



Associations with Einstein

Fred Newman

I

A MATTER OF GRAVITY

Einstein was, in my opinion, as much a philosopher as a physicist. But the relationship of physics to mushroom clouds has made it more mainstream than philosophy's brief ('60s) dalliance with mushrooms. Thus, in the mainstream, Einstein is a physicist, albeit a theoretical physicist. But despite American philosophy's "self-conscious" efforts to avoid the mainstream at all costs there is always a self-serving Judas who will betray the philosophical gods in the name of his or her self-interest. In our times his name is Richard Rorty. Due to his "bad" good work, philosophy is ever so slightly better known about in America these days. This is not to say that philosophy isn't characteristically an important part of our culture. It's just to say that it isn't typically known as such.

Relativism is one of the traditional hot-button philosophical issues. Long before Einstein gave it physical credibility, philosophers from Plato on down debated such matters. Is there an ultimate absolute by which we can objectively measure things step by step? Or are there only relativistic relationships? From Plato's ideals (forms) to Russell's sense data, such matters have preoccupied philosophers. Indeed, they preoccupy everybody. Struggling working class parents can be as committed to their absolutism in raising their children as any Church Father. On the other hand, middle class parents influenced by the '60s can be as relativistic as Bishop Berkeley.

Einstein confounds the world of the early 20th century by suggesting that there is a kind of subjectivity to be found where you would least expect it: namely, in Newtonian physics – more specifically, in its analysis of gravity. His formulation of the general theory of relativity is both analytically rigorous and, eventually, empirically verifiable. Now of course there are those who say that Einstein's discoveries have nothing to do with the longstanding philosophical debates on relativism. I do not agree. Ultimately, in my opinion, such people simply want to create self-serving and utilitarian boundaries between academic subjects.

To be sure, the brilliance of Einstein was that his theoretical observations about gravity could not be laughed off as philosophical abstraction. He was, even at a very early age, a brilliant physicist. But Einsteinian physics (in no way a complete denial of Newtonian physics) brought the old philosophical questions back

into the center of the dialogue in the discipline in much the same way that Russell, Whitehead, Gödel, and others did in mathematics.

II

DEBATES

It is less than clear what discussions or debates between philosophers have to do with what most of us uncritically identify as the real world. From Socrates and Thrasymachus, to Galileo and the Church Fathers, to Berkeley's Hylas and Philonius, to Einstein and Gödel roaming "mindlessly" about Princeton University in the 1940s and '50s discussing the limits (and existence) of time, esoteric conversations of this nature are often thought to mean nothing for the daily affairs of the earth's inhabitants. And yet there is a nagging belief among some of us that if, for example, time itself is limited (or, indeed, unreal), it should make a difference to those who live in at least a portion of time's domain.

The significant philosophical debates of our post-modern times are, not surprisingly, meta-debates – unlike the dialogues of the early years of the last century, which focused on the limitations of the first 200 years of that extraordinary phenomenon known as modern science from the vantage point of science. Contemporary philosophical debates are, first and foremost, about the vantage point itself. Hence, post-modernism. A curious characteristic of this profound shift is that it simultaneously brings philosophy much closer to and takes it much further away from the masses and their daily lives.

Everyone who cares about such things has a favorite contemporary abstract debate. My favorite is the one between Donald Davidson and Richard Rorty. *Who?* I imagine the reader asking, reasonably enough. The reader, who ever so vaguely remembers the names of Plato, Galileo, and Einstein from a rapid-fire survey course in intellectual history at the local college or university, becomes a *tabula rasa* when it comes to Davidson and Rorty. Or maybe not. Rorty, the betrayer of contemporary philosophy, has made a little bit of a name for himself in contemporary thought. But Davidson? Who in God's name (or anybody else's, for that matter) is Donald Davidson?

