

Science Towards Ethics: Epistemological Humility and the Violence of Scientism

Introduction

According to Jacques Derrida, what we call 'science' is just as wrapped up in social meanings and philosophical assumptions as anything else. Rather than showing us what is 'fact' or 'natural,' the language of 'science' is based on complex and heavy metaphysical assumptions or idealities. These idealities are, in a sense, mental representations of the world as we experience it. In itself, the idea that what we call 'science' is based on any ideality is not troubling. All paradigms and ways to knowledge rely on some set of metaphysical assumptions about what our perception represents. What makes the case of today's science problematic is that society, science writers, and often scientists themselves tend to speak of science as if it is reflecting the natural world untethered to any ideality. When we do not recognize the base assumptions of science, we are likely to fall into "scientism," or the tendency to assume that science always produces absolute and superior knowledge.

However, like all fields, science has limits. When we look at cases of people who live on the borders of scientific categories, what I call 'the liminal' instance, we often see how destructively biased scientific institutions and discourses can become. For example, historically, scientific institutions have maintained specific categories regarding sex. These categories are idealities, because they are mental constructions of perceived biological traits. In other words, the idea that there are two, and only two, sexes is based on the observation that there are two types of gametes required for reproduction. This does not represent the biological gametes in themselves, because it is a representation of what the gametes signify. In other words, sperm and ovum meet to form an embryo, but it

does not necessarily follow that there are only two sexes or genders. Yet, science has adopted and maintained this ideality. Subsequently, these categories push intersex and transgender individuals into a conceptual and political liminal space. As a result, scientific institutions have often responded to these liminal individuals with violence, under the onus of conformity to nature as it is known through scientific paradigms.

To make sense of this violence, we need to make sense of what Derrida calls the “logic of presence” in the sciences.¹ This logic allows scientific institutions to perpetuate the idea that their way of understanding the world, and their own theories and conclusions, are above the social complexities of everything else, and thus, they give us absolute objectivity. If we do not question the 'logic of presence' then we fall into scientism. When we fall into scientism we are unable to respond when particular scientific institutions perpetuate violence based on prejudiced idealities. In order to recognize these violent idealities, we need to not just look at the actions of specific scientists, but the construction of the language of these categories in science in themselves. We must do all of this in order to engender an epistemological humility when we encounter the liminal instances of our idealities. In this essay, I am not arguing that science is inherently cissexist; I am arguing that an unwillingness to embrace uncertainty and epistemological humility leads to unethical action.

Drawing on the work of Vandana Shiva and Judith Butler, I reiterate arguments made to connect scientific thinking to violence. With Butler and Derrida, I argue that this scientific thinking and its subsequent violence is rooted in a myopic view of ontology and epistemology that has permeated western culture. It is in this myopic panorama that western society has, perhaps unbeknownst to its constituent parts, dreamt

of the annihilation of ‘uncertain’ people and forgotten how to be humble in the face of an illegible idea or entity.

I will explore a selection of paradigms and logics that contribute to scientism, like the cost-benefit analysis and the premium on biological sex by scientific standards. By no means are these examples the exclusive ones, because I suspect that the drive to certainty is detectable in many sectors of society and fields of knowledge. Likewise, I take transgender and intersex identities as spearheads against this drive to certainty, but it is not the exclusive subversive identity. Nonetheless, I believe that an analysis that would take race, ability, or psyche could and would demonstrate how embracing uncertainty and effacing scientism fosters ethical and examined living.

