

## GETTING OUR BEARINGS: A SCHEMA FOR THREE WAYS OF KNOWING

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*Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer [her]; another comes to your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponents, depending upon the quality of your ally's assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress.<sup>1</sup>*

So it is that every time we embark into a new territory in understanding and of participation in organizations. Arriving after the conversation has been going on, we enter our parlors (old haunts or the new hot spots), at first hardly understanding the meaning of the heated debate, and we listen until we get the tenor of the conversation.<sup>2</sup> Yet, once we

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- 1 Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action*, 3rd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 110-111.
- 2 Therefore, research is truly a communal activity in that those in the parlor decide, rather than the individual, whether the researcher's findings are meaningful. For most pastors and teachers, we are first invited into a parlor by a colleague who takes us to a professional meeting, asks us to analyze part of his or her data, or prompts us to publish the paper we wrote for him or her. In these ways, and other more subtle ones, theological education initiates us to the particular contours and etiquettes of the parlors that constitute our work. Subsequently, we begin to enter and exit parlors as our interests wax and wane. For some of us, it takes years to get the tenor of the argument before we risk putting in our oars. Others of us immediately set to rowing because of the nature of our work (e.g., working with a local congregation's governing board as a newly ordained pastor).

get the gist of the argument by learning vocabularies, methodologies, and content, we put in our oars. Such is the nature of our many conversations in church councils, faculty meetings, as well as in our research and writings.

As leaders, we are sometimes confused, or simply irritated, by another's argument and, likewise, others are baffled by or annoyed with our perspectives. Sometimes the principal reason for such discord is the differing approaches with which people come to their understandings. Consequently, as leaders, if we can better recognize and appreciate the multiple ways we, and others, come to know the world around us, we would function as better leaders in our various parlor conversations.

Often times, our various parlors are filled with vigorous debate. When people differ, though, one way to deal with the conflict is to retrace the steps by which conclusions were reached and examine them for their legitimacy. Thomas S. Kuhn<sup>3</sup> has written about such a relation between what we know and how we know it:

If there is a disagreement about conclusions, the parties to the ensuing debate can retrace their steps one by one, checking each against prior stipulation. At the end of that process one or the other must concede that he has made a mistake, violated a previously accepted rule. After that concession he has no recourse, and his opponent's proof is then compelling.<sup>4</sup>

Most of us have been part of debate focused on technique, this retracing of steps to discern how each participant knows. The issue Kuhn raises is that once we retrace our steps to determine the correctness of the technique, and once our conclusions are determined by the correctness of technique, then it is solely technique that has determined what the community believes to be truth. In other words, the *righteousness* of the technique establishes the legitimacy of the argument rather than the content. To my

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3 Thomas Kuhn earned his Ph.D. in theoretical physics but took, as he states, "a drastic shift in my career plans, a shift from physics to history of science and then, gradually, from relatively straightforward historical problems back to the more philosophical concerns that had initially led me to history," Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), v.

4 Ibid., 199.

mind, to prioritize technique over content recalls the same problem that Hans-Georg Gadamer addressed in his magnum opus, *Truth and Method*.<sup>5</sup>

There are two interrelated aspects of our parlor conversations that orient us - the process (*how*) and content (*what*) of knowing. And these two aspects are circular in nature; in other words, the *how* and the *what* shape, frame, and even create each other.<sup>6</sup> In this article, I offer a schema of *how* we know and *what* we know. The purpose of the schema is to illustrate only some of the many elements that are operative before, during, and after our varied parlor conversations and, thus, the schema is neither comprehensive nor exhaustive.<sup>7</sup> I offer this schema because I believe it enables us to be better leaders and teachers. By mapping the interplay between the *how* we know and *what* we know, we may enjoy more reflective and productive parlor conversations. Such a map helps us grapple with the more fundamental issues of process and content, which are beyond technique (the specific steps we took to arrive at our conclusions).<sup>8</sup>

## A PROPOSED SCHEMA<sup>9</sup>

This schema is a continuum made up of three paradigms<sup>10</sup> of *how* we know *what* we know that have emerged chronologically over the past two centuries and are still

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<sup>5</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, eds. G. Barden and J. Cumming (New York: Seabury Press, 1975).

