

University of Dayton Review

Volume 17
Number 1 *Proceedings of the 11th Annual
Philosophy Colloquium: Philosophical
Hermeneutics*

Article 4

5-1-1984

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Robert Hollinger
Iowa State University

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Recommended Citation

Hollinger, Robert (1984) "Toward a Hermeneutical Approach to Education," *University of Dayton Review*.
Vol. 17: No. 1, Article 4.
Available at: <https://ecommons.udayton.edu/udr/vol17/iss1/4>

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Hollinger, Toward a Hermeneutical Approach to Education

TOWARD A HERMENEUTICAL APPROACH TO EDUCATION

Robert Hollinger

I

In his remarkable essay "The Problem of Historical Consciousness"¹, Gadamer attempts (*inter alia*) to recover Aristotle's idea of practical philosophy, and connect it up with his own hermeneutical project. Others, notably Charles Taylor², David Hoy³ and Habermas⁴ have similar aspirations. Hampshire⁵ and Perleman⁶ also take up ideas in Aristotle's ethical and rhetorical work as part of the same general current of thought, which has recently included the development of a basically Aristotelian notion of human action and understanding,⁷ as well as new and exciting research on the *Nichomachean Ethics*.⁸

In this paper I want to suggest one area in which these efforts have potentially significant ramifications: modern society's educational ideals and practices. By way of introduction, the basic features of these newly revised Aristotelian ideas will be sketched. I shall confine my discussion to Gadamer's presentation, since it is the clearest and most fully worked out.

According to Gadamer, the Greek distinction between *theoria*, *praxis* and *poesis* is correlated with the distinctions: *episteme*, *phronesis* and *techne*. *Episteme* concerns objects of human contemplation, which cannot be changed by human will or action. *Phronesis*, or practical wisdom, covers the main sphere of human life, especially ethics and politics and allows no sharp separation between ends and means; *techne* concerns the sphere of *poesis*, broadly construed, and deals with craftsmanship and technique.

On this view, *praxis* is not applied *theoria*, as it is for us; nor can *phronesis* be reduced to *techne*, as it is on cost-benefit, utilitarian models of rational choice. *Phronesis* involves the rational deliberation of ends; while *techne* operates with given ends which are not problematic or subject to rational deliberation. In our own day, as Habermas has shown, decisionism reduces *praxis* to applied *theoria*, and applied *theoria* to *techne*. The result of this is one-dimensional society, where ends cannot be rationally deliberated, where politics becomes a branch of technology, and where calculative thinking threatens to destroy us all.

It is Gadamer's view that the hermeneutical project of recovering the traditions and modes of truth and knowing that are covered up by enlightenment thinking — i.e., by scientific culture — must involve a retrieval of Aristotle's insights about *phronesis* and *praxis*. I think he is absolutely right. In what follows an attempt is made to suggest some important applications of these ideas to the area of modern education.

II

Modern education is based upon several related assumptions: egalitarianism, the idea that method — especially scientific method and *techne* — is the road to truth, and two principles which Mannheim called "The Principle of the Ontological Equality of All Men" and "The Principle of the Autonomy of the Social Units" in his classic but neglected paper "The Democratization of Culture."⁹ Since Mannheim's remarks bear more directly on my discussion, and are less familiar than the remarks by Nietzsche and Heidegger on the effects of egalitarianism and scientific method on modern culture, I shall elaborate on his views a bit more fully.

In his Introduction to *From Karl Mannheim*,¹⁰ Kurt Wolff makes the following remarks a propos the "principles" mentioned above:

1. 'The principle of the ontological equality of all men' shows itself, for instance, in the democratic directive that knowledge be accessible

and communicable to everybody (epistemologically founded in Descartes' 'clear and distinct' ideas and Kant's 'necessity' and 'universal validity' as criteria of true knowledge), and in the replacement of the connoisseur by the expert and of " 'articulation of a global intuition' " (such as the connoisseur's) by increasingly abstract analysis (explanation)

2. 'The autonomy of the social units' . . . is indicated by the conception that the individual can gain knowledge, and criticize traditional beliefs, by a spontaneous use of his own mental energies (xcii)

