that an important problem in American politics is that there is little consensus about who are trustworthy sources. For instance, if a climate scientist says \( p \), a member of the American left may increase her confidence in \( p \) but a member of the right will often discount \( p \). Political factions in America often have their own news sources and—importantly—different authority figures that they trust on matters they do not know or understand. Such a common psychological profile was perfectly articulated by Tea Party member Terry Rushing: “I don’t really understand it, but I like what they stand for” (quoted in Page and Jagoda 2010). Of course, it is a complicated question exactly who has authority in the Tea Party—this is a complex empirical matter. The point is simply that there are structures of deference in the Tea Party, and reconstructing the Tea Party worldview has the potential to be sensitive to such facts of deference. This authority structure is what undergirds the attribution of beliefs and policy positions to the Tea Party that are too esoteric to be held by many Tea Party members.

Why care about this deference structure in the context of reconstruction? I believe the answer is that such structure gives us information about members’ rational commitments qua group members. A rational commitment, in the sense employed here, is a normative relation to an attitude that plays a particular role in deliberation and evaluation. A member’s attitude towards \( p \) and commitment towards \( p \) may pull apart if that member defers to someone else in the group with respect to \( p \). For instance, if Hank believes that everything his Christian fundamentalist pastor says is literally true, he is committed to believing that the world was created in six days. This is so even if he has never considered the issue or holds a

\[ \text{Shpall (2014) offers an extended discussion of the commitment relation.} \]
contrary view. Moreover, there is a simple story to tell about why a rational reconstruction of a group’s attitudes should be sensitive to the group’s commitments rather than its actual attitudes. What one may want to “make sense” of in the reconstruction is not just the statistical aggregate of what the members believe about various issues but rather the attitudes of who the members believe should speak for them on the relevant issue. A rational reconstruction that is sensitive to these attitudes is one that seeks to understand whether and how some set of commitments can be turned into a coherent system of thought.

3. Rational Reconstruction: Why Coherence and Comprehensiveness?

Our initial question concerned what it was for a group such as the fascists—or the Tea Party, or the scientific community—to have a worldview, or, less grandly, a systematic view about some subject matter. One part of the puzzle about such ascriptions is that group views often have attitudes that few or no members of the group possess. We have made some progress towards understanding how this can be so by considering the role of deference structure within groups that do not exhibit the rich organizational structure of corporate agents.

But now there is a second puzzle about such views—that they exhibit degrees of coherence and comprehensiveness that is atypical of even an individual’s set of opinions about a subject matter. This puzzle is particularly pressing given the results of the previous section. For if group attitude ascriptions are sensitive to the attitudes of authorities, and there is no institutional mechanism to resolve inconsistencies between opinions of experts in

---

89 Of course, it is not the case that for any group, the fact that there is deference structure within the group tempts us to ascribe the attitudes of the authorities to the group as a whole. Our practice of attitude ascription is messy and highly context sensitive. Consider a remark by Sandy Berger, the National Security Advisor during the Clinton administration: “We’ve learned since 9/11 that… the FBI didn’t know what it did know” (quoted in Goldman 2004, 12).
different domains, then it is not likely the overall set of group attitudes will be coherent. The answer to this puzzle is that these views are *idealized constructions* that facilitate achieving certain epistemic and practical aims. Moreover, when the “inputs” to the reconstructions are derived not via statistical summary of the group members’ actual attitudes but rather are sensitive to *spokespeople* for the group, i.e., those with *authority*, one can think of the rational reconstruction as the construction of a *single idealized* spokesperson via an assembly of the views of the *actual* spokespeople. This section explains these ideas by explaining what such a rational reconstruction is and why we have reason to care about it.

**The Problem to Which Rational Reconstruction Is the Solution**

It is a truism that the attitudes that characterize an individual’s psychological makeup are often defective along a number of dimensions. Individuals often have false beliefs, respond poorly to evidence, employ defective concepts, lack appreciation of the inferential connections amongst their attitudes, and fail to see obvious implications and sources of support of their thoughts. These various imperfections often make it difficult to *understand* and *reason with* those agents.

That such defects inhibit understanding is particularly clear in many communicative contexts. For example, imagine you are having a conversation with a student, who is explaining his Big Idea. You listen attentively, but the main points are hazy and—to the extent that you can grasp them—appear logically disconnected, only related via some vague thematic association. While you understand the student’s words and the individual discreet claims, there is something crucial that you do not understand: you do not understand how those claims add up to a *view* about something. Moreover, your difficulties in understanding
are not due to imperfections in verbal description. It is rather that the things being verbally described—the ideas of the student—are themselves defective in a way that inhibits understanding.

Rational reconstruction is the solution to this problem of understanding. A rational reconstruction is a construction that seeks to remove the sundry imperfections in an agent’s attitudes such that one can understand what the individual is getting at. Intuitively, rational reconstruction is a particular type of systematic clarification and elaboration, a clarification in which one seeks to render some set of ideas less confused and more cohesive and comprehensive.90

We can think of a rational reconstruction as performing a function similar to those of idealized models familiar from the natural sciences. However, there are crucial differences between a scientific model and a rational reconstruction. First, idealization in the sciences is typically a response to the problem of how to get a grip on systems that are complex. While rational reconstruction is certainly a response to complexity, it is a response to other problems as well.91 Particularly, it is a response to a system being confused, incomplete, and indeterminate. Rational reconstruction is therefore a kind of idealization that is only appropriate for systems of a very particular kind: systems that themselves can possess the properties of being unclear, indeterminate, and unsystematized.

90 Like the term “explanation,” the term “rational reconstruction” can refer to both the process of reconstructing (you’re rationally reconstructing the thoughts of the student) as well as the product of that process that can be used to understand the student (you can understand what the student is saying by employing a rational reconstruction). The ambiguity is harmless.

91 While both idealized models and rational reconstructions respond to complexity, the kind of complexity that seeks to abstract or idealize away is actually quite different. Causal models attempt to abstract and idealize away features of a system that obscure the key causal difference-makers. But rational reconstructions seek to idealize away confusions that prevent one from grasping the rational structure of the view in question.
Rational Reconstruction as Inference to the Best Justification: From Simple to More Complex Cases

Let’s consider how we go about doing rational reconstruction. Often rational reconstruction of an agent’s beliefs involves what I will call inference to the best justification. (Or rather, inference to the best nearby justification.) The basic idea is easiest to illustrate when we consider a simple case: when we are trying to reconstruct an individual’s answer to a particular question in which there is a relatively clear set of possible answers. I’ll then consider how to extend the account to cover cases beyond this simple one.

Say that you’re talking to a student, and you ask him a yes-or-no question whether \( p \). The student does not respond with a simple “\( p \)” or “\( \sim p \).” Rather, he gives an elaborate and convoluted reply but does not specify the answer. (It is not even clear to the student what he believes the answer is.) In trying to make sense of the student’s answer, you are looking for whether the response best “fits” a “\( p \)” or “\( \sim p \)” response. The kind of “fit” in question is normative. One is looking whether what the student is saying better supports and is better supported by \( p \) or \( \sim p \). To figure this out, you must consider the network of support relations amongst the attitudes evinced in his utterances to see whether and how one could embed a belief in \( p \) or belief in \( \sim p \).

Now let’s consider a slightly more complex variant on the above case. Say you ask the student a deep philosophical question: what is causation? He responds with an even more convoluted string of assertions. Reconstructing the student’s answer in this case poses challenges because you are asking not merely for the student’s attitude towards a particular proposition but rather the student’s theory about a delineated subject matter. So you cannot just look whether some particular proposition supports and is supported by the student’s
attitudes. Rather, what one needs to do is look for what theory supports and is supported by what the student is saying. Where do you find this theory? Unlike a yes-or-no question above, this question does not—on its face—carve out a space of possible answers (who knows how many possible answers there are!). However, as someone who is familiar with the causation literature, you might have good reason to believe that there are four basic kinds of views on this question: regularity views, counterfactual views, probability views, and transference views. In reconstructing the student’s view, you might try to determine which of four basic positions would support the student’s attitudes and which of the four basic positions the student’s attitudes would support. That is, you are looking to fit some theory—an interconnected set of propositions—into a web of attitudes rather than a single proposition.

Now imagine a slightly more complex variant on the last case. Say that rather than asking a targeted question, you ask—in a more open-ended way—what the student thinks about the Obama Presidency. As there is no concrete question, there is no pre-delineated set of possible answers. Rather, you need to construct the set of possible answers and assess their relative merits. The kind of possible answers you are looking for are plausible views about the subject matter at issue. So we have two questions: (1) How do you generate views about the subject matter that are likely to support and be supported by what the student is saying? (2) How do you pick the best reconstruction of the student from amongst these views? I’ll briefly sketch an answer to these questions.

To answer the first question, let us idealize slightly and imagine that instead of simply having the student’s utterances, you have perfect access to the student’s actual attitudes. Call

---

92 For a quick overview, see Hall and Paul 2014, 13–24.
the set of these attitudes the “actual attitude set.” There are two basic operations that you need to employ on the actual attitudes that the student evinces: clarification and elaboration. Clarifying a set of attitudes involves, on the view I will sketch, looking for nearby variants on that set that are more coherent than the original set. Call these variants “clarified sets” of attitudes.

Clarification: An attitude set $A^*$ is a clarification of an attitude set $A$ iff

i. $A^*$ is sufficiently similar to $A$

ii. The attitudes in $A^*$ are more coherent than those in $A$

So a clarified set of attitudes is like the actual set but more coherent. How coherence should be understood is a vexed problem that I will put aside. We can rely on the intuitive notion along with the observations—observations that any account of coherence should honor—that inconsistencies amongst attitudes decrease coherence while support relations amongst attitudes increase coherence.\(^9^3\)

Elaborating on a set of attitudes involves making additions to the set. The additions count as elaborations in virtue of standing in a normative relation of support to the attitudes in the set.

Elaboration: An attitude set $E^*$ is an elaboration of an attitude set $E$ iff

i. $E$ is a proper subset of $E^*$

ii. Every attitude in the extended set that is not in the original set supports or is supported by an attitude in the original set\(^9^4\)

\(^9^3\) There are a number of differing views of coherence in the literature. One prominent approach is probabilistic: coherence is a property of a set of propositions that bear certain probabilistic relations to one another. On another approach, coherence is some weighted sum of various factors such as lack of inconsistency and number of inferential connections. There is no need to resolve this dispute here.

\(^9^4\) $\forall x ((x \in E^* \land x \notin E) \Rightarrow \exists y (y \in E \land (xSy \lor ySx)))$
One uses clarification and elaboration to construct variants on the actual attitudes that are more coherent and elaborate than the actual attitudes. Call the set of all of these clarified and elaborated variants that are sufficiently similar to the original attitudes the set of potential views $V$ that the student’s attitudes approximate. This is the set of views similar to the actual view and can be arrived at via small steps of good reasoning.

Now we need to answer the second question: how to pick the best\textsuperscript{95} rational reconstruction from amongst these views? Here is my proposal: it is the member of this set of potential views that best balances similarity to the actual attitudes with accuracy to the world, coherence,\textsuperscript{96} and comprehensiveness.

**Rational Reconstruction:** A set of attitudes $R$ is the best rational reconstruction of an actual set of attitudes $A$ iff $R$ is the member of the set of potential views $V$ that optimizes over the following four values:

i. Accuracy to the world

ii. Coherence

iii. Comprehensiveness

iv. Similarity to $A$

Here is the intuitive idea: The outcome of this procedure is a set of attitudes that is close to but better—better on the relevant dimensions of epistemic evaluation, i.e., better as a view—than the actual set of attitudes. In this respect, a rational reconstruction is like what Dworkin calls a

\textsuperscript{95}Here I am assuming that there is a single member of the set of potential views that best balances these desiderata. This is a simplifying assumption adopted for ease of discussion. However, the assumption of a unique result is not crucial for the epistemic and practical functions of rational reconstruction. Compare to the case of an idealized causal model: for any particular target system, there may not be one single idealized causal model that is best for describing that system. Moreover, different models may conflict in that they ascribe different properties to objects in their respective models that have the same referent in the target system. This does not undermine the project of developing causal models.