<sup>6</sup> See James J. Scheurich, *Research Method in the Postmodern* (Washington, D.C.: The Falmer Press, 1997), 29.

<sup>7</sup> I do not believe a schema could be produced that captures “the reality” of all that is going in research (or knowing). Additionally, I am writing (and you are reading) about these paradigms from a particular worldview. So the schema offered here is my sense making of how I see and what I see as a theological educator as a white male in the North-American context.

<sup>8</sup> Additionally, the schema provides leaders with a vocabulary with which to discuss worldviews.

<sup>9</sup> A paradigm map could be drawn in various ways. An often used map is the “modernism-postmodernism” one. I would argue that this dichotomy is not as helpful to understanding epistemologies because not only is it either/or but it leaves little room for overlap between them. I think it is more helpful to consider paradigms along a continuum and that we are positioned along the field when considering a particular issue and concern.

<sup>10</sup> Yvonna S. Lincoln and Egon G. Guba state that “inquiry, whether in the physical or social sciences, has passed through a number of ‘paradigm eras,’ periods in which certain sets of basic beliefs guided inquiry in quite different ways.” *Naturalistic Inquiry* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1985), 14.

operative in the West - (1) positivism, (2) interpretivism, and (3) constructivism. These paradigms are culturally embedded and govern much of our work as teachers, pastors, and religious leaders. I do not intend to ultimately privilege one paradigm over another.<sup>11</sup> I do, however, believe we need to be as aware as possible of how people arrive at their particular conclusions.

The schema offered here is one way to begin reflecting on how people's perspectives are shaped by the particular paradigm, or worldview, from which they operate. The schema's continuum, though, is not Reality<sup>12</sup> nor does it correspond to three distinct *realities*. Rather, it is intended to be a heuristic tool to help us think about *how* we know and *what* we know. Our various locations on the continuum are normative; they govern our orientations. Therefore, our worldview both enables and limits our research because it is only one way, among many, by which we might understand.

To begin the discussion about the three paradigms, first consider this often repeated story of the three umpires who disagree about the task of calling balls and strikes. The first one says, "I call 'em as they is" (*positivist*). The second one says, "I call 'em as I see 'em" (*interpretivist*). And the third umpire says, "They ain't nothing 'til I call 'em" (*constructivist*).

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<sup>11</sup> While I do not intend to devalue any of the three paradigms, I understand that I cannot help but to think and write about these ways of knowing apart from my own worldview. The classic question for any paper like this is reflexive: What paradigm is the author writing from when putting this paper together? Consciously, I am attempting to use contributions from all three paradigms. I am enough of a positivist to think that I can name and describe three types that exist *out there* for us to see. I am enough of an interpretivist to recognize that these three types do not exist in ideal form and that this paper is thereby an expression of my attempt to participate in a larger conversation in which this paper is not the only voice. And I am enough of a constructivist to appreciate the way power shapes knowledge and, thus, this paper is an expression of my own power in the conversation. Therefore, the paper ends in questions with the hope of not disempowering readers.

<sup>12</sup> Throughout the paper, I capitalize Reality when I am referring to the positivist conception of the world. Because the three paradigms concern worldviews, or reality-views, it is important to understand whose concept of reality is being portrayed and advanced. This understanding is especially important for this paper since I am writing it from my worldview and you are reading it from yours - such are the enabling and limiting aspects of paradigms.

Now consider a case study. Imagine you are a pastor in a county just outside of Atlanta, Georgia. Your local school board elects to place a sticker in all the high school biology textbooks.<sup>13</sup> The sticker reads, “This textbook contains material on evolution. Evolution is a theory, not a fact, regarding the origin of living things. This material should be approached with an open mind, studied carefully, and critically considered.” Some parents do not approve of the sticker and sue the school board to have the sticker removed. After winning their case, the attorney for the disapproving parents celebrates, saying: “This is a great day for the students; they’re going to be permitted to learn science unadulterated by religious dogma.”