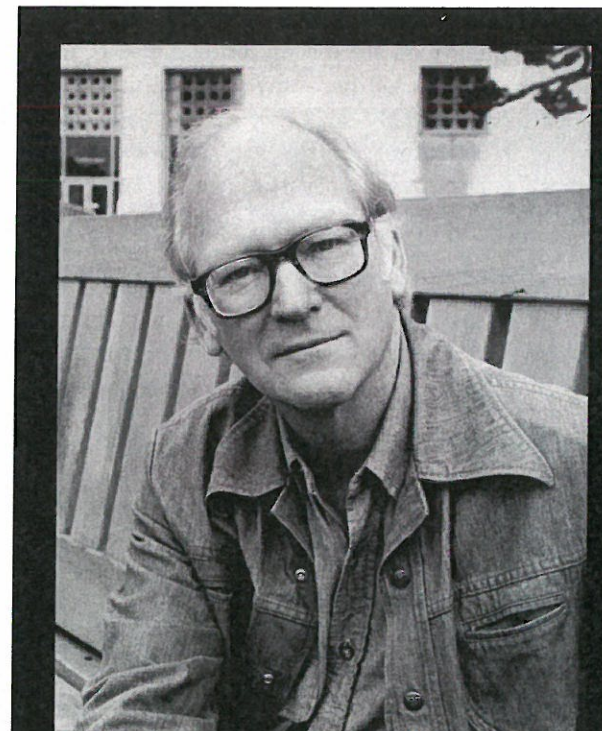
III

DAVIDSON AND RORTY:
REMINISCENCES

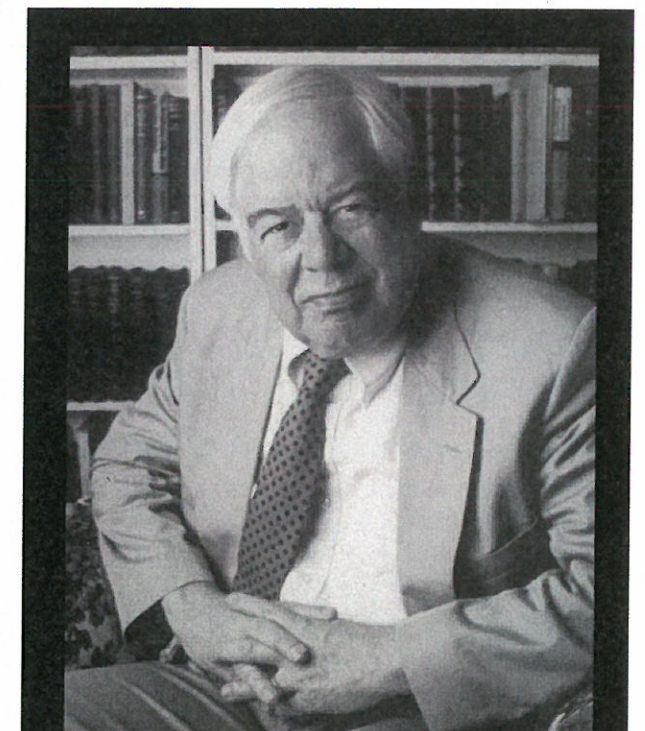
It is the fall of 1960. In Cuba, Fidel Castro, not much older than me at the time, is determining what Cuba and he will become. I am at Stanford University, having completed my first year of graduate school. It was a hectic year. I wound up in the Ph.D. program in philosophy at Stanford not so much by mistake as by accident. My teen-into-twenties years had been lived, educationally speaking, more by scam than by substance: three horrific years at one of New York City's best high schools, Stuyvesant, failing everything I could get my hands on; almost three years as an infantry private in the U.S. Army (including 16 months in South Korea), like any good soldier giving all of my life energy (emotional and cognitive) to avoiding being seen; and three years at the City College of New York (on the G.I. Bill) trying to catch up socially with my now three-years-further-along-in-life college chums and winding up (for no discernible reason then or now, some 50 years later) with a wife (then) and a B.A. in philosophy (still). I had just come through that first year of graduate school in beautiful northern California with

absolutely no idea of who I was or what I was doing, but with a talent (an actor's talent) for improvising my way through life situations I had no business being in.