\textsuperscript{96}Note that one may think that coherence is accuracy-conducive. If so, then these desiderata of coherence and accuracy are interconnected.
“constructive interpretation,” an interpretation that makes the object of interpretation the *best example* of its genre that it can be (Dworkin 1986). So, a rational reconstruction is a set of attitudes close to the agent’s actual attitudes, but slightly more accurate to the world, coherent, and embedded in a more comprehensive inferential network.

When you grasp the support relations amongst the attitudes in a rational reconstruction, you are in possession of a kind of “normative map”—a structure that you could use to orient yourself in an interaction with a being that is reasons-responsive. The map would tell you where a certain chain of thoughts “leads” and inform you what other attitudes the agent would be rationally required to modify were she to make particular targeted changes. It is the sort of map that is useful when you’re engaged in particular kinds of interaction, most obviously a *conversation* involving co-deliberation about a subject matter.

That a rational reconstruction should facilitate co-deliberation about a subject matter is what explains why the selection amongst potential views is sensitive to truth. In considering how another individual could best reconstruct her own position, an important consideration when choosing amongst potential alternatives is whether some of those alternatives contain fewer falsehoods than others.97 Consider an analogy: when we try to make rational sense of our own personal views, we are not looking for mere coherence amongst our beliefs.98 Rather, we are trying to come to a set of coherent *and* true *and* comprehensive beliefs. One might think that the difference between deliberation and mere auto-

---

97 From the fact that false beliefs are bad, it does not immediately follow that true beliefs are good. For example, it is not the case that one can improve a reconstruction simply by adding true beliefs. Rather, the point is that conditional on there being a belief in the reconstruction, it is bad that the belief is false, while good that the belief is good.

98 Discussing reflective equilibrium in *Being Realistic About Reasons*, T.M. Scanlon writes, “it should be emphasized that the fact that we have attained consistency by arriving at a coherent set of judgments is not itself what matters. Mere consistency amongst our judgments (what might be called “unreflective equilibrium”) can be attained too easily, simply by throwing out conflicting judgments in one way or another” (79).
anthropology just is this attentiveness to truth and comprehensiveness. Similarly, when attempting to reconstruct the thought of another for the purposes of deliberation about a subject matter, attention to the truth of the attitudes in the reconstruction is crucial. It is this attentiveness to the truth of the other’s attitudes that constitutes relating to that other as a potential co-deliberator, not merely as an object of anthropological knowledge. Moreover, attentiveness to the truth is particularly important when reconstructing the view of a group of which one is a participant. When deliberating about the group’s view on a subject, the participant is deliberating about what attitudes the group should adopt, given the constraints of the other members’ attitudes.

4. Rationally Reconstructing Group Attitudes: Combining Composition and Reconstruction

Composition and reconstruction can be practiced in isolation. However, when dealing with groups whose internal structure often makes their commitments opaque to any particular individual, combining the two is especially sensible. Since few individuals will have the various group commitments in view, it is likely that certain commitments will conflict, that support relations amongst the commitments will not be apparent, and that evaluating and engaging with those commitments will require putting them in a broader inferential context. Rational reconstruction is the solution to such problems that plague informally organized groups. For a rational reconstruction is the local optimum of commitments that individuals in the group have reason to endorse given their commitment to the group. It is a

99 What it is to be in a particular kind of relationship to another in conversation—to be “taking her seriously”—is for the truth to play a role in your reconstruction of the other person’s thought.
construction of an *ideal spokesperson* out of the raw materials of a collection of real spokespeople.

However, when considering how composition and reconstruction are to be combined to create a group reconstruction, we need to tread carefully. For different ways of combining these elements can yield differing results. For example, consider the following case in which we reconstruct the attitudes of a group with three members:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Person 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Person 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Person 3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Here, we have a group of three individuals, each with attitudes towards the propositions listed on the right. For simplicity, imagine that composition involves ascribing to the group any attitude that is held by two out of three members and that reconstruction involves drawing a one-step deductive inference from their attitudes. In this case, reconstructing first and composing second will yield different results from composing first and reconstructing second. If we reconstruct and then compose, we get the following result:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Person 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Person 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Person 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Person 1 Reconstructed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Person 2 Reconstructed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Person 3 Reconstructed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Composition of Reconstructed Attitudes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

By contrast, if we compose and then idealize, we get:
Composing reconstructed attitudes and reconstructing composed attitudes yield different results. Moreover, we see that we are in a situation that bears a striking resemblance to the situation of aggregating judgments over a set of logically interconnected propositions (see Figure 1). This resemblance arises because reconstruction elaborates on some set of attitudes, and elaborating on a set of attitudes involves adding logically connected attitudes to the set. In this case, prioritizing reconstruction over composition is analogous to prioritizing the conjuncts over the conjunction in the judgment aggregation situation depicted in Figure 1.

Since choices about the order of composition and idealization have implications for the content and coherence of the group’s attitudes, we need to consider how these aspects of group reconstruction can be combined in a way that does not systematically tend to inconsistency. The reason to consider this is not because consistency is a requirement of a reconstruction. The best reconstruction of the Tea Party’s beliefs might, for instance, contain inconsistent attitudes. However, because consistency detracts from coherence, and coherence is one factor contributing to the goodness of a reconstruction, we have reason to look for a way of combining composition and reconstruction that maintains consistency. Moreover, if the reconstruction is to function as a view with which we can rationally engage, then it needs to display a sufficient degree of coherence (even if this falls short of complete consistency).
Here, we can draw on certain lessons from the judgment aggregation literature. An important lesson for our purposes is that if a group wishes to come to a consistent set of collective attitudes on the basis of the attitudes of its members, there is good reason to use a procedure100 that has feedback and reasoning (see List and Pettit 2013, 60–6). For example, consider a so-called “straw vote procedure”:

1. Consider the propositions on the agenda in a sequence, which may reflect either a temporal order or some other order of priority.
2. Take a majority vote on each proposition considered. If the attitude formed is consistent with attitudes already formed, let it stand as the group attitude.
3. If the attitude formed is not consistent with these attitudes, consider all the different possible ways in which previously formed attitudes or the new attitude could be revised so as to restore consistency.
4. Take a vote under a suitable procedure, or deliberate, on which of the possible revisions to make.

Such a procedure involves feedback—the members react to the original vote—and reasoning—the members hold beliefs about the consistency of the propositions. Given that the procedure has these features, a group employing it will be able to come to a consistent view about a range of sets of logically interconnected propositions.

---

100 To avoid confusion, note that a “procedure” in the sense employed here is not the same as what in this literature is called an “aggregation function.” An aggregation function is a functional relation between some set of individuals’ attitudes towards some a set of propositions and the group’s attitudes towards those propositions. Much of the literature on judgment aggregation is concerned with the possibility of jointly satisfying various requirements on such functions. By contrast, a “procedure” in the sense used here is a set of rules that are employed by individuals in a group to determine their attitudes. The same aggregation function might be realized by a variety of procedures (see List and Pettit 2013, 60).
To combine composition and reconstruction, we can use a similar strategy of introducing feedback and reasoning. In this case, rather than reacting to an initial vote by considering whether winning positions are consistent, we react to a group reconstruction by considering whether the attitudes in the best reconstruction are sufficiently coherent. The answer, of course, may be no. For instance, there may be no sufficiently coherent rational reconstruction of the Republican Party if, e.g., there is no way to reconcile the attitudes of the Tea Party and Establishment factions.

If there is no such reconstruction, we need to consider what could be done to yield a plausible reconstruction. How does we do this? Consider the way social movements react when faced with the problem of insufficient ideological homogeny: by considering whom to kick out and how to reshuffle authority. Similarly, when faced with no sufficiently coherent reconstruction of a group, we consider what reconstructions would be yielded by variants of the group extension and principles of composition. Considering these alternatives is analogous to the reasoning about alternative sets of consistent attitudes in the straw poll procedure above. One can then use exactly the same criteria for picking the best reconstruction that were used before: the coherence, accuracy, and comprehensiveness of the reconstruction as weighted against dissimilarity from the original extension and authority structure.

Putting these pieces together, we can say that composition and reconstruction are to be combined in the following way:

---

101 It is not uncommon that the process of reconstruction suggests abandoning certain initial assumptions about group extension and authority structure. For example, in reconstructing the attitudes of Marxists, one might come to decide that one should not include Marx (as Marx apparently thought appropriate). Or one might come to think that a better reconstruction of Marxism would give less authority to Marx’s original texts and more weight to the views of later Marxists. Similarly, groups that seek to represent a consistent ideology are constantly policing their borders and disputing who should count as an authority. Consider why certain Republicans call others “Republicans in name only.”
1. Make a preliminary composition of group attitudes from individual attitudes via considering the authority structure with a group.

2. Attempt to reconstruct attitudes. If your reconstruction yields a sufficiently accurate, cohesive, and comprehensive view, let the reconstruction stand.

3. If not, consider modifications to either:
   i. Who you count as a member of the group
   ii. The principles according to which you compose and close group attitudes

4. Construct the best reconstruction for each of these various modifications. The overall best reconstruction is the reconstruction that best weights similarity to the original group membership and actual principles of composition against coherence, accuracy, and comprehensiveness.

This “procedure” for arriving at a rational reconstruction is extremely schematic and—of course—the actual processes by which rational reconstruction is accomplished are usually not so neat. There may be times when the process is not so different from the schematic one. For example, book-length treatments of the Tea Party may perform all the steps in the processes of rational reconstruction—clarification, elaboration, constructing possible views, picking a view as the best reconstruction—in one place (e.g., Parker 2013; Skocpol and Williamson 2012). However, public discussion in the media is often such that one gets a bit of composition here (e.g., Page and Jagoda 2010), a bit of elaboration there (e.g., Salam 2014), some clarification in one place (e.g., Sullivan 2014), and a little reconstruction in another (e.g., Chait 2011a). That is, while public discussion often proceeds on the assumption that social movements such as the Tea Party have a worldview, participants in that discussion are not continually in the business of putting that worldview on display in a systematic fashion.
5. Rational Reconstruction and Public Deliberation

So we now have our account of rational reconstruction: in rationally reconstructing a group, we are coming up with a coherent and comprehensive view that we can properly attribute to the group on the basis of who are the spokespeople—the informal authorities—in the group. When the group in question is one that seeks a voice in deliberative politics, we can think of this construction as the position of an idealized spokesperson for the group. The construction of this ideal spokesperson enables us to discursively engage with the group as an interlocutor. But, you might ask, why should we do this?

Consider first why we might rationally reconstruct an individual’s thought in a seminar discussion. Say a student is explaining his confusing Big Idea in your seminar. There are a number ways—not of equal pedagogical merit—that you might engage with such a student after his attempt to explain The Idea. One way is to sit back and—without any effort at reconstruction—assess the ideas by pointing out the various falsities, inconsistencies, and gaps (or, more positively, note some local points of agreement) amongst the elements of The Idea. A second way—one sometimes employed by other participants but hopefully not by instructors—is to provide a non-rational causal explanation, a diagnosis, of those ideas: “you just think these things because…” The focus of our attention has been on a third way of engaging with those ideas: to try to make rational sense of them by looking for more coherent, accurate, and comprehensive variants. Why employ this latter mode of engagement in this context?