The Sunday following the verdict, someone in your congregation’s governing body raises the issue. It seems that several of your church leaders have strong feelings about the case and a variety of points of view. Here is just part of your conversation:

Ruth (52-year old, white female): “While there are some gaps in the theory on creationism, I still feel that it is the true theory. Evolution has its problems, as do the other theories. I read somewhere that Neanderthal man turned out to be an elderly man with arthritis or something. I don’t claim to be a scholar, or even well educated, but one thing sticks in my mind. While evolution is a new theory, creationism has been a theory for thousands of years and has yet to be disproved. Besides, how God created the world is right there at the beginning of the Bible.”

Richard (66-year old, male): “It is a fact that the earth is more than three billion years old and that life has been around for at least half of that period. It is a fact that some animals, like birds, living today were not always here and other creatures of the past are no longer living. There used to be dinosaurs, and there are none now. It is a fact that all living forms come from previous living forms. So everything living comes from creatures that were different.

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<sup>13</sup> This case is based on a similar story from Cobb County, Georgia but is fictitious and intended to be only illustrative.

No one can deny these facts any more than they can deny that the earth is round, rotates on its axis, and revolves around the sun.”<sup>14</sup>

John (32-year old, white male): “Well, when I read Genesis, I hear two different stories about God creating the world. And for the longest time, I wondered which one was true? Both? Neither? Then it seemed to me that the two different stories were not about how God created the world but that God created. So for me the Genesis account of creation is not about science but about faith and the theory of evolution is not about faith but about the how, about science.”

Mary (42-year old, black female): “I do not think creationism or evolution is the issue here. I think it is about getting the fundamental Christian perspective into the school systems. And to do this, they need to change the way we talk about Genesis. They use scientific language to label what we read in Genesis so that they can argue that it should be taught alongside evolution in public schools. So they changed a Bible story into ‘creation science.’ I think this has more to do with their control of education than competing theories.”

How would you, as a leader or teacher, respond to each of these people? Is there one or more with which you resonate? If so, is that resonance because of the content of what he or she said or the paradigm with which they approach the issue (or both)? Where do you imagine this parlor conversation going from here? How does your perception of the content of what each person says change if their age, gender, and race were different?

My hunch is that such conversations are standard fare in our lives. With an awareness of the various paradigms at play in our communities, the hope is that we may be better listeners and, as such, more effective leaders helping people engage one another we learn and grow from our interaction. So with this case in mind, let us consider three paradigms of

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<sup>14</sup> This statement is adapted from Richard C. Lewontin, “Evolution/Creation Debate: A Time for Truth,” *Bioscience* 31 (1981): 559.

the schema and learn what is, at least in part, operative behind our four church members' comments.

## POSITIVISM<sup>15</sup>

The *Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion* defines positivism "as a family of philosophies characterized by an extremely *positive evaluation* of science and scientific method."<sup>16</sup> This positive evaluation of research (scientific) can be characterized by seven general claims.<sup>17</sup>

First, Reality is unique, tangible, orderly, fragmentable, and material. This worldview enables us to predict and control Reality because we classify variables as either dependent or independent. For instance, what is the temperature increase when electricity passes through a copper wire? To answer the question, we measure the temperature (dependent variable) when a specified amount of amps (independent variable) is passed through a particular gauge of wire (another independent variable). Thus, as positivists, we aim to find out what is universally or absolutely true regardless of the situation (e.g., to find out what is true of all metals' capacity to conduct electricity).

Second, we need to be separated from what we study. That is, in order to be objective, we must be located *outside* of Reality and thus operate completely independent from that which is being studied (i.e., who the observer is has nothing to do with the temperature change in the copper wire). In the positivistic scientific method, this separation is not only achievable but *required* to produce valid, reliable, and reproducible outcomes. In other words, objectivity is essential

<sup>15</sup> For the followers of Kant, "...the universal and objective validity of proven hypotheses is guaranteed precisely because the subject constituting the fields of objects is a universal and purely formal one. The explanatory power of science is the consequence of its basis in a logical, epistemic subject whose activities can be generalized and understood as context-free operations." Paul Rabinow and William Sullivan, eds., *Interpretive Social Science: A Reader* (Berkeley: University of California, 1979), 3.