A Brutal Scientism and How It Annihilates

Scientism and its propagation as absolute knowledge constitutes a brutal practice. Vandana Shiva expresses this sentiment when she writes, “...modern science and development are projects of male, western origin, both historically and ideologically. They are the latest and most brutal expression of a patriarchal ideology which is threatening to annihilate nature and the entire species.”ⁱⁱ Science is brutal in that it is reductionist, meaning it reduces entities (people, animals, things) to their use or exchange value in an industrial or laboratory setting. Science, for Shiva, often reduces nature and subjugated people to their use-value within the framework of a cultural hegemony that values masculinity, industry, and violence. Anything that is not useable is annihilated to remove its potential threat to the reductionist logic. This annihilation creates and perpetuates a logical circle by justifying reductionism as a practical means to a utilitarian end, thus ensuring the future annihilation of the liminal cases that question reductionist

thought. Anything that is not useable can also be thought of as anything that is more costly than beneficial. In this way, even applying a cost-benefit analysis to the classifying, ordering, and naming of people and their identities involves a reductionist maneuver. This is problematic because science and society take the cost-benefit logic as an unquestioned starting-point; a presupposition which belies a societal scientism.

The cost-benefit logic—present in scientific methods, scientism, and utilitarianism—is a partial reason for the historical and contemporary violence against trans women of color. A society that has made a white cisgender heterosexual reproductive person a paragon of human value can only understand people who closely resemble this paragon. No one can say that anyone embodies this abstract ‘perfection,’ this unified ideality of real genderedness, but merely imitates it. Those who imitate it well are useful; they can reproduce and we know how to organize and train them for an industrious career within our society. Those who fail this imitation game are annihilated.

This logic is directly related to contemporary scientific practices, in that it relies on a reductionist premise to construct the image of the paragon identity. Notice here how the paragon subject is: white, thus reduced to skin color; cisgender, and likely male, thus reduced to their biological sex; heterosexual, thus reduced to their amorous inclination; and, reproductive, again reduced to the use of their reproductive organ system. These designations result in two groupings of people, roughly: intelligible, legible, and gender-conforming people and the opposite. Science classifies people based on this opposition. A scientific society takes these classifications and propagates them to use as ways of understanding the complexity of life. Women and men are assigned certain roles in a

society, and these roles then come to be justified by a weakly demonstrated biological or psychological study confirming that, for example, men are naturally more aggressive and therefore we can expect them to be more violent and allow them a larger margin of acceptable violent behaviors. Through processes like this science is rendered a brutal tool of political oppression. Even if some wish to claim that science is objective in its empiricism and that these instances I bring up are isolated, they cannot deny that the logic that allows this misuse of science has material effects on peoples' lives; often life-or-death effects.

However, the brutality of scientism is indeed rooted in science itself and not just a misuse of science. When someone fails to imitate the paragon well enough they are subject to the juridical power of the scientific establishment. Butler explains, "... the political construction of the subject proceeds with certain legitimating and exclusionary aims, and these political operations are effectively concealed and naturalized by a political analysis that takes juridical structures as their foundation."ⁱⁱⁱ Juridical power, in Butler's sense, is present in that science constructs what it claims to merely represent. The productive power of the regulatory regime, or the cultural norms that determine what can and cannot be said about a certain person, is present in a cost-benefit analysis.

Butler's allegorical analysis of David Reimer's story shows us what this juridical power of science is. David Reimer was born biologically male, but reassigned as a girl and raised as such following medical advice and intervention after his penis was accidentally destroyed during a botched circumcision in infancy. The psychologist John Money attempted to 'socialize' Reimer into womanhood. This therapy included roleplaying sexual positions with David's twin brother, with David as the 'bottom.' At

age fifteen, David was living as a man. Later in life, David Reimer committed suicide after years of struggling with several life hardships.^{iv} We cannot say exactly why David committed suicide and we should not say why. This is why Butler's allegorical analysis is powerful; she does not assume anything about her subject, David Reimer,

Now, someone approaching that issue with a cost-benefit analysis would conclude that, although David's life was certainly tragic and he experienced harm at the hands of the medical establishment, the methods of science have benefitted a greater number of people. Classifying, naming, and ordering diseases and their causes is one such product of scientific endeavors that provides a benefit outweighing the cost of David Reimer's life. Using a cost-benefit analysis reduces people to their use and assumes that people have a fixed value that determines who they are and what their cost or benefit is. The cost-benefit analysis cannot question science itself, because it presupposes that science has an adequate method and it assumes that scientists are not active agents in the construction of personhood.