There are a number of reasons. Some of these reasons are instrumental. For instance, perhaps the student is onto something, and thinking through the variants might be a means to figure out some interesting truth. Or perhaps you are interested not primarily in bringing
the student to truth but simply to a better understanding of his own view, an understanding that requires knowledge of the broader set of commitments (and their interrelations) that he is taking on in holding the view. Or you might be interested not primarily in that particular student’s self-exploration but in articulating his view in a way that enables the class as a whole to discuss and explore it. But there are also reasons beyond these instrumental ones. Particularly, in attempting to rationally reconstruct the Big Idea, you are expressing epistemic respect for the student, i.e., expressing the judgment that the student is a competent thinker whose Big Idea contains some plausible and interesting view. And in working out what that view is, you are establishing a certain relationship with the student, one in which you and the student engage in co-deliberation, deliberation about the subject matter in which both your and the student’s ideas serve as constraints.

Now consider the sphere of public discussion. When journalists, social scientists, and interested citizens confront a social movement, that movement often does not speak with a unified and articulate voice but rather presents a string of demands and claims that—to the uncharitable interpreter—appear like the disjointed and inchoate thoughts of a confused human individual. And as when responding to the confused student in a seminar, there are multiple ways of engaging with groups whose attitudes exhibit such a lack of structure. One can—without any reconstruction—assess political movements by pointing out various inconsistencies, blind spots, and gaps in these slogans and demands (or, on the other hand, register agreement). One can also diagnose the slogans and demands as products of irrational forces. Or one can engage with such a group via the kind of reconstruction that has been the object of discussion here.
One might wonder why choose reconstruction from amongst these options. It is an obvious fact that the sphere of public discussion is not like that in the seminar room. Seminars are places for students (and instructors) to work out ideas, and good pedagogy often requires not simply assessing those ideas in their current form but helping students search for better alternatives. Moreover, seminars are characterized by certain norms of cooperative discussion, norms that participants should be sincere, be respectful, and assume that others are ready to change their views when and only when they feel pressure to do so from the force of the better argument. By contrast, discussion in the public sphere is often driven by actors of dubious motives, insincerely peddling arguments of questionable merit, whose opinions—and particularly public statements—are not liable to be changed by the forces of reason. Thus, even granting that rational reconstruction enjoys a privileged place in the seminar room, it might seem that approaches that question motives, challenge epistemic competence, and search for the most efficacious levers to change objectionable opinions are preferable in the public sphere to a mode of engagement that privileges discursive interaction and the attempt to make rational sense. It seems that non-reconstructive modes of engagement are therefore crucial in the public sphere given the non-ideal circumstances in which we often find ourselves.

However, the regrettable above-mentioned facts notwithstanding, a crucial aspect of democratic politics is deliberative, and there are a number of reasons for engaging with social groups as interlocutors, reasons that bear strong parallels to reconstruction’s use in the seminar room. As in the seminar, rationally reconstructing a group’s view may be instrumentally useful for some other epistemically valuable state such as knowledge or true
belief.\textsuperscript{102} Moreover, just as a reconstruction of a student’s Idea may aid that student’s self-understanding, group rational reconstruction facilitates the collective self-understanding of members of a group by making explicit and charitably interpreting the group’s commitments. Understanding these commitments is critical for members’ deliberation regarding whether and how they wish to live up to those commitments.\textsuperscript{103}

For non-members—even those who think that the group’s views are far from the truth—a rational reconstruction can reveal whether some group embodies some set of interconnected underlying ideas. It is usually far from clear whether a group—even a group that presents itself as representing a unified worldview—truly expresses some coherent ideology. Many groups in the political sphere are held together by modi vivendi writ small; they are collections of individuals pragmatically united to grab what political power comes within their reach. Similarly, there are groups whose self-presented “ideology” is merely a collection of slogans that can only hang together in a rational psyche with the aid of ambiguity, vagueness, and selective attention. So whether a movement in fact does embody some coherent and comprehensive ideology is an open question. But the question at issue is not one about some psychological fact—even some psychological fact of a peculiar supra-individual kind—but rather a question about what can be drawn out of some collective using our powers of reflection. Rational reconstruction is what answers this question.

\textsuperscript{102} Constructing the most plausible version of a group’s views may be an important tool for figuring out what is true \textit{simpliciter}. For instance, when we reconstruct the view of the scientific community about some subject matter, one plausible reason to care about the reconstruction is that the view of the scientific community is likely to be an accurate guide to the truth. The same goes for certain intellectual movements or religious groups that one believes contain insight.

\textsuperscript{103} To decide whether one should to identify with the Tea Party, one needs to understand the system of thought to which the group ascribes. Such reconstruction is particularly important for individuals who identify with ideological groups whose views may be in tension. For instance, in deciding whether to be a Marxist, a Catholic, or both, individuals must know what Marxism and Catholicism require of them. Moreover, they also have reason to care about whether the commitments of these two groups are compatible.
Moreover, when rational reconstruction answers such a question in the affirmative and describes the content of such a view, it facilitates rational engagement with that group. For example, a politician may want to know if there is any such thing as a Tea Party worldview and, if so, whether some particular policy is compatible with that view. Just as reconstruction of a student’s comment enables other seminar participants to engage with the ideas of that student, a rational reconstruction of a group facilitates citizens’ and political actors’ engagement with that group as a discursive partner. When rational reconstruction performs these functions of facilitating discursive engagement with some collective, it creates a relation of deliberative partnership amongst those groups and individuals exploring their views, a relationship that is expressive of a certain degree of epistemic respect.

6. Rational Reconstruction and Critique

Of course, not every group that makes claims in the public sphere is one with which one is disposed to have a discussion. And given that rational reconstruction is constructive, charitable, and expressive of a certain degree of epistemic respect, one might think it is particularly ill suited to groups embodying a pernicious ideology. Here, it is critique rather than charity that is needed.

And if one looks at the practice of ideology critique, one often sees concern to demonstrate how a group’s view is explained by considerations that the agents themselves are not in a position to acknowledge. Since ideology critique often has aspects beyond demonstration that a group’s view is incorrect or misguided, it might therefore be tempting

---

104 These modes of engaging with groups require understanding them as having a view that can be addressed and assessed for compatibility with various policies or reasons for policies. Since these groups often fail to satisfy the conditions of agency even if they have sophisticated internal structure, rational reconstruction is required for such engagement. For an example of such reconstruction in political philosophy, see Cohen 2004.
to think that it is quite different in character from rational reconstruction. Moreover, rational reconstruction might seem positively misguided in such a context, as it appears overly solicitous to malign or incoherent views. Shouldn’t one try to diagnose rather than charitably engage with such views? It might seem that the answer is obviously yes.

However, this conclusion is mistaken. Rather than constituting a fundamentally different enterprise, rational reconstruction is better understood as an important aspect of such critical projects. First, reconstruction is often necessary to get critical projects off the ground because the individual member views may be so amorphous and confused that criticism is impossible without systematic clarification. Such amorphousness and confusion are typical of objectionable ideologies, which often lack sufficient definition for easy criticism. (For instance, how can one criticize the view that America is the “land of the free and home of the brave”?)

Second, a theory of ideology is often brought in as an answer to a particular question: why do agents have beliefs that are both false and deeply against their interests? However, it might seem theoretically extravagant to appeal to a theory of ideology to answer this question if agents have good epistemic reasons to hold false beliefs that are against their interests or if agents are imperfectly grasping a sensible point of view. That is, a rational reconstruction of ideological viewpoints is needed to defeat the default presumption that agents hold the attitudes they do because they have good reason to do so. Such reconstructions illustrate that the agent’s beliefs cannot be understood as grasping at some plausible view; therefore, a non-rational explanation is required for their holding the attitudes they do.

105 Appiah’s (1993) reconstruction of “racialism” is a perfect example of reconstruction for such purposes. 106 For an account of the intellectual development of the theory of ideology, see Rosen 1996.
Third, if one thinks of rational reconstruction as a component of ideology critique, then one has a response to an important worry about such critical projects: that they are uncharitable or disrespectful to subjects. In constructing a rational reconstruction, you are appealing to the most rational side of the agent's views, and when you show that the most charitable reconstruction of someone's view is wanting, this enables you to “open up the conversation” with that agent about what could be motivating these attitudes.

While rational reconstruction is crucial for ideology critique, its critical use is not confined to cases in which the views under scrutiny are deeply pernicious and confused. A good criticism of a view criticizes not only the “letter” but the “spirit” of a proposal. That is, such criticisms target the best version of view in order to avoid fixating on inessential features of a view (i.e., those features that can be modified without the view ceasing to be a view of a particular kind). There are two reasons why the appropriate project of a critical project is the best version of a particular view. First, if there are strong arguments against the best version of a view, then there are strong arguments against any version of the view (the arguments may not be the same, of course). So criticizing the best version of a view is the best way to settle the question of whether any version of the view is plausible. Second, critical projects are often interested not only in demonstrating that a viewpoint is false but in understanding why it is false. And objections that target the strongest version of a view are those most likely to expose the “deepest” reasons why a view is incorrect. Targeting the best

---

107 Of course, trenchant criticism may be targeted at self-consciously simplified versions of a view in order to show that various complexities are obscuring the view’s fundamental aspects. (Similarly, an idealized causal model might idealize in order to illuminate what are the most important difference-makers.)

108 The arguments against the best version of a view may not be arguments against weaker versions of a view because the weaker versions of a view may be weak for reasons independent of the problems with the best version. Say that a version 1 of a view faces decisive objections unless it is modified in particular way (call the modification “version 2”). It may be that these modifications themselves create problems, such that there are new objections that apply to version 2 that did not apply to version 1.
version of a view prevents a critical project from mistakenly fixating on features of the view that are merely superficial.

7. Conclusion

This essay began by asking how rational engagement is possible with groups whose organizational structure enables only inchoate expression. We took as a clue the fact that public discussion often assumes that the inchoate expressions of such groups are manifestations of more coherent and comprehensive worldviews. However, this clue was obscure, because it is not clear what such “group worldviews” are and how they relate to the attitudes of group members. We have now deciphered this clue. Such views are constructions that aim to “make sense” of the commitments made by differing authorities within the group. As such, they are constructions of a single position that could, in principle, be represented by an idealized spokesperson. So we have a solution to our initial puzzle: we engage with such groups via constructing and engaging with the positions represented by their idealized spokesperson.

That social scientists are in the business of developing such constructions—whether they view them as constructions or not—illustrates an important way in which the social sciences can be relevant for deliberative politics: by constructing a position for groups that cannot effectively do so for themselves. Moreover, we’ve seen that this aspect of social scientific and journalistic practice is informed and supported by a wide set of values such as truth, self-understanding, and respect. We are therefore in a better position to see what is at stake when those in the public sphere fail to engage with groups via reconstruction.

Recall that during the Occupy Wall Street protests of 2011 there was a recurring question about whether there was anything more to the movement than inchoate anger and
shared allegiance to memorable but vague catchphrases. Some clearly thought there was (e.g., Gitlin 2012), but many were more dismissive (e.g., Mataconis 2011). And it was—of course—easy to be dismissive because the protests had only rudimentary institutional organization, organization insufficient to articulate a clear, coherent, and comprehensive message about the economic and political situation. But now we see that accepting that a protest’s message is inchoate is not to grant that it fails embody a view; it is simply to admit that reconstructive work needs to be done. Of course, it might turn out that there is no sufficiently coherent reconstruction. There might have been outrage but no ideology. Determining whether this is the case requires more than knowledge of the attitudes of all the individuals and even supra-individuals. It requires reflection on those attitudes to determine whether they can be formed into a comprehensive doctrine. Moreover, we are also in the position to see the costs of preemptively dismissing such reflection: one misses an opportunity for understanding, dialogue, and systematic critique.