<sup>16</sup> William L. Reese, *Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities, 1980), 450. Positivism within the social sciences is first seen in Emile Durkhiem, who encouraged social scientists to examine social facts as the variables that influence people. See also Auguste Comte who stated that what is found as genuine is based on verifiable claims based on a reproducible method and not on human reason and belief.

<sup>17</sup> Not all these characteristics need be in place in order for one to have a positivistic worldview and so are listed as descriptors.

for us to know *what* Reality is. Therefore, safeguards - e.g., control groups, double-blind tests, and random sampling - are put in place to remove our particular biases and thus guarantee impartiality. As Jerome Kirk and Marc Miller argue:

Objectivity, though the term has been taken by some to suggest a naïve and inhumane version of vulgar positivism, is the essential basis of all good research. Without it, the only reason the reader of the research might have for accepting the conclusions of the investigator would be an authoritarian respect for the person of the author. Objectivity is a simultaneous realization of as much reliability and validity as possible. Reliability is the degree to which the finding is independent of accidental circumstances of the research, and validity is the degree to which the finding is interpreted in a correct way.<sup>18</sup>

The more objective the method is, the more reliable the findings are.

The third claim is generalizability, namely, what we find to be true for the particular is true for the general. For instance, we do not have to test all the copper in the universe to know how much its temperature rises when a specified amount of current is passed through it. Rather, after we establish what is true about a representative sampling, we know with relative certainty that it is true for the whole. In this way, Reality is material and easily fragmented.

Fourth, causality is linear; the dependent variable (i.e., the increase of temperature of the wire) changes in a mathematically predictable way when the independent variable is changed (i.e., the increased amount of amperes). Additionally, we may exclude unwanted variables by, for example, working in a laboratory. Linear causality is at the heart of prediction and control. In the case of our copper wire, because we know the temperature increase, we can determine the amount of insulation required to keep us from burning ourselves.

Fifth, knowledge is nomothetic or law-based. If our goal

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<sup>18</sup> Jerome Kirk and Marc L. Miller, *Reliability and Validity in Qualitative Research* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1986), 20.



is to produce or validate empirical theory, we understand Reality to operate according to certain laws or patterns and we are able to discover those laws (or origins) for they exist independent of ourselves. For example, most texts explain gravity as Newton's discovery of the truth (as compared to an interpretation or invention). "In addition to his laws of motion, Newton discovered a law to describe the force of gravity, which states that every body attracts every other body with a force that is proportional to the mass of each body."<sup>19</sup> Newton did not *invent* this theory but *discovered* this truth about Reality.

Sixth, knowledge is progressive; that is, we are moving closer and closer to knowing Reality fully. Steven Hawking, the renowned physicist, asks whether or not there can ever really be full knowledge of reality, or a complete unified theory. He answers, "There seems to be three possibilities:

- 1) There really is a complete unified theory, which we will someday discover if we are smart enough.
- 2) There is no ultimate theory of the universe, just an infinite sequence of theories that describe the universe more and more accurately.
- 3) There is no theory of the universe; events cannot be predicted beyond a certain extent but occur in a random and arbitrary manner."<sup>20</sup>

Hawking believes that the third option has been "effectively removed" and that there is "a good chance" that the first will be mathematically found.<sup>21</sup> Notice that both the first and second options support the idea that knowledge increases over time and that such accumulation either constitutes a grand unified theory or, at least, "continuous progress toward deeper and deeper truths."<sup>22</sup>

The Seventh aspect of positivism is its preferred procedure for investigation, namely, the scientific method. There is an important distinction here between a paradigm and a research method. A paradigm is how we understand the world. A

<sup>19</sup> Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time* (New York: Bantam Books, 1990), 16.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 166-7.