How did I get into Stanford in the first place? Hold onto your hat. I had sent in my application a month and a half late. But an already-accepted undergraduate from I don't know where changed her or his mind and went to Harvard. So now there was an opening and no one was likely to apply (it's a month and a half late). The day after whoever it was turned Stanford down, my application showed up in the mail. Under these circumstances, it got a look it would never have received if it had been on time. Well, it looked weird. My undergraduate record was terrible. But my philosophy professors at City – all of whom had given me low grades – had written rather glowing letters of recommendation about my level and degree of class participation. The philosophy faculty members were curious. That's it. I got into the Stanford Ph.D. philosophy program as a curiosity. So that first year I had to prove that I was something other than a curiosity. And I did. I got some A's and fought my way through a year-long struggle with symbolic logic (for which I had little or no apti-



Donald Davidson



Richard Rorty

tude), surprising even myself.

Okay. So here we are, back in September of 1960. Throughout my “qualifying” year of 1959-60, in the department hallways, in the campus coffee shop, with friends at Stanford Village (married student housing), I hear talk of the “preeminent” member of the philosophy faculty. I had avoided him like the plague in my first year. He was obviously out of my league at that point. But now it’s 1960. I had established (by hook and by crook) that I was “qualified.” It was time to figure out what that meant. It was time for “his eminence.”

The undergraduate Introduction to Ethics course was regarded by all who had come near it as one of the greatest lecture series ever given, anywhere, any time. Many undergraduates, as well as graduate students, had audited it several times. Now it was September of 1960 and I was about to begin my audit with the incomparable Donald Davidson. He would not disappoint. He never did. There were close to 100 students milling around the base of the metal staircase that led to a lecture hall on the outer quad of the campus, notable among other things for the Spanish-influenced architecture of its buildings. I stood a short distance away from the crowd and watched Donald Davidson approach. I had seen him before, but never really looked at him. I was afraid. I feared he might turn to me and say in a god-like voice (even though he didn’t have one): “What are you doing here?”

Donald is of average size. He is an attractive man, casually though nattily dressed, but not so attractive as to be anything but average. A man in his mid-forties, he is well groomed and balding. Still, average looking ... with one exception. As he comes closer I notice something. He has the ruddy complexion of a seafaring man. His complexion makes his eyes seem to twinkle. In many ways he is an average man. Yet even before he opens his mouth to speak, I see a storyteller.

Donald Davidson, in his forties, has published very little. It is a subject of campus gossip: he is a “perfectionist” who won’t let go of what he has written. He is well known in the field as one of America’s important philosophers, but not from his writings. He is a brilliant teacher. The Stanford philosophy department is filled with men (sorry, no women yet) who recite the history of philosophy. But Donald, the department’s glowing star, *performs* the story of philosophy. He is Socrates in a tweed jacket. He is David Hume with an American accent. He is Ludwig Wittgenstein without the bizarre affect. As with all great performers, everything he does is understated. He is analytically precise almost to the

point of excess, just as Melville included far too much detail in *Moby Dick*. But like Melville, Davidson never allows the story to get lost. He is sharing with us the love story of his life – the story of philosophy as a living performance piece.

Fast-forward more than 40 years. Donald Davidson is now recognized by all who care about such things as one of the world’s great thinkers. When W.V.O. Quine dies, in 2000, Davidson ascends, in the minds of many, to the position of America’s greatest living philosopher. Much has happened, of course, in those 40 years, for everybody, everywhere. In the world of those who indulge such generalization, some say that even history has transformed, moving from the modern epoch to the postmodern.

While Donald Davidson is thought by some to be America’s greatest living philosopher, he is generally not seen as its most popular. That position, often unfilled, is held by Richard Rorty.

Rorty, a much-published neo-pragmatist, is, ironically, now teaching at Stanford. Like Davidson, he is well trained in the rigors of analytic philosophy. Unlike Davidson, however, he has written, it seems, about almost everything, everywhere. He is, as I said, a popular writer.