References


4. DELIBERATION THROUGH MISREPRESENTATION

Integrating Inchoate Speech into Democratic Discussion

Summary: Much political speech takes the form of protest movement slogans, tweets, artistic expression, or hazy and underdeveloped arguments. Vague, patchy, and haphazardly expressed, such “inchoate speech” poses a problem for deliberative democracy because the kind of political speech often employed by the disenfranchised is the kind least amenable to rational engagement. This paper concerns how we can increase our understanding of such speech through a kind of misrepresentation I call “rational reconstruction.” I begin by considering how the inaccurate representation of an argument can be used to increase our understanding of that argument. I then address the justifiability of inaccurately representing others’ speech. I argue that it is justifiable and politically desirable to have practices and institutions that systematically construct inaccurate representations of citizen’s speech. Such practices and institutions make contributing to public deliberation less demanding, thereby answering important concerns about the ability of citizens to equally contribute to discussion in a deliberative democracy.

According to many philosophers and political theorists, democratic decision-making requires more than a fair aggregation of judgments. It requires that those judgments be informed by public deliberation.109 While there is disagreement about what counts as public deliberation, what benefits such deliberation provides, and which of those benefits are most important, there is widespread belief that public deliberation is an essential aspect of a well-ordered democracy.110

However, the ability to make clear and informed contributions to public deliberation seems — at least at first blush — very demanding given modern conditions. Policy questions are extremely complex and often require specialized training to understand, let alone evaluate. Moreover, individuals often hold conflicting values, and they lack time and training to make

110 There are a number of reasons why robust public discussion is important for democracy. First, there are instrumental reasons such as public deliberation’s ostensible tendency to improve the quality of the laws, improve citizens’ understanding and acceptance of the laws (thereby promoting legitimacy of the laws), and improve citizens’ virtue (e.g. Mill 2007). Second, there are non-instrumental reasons such as that participation in public discussion is an essential part of the good life (e.g. Arendt 2002), expresses mutual respect (e.g. Christiano 2012), or is essential for contestation of interference (and thereby for non-domination, e.g. Pettit 1997: 186-187. Claims about the instrumental value of public deliberation have been subjected to empirical scrutiny in Sanders 1997 and Christiano 2012.
their political views coherent and precise enough to yield determinate verdicts about various policy disputes. It is therefore no surprise that when we look at actual political speech, we do not just see articulate, informed, and reasoned arguments. Rather, much political speech is what I will call “inchoate” in that it is vague, patchy, haphazardly expressed, and rife with seeming inconsistency. For instance, much political speech takes the form of vague slogans from social movements like Occupy Wall Street or the Tea Party, ambiguous and mixed messages contained in artistic works, concise snark in the form of tweets, or just the normal hazy and underdeveloped arguments that one often hears from political pundits and in everyday political discussion. Clear, reasoned argument is only a small part of political expression.111

When we encounter inchoate speech in the public sphere, there are multiple ways in which we might respond to it. First, we can simply ignore it. For example, we might ignore Occupy Wall Street slogans until Occupy has collectively decided on a clear platform and provided arguments for the components of that platform. Second, we might engage with the speech as it is. For example, we might consider whether to change our political position in light of exhortations such as “Tear down this Wall Street.” However, neither of these options is optimal from the point of view of a deliberative system. On the one hand, ignoring such speech raises a concern about democratic inclusion – given how demanding it is to make articulate, informed, and reasoned contributions to the public sphere, ignoring contributions that fail to meet such standards will exclude many citizens from participation in the processes of deliberation. On the other hand, rationally engaging with such speech as is might not be feasible. It is difficult to engage in any sophisticated way with such speech in its “raw form.” Such speech is – ex hypothesi – patchy, vague, and often incoherent. For

111 For consideration of the importance of contributions to public deliberation that do not take the form of arguments, see Dryzek 2000, Estlund 2001, Fung 2005, Young 2001, and Young 2002.
instance, it is not obvious exactly what is meant and what policy recommendations follow from slogans such as “We are the 99%!.” It is therefore difficult to rationally engage with such speech in any sophisticated way.

But there is a third way of engaging with such speech, one that might allow for more sophisticated rational discourse with inchoate speech. We might engage with a transformed, non-inchoate version of this speech. In particular, we might engage with a transformed version that is delivered by some intermediary. And this is what we often do. For instance, instead of engaging with the Occupy Wall Street slogans directly, we might read an Op-Ed—or even better, a book—that tries to put some structure on the protest’s speech by laying out a clear set of claims and arguments that makes sense of what Occupy Wall Street thinks.

There are a number of actors, institutions, and practices that might be thought to provide transformed versions of inchoate speech. For example, among the various functions performed by interest groups, political parties, think tanks, journalists, and social scientists, one important function is making sense of inchoate points of view. For instance, one thing that journalists are often tasked with doing when covering protest movement is to say what some protest movement is about and say what exactly the protesters think. And when journalists are tasked with doing this, they are not tasked with relaying some haphazard collection of thoughts but rather with providing a coherent account of the views and arguments of the protesters (if such an account is possible).

This paper concerns how one can use some transformed version of an agent’s speech to engage with an actual agent’s speech. There is an obvious concern about engaging with other citizens via some intermediary that transforms their speech. The concern is that to rationally engage with some transformed version of inchoate speech is not to engage with the

---

112 Why intermediaries are important in this context will be discussed in §2.
original speech, and therefore not to engage with the person whose speech it is. For example, say you’re reading an Op-Ed about Occupy Wall Street’s views. In giving an account of Occupy’s view, the Op-Ed author is relaying some information about what the protester thinks. But to the extent that the author imposes structure and introduces differences to the actual claims of the inchoate speech, the author leads you away from engaging with the protesters. This poses a problem because the basic idea behind this third strategy for engaging with inchoate speech just is that one should engage with it by first imposing such structure and introducing such differences. So if changing the speech in this way leads you away from it, then this strategy seems like a non-starter.

I’m going to argue that the way out of this worry is to think of this “transformed” speech as a particular kind of idealized model of the inchoate speech, a kind of model that I will call a “rational reconstruction.” However, this way of addressing the concern itself raises puzzles. First, there is an epistemic puzzle:

Epistemic Puzzle: How can transforming speech improve our understanding of that speech?

This puzzle is particularly pressing if this transformed speech is a model that is idealized, an inaccurate representation of the inchoate speech. Then it seems that you can increase your understanding of another agent’s speech by (willfully) misrepresenting the claims made in that speech. And this might seem bizarre because you might think that to understand such speech just is to know the content of the actual claims of that speech. So, to the extent that you introduce inaccuracy in your representation of that speech, you must, correspondingly decrease your understanding of it.

113 Note that one can misrepresent another’s view without intending to misrepresent it. Philosophers misrepresent each other’s views all the time, although (hopefully) they only rarely intend to misrepresent each other.
Second, there is a normative puzzle:

**Normative Puzzle.** How could practices and institutions that systematically misrepresent other’s speech be politically desirable and justifiable in a deliberative context? To put it bluntly, it seems bizarre to think that a deliberative order is improved by the presence of actors that systematically distort the views and speech of other citizens. How could misrepresenting citizens’ views be justifiable to those misrepresented? That is, how can an intermediary *speak for* an individual or group when they willfully misrepresent their speech?

The purpose of the paper is to answer these puzzles and thereby make plausible a suggestion about how inchoate political speech can be appropriately integrated into a deliberative order using intermediary institutions. An account of how such integration is possible is important for two reasons. First, such an account is needed to ease the tension between deliberative ideals and the realities of political expression. As many have argued, political expression may have deliberative value without taking the form of argument (see e.g. Dryzek 2000, Fung 2005, Young 2002). Nevertheless, if deliberation is to bring collective decision-making under the guide of reason by making citizens and political elites answerable to the “force of the better argument,” then argument must have some privileged role in a conception of deliberation. An account of how intermediary institutions can appropriately transform inchoate speech can help reconcile the privileged role of argument with the deliberative value of political expression that does not take the form of argument. This in turn helps answers concerns about the demandingness and inclusiveness of deliberative ideals."

---

114 These concerns arise if one assumes that privileging argument in a conception of deliberation requires privileging contributions to public deliberation that take the form of argument.
Second, careful attention to the role of deliberative intermediaries will reveal that a deliberative system with such intermediaries can realize important political values beyond those realizable in a system of unmediated deliberation. That is, mediated deliberation is not a mere “second-best” response to the infeasibility of realizing the town hall in a mass democracy. As I will argue, a system of mediated deliberation has distinct means of realizing important values of solidarity, respect, and equal concern that are not available within a system privileging face-to-face discussion.

We will proceed as follows. I begin by considering why we should want to integrate inchoate speech into a deliberative order (§1), and why deliberative intermediaries have an important role to play in this process (§2). I then argue that integrating inchoate speech will often require a deliberative intermediary to misrepresent the original speech (§3). This result raises the Epistemic Puzzle and the Normative Puzzle. §4 answers the Epistemic Puzzle by providing an account of rational reconstruction, a kind of idealization that facilitates understanding a point of view. Using this account of rational reconstruction, §5 raises and then allays some concerns about self-consciously employing misrepresentation to understand and engage with others’ views, thus answering the Normative Puzzle. The conclusion (§6) briefly considers implications of the discussion for the norms applying to deliberative intermediaries.

1. Why Care About Integrating Inchoate Speech into a Deliberative Order?

Before considering how inchoate political speech can be integrated into the deliberative order, we should briefly consider why we might want to integrate it at all. While some inchoate political speech is aiming to contribute to public discussion via providing arguments for policy conclusions, much is not. Such political speech might, for example, be
aiming to rouse emotion, express dissatisfaction, share experiences, focus attention on a topic, etc. Moreover, the political aspect of a speech act may be secondary or incidental, e.g. in artistic works (see Shelby 2015). And even when contributing to political discussion is the aim, one might think that individuals are not entitled to have their arguments heard if those arguments are not expressed with sufficient clarity. So what is the value of integrating inchoate speech into the system of public deliberation?

The basic value of integrating such speech in a deliberative system is the value of inclusion. Inclusion itself is important for both instrumental and non-instrumental reasons. It is valuable instrumentally because the quality of deliberation (and quality of decisions arising from deliberation) benefits from the presence of a sufficient number of voices from distinct points of view.115 It is a familiar point that knowledge and insight are distributed among actors in society, and not every actor (or occupant of every structural position) has the time, training, and desire to put the knowledge and insight they have acquired into a form that makes it easy for others to engage with. Moreover, the fact that inchoate speech is inchoate does not mean that such speech cannot offer knowledge and insight. It simply means that this speech does not take a form that makes it easy to grasp and engage with. This instrumental reason for integrating inchoate speech remains even if such speech does not aim to contribute to public discussion.

Second, there are non-instrumental reasons to care about inclusion. If public deliberation only included the voices of those with clear, well-worked-out arguments, such deliberation would be highly inegalitarian. Those in privileged structural positions typically have more time and training to put their points of view into this particular form, and when

---

115 See Anderson 2010 on the importance of having different points of view represented in public discussion.
they lack such time and training, they can hire others to make their arguments for them.¹¹⁶ Moreover, one reason political expression may take inchoate form is as a self-conscious rejection of the norms governing the sphere of public deliberation. Modes of political contestation like protest movements, political art, and sloganeering are appropriate not only in non-ideal conditions but also in the public life of a well-ordered society (see Tarrow and Tilly 2006). Consequently, a well-ordered deliberative system needs means of integrating such alienated voices into public deliberation.

2. The Need for Deliberative Intermediaries to Integrate Inchoate Speech

So there are strong reasons to integrate inchoate speech into our system of public deliberation. How should this be done? I would like to suggest that this integration is best achieved by employing deliberative intermediaries – such as the mass media, think tanks, and academics – as “reconstructers.”¹¹⁷ A public sphere with such reconstructers enables more sophisticated rational engagement with a larger number of voices and perspectives, thus improving the quality of deliberation.