When science cannot give a person a clear-cut and unquestionable classification, name, or order, then they are vulnerable to violence and annihilation. This is the juridical power of science; the power to decide who can be what, justified through official titles and authority. In the case of David Reimer, a person with an M.D. had the power to determine the fate of the infant whose circumcision they botched. The juridical power of science and its reaction towards illegibility partially explains the epidemic of murders against trans women of color, as well. Of course, scientists and doctors are not murdering these women, but the pervasive discourse of scientism has had the simultaneous effect of propagating an inflated value on certainty and intelligibility when it comes to gender.

Trans women of color do not match the paragon identity well, and they confront the threat of annihilation because our society overvalues human intelligibility above human flourishing. Butler defines human intelligibility by proposing that “[w]hen we ask, what are the conditions of intelligibility by which... the human is recognized, by which some subject becomes the subject of human love, we are asking about conditions of intelligibility composed of norms, of practices, that have become presuppositional, without which we cannot think the human at all.”^v Norms are equivalent to paragon identities, or rather, norms are what maintain the idealities of paragons. Scientific discourse assumes knowledge of a person based off a comparison to these norms. If someone does not meet the ideal norm, then that person must be made to meet that standard. Hence, brutal acts can be committed by doctors, bureaucrats, and ‘everyday’ citizens in the name of scientific certainty, even if certain scientists themselves would not abide these acts.

Of course, there are also instances where science exercises its juridical power over the bodies of trans people. The medical establishment believes a trans woman suffers from gender dysphoria and is not a real woman until she meets certain criteria. The autonomous speaking being, the trans woman, cannot be real until certain agents deem her to be real, despite her insistent utterances that she is, in fact, very real. They ask: “Has she lived as a woman for an allotted amount of time? Is she eligible for hormone therapy or reconstructive surgery?” The counterplan to this approach is to accept the claim of the person at face value. If she says she is a woman, then she is a woman. However, medical practice and scientific discourse does not accept that report as valid, because it believes that a ‘subjective’ report stained with uncertainty is

antagonistic to some pursuit of knowledge which must guide political action. Uncertainty here is the wrench in the works for the logic of this brutal science I have described.

Uncertainty calls into question classifications, upends names by multiplying the potential names one being could have, and subverts order by hiding its logic, if it has one. The response is to maintain the mechanistic ethics of science that favors an ideal of order.

Again, the brutality of science is illustrated by its methodological insistence on classifying, naming, and ordering people, and using those processes to construct a dichotomy between real and unreal.

Again, the effects of scientism are seldom felt inside laboratories or the training rooms of future scientists. The perceived failure to be real grants the scientific establishment a great deal of power over peoples' ability to flourish and to live, but it also grants a great deal of power to a cisgender person in a street interaction with a trans woman of color. If society grants certainty and intelligibility the guise of rationality, and if this rationality is presented as the founding ideality of a culture, then it stands to reason that people will adopt this viewpoint. As I have shown, this drive to certainty, this inflated valuation of intelligibility is concomitant with the overvaluation of scientific knowledge.

Butler provides a compelling analysis on why men kill trans women of color, linking the fear of uncertainty to violent rage: "Killing is an act of power... [S]o killing establishes the killer as sovereign in the moment that he kills.... Trans women have relinquished masculinity, showing that it can be [relinquished], and that is very threatening to a man who wants to see his power as an intrinsic feature of who he is."^{vi} Trans women are a threat to the presuppositions that give privilege to cisgender men.

These presuppositions are idealities within a scientific culture, because they are present in a science that is accepted as absolute knowledge in that scientific culture. Therefore, scientific knowledge is also threatened by someone who transgresses gendered presuppositions. The killings of trans women highlight a powerful point: when presented with counter-evidence to a presupposition that has been made transcendental and sacred—in this case masculinity and the male gender—the reaction is not one of self-reflection and doubt, a rumination on the contingency of our limited knowledge through our necessarily isolated and singular experience. No, the reaction is fear, vitriol, and violence. Science, because it harbors these same transcendental, gendered presuppositions, acts when they are threatened to reassert dominance over the transgressor just as the murderer does in Butler’s analysis.