Davidson completed his teaching career as professor emeritus at the University of California at Berkeley. In the 40-plus years since I left academia – or, more accurately, since it left me – my philosophical teaching has led me to an “infamous” career as a radical psychologist, a radical therapist, and a left-wing community organizer. As the years go by, I more and more recognize the extent to which philosophy (particularly Wittgenstein’s and Davidson’s) has informed my thinking. When Davidson responded to my book *The End of Knowing*, co-authored with Lois Holzman (Routledge, 1997), with a short note, he cautioned me not to bury philosophy prematurely. I wrote back that I had no intention of doing so and surely had no interest in disregarding what I had learned from him.

Much of what Richard Rorty writes is (in some sense) cognitively consistent with what I myself have said and written and yet...and yet his style of pragmatism is off-putting to me. He is clever and even rigorous. But when he says, again and again, that he has no new position on truth, that he is simply no longer interested in it, I sense a narcissism that disturbs me. “Who cares whether you are interested in truth or not?” I say to myself. I spent years being uninterested

in philosophy (“philosophy” and “truth” are, to me, nearly equivalent), but I did not proclaim my lack of interest as an argument against philosophy. Despite Rorty’s much-publicized lack of interest in truth, I presume that Davidson never warned *him* not to “bury” philosophy. They are both academics. Both members of the club.

Sometime in the mid-’90s I meet Rorty. I am co-hosting a low-low-low-budget cable TV show with the distinguished black educator/activist Lenora Fulani. He appears as a guest on the show. He is not a storyteller. He is selling books – his books. He is aloof, above performing. He is a pragmatist.

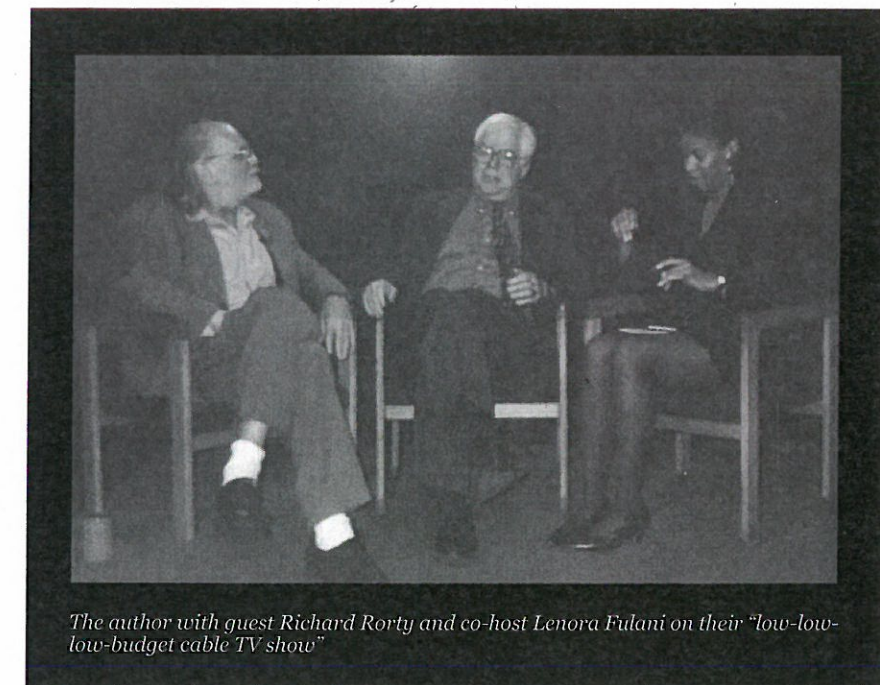
A few years later I come across a book called *Rorty and his Critics* (Brandom, 2000). The book is a collection of essays about Rorty by contemporary critical thinkers and his responses to them. Included in the book are an essay by Davidson and a response by Rorty. Now I can read some of their conversation.