Mannheim himself says the following:

In pre-democratic cultures... talent or genius is considered as an irreducible datum—something like magic charisma that set off certain individuals from the ordinary run of mankind. Pre-democratic education works very largely with such concepts of human excellence . . . (281)

Modern education.... starts from the postulate that anything that is transmitted in the process of teaching can be reduced to crystal-clear simplicity, with no 'higher' obscurities left to admire without comprehension... the democratic mind puts its thrust *a priori* in that which is transparent and clear, whereas aristocratic cultures prize the recondite and the obscure..... For the aristocratic mind, that which is culturally valuable must exist on a higher level, not accessible to the ordinary run of mankind.... (284)

The democratic mind rejects all alleged knowledge that must be gained through special channels [i.e., grace and revelation], open to a chosen few only. It accepts as truth only that which can be ascertained by everybody in ordinary experience, or that which can be cogently proved by steps which everybody can reproduce.

Clearly, this definition of truth is closely related to the fundamental democratic principle of the essential equality of all men. In addition to this, however, the modern concept of knowledge also reflects another aspect of democracy; its demand for unrestricted publicity. According to the dominant epistemology of the modern age, valid knowledge refers to the public world. Just as in politics, every individual has a share in control, in the field of knowledge every item must be subject to scrutiny by all individuals. (284-5)

In short, Mannheim, echoing Nietzsche, Heidegger and other critics of mass culture, shows the connection between the idea that truth is method (Descartes, Leibniz), modern egalitarianism's tendency toward "levelling" and educational ideals of modern society.

Let me briefly expand upon some of these connections.

1. Many students believe that if you have an opinion you can't be objective, and if you're objective you can't have an opinion. This preposterous view implies that all opinions are equally good or bad, that anything not rigorously provable is so much wind, and that no one can criticize another person's view — as if there's no difference between the First Amendment and valid criticism. It fosters false tolerance, as Marcuse has shown,¹¹ and is partly responsible for the

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general impossibility of ethical agreement, as MacIntyre has demonstrated in his brilliant book *After Virtue*.¹²

2. The problem of truth in politics is partly due to the ideals pointed out by Mannheim. In her insightful essay "Truth and Politics"¹³ Hannah Arendt remarks that the problem of contingent truth is at the core of the modern political predicament. The failure to reach agreement on such truths — underscored by the Orwellian elements in mass society — leads to nihilism and eventually to totalitarianism. She relates a story about Clemenceau, who was asked what future generations would say about the causes of World War I. He replied that he was sure of one thing: nobody would say that Belgium invaded Germany! Unfortunately, Orwell was more sagacious than Clemenceau, as the following indicates.

A recent example of this frightening Orwellian possibility appeared in a syndicated column by the Yale Psychiatrist Walter Reich, called "Old anti-Semitism behind new Holocaust revisionism" (1981 Washington Post). Reich says this:

A wave of "historical revisionism" is washing over the country, part of it originating in Europe, but much of it generated here at home. What is being revised is the conventional history of the Holocaust, with the argument being put forth that it was a hoax perpetrated to gain sympathy for Jews and for the creation of the state of Israel. The revisionists have pleaded for equal time in the name of fairness and academic freedom.

Most of us still find their argument absurd and the motivations behind it patent. But others, especially the young, seem willing to consider it *on the peculiarly contemporary grounds that everything is debatable, and that nothing should be accepted as true that was not personally seen and experienced.*

...if the revisionists are successful in rendering the Holocaust as just another matter for debate, then no piece of history is safe, nothing can remain a true fact, all human experience is conveniently subject to ideological interpretation or wishful negation and we become nothing more than we believe. (My emphasis)

I once had a graduate student in Sociology who claimed that it was merely a gratuitous hypothesis that a person screaming and bleeding was in pain. The logical outcome of this idea is that it is just a matter of "mere" opinion that genocide is monstrous, and that you have to be someone else in order to understand them. The assumptions behind a scientific culture result either in a rampant skepticism about any matter that is not subject to rigorous proof or a naive dogmatism about such matters. In either case, anything not subject to proof is a "mere" opinion. (This is one reason for revitalizing Aristotle's idea of phronesis: to sustain a distinction between reasonable and unreasonable opinions or judgments.)