<sup>22</sup> Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*, 3rd ed., (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2002), 100.

research method is the process by which we investigate the world. Understandably, our paradigms predispose us to certain research methodologies. In the case of positivism, that preferred process is the classical scientific method.<sup>23</sup>

Briefly, when we follow the scientific method, we (1) start with a well-defined issue or question, (2) formulate a hypothesis given a particular theory (deductive in nature), (3) devise an experimental procedure using valid and reliable measures to test the hypothesis, (4) utilize a controlled setting (e.g., a laboratory) so as to isolate the independent and dependent variables, (5) employ the languages of logic and mathematics to test and explain Reality, and (6) generalize about the findings using a scientific report presentation.

Positivism, though, has not only significantly influenced the traditional natural sciences like physics and chemistry but also the so-called *soft* sciences like philosophy and history. Ronald Bontekoe notes that:

In the heyday of positivism, it was a familiar refrain that the disciplines of philosophy, history, and literary and art criticism, in order to become truly human *sciences* - which is to say, disciplines concerned with the acquisition of genuine knowledge - must adopt as far as possible the methods of the natural sciences.<sup>24</sup>

Many pastors and teachers today in such fields as biblical studies, theology, and history consider the scientific method ill-suited for their work. The scientific method does not produce heuristic outcomes when studying texts, pedagogies, practices, local congregations, histories, spiritualities, and traditions. Yet, we in the North American context are still inculcated with a positivistic worldview for it has been particularly generative and productive, yielding amazing *discoveries* into the mysteries of the universe. In many respects, positivism reigns supreme in Western culture as a worldview that produces practical knowledge. For instance,

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<sup>23</sup> Remember, a paradigm is the way in which a person knows the world and stands behind his or her research methodology. So a biologist or physicist could employ the scientific method in her research while not viewing the world through a positivistic lens.

<sup>24</sup> Ronald Bontekoe, *Dimensions of the Hermeneutic Circle* (Atlantic Highlands, NH: Humanities, 1996), 92.

consider ways we evaluate arguments positively with such terms as “valid,” “reliable,” and “objective,” and, negatively, “bias,” “subjective,” and “anecdotal.”

So is positivism illustrated by any of the participants in our textbook sticker case? Explicitly, I hear positivism in both Ruth’s and Richard’s responses.<sup>25</sup> First, they believe that there is ultimately a correct answer to the origin question and, second, that we can establish it through objective investigation. Therefore, to make their cases, both Ruth and Richard present evidence (such as “Neanderthal man” or “It is a fact that...”) and use scientific terms (e.g., theory, fact) to make their cases.

Their technique and vocabulary suggest their fundamental agreement that there is one Reality that can be discovered. Interestingly, they do not agree about the origin question but use similar methods to make their cases. So Ruth places the biblical account of creation under the microscope and finds that “while there are some gaps in the theory on creationism, [she] still feels that it is the true theory.” In the same way, Richard points to the “facts” and follows a pattern of reasoning that substantiates his case. One significant reason for this similar approach to opposite conclusions is Ruth and Richard’s positivistic worldview.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> In this case study, I am using the statements made by the four speakers as ideal types to help flesh out what I mean by positivism, interpretivism, and constructivism. However, people are much more complex and wonderfully diverse than to fit simply into one of these three worldviews. More often, people move from one paradigm to another depending upon the circumstances and topic of the conversation.

<sup>26</sup> It should be pointed out that among positivists, there would probably be heated contestation about what constitutes positivist methods of research and argumentation. But that is beyond the scope of this essay. Rather, we are concerned with the broad contours of a positivistic worldview, regardless of whether or not one pursues positivistic methods adequately. That is, we are concerned with the assumptions about what is possible to know and how one would go about knowing it.