Davidson’s contribution is called “Truth Rehabilitated.” My first reaction: “Donald, you don’t rehabilitate truth – you rehabilitate those who have suffered from its authoritarian application.” That’s the radical therapist

talking. I read the essay and remember Donald in 1960 – a passionate storyteller in love with philosophy. I can live with his silly title, “Truth Rehabilitated,” because he cares. Rorty doesn’t care: he’s uninterested. Rorty wants to get rid of truth, but what about the billions who suffered and continue to suffer from it? In one way, it makes sense for me to be a Rortyan, as opposed to a Davidsonian. But I cannot make that move, despite Davidson’s silly title. Because how much you care, and how you care, count. It is not there in the logic of our argument, but my old-fashioned storyteller Donald Davidson excites me still and the pragmatist (or neo-pragmatist) Rorty does not. Why is my “excitement” any more important than Rorty’s “uninterest”? Probably it isn’t. But there is no activity in uninterest. The storyteller Davidson creates; the postmodern uninterested Rorty does not.

In the fall of 2003 I picked up *The New York Times* and there was Donald Davidson’s obituary. Donald was gone. My thoughts went back to Stanford in the early ’60s. I have been an activist my whole life. Donald was an academic to the core. But in his creatively performing the story of philosophy, he was also an activist. He was performing philosophy. I am attempting to perform the world. And Davidson and philosophy are still with me.

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The author with guest Richard Rorty and co-host Lenora Fulani on their “low-low-low-budget cable TV show”

IV

A TIMELESS STORY

What happened to Einstein? It is the 100th anniversary of his extraordinary paper on special relativity, and so the book writers/anniversary celebrators of the world are busy producing manuscripts about "Einstein and..." One such book (a particularly good one) is *A World Without Time: The Forgotten Legacy of Gödel and Einstein*, by Palle Yourgrau (Basic Books, 2005). The book jacket tells the story:

It is a widely known but little appreciated fact that Albert Einstein, the twentieth century's greatest physicist, and Kurt Gödel, its greatest logician, were best friends for the last decade and a half of Einstein's life. They walked home together from Princeton's Institute for Advanced Study every day; they shared ideas about physics, philosophy, politics, and the lost world of German-Austrian science in which they had grown up. What is not widely known is the discovery that grew out of this friendship. In 1949 Gödel published a paper proving that there exist possible worlds described by the theory of relativity in which time, as we ordinarily understand it, does not exist. He went further: if it is absent from those theoretical universes, he showed, *time does not exist in our world either*. Einstein's great work has not explained time, as most physicists and philosophers think, but explained it completely away.

Einstein recognized Gödel's paper as "an important contribution to the general theory of relativity." Physicists since then have tried without success to find an error in Gödel's physics or a missing element in relativity itself that would rule out world models like Gödel's. Stephen Hawking went so far as to propose an ad hoc modification of the laws of nature – a "chronology protection conjecture" – specifically to negate Gödel's contribution to relativity. Philosophers have been largely silent – and their silence, says Yourgrau, is one of the intellectual scandals of the past century.



Gödel and Einstein on one of their Princeton walks

In an early summing up, Yourgrau observes:

Einstein, Gödel, Heisenberg: three men whose fundamental scientific results opened up new horizons, paradoxically, by setting limits to thought or reality. Together they embodied the zeitgeist, the spirit of the age. Mysteriously, each had reached an ontological conclusion about *reality* through the employment of an epistemic principle concerning *knowledge*. The dance or dialectic of knowledge and reality – of limit and limitlessness – would become a dominant theme of the twentieth century.

