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Beyond the Hoax: a review

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A review by James Ladyman

Beyond the Hoax: Science, Philosophy and Culture by Alan Sokal (Oxford University Press) £20/\$34.95 (hb).

In 1996 Alan Sokal published a spoof article in the journal *Social Text*. “Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a transformative hermeneutics of quantum gravity” purported to be a serious discussion of the relationship between the most advanced mathematical physics and various postmodernist and poststructuralist ideas. In fact it was submitted to the journal to show that complete nonsense about science and mathematics could be passed off as profound insight, providing it was surrounded by sufficient citations of the right people, and suitably sprinkled with buzzwords. Sokal told the editors what they wanted to hear, lent scientific credibility to their favoured “theorists”, and did so in the kind of language they liked.

This book is worth buying just for the hoax article, reprinted with an extensive set of annotations. The latter explain the gaffes Sokal included to test whether anyone who knew about science or mathematics would check the article, as well as giving sources for some of his pastiches. The astonishing thing is how knowledgeable Sokal is about his targets, and the annotations are also full of citations of people saying the kind of crazy stuff parodied in the article.

Sokal’s article was the single most important intervention in the “science wars”. Together with *Intellectual Impostures*, co-authored with Jean Bricmont, it demonstrated the intellectual bankruptcy of many so-called philosophers and of the large constituency of their acolytes in the arts and humanities. Unfortunately, of course, the targets of the hoax were unmoved. Sokal was denounced as right-wing and anti-French, and a decade later, I think contemporary academia is at least as, if not more, afflicted by the lack of rigour, deference to the undeservedly celebrated, and pseudo-political posturing that set Sokal off. If there is a disciplinary boundary, it must be crossed, and if there is a hegemonic notion, it must be problematized. Dialogue between the past and the present is to be preferred to history, and if the dialogue is dynamic all the better. I recently produced a spoof announcement called “The Performance of Self-Pleasure: Masturbation, an interdisciplinary workshop”, and one of my colleagues took it to be genuine (even though the call for papers on “Masturbation and post-colonialism” seems a bit of a giveaway) because we get similar stuff coming round from the faculty on a regular basis.

The main problem is that there are so many allegedly educated people who have no real experience of genuine rigour. When they encounter someone claiming that something an idol of theirs like Lacan or Haraway has said about mathematics or science is nonsense, they would rather shoot the messenger, who can handily be denounced as a denier of Otherness, than face the fact that they have wasted so much of their time and that so much of their learning is worthless. I have been informed that “truth is a discourse”, and that my belief that academics must seek, and sometimes can and do find, the truth makes me a positivist (and a realist, but then apparently I am also a rationalist and an empiricist).

One of the biggest problems facing the arts and humanities is the prevalence of people who think they are engaging with philosophical ideas when in fact they wouldn’t get through the first year of a philosophy degree because of their inability to make themselves clear, to formulate an argument, to separate an epistemological from an ontological issue, and so on. The same narcissism that makes Sokal’s targets think that they are saying deep things about topology, non-linear dynamics, relativity,

quantum mechanics and mathematical logic, makes their acolytes believe that if the philosophers they encounter are unimpressed by crude and ill-informed forays into philosophy, this is symptomatic of the narrowness of analytic philosophy as it clings to an outdated modernist/enlightenment paradigm.

It is particularly galling that the flaky end of academia regards itself as the vanguard of political progressiveness, and that it is so ready to accuse its critics of defending some imagined hegemony. As Sokal points out repeatedly, without a culture that defends the importance of rigour, reason and evidence, there is little to stand in the way of the naked exercise of power. This has been realized by the true inheritors of postmodernism, namely the Republican right and religious fundamentalists. Hence, we find the former making use of relativism and constructivism about science to undermine the idea that the scientific consensus about global warming is a sufficient reason for governments to take action, and we find the latter employing the likes of Steve Fuller to defend the idea that “intelligent design” has a place in science education.

On a more prosaic level, within universities one finds that the same people who denounce the idea that truth is the aim of inquiry as somehow iniquitous, accept the managerial imperatives for visions and strategies and the associated jargon and gibberish with alacrity. It is depressingly common in debates about policy to witness arguments of the form: something must be done, this proposal is something, therefore this must be done, being met with the widespread nodding of heads.

As a guide to and critique of some of what has gone wrong in academia and in wider culture, Sokal's book is superb. The first section of the present book reviews the *Social Text* affair and has an illuminating discussion of science studies and its influence. The middle section contains two essays on the philosophy of science that are well-informed and well up to the standard of professional work in the area, and the modest scientific realism defended there is an open-minded and balanced attempt to take account of both arguments for realism based on the success of science, and arguments against realism based on theory change in the history of science. The third section discusses the link between pseudo-science, alternative medicine and postmodernism, includes an essay that takes on religion, and ends with a brief discussion of ethics.

Anyone who is in any doubt about the calamitous effects of relativism and constructivism about scientific knowledge as it has spread into the wider culture should ponder the fact that a growing proportion of parents in Britain are opting not to have their children vaccinated against terrible diseases like whooping cough and diphtheria, thereby undermining the herd immunity that has allowed us to forget what it was like when they killed infants by the thousand. Sokal was right to warn us in 1996 and he is to be congratulated for keeping up the fight. Without a commitment to reason and evidence in intellectual life and public policy we are at the mercy of faith and fashion.

James Ladyman is professor of philosophy at Bristol University and author of Understanding Philosophy of Science (Routledge).

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