I take it that the educational ideals implicit in the Aristotelian doctrines — and their modern reformulation within the context of the counter-enlightenment ideals of hermeneutics — run quite contrary to the educational ideas of scientific culture. The enlightenment ideas that method is the road to truth, that traditions are riddled with prejudice and prevent the realization of the unity of mankind in an abstract system of knowledge that is relevant at all times and places, the Leibnizian ideal of a universal calculus that allows all decisions to be calculated by an algorithmic procedure, run in a vastly different direction than the counter-enlightenment emphasis on tradition, the uniqueness of cultures and individuals as embodiments of humanity,

and the emphasis on lived experience and knowledge that are echoed in Aristotle, Gadamer (and mentioned by Mannheim in the passages cited above.)

Putting it crudely, the constellation of ideas that partly constitute modern educational theory seems to result in the view that any educated ignoramus with the 'right' method and the 'right' facts can come to a reasonable judgment and act in reasonable ways; that there can't be any disagreement among rational people; and that the knowledge and insight of intelligent, not to say, creative persons, can be emulated by anyone who can ape a method or blindly apply the presumed "method" of creative people. (Philosophers who used to act as if anyone could be an Austin or a Wittgenstein by aping their alleged techniques, as do people who separate style and substance, and think that writing in the third person, i.e., impersonally, gives one's thoughts a free floating objectivity. Kierkegaard and Nietzsche were the first great thinkers who saw this illusion for what it is.)

A number of recent authors, notably Charles Taylor in his seminal "Interpretation and the Science of Man," have remarked on this situation vis a vis the problem of finding a "correct" interpretation, and the hermeneutical relationship between self-understanding and the interpretation of a text. Gadamer's notion of the fusion of horizons takes up the same themes. Any viable account of education must, it seems to me, reject the fatuous assumptions that any two people can and must learn the same things and agree on everything to be reasonable; and that knowledge based upon insight and genius can be emulated by any ignoramus who can digest the allegedly right method for acquiring knowledge. Just as some people can provide more insightful interpretations of a text, some can be better educated and more intelligent, i.e., their insights are more reasonable.

We must learn to make sense of notions such as insight, imagination, judgment, intuition, connoisseurship (Polanyi) non-conceptual knowledge (Heidegger), tacit knowledge, etc. in educational and culture contexts, as well as to connect knowledge and truth to historicity, i.e., with the transmission and appropriation of traditions, texts, custom, lived experience, etc., even — perhaps especially — in the case of scientific knowledge (the critical tradition). It will also turn out that humanistic studies, e.g., literature, poetry etc. and not science will be paradigm aims of education. The truly educated person, who has the skills constitutive of phronesis, must be seen as one who appropriates his or her tradition in the best way, i.e., in order to allow it to disclose its many possibilities, so that those possibilities that are no longer vital will not be taken up, while those possibilities which promote individual and cultural vitality will be appropriated. The idea that a truly educated person is one who is, say, an expert on the facts or calculation, and who stands outside the tradition in making judgments that are meant to be truths in themselves, so to speak, can not be plausibly maintained except in very unusual circumstances. Such occasions, where revolutionary breaks with the tradition occur, are in any case themselves possible only if the tradition is first appropriated. (I take it that this Kuhnian insight can be applied to traditions in general, and to revolutions in general.) The notion of apprenticeship ("know how") as opposed to precept must, as Oakeschott and Polanyi have argued, become the basis for sound education.

