

Abstractions

Abstractions appear to present the same problem as jargon, except that, unlike jargon, we cannot just replace them with words that ground the argument in the concrete reality of our own lives. If the writer uses the concepts of 'freedom' or 'equality', we cannot just replace these with words that reflect our own interpretation, which has developed out of the way they have had an impact on our own lives. If we are to understand what the writer is arguing, we must stay as close as we can to his or her meaning and not import our own. So, as you can see, dealing with abstractions is not so straightforward.

Nevertheless, it is straightforward in another way. If we are reading an article that is full of abstractions with very few concrete referents, then our evaluation of it is governed by the fact that it holds very little actual meaning. Or more precisely, it could, in fact, mean anything. There is one important principle to remember:

The information content of an argument is directly proportional to the range of possibilities it excludes – the more it excludes the more information content it has.

Using concrete language excludes possibilities, it forbids certain things from happening, so that we can assess how probable it is that the argument is true.

But if the argument is largely composed of abstractions, we cannot do this: it could mean anything. It doesn't forbid anything, so we cannot test it in the same way. Therefore, we have to conclude that the argument is meaningless. All that we read will prompt unanswered philosophical questions of the form 'What does he mean by freedom?', 'What does he mean by equality?' If the writer fails to address these, we are left with the conclusion that it all depends what he means by these concepts.

Art theory

This example is taken from the introduction to an essay written by a student studying for an MA in Art theory. The footnote is the author's:

'Adorno's quote 'art perceived strictly aesthetically is art aesthetically misperceived', asks us through negation, to reject the past of the Kantian point of universality, and through the particular dialectical workings of Adorno, understand our present immanent with, the historical i.e. Kant's subjectivity and his pure aesthetic judgement, Adorno's reflexive objectivity and his 'fluid'¹ conception of an autonomous artwork and the unknown of our social present.'

You don't need to know anything about art theory and the philosophers to whom it refers to know that the meaning of the paragraph (in fact just a single sentence) all depends on what is meant by abstractions like 'negation', 'our present immanent', 'autonomous artwork' and 'the unknown of our social present'.

Two key questions

¹ Adorno, 'Aesthetic Theory', An artwork separates itself from what it developed out of, a reified external experience, through its law of movement which is its law of form', p. 3

Nonetheless, this is not to say that an article that uses abstractions is not worth reading. Isolated concrete facts are meaningless on their own without abstractions, generalisations and theories to make sense of them. These are important concepts: they have the power to elevate an argument, lifting it beyond our particular concerns to important levels of significance that help us to advance our knowledge and solve fundamental problems. But they must be grounded in the concrete reality of our lives by being backed by references to actual people, things and events. Otherwise the author will be free to say what he likes.

So, as you critically evaluate an article ask yourself two key questions:

1. Does the writer use abstractions as if they are real in themselves?

In other words, does it appear that the writer assumes that there are no grounds to ask the question: 'But what do you mean by X?' If it's clear that he does, then he is probably allowing himself to give his abstractions the meaning he wants them to have. Try to avoid the temptation to believe that just because we see an abstraction in a dictionary there are concrete referents by virtue of which it can be defined. In many cases there are no such referents; they are just high-level abstractions.

2. Does the writer assume that other people share the same meaning?

From this point, of course, it's easy for the writer to take the next step and assume that when he uses abstractions other people share the same meaning, even though the referents of a word (if there are any) may be different from one person to another and for one person in different situations. To talk of 'liberty' or 'equality' is to know how

having either will affect our lives in concrete terms in the society and at the time in which we live.

It's easy to deceive ourselves into thinking that because we're familiar with a word and frequently use it, we're also familiar with the idea it represents and its implications. It's also easy to believe we're thinking when we're only stringing together words that have a warm familiarity. If, in fact, these words stand for nothing, then the passage makes no sense.

So, as you critically evaluate an argument, scrutinize the writer's use of abstractions to see whether he views them as something in their own right. Analyse and translate them into everyday experience. We have to ask what difference do they make to our lives: how are we to come to understand the way they work in our experience? When the writer uses an abstraction ask yourself certain routine questions:

Critical evaluation

1. What do these words stand for?
2. What is their objective meaning?
3. What difference do they make to our lives?
4. How can we come to understand the way they work in our experience?

Example

Political culture

In a political culture where basic, verifiable facts cease to matter, political debate is inevitably debased. Add to that a polarised media, in which people access the truth they seek, rather than the one that exists, and it has given rise to bespoke realities: people don't just think different things, they know different things. And some of the things they think they know are just wrong.

As you read this, you may have thought that there was something quite odd about his use of the abstraction 'truth' and, therefore, the conclusions he draws from it. First, he says, 'people access the truth they seek, rather than the one that exists', which could mean that we should be satisfied with what we know, rather than search for the answers to problems and thereby improve our understanding of the world. This, of course, sounds odd and unconvincing.