But reality (in itself) and knowledge (of it) had long been the “bread and butter” subject matter of philosophy. Donald Davidson, in another wonderful course called “Theory of Knowledge,” taught me that. Indeed, logical positivism, a dominant philosophical school of the early 20th century (with its physical center in Vienna), insisted that modern science had resolved the epistemological and ontological antinomies of Kant and that philosophy was now merely a “handmaiden” to science and mathematics. Twentieth century positivism was a philosophically rigorous effort to show that through science one could finally answer the traditional questions: What is meaningful? What is knowledge? And what is real? But Gödel (himself an early member of the Vienna Circle) and Einstein rejected positivism even as their scientific discoveries (incompleteness and relativity, respectively) shook mathematical logic and physics to their very core. Paradoxically, the two German thinkers were, attitudinally, philosophical realists. Like Plato and Leibniz (and in his own way, Kant), they believed in the real existence of abstractions: numbers and time, for example. It was only in his commitment to the existence of time that Einstein discovered the profound *limitations* of time. And it was Gödel’s belief in time’s limitations as real that led him to recognize that time could be eliminated altogether. As they say in the beer commercials: “Brilliant!”

Heisenberg remained a positivist, even as he remained loyal to Germany during World War II. But Einstein and Gödel traveled (although not together) to America, both winding up at Princeton in central New Jersey some 60 years ago. And on those long walks that they took the two German Realists were, arguably, traversing the historical distance between modernism and postmodernism. With impeccable credentials they

carried modern science away from logical positivism to its “logical extreme” and discovered (conceptually speaking) the many “best of all possible worlds.” A lot of people have taken credit for discovering postmodernism. And presumably it has endless starting points (although it seems a bit odd to me that they should all be in France). But the two German geniuses, Einstein and Gödel, surely have a serious claim to being the philosophical transition between modernism (in its most *certain* philosophical form, logical positivism) and the string theoretic *reality* – the endless possible worlds – in which the more scientifically minded postmodernists now roam.

V

AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

My journey *into* postmodernism *from* Davidsonian decision-theoretic philosophical analysis has been a long and hard one. First of all, it involved leaving the comfortable academic sinecure (actually two havens, the university and philosophy) in favor of the community and psychology. Despite the historical connection of the university to the community and of philosophy to psychology, in our society they have little or nothing to do with each other nowadays. Actually, they are often quite antagonistic toward each other. And what about the postmodernist community? Hasn’t it been a welcoming environment? Yes and no. For in philosophy and psychology, as in politics, partisanship rules the day. Postmodernism, having staked out a sinecure of its own, seems for the most part uninterested in seriously examining itself. The British critical psychologist Ian Parker is wise to be concerned with postmodernism’s rightward drift. (I suppose he would say it’s more than a drift.) The right-wing landscape is filled with people and conceptions that are little more than unexamined left-wing ideas, e.g., the current disaster in the White House (not only Bush) called neo-conservatism. So while my writings on postmodern psychology and psychotherapy (with my chief collaborator, Lois Holzman) have received a modest degree of recognition, my work in community organizing (with my chief collaborator, Lenora Fulani) remains the object of ultra-left/liberal partisan hysteria.

Yet it is neither the modesty of the recognition nor the hysteria of some of the attacks that troubles me most. It is the unwillingness of psychology (not to mention the left) to take itself seriously, i.e., *to care*. Postmodern psychology, while ever in danger of drifting rightward, and late modernist reformist progressivism (the American Left again and again renewing its marriage vows to the moribund Democratic Party) have both an extraordinary potential and an extraordinary responsibility. Profound historical developments are taking place everywhere. Throughout the world “strange bedfellows” is fast becoming an everyday headline. Some will quickly point out that all those so-called developments are not good. To me, however, developments are neither good nor bad. Rather they are openings. And what we creatively do with them will determine what becomes of them – or, more accurately, us. And this is precisely the point. Francis Fukuyama’s self-serving philosophy about “the end of history” notwithstanding, we are, it seems to me, at a new beginning of history. And postmodern psychology (still in its infancy) and progressive politics (awaiting its postmodernization) have the opportunity and the deep responsibility to care and to transform those developments into a better world.

To do so involves – in the manner of Einstein and Gödel strolling around Princeton, and Davidson puzzling aloud over Plato and Hume at Stanford – a caring yet critical acceptance, a willingness to create a new possible world.