**TABLE 1: COMPARISON OF POSITIVISM AND INTERPRETIVISM<sup>27</sup>**

Category	Positivism	Interpretivism
<b>Reality</b> ( <i>what we know</i> )	unique tangible fragmentable material	multiple interpretations holistic meaning
<b>Instrument</b> ( <i>how we know</i> )	scientific method	researcher as instrument
<b>Causality</b> ( <i>relationship between what and how</i> )	linear	mutual
<b>Axiology</b> ( <i>philosophy on values</i> )	value free	value laden
<b>Research setting</b>	laboratory	natural setting
<b>Reporting</b>	scientific report	case study/thematic
<b>Knowledge</b>	nomothetic ( <i>theory/ law</i> )	ideographic ( <i>contextual-knowledge</i> )
<b>Application</b>	relative certainty	tentative
<b>Generalizations</b>	accontextual	contextual

## INTERPRETIVISM

Beginning in the nineteenth century, some interpreters of biblical and legal texts rejected positivism's orientation - the "empiricist, logical atomistic, designative, representational account of meaning and knowledge."<sup>28</sup> Their rejection fueled a movement that today is quite widespread. Whereas positivism works from "a conception of knowledge as a correct representation of an independent Reality, and was almost exclusively interested in the issue of establishing the validity of scientific knowledge claims,"<sup>29</sup> interpretivism asserts that knowledge is contingent on context. "One can only interpret the meaning of something from some perspective, a certain

<sup>27</sup> This chart is based on work by Lincoln and Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry*, 37, and James Scheurich's lectures at the University of Texas, Austin, Texas, September 1998.

<sup>28</sup> Thomas A. Schwandt, "Three Epistemological Stances for Qualitative Inquiry: Interpretivism, Hermeneutics, and Social Construction," in *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 2nd ed., eds. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000), 196.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

standpoint, a praxis, or a situational context, whether one is reporting on one's own findings or reporting the perspectives of people being studied (and thus reporting their standpoint or perspective)."<sup>30</sup>

To illustrate the basic differences between positivism and interpretivism, Table 1 offers a general comparison between the two.

Interpretivists understand *reality* as plural not singular. "There are multiple constructed realities that can be studied only holistically; inquiry into these multiple realities will inevitably diverge (each inquiry raises more questions than it answers) so that prediction and control are unlikely outcomes although some level of understanding (*verstehen*) can be achieved."<sup>31</sup> Instead of the positivistic aim of discovering what is, the interpretivistic aim is to make *sense* or *meaning* of a particular situation. In this way, interpretivism resists positivism's claim that knowledge is only valid when it transcends context and time.

Interpretivists hold that "all human understanding is never 'without words' and never 'outside of time.' . . . that language and history are always both conditions and limits of understanding."<sup>32</sup> This shift from *discovery* to *sense making* has to do partly with a change in the location of the observer. For the positivist, the observer stands outside Reality "on his or her own platform while manipulating the world, and arranging through methodology that the data should speak for themselves. . . . [In other words] the inquirer and the object of inquiry are independent; the knower and the known constitute a discrete dualism."<sup>33</sup> By contrast, the interpretivist locates the observer within his or her reality. "The inquirer and the 'object' of inquiry interact to influence one another; knower and known are inseparable."<sup>34</sup>

Consequently, the observer intimately impacts what is seen and how it is seen. The crux of the issue is the interpretive moment as it occurs throughout the research

<sup>30</sup> Patton, *Qualitative Research*, 115.

<sup>31</sup> Lincoln and Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry*, 94.

<sup>32</sup> Brice R. Wachterhauser, ed., *Hermeneutics and Modern Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York, 1986) 5-6.

<sup>33</sup> Lincoln and Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry*, 92, 94.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

process. And, into this moment, the researcher brings considerable conscious and unconscious baggage - other related research, training within a particular discipline (such as anthropology), epistemological inclinations, institutional and funding imperatives, conceptual schemes about story-telling or power, social positionality (the intersection of race, class, gender, sexual-orientation, among other key social locations), macro-cultural or civilizational frames (including the research frame itself); and individual idiosyncrasies, the interactions of which are themselves complex and ambiguous.<sup>35</sup>

Additionally, interpretivism does not attempt to make claims about the general, only the particular. As Gadamer states, interpretivism is "interested in knowing, not how men [sic], people, or states develop *in general*, but, quite on the contrary, how *this* man [sic], *this* people, or *this* state became what it is; how each of these *particulars* could come to pass and end up specifically *there*."<sup>36</sup> In other words, individual and communal narratives are the means by which we make sense of the particular.