There are other issues that bear in various ways on the general connections between hermeneutics and education. One such issue concerns the conflict between modern egalitarianism and the aristocratic conception of a culture mentioned by Mannheim. The idea that ("high") culture requires an order of rank, shared values and ideals to provide cultural integration, and horizons to provide limits to what can be said and done, goes back to the Greeks, and is echoed in Nietzsche, Heidegger and other recent critics of modernity such as T. S. Eliot, Daniel Bell, Durkheim and Philip Rieff. (Ultimately the conflict between scientific culture and traditional,

Gemeinschaft cultures provides the frame of reference for this issue.) Rieff, in an essay called "The Impossible Culture"¹⁴ argues that a culture needs "God terms" — i.e., horizons, in Nietzsche's sense — in order to set limits to what can and can't be said and done, to rule out those possibilities which the traditions of a culture have put out of bounds. The Greek ideal of *sophrosyne*, so closely allied to the idea of *Paideia* — and the German notion of *Bildung* — is of a piece with Nietzsche's notion of a vital culture. The idea of a scientific culture, in which everything is debatable and in which individual conscience can call into question the culture's foundation (as Socrates wrongly did, according to Nietzsche) is, *pace* Freud, the greatest illusion of them all. It is what Rieff means by the impossible culture (Whether modern science is the historical successor to the shared religious ideals and myths that formed the fabric of traditional societies is still an open question.).

The relations between politics and culture, and the possibility and/or desirability of an integration of politics and culture, raises four possible options: (i) Political and cultural egalitarianism; (ii) Political and cultural inegalitarianism; (iii) Political inegalitarianism and cultural egalitarianism; (iv) Political egalitarianism and cultural inegalitarianism. I reject (i) for the reasons advanced by Nietzsche and Heidegger against cultural egalitarianism; I reject (ii) for Marxist reasons against political inegalitarianism; (iii), which perhaps comes closest to describing current society (if Marcuse and Habermas are right) is also rejected by me; (iv), which I favor, might turn out to be an unrealistic goal (would it lead to Plato's Republic, or to (i), (ii) or (iii)?) and I have no way of arguing for it except by elimination, on the ground that (i) - (iii) have undesirable consequences. However, we can at least assume that culture and politics ought to be integrated, although the precise nature of this integration (*vis a vis* (i)-(iv)) is still an open question. It is worth noting however, that Raymond Williams points out in *Culture and Society*¹⁵ that the projects of *Bildung* as self-actualization and that of cultural and political renewal were taken to be two sides of the same task in the earlier parts of the nineteenth century.

It may be that this aristocratic ideal is objectionable, although if writers such as Taylor are correct, the project of overcoming scientific culture may be committed to the abandonment or modification of cultural egalitarianism in favor of something resembling the idea of an order of rank. The interesting issue is whether *cultural inegalitarianism* is compatible with *political egalitarianism*, as Marcuse,¹⁶ Bell¹⁷ and others seem to think.

In any event, the two views of culture, society and education that I have been contrasting do raise genuine and quite fundamental issues. This can be seen by recalling the contrast between "civilization" and "culture" that has, for better or worse been part of our heritage since the Enlightenment.¹⁸ "Civilization" expresses the enlightenment ideal of a universal, cosmopolitan culture, free of local prejudices and incorporated into an abstract system of knowledge and morality which accompanies the unity of mankind. Scientific culture, and modern (scientific?) education are the products of this ideal, which find classic expression in Lessing and Kant.

"Culture," on the other hand, is the expression used by the German tradition to resist the French Enlightenment (civilization). The "expressivist" (Berlin, Taylor) notion that a nation or *volk*, and its unique traditions, etc. are more important than the abstract ideals of "civilization" emphasizes traditions and the historicity of a people. The aesthetic ideals of education or "*Bildung*" expressed by Fichte, Schiller, Durkheim, which is to mirror the Greek ideal of *Paideia*, are taken up by Heidegger and Gadamer in our own time. This accounts for the appeal to Aristotle's notion of *phronesis* as the basis of cultural and political wisdom, since Aristotle's ideal seems to be echoed in the concept of lived experience and non-conceptual knowledge that we find in Dilthey and other thinkers whom Heidegger and Gadamer are appropriating.

The second issue concerns the connection between a hermeneutical approach to education and the

limits of individualism as an epistemological and political view, i.e., the idea that social practices are primary.