The act of relinquishing masculinity is precisely what must occur if we are to relinquish the need or desire to classify, name, and order people forcibly to make them intelligible. Using the allegory of David Reimer, Butler draws this distinction between the forcible definition of intelligibility and David’s invocation of the “I” as means to attain human flourishing defined by the subject, i.e. David Reimer. Butler writes, “He refuses their [the psychiatrists and society at-large] offering of love, understanding it as a bribe, as a seduction to subjection. He will be and he is, he tells us, loved for some other reason, a reason they do not understand, and it is not a reason we are given. It is clearly a reason that is beyond the regime of reason established by the norms of sexology itself.”^{vii} This is human flourishing; it is something that exceeds the norms of gender and all other forms that assumptions regarding fixed truth takes. It is something determined by David himself and something that can only be determined by each individual subject. When we

value this form of flourishing over intelligibility we are opening ourselves up to ambiguity. The reason David will be loved is beyond the same regime of reason that insists on classifying, naming, and ordering people. It is our task now to determine how we might find this reason and why science, as it is now, cannot find this reason to love someone.

The Unconfessed Metaphysics of Presence

The above outline of the violence of science and scientism, particularly in regard to gender and sexuality, leads me to a proper offering of an alternative mode of thinking and living. I will put identity and presence under erasure, following Derrida, to lay the groundwork for a science and a society that fosters an embracing of uncertainty and an effacing of brutal idealities in order to encourage ethical and examined ways of living.

Science exists because of a nearly concealed metaphysical system. As Derrida writes, "... the decisive progress accomplished by a formalism respectful of the originality of its object, of 'the immanent system of its objects,' is plagued by a scientificist objectivism, that is to say by another unperceived or unconfessed metaphysics."^{viii} Derrida is expressing the contingency of a scientific knowledge on a system that presupposes the fundamental nature of being and moves from this presupposition to begin classifying, naming, and ordering people. These metaphysical presuppositions allow scientists to believe that they are accessing an objective, unchanging truth as distant observers of the world. Derrida calls this a metaphysics of presence, because it posits that something must always be in the world for the knowing-subject, in this case the scientist, to make claims that other things are in the world.^{ix} Furthermore, all things that are not present or are perceived to be absent, rather, are

ontologically invalid, inviable, or mere speculations. Therefore, to say that there are men and women I require a presupposition that allows me to make that determination. Furthermore, I must presuppose that gender will be as it is now in all places for all time. In a scientific society, like our own, gender is a presence that is thought to be eternally present in all epochs; it is a fixed truth used as an unquestioned starting-point to identify a person.

How do we avoid these ideal presuppositions? How do we move forward without these ideal presuppositions? We must accept that there is no original meaning, no original transcendental signifier, that can explain who we are, why we are, and how we came/come to be. In short, I am asking us to accept our limits and incapability. This requires us to embrace uncertainty and be epistemologically humble. For Derrida, this means escaping a “naïve transcendentality” that searches for this originary meaning/entity/truth.^x We accomplish this by putting, what Derrida calls, the “transcendental arche” “under erasure [*sous rature*].”^{xi xii} This strategy of “putting under erasure” is philosophized by Derrida when he writes, “The value of the transcendental arche [origin of meaning] must make its necessity felt before letting itself be erased. [...] It is in fact contradictory and not acceptable within the logic of identity. The trace is not only the disappearance of origin, ... it means that the origin did not even disappear, that it was never constituted...”^{xiii} In simple terms: the value for any transcendental arche, or transcendental signifier, feels necessary, but it has no origin. In other words, we feel there must be some meaning or some origin to existence which can lay out the totality of life for us and make it understandable and easy, but we can only construct what we claim we are only representing. We are horribly limited, and in a way, this aligns with a

Lovecraftian cosmology wherein human beings are insignificant in the universe and are threatened, as Lovecraft is, with madness or annihilation if we accept this insignificance. Perhaps I am the anti-Lovecraft, taking his cosmology and presenting it as something to aspire to rather than wallow in. I am asking here that we abandon the desire to make the transcendental arche feel necessary; it is not necessary and we might live better without it. I believe we can begin to understand and care for other people once we abandon this feeling of necessity.