In fact, he seems to mean something different, as if we search only for those truths that we want to find. He appears to be using the concept of 'truth' to suggest that there are different types of truth, different grades perhaps, some not so true as others, which conflicts with our understanding of the concept. By 'truth', we mean something that is absolute, beyond doubt. At the risk of framing a trivial tautology, by definition a 'truth' is not something that may or may not be true. By the same token, there cannot be grades of truth, some more true than others: either something is true or it isn't.

He then develops his argument by claiming that this has 'given rise to bespoke realities: people don't just think different things, they know different things'. Either this amounts to the trivial statement that all of us just know different things, or he's saying that there are different realities, in which there are different truths and different knowledge

inhabiting what appears to be parallel universes. In this sense truth is relative, which is not what we normally mean by the concept. Truth is more than mere 'belief' or what we might just 'think' compared with what others think: it can be pinned down in objective and rational conditions that must apply to achieve an accurate representation of reality.

Of course, he may be developing a postmodernist argument that our knowledge is inescapably determined by the culture in which it is pursued. But this seems doubtful. This is an article devoted to discussing the Tea party and its impact on American politics, so it seems unlikely that the author is, in fact, proposing anything quite so speculative. If he is, then he really ought to explain this. Otherwise we have little choice but to dismiss the argument, because he hasn't made clear the meaning of these abstractions.

This illustrates just how difficult it is to negotiate abstractions that haven't been grounded in explanations that reflect the concrete reality of our lives. To be fair on the writer we cannot put ideas into the argument that are not his, but if he leaves the abstractions without this content we have to dismiss the argument as meaningless.

Example

A physics teacher and postmodernism

In 1996, Alan Sokal, a physics teacher at New York University, was so outraged at the nonsense that some postmodernist thinkers were publishing about objectivity in science that he wrote a hoax paper which parodied the worst of these arguments. Despite the fact that his paper made no sense and was just built

around quotes from these writers, his paper was published unchanged by a peer reviewed journal. He considered his biggest challenge was to write sufficiently incomprehensibly: 'I had to revise and revise to achieve the desired level of unclarity'², he explained.

In other cases, such nonsense is created with no intention of it having any objective meaning or cash value at all. Instead, the abstractions have just subjective value in their capacity to evoke certain emotional reactions. Political propaganda, speeches and editorials can be full of abstractions with not a concrete word in sight. Their aim is to evoke a certain type of response.

Exercises

1. *The Freeman*

The following passage is taken from the first issue of *The Freeman*, a magazine for American conservatives. Read it through and identify all the concrete words in it. In other words, look for pronouns that indicate a particular person and names, numbers, dates, times and words that indicate gender.

In terms of current labels, *The Freeman* will be at once radical, liberal, conservative and reactionary. It will be radical because it will go to the root of questions. It will be liberal because it will stand for the maximum of individual liberty, for tolerance of all honest diversity of opinion, and for faith in the efficacy of solving our internal problems by discussion

² *The Sunday Times*, 18 January 1998.

and reason rather than suppression and force. It will be conservative because it believes in conserving the great constructive achievements of the past. And it will be reactionary if that means reacting against ignorant and reckless efforts to destroy precisely what is most precious in our great economic, political and cultural heritage in the name of alleged 'progress'.

In fact there are no concrete words in this passage at all. With passages like this, that are full of abstract, general, metaphorical language, there is nothing to argue with. All that you read will prompt unanswered philosophical questions. If the author fails to address these, you are left with the conclusion that it all depends what he means by 'honest', 'constructive', 'ignorant' and all the rest.

2. The Founding Fathers

In this exercise identify the abstraction and explain the problem that is created by the writer's use of it.

The time has come for us to realize that our founding fathers had some mistaken ideas. For example, in the Preamble to the Constitution we read that "all men are created equal." But this is obviously false. Some are stronger than others. Some have more intelligence than others. Some have drives which lead to success, whereas others seem to lack these drives. All men are not created equal.

2. Burlington Mills

The following passage is a commercial aimed at the domestic audience in the US. Read it through and identify all of the concrete words in the passage.

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You've heard it said that we must protect our freedom lest it be lost. The reverse is even truer. Why not let our freedoms protect us, lest we be lost? For freedom isn't delicate – it's a tough, old bird. Freedom has always been, and is today, the source of America's strength.

Our freedom to think, to choose, to act has not only enriched the American character—it has given us a material standard of living that is the envy of the world. We are able to take for granted television and autos, food and clothing in abundance, precisely because freedom emancipates the mind and hand.

Freedom is constructive – while tyranny confines man and finally destroys him. That is why, in time to come, the best protection of our freedom will be more freedom. It will enable America to resist tyranny without resorting to it ... to form a great military force without being militarized ... to save a world without enslaving it.

In this climate of freedom, Burlington Mills will continue to do what it could do nowhere else on earth: fulfill the responsibility of its freedom by creating better fabrics, at better prices, for more people.³

As you can see, this passage has practically no concrete words in it, just four: 'today', 'man', 'you' and 'him'.

³ This and *The Freeman* passage are taken from Rudolf Flesch. *The Art of Clear Thinking* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951), pps. 55 and 57.

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