Frederick Will, in a recent essay "The Rational Governance of Practice,"¹⁹ takes up the Mannheimian "Principle of the Autonomy of Social Units" in connection with some of the issues recently adumbrated. He says this:

The thought that the processes of governance of practice could be both rational and deeply rooted in practice has not been favored much in modern philosophy, which has in the main followed a contrary view forcefully advanced by Descartes in the *Discourse on Method* and the *Rules for the Direction of Mind*. The extreme divorcement maintained between reason and accepted practice in the dominant tradition of modern philosophy was a consequence of a presumption that since reason, as a source in the governance of practice, must be granted to have the capacity to transcend and oppose practice, it must be conceived, as an authority and agent of governance, to be independent of practice. The passage from condition to consequence in this conviction excluded the possibility, little contemplated in this philosophical tradition, that rational governance of practice represented a capacity in accepted practice to transcend, oppose and in other ways modify itself. Adhering to this conviction, a long line of modern philosophers through the years persevered in the search for resources . . . that are identifiable as rational and independent of all rational institutions and social practices But these familiar resources [experience and reason, construed as properties of isolated individuals] as they are normally employed, are thoroughly permeated by social practices. It was therefore proposed that by careful intellectual analysis we might eliminate from them their conceived inessential and invalidating social elements, arriving at, as a purified form of experience, pure sensation, and a purified form of thought engaged solely with the relations of what were conceived to be certain very intimate intellectual resources, namely our own ideas (192).

Prof. Will goes on to suggest that we must learn to see even individual criticisms as secondary to, and thus dependent upon, the primacy of Social practices and traditions. His observations bear on a number of issues, e.g., the Gadamer-Habermas debate.

Habermas' notion of an ideal consensus rests upon a conception of truth, rationality and *phronesis* which comes pretty close to the Enlightenment ideas discussed in this essay: an entire tradition can be invalidated by appeal to abstract reason. Another issue posed relates to the views of Devlin and others,²⁰ who maintain an Hegelian idea of *sittlichkeit*, according to which certain activities may rightfully be put out of bounds by a culture, even if this means limiting individual freedom of choice. The view maintained in this paper are in consonance with those of Devlin, although we must keep in mind that the primacy of tradition is not tantamount to traditionalism or political conservatism, as Gadamer has amply shown.

The educational and cultural ideals associated with political liberalism and epistemological atomism²¹ are conducive to the denial of the primacy of praxis and the idea that there are no limits to legitimate individual criticism of tradition, and that an individual, through appeal to abstract principles of reason can stand outside and judge her or his tradition. This, of course, is the basis of Nietzsche's criticism of Socrates, whom he calls an egalitarian and a democrat.

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Rationalism, which appeals to abstract, "free floating" a - historical standards is thus associated with some of the educational ideals criticized in this paper. Just as any fool can claim knowledge if given the 'right' methods and the facts, anybody is entitled to judge an entire tradition by appeal to the same resources, which allegedly are independent of tradition.

I am not suggesting that no social criticism is permissible. Nor am I suggesting that an extreme version of nihilism is the consequence of hermeneutics. In fact, I think just the reverse is true: Relativism as an epistemological doctrine is based upon the rationalist idea that truth is a property of an abstract system of propositions. All the relativist does is to postulate that there are incommensurable sets of such propositions which hold true in different societies. (This insight is due to Richard Rorty.) As Heidegger and Gadamer have shown, the historicity of Dasein overcomes this type of relativism, because there are no "free floating truths" to generate the alleged problem to begin with. The historicity of Dasein and Being should lead us to expect change, just as change occurs over the life span of an individual. That is, the historicity of Being and Dasein, coupled with the idea that truth is the freedom of tradition to speak to us (or: the freedom of the Phenomena to disclose themselves) leads to an ontological conception of truth and knowledge, in which different things stand out and disclose themselves in the process of coming to be, lingering for a while, and then passing away.)

It does remain likely, however, that hermeneutics must speak to the issue of how to deal with the existence of different traditions, i.e., cultural pluralism. Feyerabend²² suggests that we must give all traditions their due in educational and political contexts, recognizing the strengths and limits of all traditions which are neither good nor bad in themselves. It is true that Feyerabend talks as if one can join or leave a tradition the way one joins or leaves a voluntary association with a fraternity, which certainly runs contrary to the thought of Heidegger and Gadamer. But the tenor of his remarks about education is consistent with the educational ideas that I have associated with a hermeneutical approach to learning, knowledge and the primacy of traditions.