Embracing uncertainty and shaking off this feeling of necessity entails a confession of the metaphysics of presence that saturates science and our lives within a scientific society. Returning to the issue of gender and the logics that justify the murder of trans women of color: the paragon person, that white, cis-het man is one such construct that acquires the feeling of necessity. Scientists fall into a naïve transcendentalism when they presuppose one way of being in the world as being paragonic, which is done when biological sex is used to as a tool for analyses of gender and identity. Furthermore, scientists fall into a different, but related, transcendentalism when they presuppose that the scientific method can make them simple observers of the world. These presuppositions are naïve because they go unrecognized by most scientists and neglect the complex uncertainty of life. These presuppositions are transcendental, because they refer to this never-realized concept or model, which is presented as a material truth, but depends upon a unified ideality, such as “man” or “objectivity.” How do we escape this fall into naïve transcendentalism? An answer: we efface our desire to be certain and our epistemological pride by putting identity and metaphysical thinking under erasure. Graphically, Derrida demonstrates how this type of thinking by striking-through a word, but leaving it in the

sentence; this recognizes its contingency.^{xiv} We need the word (be it the Word of Science or God or Philosophy) to communicate, but we must readily admit when this word is inadequate. In so doing, we accept humility and allow that person or thing which we have no word for to flourish.¹² Where language meets its limit, we can only be silent. "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent."^{xv}

Embracing Uncertainty through Epistemological Humility

The question is, how can a graphic decoration on a word be emblematic of an ethical position? There is a conventional difference between words that are thought, words that are spoken, and words that are written. In this history of western thought, speech is derivative of thought and writing is derivative of speech. This succession of derivatives becomes a premise employed by several western thinkers. G. W. F. Hegel called iconographic languages, Chinese in particular, less developed than phonographic languages, like German. Claude Levi-Strauss used the divide between writing and speech to justify calling certain people "savage." Jean-Jacques Rousseau felt that written word was a tainted expulsion of speech akin to masturbation. One object of Derrida's *Of Grammatology* is to reveal the aporia, ethnocentrism, and epistemological pride laden within the arguments of these thinkers.^{xvi} This ethnocentrism colluding with logocentrism reveals why the opening question is problematic. There are no hard-and-fast divisions between writing and speech or speech and thought. To ask how a graphic modification on

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Derrida in fact co-opts this method from Martin Heidegger, but diverges from Heidegger's usage of *sous rature* drastically. For a thorough review of this see Spivak in the "Translator's Preface" to *Of Grammatology*.

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I have intentionally avoided the term "deconstruction" up until this point, and going forward, because I am suspicious of the place this term has taken in current discourse. My fear is that naming a method "deconstruction" may be consecrating a transcendental signifier where we need it least, thus I refer to my method using the French term for "putting under erasure" (*sous rature*) so that I avoid joining a cult following of Derrida.

writing can aspire to have the same effect as a spoken word or an action is to indulge this prejudice. So, while my *sous rature* may seem like a mere decoration or a convoluted French way of trying to say something meaningful, I think that this sentiment begins on treacherous, unexamined ground.

The points on ethnocentrism and logocentrism also demonstrate how and why Derrida's thought in *Of Grammatology* aligns well with Shiva and Butler's more explicitly ethical and political projects. All three oeuvres are motivated to displace the desire to make something feel necessary. Shiva wishes to combat the desire to make science feel necessary in light of its complicity with planetary destruction and environmental racism. Butler wishes to combat the desire to make a gender binary feel necessary in light of the existence of multiple ways of gendered being that elucidate the contingency and fragility of that ideality. What all three thinkers wish to remind us is that certain knowledge and ways of being are contingent and not absolute.