It is conceivable, of course, that a deliberative system could integrate inchoate speech without any intermediary. For example, imagine a seminar whose participants are all extremely good at making sense of each other’s inchoate remarks. In this seminar, there might be no need for some intermediary to make inchoate contributions clear and comprehensible. However, actual seminars are rarely composed of participants with such rarified abilities. It is therefore no surprise that seminars are often improved by having a

¹¹⁶ Of course, the speech of those in privileged positions is also often inchoate, particularly in the political arena. ¹¹⁷ Deliberative intermediaries are part of a more general system of public knowledge (see Kitcher 2011), a system whose role is to provide citizens with accurate information needed for democratic decision-making. The specific function of these intermediaries is to provide information about other citizens’ points of view. For a discussion of the role and importance of such intermediaries, see Page 1996.
professional instructor who mediates discussion, an instructor part of whose job is making
inchoate contributions clear and comprehensible so that other seminar participants can
engage with them. Instructors are often needed because just as it is difficult to come up with
clear and comprehensible contributions of one’s own, it is also difficult to make others’
 inchoate contributions clear and comprehensible.

What holds in the seminar holds all the more in the public sphere. While seminars
rarely lack for inchoate contributions, contributions to public discussion are liable to be even
more inchoate, especially since not all contributions even aim to be clear and immediately
comprehensible. Moreover, while seminar participants may have trouble understanding one
another, it is often much more demanding for citizens to make sense of other citizens’
inchoate speech. Making sense of inchoate speech often requires acquaintance with the
speaker’s mode of expression as well as some expertise on the subject the speaker is
discussing. Given the range of subject matter and modes of expression in a modern
democracy, it is frequently impossible for individuals to make sense of inchoate speech alone.
And even if it were possible, it would demand significant time and effort.

Fortunately, there are ways for a system of public deliberation to be so as to remove
such burdens from individual citizens: the system can contain deliberative intermediaries
charged with making sense of inchoate speech. Of course, one might be concerned that
reliance on intermediary actors in a deliberative system would undercut – or at least direct
attention away from – the kind of valuable face-to-face interaction among citizens often
emphasized by deliberative democrats. But here, we should recall the important point –
 made forcefully by Robert Goodin (2000) – that when providing an account of public
deliberation, it is a mistake to focus exclusively on face-to-face discussion among distinct
individuals, on deliberation in its “external-collective” aspect. Rather, one needs to also focus
on the “internal-reflective” aspect of deliberation, the aspect of deliberation in which individual citizens think to themselves about issues from the perspectives of other citizens.

This internal-reflective aspect of deliberation is particularly important given some truisms that any account of deliberative politics must take into account: (i) modern states have large heterogeneous populations spread out over large distances; (ii) these populations are often residentially segregated along the lines of political ideology; and (iii) face-to-face deliberation of political issues is time consuming and – for many citizens – unpleasant. These truisms imply (iv) that it will be impossible to organize a face-to-face group among all citizens, (v) that organizing small-group discussions at a local level would be unlikely to yield a group of citizens that is representative of the larger population, and (vi) that even if such a representative group could be assembled, participation in it would be very demanding.

Goodin makes the point that the possibility of individual “internal-reflective” deliberation that incorporates others’ views can – at least partially – mitigate concerns about the infeasibility of organizing representative face-to-face discussions in a mass democracy. Moreover, much of the good of face-to-face discussion consists in its facilitating a process in which citizens on their own think through the perspectives of others.\textsuperscript{118}

While the internal-reflective aspect of deliberation is certainly aided by face-to-face discussion, even more crucial is information about the views and perspectives of other citizens delivered by deliberative intermediaries. We can’t organize a town hall for the nation, but we can engage with other citizens via reflecting on their views using information provided by the mass media, universities, think tanks, and other such actors.

\textsuperscript{118} As Goodin mentions, Habermas (1995) himself makes this point in his reply to Rawls: “Discourse ethics rests on … a joint process of ‘ideal role taking,’” in which “everyone is required to take the perspective of everyone else, and thus project herself into the understandings of self and world of all others; from this interlocking of perspectives their emerges an ideally extended we-perspective from which all can test in common whether they wish to make a controversial norm the basis of their shared practice” (117).
3. Integrating Inchoate Speech Requires Misrepresentation

While there are many interesting philosophical questions regarding what norms apply to the activity of deliberative intermediaries,\(^\text{119}\) we will focus on one: whether such intermediaries should constrain themselves to accurately representing the thoughts of the individuals whose views they are reporting. This section argues that there can be no such norm if we are to integrate inchoate speech by making rational sense of it. Making rational sense of inchoate speech often requires misrepresenting what an agent thinks.

One might be skeptical that making sense requires misrepresentation. First, one might note that some speech that appears inchoate is merely elliptical. Much content may not be explicitly asserted, but attention to context enables it to be filled out (say by using Gricean norms). Second, even when such devices are not sufficient for rendering speech less inchoate, the fact that some piece of speech is inchoate does not entail that the agent whose speech it is has an inchoate set of thoughts. The problem of inchoate speech might just be the problem of inchoate articulation of those thoughts. If this were the problem, then the solution might seem obvious: institutions could “transform” inchoate speech by identifying the set of thoughts that is inchoately expressed. And while this “transformation” would involve misreporting the agent’s speech, it would not involve misrepresenting the agent’s attitudes. Such a “transformation” might seem unproblematic, since what matters to both the speaker and hearer is the speaker’s thoughts, not the particular speech that imperfectly articulates those thoughts. So, one might think, there is no deep epistemic and normative concern about misrepresentation.\(^\text{120}\)

\(^{119}\) For example, are such intermediaries obligated to give a platform to multiple viewpoints on political issues? Are intermediaries obliged to focus discussion on particular topics?\(^\text{2}\)

\(^{120}\) After all, if one could infer from inchoate speech to a set of choate attitudes, we would have straightforward responses to the supposed puzzles. In the case of Epistemic Puzzle, there is not a puzzle about misrepresentation because the thing we have reason to care about – the agent’s view – is accurately represented.
But this is not a satisfactory solution for a simple reason: inchoate speech is often – in
fact usually – the product of inchoate thoughts on the part of the speaker. Let us we
distinguish two cases, which I will call Inchoate Expression and Inchoate Attitudes.

*Inchoate Expression:* An individual who has a determinate, coherent, and comprehensive
set of attitudes towards some subject matter expresses himself inchoately about that
subject matter.

When we try to “make sense” of the agent’s speech, what we might care about is accurately
depicting those attitudes, not the imperfect expression of those attitudes in speech. So far so
good for the suggestion above. But now consider a second case:

*Inchoate Attitudes:* An individual has an indeterminate, inconsistent, inaccurate, and
patchy set of attitudes towards some subject matter and accurately expresses those
inchoate thoughts.

When trying to apply the solution of *Inchoate Expression* to the case of *Inchoate Attitudes*, we
face a problem. What we want when “making rational sense” of the agent’s speech is not to
discern the indeterminate, inconsistent, inaccurate, and patchy attitudes of the agent. Rather,
we want to see whether there is a sensible view “behind” the indeterminate, inconsistent,
inaccurate, and patchy set of attitudes. But what does “behind” mean in this case? Unlike in
*Inchoate Expression*, there is not some coherent, accurate, and comprehensive set of attitudes
of which the inchoate speech is an expression.\(^{121}\) Therefore, intermediaries that aim to
integrate inchoate speech into the deliberative order often cannot accomplish their task
merely by making explicit inarticulately expressed attitudes of the speaker. Rather, I will

---

\(^{121}\) It is crucial that an account of how to integrate inchoate speech into a deliberative order provide an account
suitable for cases like *Inchoate Attitudes* as many contributions to public deliberation are inchoate because the
agents’ underlying attitudes are inchoate. For example, when Tea Party (or Occupy) protesters make inchoate
statements to the media, these statements are often reflections of inchoate thoughts on the part of the speaker.
suggest, such intermediaries need to construct the view that is “behind” the attitudes. The next section details what kind of construction this is and provides an account of the relation between the construction and the original such that the construction provides understanding of the original.

4. Answering the Epistemic Puzzle

4.1 How Misrepresentation Can Aid Understanding

In order to get clear on how intermediary institutions can facilitate understanding of citizen’s speech by transforming that speech, I'm going to consider a simple example of how we can come to better understand speech by rationally reconstructing it. This example will ignore certain complexities arising when dealing with groups in the public sphere, but these complexities can be safely ignored. Here’s the example:

*Inchoate Paper:* Imagine that you’re reading a draft of your advisee’s senior thesis. Sadly, the draft is horrible. There is no clear thesis, the main points are hazy, and the argumentative structure is unclear. Basically, the paper consists of a set of thoughts seemingly linked to one another by only a vague thematic association.

The student’s paper – and the thought behind it – is inchoate. What are your options in this situation? There are three options for dealing with the paper, the same three options we encountered earlier. First, you could just not engage with the paper, perhaps writing the student an email saying, “Sorry, this is too confusing. Try rewriting.” Or, second, you could

---

122 Why? Because the epistemic and normative puzzles are more pressing when dealing with individuals than with groups. In the case of individuals, we have a clear grip on what the “original view” is – it is the agent’s actual attitudes. But in the case of a group, our grip on the “original” from which the reconstruction is a deviation might seem less clear. Correspondingly, it is less obvious that reconstruction involves misrepresentation.
just engage with some of the claims in the paper piecemeal.\textsuperscript{123}

We’ll focus on the third option: you could reconstruct the student’s argument. Imagine you take this option. What are you doing when you doing this? Intuitively: you hunker down and try to figure out what the paper is trying to get at. The paper is some cluttered mess, and, intuitively, you’re trying to clear away the clutter and fill out an intelligible argument that “stands behind” what seem to be the main claims of the paper. In constructing this argument, you aim to approximate the claims of the original paper but with various subtractions, additions, and corrections. You make these changes so as to yield a plausible argument.

But now we’ve landed at the epistemic puzzle: how exactly can we increase our understanding of the paper by coming up with a schematic argument of this kind? In particular, how can such a schematic argument increase our understanding of the paper by misrepresenting the claims that it makes?

I think a clue about how to answer this puzzle is to consider another context in which misrepresentation is used to increase our understanding: scientific modeling. In the sciences, it is common to use simple models to understand complex systems. When employed to understand a particular target system, models abstract – omit detail about that system – and idealize – misrepresent certain features of that system. And it is uncontroversial that models can be used to provide understanding of their target systems despite and even because of these abstractions and idealizations. Of course a rational reconstruction will be different from typical scientific models because of a difference in subject matter, i.e. a difference in the kind

\textsuperscript{123} To see clearly the problems of merely engaging with some of the paper’s claims in isolation, consider that when you make criticisms of individual claims, it will be exceedingly difficult to know whether your disagreement matters for the paper. Absent a more holistic understanding of the paper’s structure, you do not know the role of the claims you are criticizing in the argument (and therefore if the conclusion depends on them). You also don’t know whether those criticisms might be question-begging, because you don’t know whether the grounds you provide for rejecting those claims are themselves under dispute.
of “system” modeled. But the comparison to scientific models is, I believe, illuminating because a rational reconstruction – like a scientific model – is a construct that can be used to engage with a system in an indirect manner.

While there are various stories about how models in the sciences work (for an overview, see Weisberg 2013), one important account is that they employ abstraction and idealization for the purposes of putting on display the dependence structure of some system when certain kinds of “noise” are eliminated. This way of thinking about models is useful for our purposes because like a model used in this way, a rational reconstruction also helps you understand and practically engage with a system by putting clearly on display a kind of dependence structure characterizing that system when various kinds of “noise” are eliminated. But there are important differences between a rational reconstruction and a scientific model. These differences concern the kind of dependence that one seeks to put on display and the kind of practical engagement one seeks to facilitate. These differences have implications for the kind of “noise” that one seeks to eliminate when idealizing, and therefore for how idealization increases understanding.