In fact, I am inclined to think that the problem of cultural pluralism, as it relates to the American experience, makes it difficult for us to accept the ideals of Hegel, Nietzsche and Heidegger precisely because they speak to us from a culturally homogeneous tradition, as do the Greeks, whose notion of the Polis as a shared political space is the basis for the German ideal. Feyerabend and Rorty's conception of a culture without a permanent center speaks to the American experience; e.g., Madison and others envisioned democracy as resting upon the existence of "factions" and changing consensus, and thus the absence of a permanent fixed center.

In any event, the aim of education on the hermeneutical view is something like the joint goals of *Paideia* and *Bildung*, i.e., acculturation into a *Gemeinschaft* and self-development in the sense expressed by Schiller in *The Aesthetic Education of Man*. Of course, we do not live in a society which by any stretch of the imagination is a *Gemeinschaft*. But I take it that one of the ultimate goals of hermeneutics is to recover those elements in our tradition which are worth preserving in order to make such a society a living reality for us. Whether or not this goal is a realistic one will affect not only the viability of the educational ideals suggested here, but the viability of the hermeneutical project, which in the final analysis must encompass the goal of cultural renewal.

Iowa State University

NOTES

- 1 H. G. Gadamer, "The Problem of Historical Consciousness" in P. Rabinow and W. Sullivan ed. *Interpretive Social Science: A Reader* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), pp. 103-163.
- 2 Charles Taylor, "Interpretation and the Science of Man," *ibid.*, pp. 25-73.
- 3 David Hoy, *The Critical Circle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), especially pp. 55-61.
- 4 J. Habermas, especially *Theory and Practice* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972).
- 5 S. Hampshire, "Public and Private Morality" in a volume with that title (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), pp. 23-44.
- 6 C. Perleman, especially *The New Rhetoric and the Humanities* (Holland: D. Reidel, 1980).
- 7 See here G. H. von Wright, *Explanation and Understanding* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971), ch. 1.
- 8 See here A. Rorty, ed., *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics* (Berkeley: University of California, 1981); and J. Cooper, *Reason and the Human Good in Aristotle's Ethics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975).
- 9 In *From Karl Mannheim* ed. K. Wolff (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971).
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. xcii.
- 11 H. Marcuse, "Repressive Tolerance" in *Critique of Pure Tolerance, 1969* ed. R. P. Wolff, B. Moore, H. Marcuse, pp. 81-123. See also G. Friedman, *The Political Philosophy of the Frankfurt School* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980). On mass culture see N. Jacobs ed. *Culture for the Millions?* (Princeton: Van Nostrand, 1959).
- 12 A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (South Bend: Notre Dame University Press, 1981).
- 13 H. Arendt, "Truth in Politics" in her *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin, 1965), pp. 227-65.
- 14 P. Rieff, "The Impossible Culture," *Encounter* (September, 1970), pp. 33-44.
- 15 R. Williams, *Culture and Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958).
- 16 H. Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964); and "The Affirmative Character of Culture," in *Negations* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), pp. 88-134.
- 17 D. Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions in Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).
- 18 See here N. Elias, *The Civilizing Process* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), vol. ch. 1.
- 19 F. Will, "The Rational Governance of Practice," *American Philosophical Quarterly* (1981), pp. 191-201.
- 20 See also J. Cameron, "The Prison of Sexual Liberation," in R. Wasserstrom ed. *Today's Moral Problems*, 2nd edition.
- 21 See here Charles Taylor's "Introduction (written with A. Montefiore) to G. Kertian's *Metacritique* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980) for the connections between political individualism and epistemological atomism.
- 22 P. Feyerabend, *Science in a Free Society* (New York: Schocken, 1979). I have discussed Feyerabend's views about reason and tradition in "Freedom, Reason and Tradition," *Reason Papers* 16 (Sp. 1980), pp. 83-93. See also Feyerabend, "How to Defend Society Against Science," in E.D. Klemke, R. Hollinger, and A. David Kline ed., *Introductory Readings in the Philosophy of Science* (Buffalo: Prometheus, 1979), pp. 55-66.