Placing a word under erasure is an acceptance of this contingency and is an act of humility. This *sous rature* is a practice of recognizing the limits of human knowledge. I do not know all there is to know about a person based on their gender. I do not know all that nature does based on one field of knowledge. I do not know that one culture is less developed than another based on their language. Pausing and reflecting on this lack of knowledge may be the practical version of striking through a word; leaving the thought or word legible, but effacing it slightly to show its contingency.

The ethical issue then is legibility. Who can be legible and who cannot? The scientism of western society, the gender binary of western society, and the logocentrism of western society are tangled in this knot. This ethics of *sous rature* is geared towards

transforming a society that has valued legibility above human flourishing. As Butler writes, “[t]o intervene in the name of transformation means precisely to disrupt what has come to be settled knowledge and knowable reality, and to use, as it were, one’s unreality to make an otherwise impossible or illegible claim.”^{xvii} Trans women of color represent this disruption of settled knowledge on gender. In a society that insists on viewing their identity as impossible or illegible (“They are really men”) the status of unreal grants a furtive power to trans woman of color. The undoing of gender, scientism, and logocentrism is possible through this type of disruption.

But are science and scientism really complicit in this violence? Let me reiterate my arguments from above. The processes of classifying, naming, and ordering are futile attempts to make us feel something meaningful about ourselves by constructing an unreal knowledge of ourselves. Those processes result in the annihilation of those whose identity is not intelligible per the presuppositions of a metaphysics of presence. The case of David Reimer illustrates this. David, whose body was molded to better imitate the transcendental paragon and whose life was reduced in a brutal way by the science of his time. There ought to have been intelligible genitalia present for David to count as human. When that was not present, when David posed a threat to that stalwart meaning constructed by science, he was violated and forcibly changed so that we might make more sense of him. We could not allow the infant David the chance to make sense of himself for us. David Reimer ended his own life in 2004; we cannot say why, but we ought to recognize that David was not treated justly in his life. Science tried to force meaning onto David rather than let David flourish and be David, as David saw fit. This is the consequence of an unconfessed metaphysics of presence; the annihilation of people

who deviate too far from the paragon person presupposed to be present prior to anything else.

If we were to meet David Reimer with the ethics of *sous rature*, we would not focus on trying to make him intelligible. Perhaps, given enough time and intimacy, we could make out that reason David is loved, that same reason that is beyond the regime of reason itself. Rather than assume that the absence of intelligible genitalia makes David Reimer unintelligible, assume that people to begin are never completely intelligible and that no presupposition is enough to avoid violating or annihilating someone.

Science cannot be just until it recognizes the transcendental signifier of its unconfessed metaphysics that allows it to classify, name, and order people. To do so, we cannot rely on an argument that uses the terms of a cost-benefit analysis, or any other political analysis that takes the foundational principles of a regulatory regime as presuppositions. We must efface and disrupt our settled knowledge and face an illegible claim. We must accept that we cannot know everything, that there is no transcendental signifier that originated all words and meanings. This is how science may construct a more examined and critical disposition towards justice: confess its metaphysical presuppositions, and accept an epistemological humility that allows love between human beings to flourish and guide our thoughts, words, and actions.

The stated goal of science is to understand and reflect our natural reality with accuracy and some level of certain truth. This is not problematic in itself, but when we overestimate our epistemological limits and afford one single field of knowledge an absolute reign over knowledge, then we have a problem. We live in such a society. This society has adopted certain idealities, called them science, and used them to annihilate or

conform people to match these idealities. An ethics of *sous rature* fundamentally calls into question these idealities. A person's subversive 'unreality' is the better mirror for reality, because it shows precisely what settled knowledge and epistemological pride attempt to hide beneath the promissory glamour of an absolute science.

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viii

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xvii

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