In the sciences, models often aim to help you grasp causal dependences and aid your practical engagement with a system by providing information useful for predicting and controlling how a system will evolve. When such models misrepresent a system, they often do so with the aim of idealizing away certain kinds of “noise” characterized causally. That is, various interfering conditions are imagined away, and a model makes clear how the system’s parts are causally connected absent various kinds of causal interference.

By contrast, a rational reconstruction aims to help you grasp rational dependences and so helps you see how a set of claims rationally interrelate. Having this information – while sometimes useful for prediction – has its paradigmatic use in reasoning together with an agent
about an argument or view. For instance, when you reconstruct the argument of the inchoate paper, you aim to clearly articulate the basic argument in a way that makes it easy to grasp which claims the paper’s conclusions rationally depend on. With dependency information of this kind, you could focus discussion with the student on the claims that make a difference to the argument, i.e. those that make a difference for whether the student should believe the conclusion of his paper.

In this case, the kind of “noise” that needs to be eliminated to make rational structure clear is not causally but normatively characterized. You’re trying to eliminate sources of confusion and error that obscure the plausibility and rational organization of the argument. So various mistakes and omissions are imagined away, allowing the model to put clearly on display how the claims of the argument are connected absent various kinds of mistakes, that is, how the argument would be if it were well-formulated and to the point.

One can summarize these differences using the following chart:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Causal Model</th>
<th>Rational Reconstruction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Kind of Dependence</strong></td>
<td>Causal</td>
<td>Rational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mode of Practical Engagement</strong></td>
<td>Prediction and control</td>
<td>Reasoning together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Kind of “Noise” Eliminated</strong></td>
<td>Causal noise</td>
<td>Noise characterized normatively</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Answering the epistemic puzzle requires cashing out this metaphor of “noise.” Moreover, as we’ll see, going into more detail will later enable us to better answer normative questions about misrepresentation.

When we consider how rational reconstruction increases understanding by “noise
removal,” we should distinguish three kinds of “noise” that are roadblocks to understanding: incoherence, inaccuracy (under which I include imprecise claims), and what I will call “patchiness.” By “patchiness,” I mean failure to draw obvious implications, recognize obvious sources of support, and include intermediary steps in reasoning.

An idealization that corrects for these mistakes is one that clarifies — i.e. reduces incoherence and inaccuracy — and makes comprehensive — i.e. reduces patchiness — of inchoate speech. So to the extent that an inchoate view contains defects of incoherence, inaccuracy, and patchiness, a good reconstruction exhibits coherence, “accuracy to the world,”124 and comprehensiveness. But while idealization aims to correct for these mistakes, it tries to do so without deviating too sharply from the actual claims of what is being reconstructed. If an alternative model were extremely different from its target system, it would — after all — give us no epistemic and practical aid. A good reconstruction should therefore be similar to its target system.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mistakes in Inchoate Speech</th>
<th>Values Guiding Idealization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Incoherence</td>
<td>Coherence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inaccuracy</td>
<td>Accuracy to the world</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patchiness</td>
<td>Comprehensiveness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Similarity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

So these are the values that guide normative idealization in a rational reconstruction. Consequently, they are values that one should take into account when assessing alternative

124 I’ve picked this term to distinguish the accuracy of the model’s claims about the world from how accurately the model depicts the original inchoate speech. It is the former that concerns us.
potential ways of idealizing the original inchoate speech.

Remember again what you are doing when trying to figure out what a paper is trying to get at. You are thinking of variants on the original inchoate speech, trying to find a variant that “fits.” We now have a more precise way of saying what it is you are doing in this case.

You’re starting with some set of possible alternatives to the actual inchoate speech that are sufficiently coherent and sufficiently similar to the inchoate speech to count as potential reconstructions. (Here, the idea is that there are some side constraints on a reconstruction: the reconstruction itself should be coherent, and it needs to be sufficiently similar to the original.) So we’re just going to give a name to the set of all possible sets of claims that meet those side constraints: call it \( V \) (for variants on the inchoate speech).

We can now think of the question of which idealization to choose as having the structure of an optimization problem, where the best reconstruction is the one that optimizes over the four values mentioned above.\(^{125}\) The problem is to choose a reconstruction \( R \) from within \( V \) using the values of accuracy to the world, coherence, comprehensiveness, and similarity as optimization parameters.

**Rational Reconstruction:** A set of claims \( R \) is the best rational reconstruction of an inchoate set of claims \( I \) iff \( R \) is the member of \( V \) that optimizes over the following four values:

1. Accuracy to the world
2. Coherence
3. Comprehensiveness
4. Similarity to \( I \)

\(^{125}\) I’m going to talk as if there is a unique best reconstruction. I’m not actually committed to that assumption — in fact I think it is often false — but it will simplify things to assume that is true. I will also ignore additional complications such as what weight these different values should be given.
Consider the student’s paper. When you try to reconstruct it, you consider various possible arguments and assess those possibilities along a number of dimensions: whether the argument is valid, whether the premises are accurate, whether the argument is filled out enough to see how the premises support the conclusion, and whether the argument seems to match the claims of the paper. My suggestion is that the best reconstruction is the argument that does best according to these criteria.

4.2 An Example of Mediated Speech: The Tea Party

Let’s now move from the toy example of the student paper to an actual case of reconstruction by an intermediary. We’ll consider a recent book by Theda Skocpol and Vanessa Williamson called *The Tea Party and the Remaking of American Conservatism*.

By now, the Tea Party is a familiar staple of American political life. Despite this familiarity, it can be quite difficult to understand what members of the Tea Party think and want. What creates this difficulty is that Tea Party members – like all of us – will often say things that are vague, inaccurate, and even sometimes incoherent. And this is so even when you’ve already pared down what Tea Party members say and isolated the core Tea Party convictions.

For example, after conducting a series of interviews with Tea Party members, Skocpol and Williamson report that Tea Party members often voice vague concerns that “our country is being taken from us” or that “people rely too heavily on government.” Moreover, Tea Party members say things that seem inconsistent. For example, they will say that “government is too powerful” but will also say that there is a “need to give police more power.” They will say that “the deficit is too high, and we need to cut social welfare programs” but they will also say, “Social security should not be cut, even though it is
expensive.” They repeatedly mention that “our grandchildren are lazy,” something that they imply has political significance, although it is not immediately obvious what significance it has. Finally, there is the classic: “Get your government hands off my Medicare!”

So what do Skocpol and Williamson do with these claims? In a chapter entitled “What the Tea Party Believes,” Skocpol and Williamson try to make rational sense of them by offering a reconstruction of the Tea Party view. Here is what they say: Tea Party members have a background social-historical theory about an important cultural shift. They believe that norms of hard work and self-reliance are eroding and a sense of entitlement is becoming more culturally acceptable. As a consequence of this shift, the American population is divided roughly into “moochers” (those with little work ethic and a sense of entitlement) and “productive citizens” (those who earn their living). The Tea Party thinks that the danger facing this country is that the unproductive citizens, the moochers, will use the tools of government for expropriating the productive.

Notice that this reconstruction resolves some of the seeming inconsistencies and makes the vague pronouncements more determinate. According to the reconstruction, the Tea Party believes that more power should be given to the police in order to punish unproductive citizens for turning to crime and taking what is not rightfully theirs. But one should not expand the government’s powers to create further channels for redistribution. Similarly, with respect to government programs, Tea Partiers draw a distinction between government programs giving “productive citizens” what they earned and those that give “handouts.” Social security is an earned benefit, so it should not be cut (cutting it would constitute taking from the productive what they have earned). Moreover, we can see how complaints about grandchildren fit into these broader political concerns. The grandchildren are some of the “moochers.” They exemplify this cultural shift away from self-reliance. So
the reconstruction gives us a coherent political view. It might not be one that you want to accept, but it is one with which you could rationally engage.

However, there is a certain price to this: there are parts of the account that do not fit with what Tea Party members’ self-conceptions. In particular, Williamson and Skocpol argue that – contrary to what many Tea Partiers explicitly claim – the best way to make rational sense of the Tea Party is to not see them as particularly anti-government. Rather, it is to see them as thinking that the government should avoid doing a particular thing: redistribute from the hard-working to the – in their view – “lazy and unproductive.” Moreover, on this reconstruction, states’ rights, freedom, and concern with federal power are not central to Tea Party ideology. According to Skocpol and Williamson, these values play only a derivative role (if they play a role at all) in the Tea Party worldview. For instance, in their reconstruction, the importance of states rights derives from background beliefs that the states are less likely to redistribute from the productive to the unproductive. However, this clashes with how many Tea Partiers explicitly see things.

So the reconstruction omits and misrepresents certain parts of what Tea Partiers say to yield a more coherent structure that can be used to “get a grip” on what grassroots members say and on the pronouncements of Tea Party authorities. Why are those aspects omitted and changed? Because, according to Skocpol and Williamson, such omissions and changes enables us to see a coherent, elaborated, at least semi-plausible view that accurately captures a core part of what the Tea Party believes.

4.3 Answering the Epistemic Question

Now we have a more precise account of our intuitive notion of “making rational sense” of another’s inchoate speech. This account enables us to answer the epistemic questions
raised at the beginning: what is it to make rational sense of inchoate speech? How can misrepresentation aid us in understanding that speech? The answer is that to “make rational sense” of inchoate speech is to idealize – to clear away clutter and eliminate distracting mistakes. The function of misrepresentation in this context is to put on display a clear argument or point of view from which actual speech and attitudes can be grasped as an imperfect version. As such, the reconstructed argument is a kind of normative standard from which deviations can be depicted and explained. So when you look at the student paper (or Tea Party speech) you can say, “OK, it’s an argument of this kind, but there is some confusion here and here.”

5. Answering the Normative Puzzle

5.1 Concerns About Misrepresentation

So far I’ve given an account of how transforming inchoate speech in a particular way can enable you to understand and engage with that speech. And I’ve said that this account can be used to specify what it is for intermediary deliberative institutions to perform their functions well. Now given the fact that these institutions provide this important benefit — understanding and engagement with inchoate speech — we can see that there is a pro tanto reason for a well-organized deliberative system to have institutions that transform speech in this way.

However, one might have a concern about institutions performing this function, a concern that in seeking to provide understanding, these institutions are charged with misrepresenting not just any part of nature but persons. In particular, one might be concerned that while misrepresentation has benefits, it also has costs, costs that might make it unjustifiable to those individuals who are being misrepresented. For example, when Skocpol
and Williamson say that states rights are not central to Tea Party ideology, many Tea Partiers would strenuously object. But if deliberation with the Tea Party proceeds by internal reflection on the worldview sketched by Skocpol and Williamson, then it would seem that their concerns have not really been heard. Their message has been distorted.

The degree to which such misrepresentation is a concern depends on the use to which such misrepresentations are put in the deliberative system. If one were to use the idealized version of an individual’s view in the context of direct discursive engagement with that very individual, concerns about misrepresentation would not be pressing because the individual could directly contest differences between the reconstruction and her actual view. However, engaging with a reconstruction is often used as a substitute for engaging with the actual individual. And it is in this use that individuals may have objections to intermediaries misrepresenting their views. So I want to consider what these objections might be and how they might be answered.

To illustrate the kind of objections individuals might have to being misrepresented, I’m going to consider a story. It is the story – presumably apocryphal – of a famous philosopher who would bring along an assistant whenever he gave talks. In the Q&A, it was the assistant’s job to “reformulate” questions in order to make them more clear and sensible, to turn them into appropriate objects for engagement with this philosopher. The assistant was a mediator, a personal analogue to the kind of mediating actors I’m suggesting are crucial to enabling incoherent speech to get uptake in a deliberative system.