In 1997 I was mysteriously invited to join a New School panel as one of several respondents to a talk by Alan Sokal, a New York University physicist who had gained a modicum of notoriety by submitting, under a pen name, a “postmodernized” theoretical physics paper to the journal *Social Text*. According to Sokal, the paper was *intentionally* completely meaningless and was, consequently, untrue and invalid. His point was to show that such a fraudulent paper could get accepted for publication, which it was (by the postmodernist editors of *Social Text*). In the very limited circles where such matters are taken seriously, the ensuing “Sokal affair” generated intense discussion.

The invitation to me to speak on the New School panel was “mysterious” because I do not travel in those circles. I have always assumed that it was effected by Kenneth Gergen, the most distinguished American postmodernist psychologist and, at the time, a “becoming” friend and colleague. In 1995 Ken

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and I had delivered a joint paper on "reforming diagnostics" at that year's annual meeting of the American Psychological Association. In the fall of 2001 we – along with Lois Holzman and the social constructionist Sheila McNamee – organized a conference on the role of performance and improvisation in personal, social, and political change. Gergen and I opened the conference, which took place at the Montauk Yacht Club on Long Island, with a joint presentation (a conversation) that we had previously agreed would take the form of a dialogue on our points of agreement and disagreement. As part of my presentation, and in the tradition (I hope the best tradition!) of Einstein and Gödel reflecting on time, I noted that Gergen's concept of a radically reformed notion of knowing (social epistemology) did not carry postmodernism to its logical or sociological conclusion; what was demanded of critical postmodernism, I argued, was the elimination of knowing altogether. (See Newman and Holzman, *The End of Knowing*.) Gergen, for whom I felt and continue to feel deep admiration, had taught me, through his writings (*The Saturated Self*, and others) and our evolving relationship, a great deal about postmodernism. Moreover, I deeply valued our friendship. We have not spoken since our joint presentation in Montauk. Of course, Ken Gergen (like everyone else) has every right – personally, politically, and professionally – to move in whatever direction he chooses. He is not alone in moving away from the Newman-Holzman thesis on knowing. Indeed, if I can generalize for a moment, the American postmodernist community has collectively moved away from such "extremism." Perhaps they are right (politically) to do so. Perhaps it was right (politically) for the community of theoretical physicists to essentially ignore Gödel's paper on the elimination of time.

And what of the Sokal affair? How does it tie into our discussion? My presentation at that New School forum was for the most part an identification and a brief history of the pro-scientific philosophical roots of postmodernism. From Einstein and Gödel, to Quine's breathtaking "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," to Kuhn's popular book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, to Nelson Goodman's *Fact, Fiction and Forecast*, to John Searle's *Mind: A Brief Introduction (Fundamentals of Philosophy)*, along with a thousand other articles and books and lectures and conversations less well known but critical, a scientific critique of science (at least as important as French existential postmodernism) had emerged. Did Sokal attempt to

engage this pro-scientific body of intellectual work in his effort to discredit postmodernism? No. Not a word. There was little or no evidence that he even knew of it. His understanding of postmodernism was, in large measure, a caricature of contemporary French existential thought. To turn postmodernism into an antagonistic debate between itself (postmodernism) and science is to trivialize postmodernism and effectively to move it to the right. To be sure, science versus anti-science, like Rorty's lack of interest in truth, will sell a few more books than Davidson ever will. But the community of scholars has a far deeper responsibility to the community at large. Philosophers and/or thinkers in general must be asked, "For whom are you thinking?" "Have you now become the 'handmaidens' of your university or your publishing house?"

In these times of almost universal commodification it is vital that thinking itself not be further commodified. Postmodernism, at its best, is an effort to prevent this from happening. But is postmodernism itself vulnerable to being consumed? Of course. Thinking is probably more important now than ever. But what is thinking? And for whom are we doing it? Not new questions, but to be sure a new historical moment for asking them. WEN

Fred Newman is the co-author of *The End of Knowing* along with several other books. He is a contributing editor of *The Neo-Independent*.

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