Now, this assistant was reportedly very talented, and he helped the eminent thinker understand many of the questions that audience members would pose. However, despite these epistemic and communicative benefits, many people in the audience did not like having their speech mediated and reformulated in this way. Why did audience members not
like this? I will focus on four objections.

First, there was annoyance that the assistant would leave parts of questions out, parts that the audience members themselves thought were important. Moreover, the assistant might add things to the questions. So there is a concern that the intermediary would exclude and distort part of the questioner’s speech. That is, adding this intermediary would inhibit communication with the philosopher.

Second, there is a concern that exclusion and distortion might have some harmful effects on the reputation of the questioner. The famous philosopher would apparently ignore the original question and just listen to the reformulation, and since he was a judgmental fellow, he would make assessments about the competence and intelligence of the questioner on the basis of the intermediary’s reformulation. But if this reformulation involves various additions and subtractions, then the questioner might be concerned that these changes would make the question worse, and therefore the famous philosopher might come to a negative assessment of the question when that was not warranted.

Third, this whole setup seemed to be insulting or disrespectful. Conversation and report have an expressive dimension, and having an intermediary to reconstruct one’s question seems to manifest disrespect, distrust, or dismissal of other’s abilities to articulate their points of view. So rather than “charitable” or “helpful,” such reconstruction might appear oppressive, paternalistic, and closed-minded.

Fourth, introducing an intermediary seems elitist. The philosopher seems to assume that his assistant will know better than the questioner what the questioner is asking even before hearing the question. This assumption seems problematic.

These four objections – distorted communication, harm, disrespect, and elitism – are general concerns that arise when intermediaries misrepresent others’ speech. Moreover,
these objections become even more serious when one considers more remote and complex forms of mediation than a mediating individual reconstructor. At the philosophy Q&A, a questioner is able to directly contest the assistant’s reformulations, answering certain concerns about exclusion and harm. But opportunities to directly contest misrepresentation are often not available in the public sphere. For example, when social scientists write a schematic account of what some individual thinks, that individual rarely has an available platform to contest that account.

5.2 Answering Concerns About Inhibited Communication and Harm

Given the results of the last section, we have some ready responses to concerns about inhibited communication and harm. In the case of inhibited communication, if the intermediary institutions are operating well, then the misrepresentation of speech takes the form of abstraction and normative idealization. They therefore facilitate rather than inhibit understanding and engagement with inchoate ideas and arguments. There is a similarly direct response pertaining the concern about harm through misrepresentation. Remember that the values that guide idealization in this context are coherence, accuracy to the world, comprehensiveness, and similarity. Consequently, to the extent that intermediary institutions operate correctly, any misrepresentation they introduce will make the speech they transform all-things-considered better as speech than the original.\footnote{To see intuitively why this is so, consider the difference between a rational reconstruction and a straw-man version of an argument. A straw-man version of an argument is an argument of the same type as the original argument, but it is \textit{easier to refute}. A rational reconstruction of an argument is similarly an argument of the same type, but it is \textit{harder to refute}.} Moreover, given the side constraint that a reconstruction be sufficiently similar to the original, there is not a concern of relaying some totally different message.
5.3 Answering Concerns About Disrespect

However, the concerns about insult and disrespect are, I believe, more interesting and complex. The background worry here is that introducing intermediaries to rationally reconstruct others’ views might manifest some kind of objectionable attitude, particularly an unwarranted doubt in others’ epistemic competence. However, I believe that it is importantly mistaken that reconstructing another necessarily manifests these kinds of attitudes. Rather, I believe that aiming to rationally reconstruct others is not only compatible with respect but often essential to it in many cases. I’m going to argue for this by considering a case, and then I’m going to come back and diagnose our intuitions in the case of the philosopher’s assistant.

Imagine the following case (familiar to philosophers):

*Logic Chopper*: A and B are discussing a philosophical topic. A is a philosopher, while B is a non-philosopher. B makes an informal argument for \( p \). As stated, B’s argument is invalid, and some of the premises are false. However, one could easily modify and add a few plausible premises to yield a sound argument for \( p \). But in the conversation, rather than suggesting some modified version of B’s argument, A simply points out that it is unsound. A makes no attempt to think of alternatives to B’s informal presentation, even though it would be easy for A to identify a similar but sound argument by considering such variants. Rather, A “logic chops,” simply pointing out the problems with B’s claims without suggesting improvement.

There is some sense in which A is failing to be a good deliberative partner. In effect, A is saying: “I’ll take your opinion seriously, but you are on your own when it comes to making it clear.” But what exactly is going wrong here? There are a number of possibilities, but I will focus on two aspects of the situation that seem problematic.
The first aspect is a failure of what I will call “epistemic aid.” By “epistemic aid” I mean aid that helps the other to achieve a fundamental aim of rational creatures, the construction of accurate, coherent, and comprehensive views of subject matters. (The claim that rational creatures aim at accurate, coherent, and comprehensive views – i.e. at understanding – will be explicated below). The second aspect is a failure of what I will call “epistemic respect,” a failure to respond to them appropriately as an epistemic being, a person aimed at constructing an accurate, coherent, and comprehensive view of the world.

I’m going to say more about what I take these failings to be and how they are interconnected. So I’m going to start by considering the importance of epistemic aid, and then I’m going to provide some considerations that suggest that such aid is often owed not merely as a matter of fiduciary duty but as an appropriate response to another’s nature as an epistemic being.

5.4 Epistemic Aid and Equal Concern

To make the nature and importance of the idea of epistemic aid clear, I want to consider a remark by Jane Heal in “Understanding Other Minds from the Inside.” In talking of other’s minds, Heal writes:

When we think of persons the complexity [of their psychology] … is unified in a particular way. It is not unified just as ‘the states of the bits of stuff inside that skull’ but rather as ‘the elements of the coherent world view constructed by the person whose body that is.’ And the person is unified inasmuch as her mind is unified, i.e. inasmuch as the elements of it are seen as cohering and are brought to bear on one another, to suggest new conjectures, to correct misconceptions, to provide mutual support through their rational connection and so forth. (94)

According to Heal, part of our conception of a person is that of a being with a kind of
epistemic unity.

I think Heal is right that our concept of a person is crucially tied to the possession of a coherent and comprehensive view of the world. However, we need to be careful how we formulate out this idea. When we think of others as persons, we do not think of them as actually unified in the way she describes. Rather, we often appraise others as cognitively disunified, as thinkers with inconsistent and patchy conceptions of the world. Nevertheless, it is part of our conception of others as persons that they are committed to striving for unity of this kind, that unity is an ideal for them as cognitive beings.

While it is an unfortunate fact of life that we often do not achieve this kind of unity, this fact is made slightly less unfortunate by its being a condition of a valuable kind of aid: aiding others meet standards the taking seriously of which is constitutive of being a thinker at all. Moreover, when we help others in this way, we are not helping them meet those aims in any old way. In providing this aid – in reconstructing their view – we are employing our own judgments about coherence, accuracy, and comprehensiveness of their claims. So trying to make rational sense of them, we are, as it were, “interlocking” our reason with theirs.

We’re now in the position to see how there is an important kind of moral value in aiming at reconstruction. That value derives from the moral value in aiding others achieve their valuable aims as rational beings.

5.5 Epistemic Recognition Respect

But we can also say something even stronger: a refusal to provide this aid can manifest a kind of epistemic disrespect, a lack of responsiveness to this fundamental aspect of their nature as epistemic beings.

Think about Logic Chopper. A is doing something wrong in responding to B in this way.
But what could the nature of that wrong be? Well, one might think it is the wrong of failing to fulfill some role obligation to B. For example, if B were A’s student, A would have the duty to help B formulate his ideas because of this institutional connection between A and B. But for all that has been said, there is no institutional relationship between A and B. So the explanation for this obligation cannot run through institutional connections.

What I want to suggest is that B is wronged by A’s failure to provide epistemic aid because this failure constitutes an objectionable lack of recognition of B as an epistemic being. One might call this kind of disrespect “epistemic disrespect.” Moreover, just as providing epistemic aid creates a kind of relationship between A and B, where A joins his reason to B’s thinking, a refusal to provide this aid involves A distancing himself from B, refusing to join his own capacities for reflection with B’s.127

In discussions of respect, it is typical – following Darwall (1977) – to distinguish between “appraisal respect” and “recognition respect.” To have appraisal respect for some individual (for some property) is to have positive regard for that individual (for possessing that property). By contrast, recognition respect for an individual consists in the disposition to take some property of that individual appropriately into account in one’s deliberation regarding that individual. For example, one (appraisal) respects someone as a professor in virtue of holding her in high regard with respect to how she performs her professorial duties. By contrast, one (recognition) respects someone as a professor in virtue of e.g. taking her request that papers be turned in by a particular deadline as a reason to turn those papers in by that deadline.

127 In Utilitarianism, Mill claims that we are motivated to be moral by “the social feelings of mankind; the desire to be in unity with our fellow creatures” (Chapter 3, paragraph 10; quoted in Scanlon 1998: 154. I’m suggesting that refusing to help make rational sense of others engenders in a particularly powerful way the kind of alienation from others constituted by wronging them.
When considering others as epistemic beings, one might fail to respect them in either the appraisal or recognition sense. One might fail to (appraisal) respect someone who holds false or irrational views. By contrast, one might fail to (recognition) respect someone by failing to appropriately respond to an important property of theirs: their striving towards understanding their world, i.e. achieving a coherent, accurate, and comprehensive view on the subjects they take to be at issue for them.

What does an appropriate response to others as epistemic beings involve? Consider a remark that Kant makes in *The Metaphysics of Morals*:

[There is] a duty to respect man even in the logical use of his reason, a duty not to censure his errors by calling them absurdities, poor judgment and so forth, but rather to suppose that his judgment must yet contain some truth and seek it out, uncovering, at the same time, the subjective illusion (the subjective ground that that determined his judgment that, by an oversight, he took for objective), and so, by explaining to him the possibility of his having erred, to preserve his respect for his own understanding. (463-464)

Without getting into Kant exegesis, one way of interpreting this passage is to say that one might fail to respect someone by taking their views to be mere products of stupidity, ignorance, ideology, or a backward upbringing without first considering whether there is some way to “make rational sense” of them. That is, an appropriate response to another’s speech is to first seek to reconstruct a view from it. If this is correct, then the concept of a rational reconstruction is crucial for specifying what some our duties towards others as persons.

---

128 Exactly how to specify this duty is a delicate matter. There are, after all, many contexts of discussion in which reconstruction is not required (or even good). For example, if one is having a formal debate, it might be important *not* to reconstruct one’s opponent charitably. But the existence of contexts in which these requirements are suspended does not show there is no general requirement of trying to make rational sense of others. (The existence of boxing does not show there are no general requirements to refrain from punching others in the face.)

129 If this is correct, then the concept of a rational reconstruction is crucial for specifying what some our duties towards others as persons.
constitutes an objectionable kind of disregard for other’s powers of reason. And such disregard seems to be what is going on in the case of the logic chopper.

Consider complaints about lack of respect for other cultures and worldviews. What is meant by such complaints? It is clearly not required to positively appraise all systems of thoughts, and no one is complaining that individuals are failing to believe that conflicting views have equal merit. The basis of such complaints is, I believe, the concern that judgments about other cultures are formed without careful consideration of their views. By making these judgments without such consideration, one is not taking those others seriously as individuals who are trying to make sense of their world. These complaints often arise when one set of individuals is quick to form the judgment that the views of some other set are obviously the mere products of stupidity, ideology, or a backwards upbringing. The problem with such reactions is the “obviously.” It might very well be that the only explanation for an individual having a particular set of views is that they are foolish, self-interested, pathologically insensitive to the views and interests of others, or duped by the social and political system. However, to take such a view as a starting point is to not recognize them as beings who are trying to achieve an accurate, comprehensive, and coherent view of their world.

Many groups – even those familiar to us – do not enjoy such recognition. Consider how Alford A. Young Jr. motivates his detailed focus on worldviews of urban impoverished black men in *The Minds of Marginalized Black Men*. He writes, “The narrowed application of this cultural vocabulary, taken together with the preoccupation with capriciousness and volatility as core features of the public behavior of poor black men, has resulted in an exceptionally myopic view of their humanity” (20). In Young’s view, cultural research on poor black men has long portrayed them as mere responders to a small set of cultural norms.
This research focus is not only epistemically impoverished but also pernicious because it does not adequately recognize this population as persons, as epistemic agents with complex sets of attitudes about their social conditions, future prospects, the nature of the good life. Moreover, this paradigm in the social sciences has fed into a presumption in public discussion that these men are mere products of an environment they neither control nor understand. It implies these individuals are not people worth listening to. Insofar as this paradigm manifests itself in a disposition not to try to make sense of their views, poor urban black males are not being respected – taken seriously – as epistemic agents. A key motivation of Young Jr.’s book is to evince this respect by attempting to make rational sense of their views of inequality, stratification, social mobility, the work world, and the constituents of personal well-being and social justice.

5.6 Epistemic Solidarity Rather than Elitism

Is employing intermediaries to reconstruct one’s speech elitist? Does it assume that the reconstructer “knows better” than the reconstructee? Not in a way that is objectionable I will argue.

Let’s start simple. The fact that some speech is inchoate does not mean that the individual who utters that speech is somehow stupid or incompetent. The individual might just not express him or herself clearly. Moreover, the fact that individuals have inchoate views and arguments about matters of policy also does not imply stupidity or incompetence. It is quite demanding to work out articulated, clear, and intelligible views and arguments. As Thomas Christiano (1996) writes,

The complexity of the task of elaborating [political] aims is sufficiently great that not all citizens can fully participate. If everyone participates fully in the elaboration and
justification of aims, little time will be left for the other socially useful tasks. It is important that some persons spend a lot of time at it and others spend little time at it in order to do other things. Therefore, a socially useful process of deliberation requires specialization in the task of elaborating and justifying conceptions of aims. (245)

For our purposes, the main point is that given how demanding it is to work out clear views and arguments, the fact that citizens do not possess such views and arguments – and that intermediaries can serve an important function of providing elaborations and articulations – does not impugn their intelligence or competence.

Consider an analogy. The fact that the state provides citizens with help in making a living (in the form of the provision of financial assistance, public infrastructure, schooling, protection from predation, etc.) does not impugn citizens’ intelligence and competence to provide for themselves. It simply creates conditions for them to succeed in a complex modern economy. Just as a well-ordered economic system contains institutions that make sure that individuals with diverse talents and interests are able to form those talents in a way that enables them to contribute to economic life, a well-ordered deliberative system contains actors who make rational sense of the pieces of knowledge and insight distributed around the economy so that knowledge and insight is not held hostage to individuals’ abilities to clearly articulate it. Moreover, just as a well-ordered economic system is not one that simply puts individuals in the position to succeed all on their own but rather coordinates talents so that individuals can succeed together, so too a well-ordered deliberative system is one that not only trains individuals to be able to articulate, elaborate, and defend their own point of view solely on their own but also integrates individuals’ deliberative capacities so as to better articulate each’s distinctive viewpoint.
5.7 Political Values of Reconstruction: Inclusion, Concern, Respect, and Solidarity

So far, I’ve argued that reconstruction provides “epistemic aid” and that epistemic aid enables subjects to achieve a unity of outlook, thus helping them meet cognitive standards the taking seriously of which is constitutive of being a person. Moreover, refusal to provide this aid can manifest disrespect, lack of recognition of the other’s nature as an epistemic being. When we consider the role of such aid in politics, it is often not to help the subject herself meet those standards but rather to help others see how that subject’s view could better meet those standards. However, the story of the value of such aid is similar: this kind of aid not only helps others understand the subject’s inchoate speech, but to see that speech as a reflection of a more perfect speech, and thereby to see the person making that speech as a person.

So now we can now see more clearly the value of having a political system that systematically provides epistemic aid. One reason mentioned at the beginning is the value of inclusivity. Institutions that transform inchoate speech into objects of rational engagement promote inclusive deliberation. But there are other values as well. Having such institutions gives epistemic aid to citizens, thus showing concern for citizen’s aims as rational creatures. Moreover, this concern provides recognition respect of their epistemic capacities. And in providing this kind of aid and exhibiting this respect, intermediary institutions allow the community to interlock its reason with the thoughts of individual citizens, thus joining the reasoning of citizens together. They thereby promote a kind of epistemic solidarity among citizens.

5.8 Justification of Misrepresentation by Intermediaries to Misrepresented Individuals

We are now in the position to provide a response to a citizen who is concerned that
his speech is not accurately represented by deliberative intermediaries. The response is that to the extent that this misrepresentation takes the form of a reconstruction, one can say: “This idealization answers to standards to which you are committed as a rational being.” More laboriously: “This reconstruction best enables you to achieve your aims of having others understand and rationally engage with you, only deviating from your actual speech in ways that aid you in (i) in meeting standards to which you are committed and (ii) helping others see you as responsive to those standards. In modifying that speech, I’m taking you seriously as epistemic being, because my responses to your thought are guided by the standards that I recognize you as taking seriously.”

5.9 Diagnosis of Intuitions in the Philosopher’s Assistant Case

With these thoughts in mind, let me provide a diagnosis of what seemed insulting about the philosopher’s assistant. The initial thought was that introducing an intermediary whose job was to reconstruct raised a concern that reconstruction itself was disrespectful. But this is incorrect. Philosophers reconstruct each other at philosophy conferences all of the time.

So what was the eminent philosopher doing that was wrong in introducing this intermediary? I believe the problem was that he is “off-loading” his duty to provide epistemic aid to another. That is, he was shirking rather than fulfilling his duties to others. And by shirking this duty, he was distancing himself from the other philosophers, putting himself above them. So: the problem was not that the philosopher was forcing reconstruction into the interaction but that he was himself refusing to do the reconstructing. Since the philosopher himself was perfectly able to provide epistemic aid, when he refused to do so, this refusal exhibited epistemic disrespect.
Now, if this account is right, we have a response available to concerns about introducing intermediaries among citizens in a deliberative democracy. The response is that such an introduction is objectionable only if the intermediaries are introduced to avoid rather than fulfill duties of epistemic aid. But such intermediaries would only replace citizens’ reconstructing each other if citizens were in the position to offer clear and informed reconstructions of each other. Yet – as previously emphasized – being in the position to reconstruct everyone else on every subject would be extremely demanding given modern conditions. Just as it is demanding to come up with a clear and informed view of one’s own given modern conditions, so too is it demanding to reconstruct others on a subjects on which one is not an expert, which is almost every subject of public concern. This is why we have reason to establish actors, institutions, and practices to provide such reconstruction: not as a way of shirking a duty to understand each other but rather to better fulfill it by collectivizing it.

6. Conclusion

I’ve argued that intermediary deliberative institutions have an important function: “making sense” of others. We’ve seen that making sense of others is quite different from merely relaying information about what they think. This difference matters for how to assess these institutions. One might think that intermediaries perform well when they accurately report the facts. But this is crucially wrong. Rather, they perform well when they provide understanding, and providing understanding may require not reporting or even misreporting the facts. But, of course, when such institutions do misreport the facts, the misreporting must be of a particular kind: misreporting that provides understanding and is justifiable to those whose views are being misreported.
Understanding of how misrepresentation can function in this way is, I’ve argued, crucial for understanding how a well-functioning deliberative democracy is possible. Despite the current popularity of deliberative approaches, there is a central difficulty for any political conception in which collective decision-making is guided by public deliberation. In order for public deliberation to steer decision-making effectively and appropriately, deliberation needs to be of a sufficiently high quality. However, political equality requires that deliberation be inclusive. The difficulty is that inclusiveness and high quality are often in tension, since a natural way to ensure high-quality deliberation is to exclude or ignore contributions that do not meet a certain threshold of clarity and argumentative structure.

An account of misrepresentation as rational reconstruction is a first step towards answering this challenge. The next step is to more carefully consider what features deliberative institutions must have to ensure that when intermediaries do misrepresent citizen’s speech, they do so in a way guided by standards that facilitate understanding. Here, there is much work to be done. One thought is that a deliberative system must provide opportunities for contesting misrepresentations. The presence of such opportunities is certainly important. However, providing a forum for contestation may not be feasible.130

One might therefore think that these institutions need not only provide checks on misbehavior but also embody a particular ethos, an ethos of approaching other’s speech with an aim of making rational sense of it. Such an ethos would have both an epistemic and moral dimension.131 To approach speech in this way is to try to understand it, and in approaching a speaker’s speech in that way, one is approaching the speaker in a particular way, namely as a

130 Of course, it is feasible to allow individuals to express their disagreement with a representation of their view. But unless such expression will influence those who created or consumed the misrepresentation, it will not qualify as contestation.

131 An institutional ethos is more than a widespread instantiation of personal virtue on the part of the individuals who are members of the institution. It requires a common commitment on the part of the members to hold each other accountable for adhering to a certain set of norms. For a detailed discussion of what it is for an institution to have an ethos, see Fricker 2013: 1327-1331.
epistemic being for whom accuracy, coherence, and comprehensiveness are at issue. A set of deliberative institutions that embody such an ethos would not be a mere second-best solution to the infeasibility of realizing a national town hall. Rather, they would socialize the responsibility of providing epistemic aid, thereby institutionalizing social recognition of persons as epistemic beings. Such social recognition does not require these institutions to assume each person is equally epistemically perfect. It only requires that they express that each merits equal epistemic respect and concern.

References


CONCLUSION: SOCIAL SCIENCE IN A DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY

Thou shalt not answer questionnaires
Or quizzes upon World-Affairs,
Nor with compliance
Take any test. Thou shalt not sit
With statisticians nor commit
A social science.

-Auden, “Under Which Lyre”

A healthy political society requires an effectively organized practice of acquiring and applying knowledge about the social world. It needs well-ordered social science. And what such a well-ordered social science should be like depends on a broad conception of the aims of social scientific inquiry.

There is one conception of social science according to which social science would be complete if it could deliver all the facts about the social world and the relations of causal dependence among them. On this conception, there is a clear but limited way that social science is to be integrated into the political process: providing information about what means can be exploited to achieve our ends.

I have proposed an alternative account of the aims of social scientific research and have offered an alternative conception of its potential political significance. Without denying the obvious importance of causal knowledge, I have argued that there is an additional crucial aim of the social sciences: to make rational sense of others. This aim is crucially different from the aim of providing information about the causes of others’ beliefs and actions, and achieving it often requires systematic clarification and elaboration rather than mere description. On this conception, the role of the social sciences in political life is more than providing empirical information relevant for policy disputes. These sciences make possible rational
understanding, thus promoting discussion and criticism of inchoately expressed points of view.

These two visions of the social sciences provide very different recommendations regarding how social inquiry should be conducted and organized. One vision recommends focusing inquiry around questions of causal identification, thereby encouraging qualitative researchers to reframe their questions and reorient their methods to make their results evaluable using rules of statistical inference. The other vision supports a more humanistic approach to social inquiry, emphasizing the importance of discussion and dialogue with the subjects of inquiry and encouraging reflection on the interconnections and tensions among aspects of a worldview.

Deciding between these visions still leaves unresolved many questions about how to organize social inquiry so as serve the aims of a well-ordered democratic society. But the first step towards answering such questions is to recognize certain very basic desiderata of the social inquiry and to understand why those desiderata matter. In particular, it is to recognize that to organize our practices of social inquiry around treating people as mere objects is not to make social inquiry more scientific. It is to commit a social science.