Whereas positivists prefer the languages of mathematics and logic, interpretivists prefer narrative and, consequently, do not contend that narratives correspond in a one-to-one relationship with Reality. Rather, words function as ideograms (symbols of realities) and causality is neither linear nor formulaic but rather mutual-a product that results from the dynamic interplay of the observer, her context, and the readers'/hearers' particular contexts.

The traditional criticism of interpretivism is that it is subjective, biased, and/or anecdotal because of this mutuality in interpretation. In fact, this criticism is helpful in understanding interpretivism because the response to such criticism is that of course it is. If the observer cannot remove herself from reality to gain an *objective* position, then she is by definition *subjective*. Moreover, the interpretivists claim *all* research, even in the hard sciences, is inherently biased.

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<sup>35</sup> Scheurich, *Research Method*, 74.

<sup>36</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The Problem of Historical Consciousness," trans. Jeff L. Close, in *Interpretive Social Science: a Reader*, eds. Paul Rabinow and William M. Sullivan, 103-160 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 116.

Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle<sup>37</sup> captures well this understanding: "What we observe is not nature itself, but nature exposed to our method of questioning."<sup>38</sup>

With regard to research settings, interpretivists reject the laboratory in favor of immersing themselves in their contexts. They do so because the observer - not the method - is instrumental to understanding. Based on their involvement in their contexts, they report their findings as themes, often invoking symbols, diagrams, metaphors, images, or narratives. To the extent that a theory is involved, it functions as a prism that refracts certain aspects of the situation. It is not law based on how Reality is put together but is rather ideographic - communication by symbols.

Finally, interpretivists strive to avoid making general claims from their findings but rather provide a thick description of their particular contexts. Patton describes thick description as "the capacity to open up a world to the reader through rich, detailed, and concrete descriptions of people and places in such a way that we [the readers/hearers] can understand the phenomenon studied and draw our own interpretations about meanings and significance."<sup>39</sup> Such thick descriptions increase the likelihood that the reader may find meaning(s) appropriate for his or her own context. As such, the locus of control shifts from the writer to the reader. The reader decides what conclusions, if any, are transferable.

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<sup>37</sup> "Heisenberg demonstrated his uncertainty principle by proposing, by way of an ideal or 'thought' experiment, a remarkably uncomplicated mental image. At the Copenhagen Conference he asked his audience of leading scientists from around the world to imagine someone holding a gun in his hand. With this gun the person is able to 'shoot' a single electron into a dark chamber that is totally empty of all other atoms, even those of air. An observer of this process has an ideal 'microscope' with which the movement of the electron through the dark chamber can be observed by directing a single photon of light onto it. (At least one photon of light is necessary or it couldn't be observed). What happens, however, as Heisenberg explained, is that the photon, as it strikes the electron, throws it out of its predicted path of movement. 'By the very act of lighting up the electron's movement, that movement would be disrupted' (Moore, 1966, p. 151). From this, the conclusion is that it is impossible both to see the electron and to measure its velocity. At best, the observer would be able to calculate from the observational data 'the probability of its being in a certain approximate area' (Moore, 1966, p. 152)." Daniel D. Tranel, "A Lesson from the Physicists," *Personnel and Guidance Journal* 59:7 (1981): 426.

<sup>38</sup> Werner Heisenberg, *Physics and Philosophy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), 58.

<sup>39</sup> Patton, *Qualitative Research*, 438.

Hermeneutics, classically defined as the method of interpretation reserved for the priesthood and lawyers, is illustrative of interpretivism. The contemporary roots of hermeneutics began in the nineteenth century with Friedrich Schleiermacher, a biblical exegete.<sup>40</sup> The field of hermeneutics extended to historical studies with Wilhelm Dilthey (1867) and ontological studies with Martin Heidegger (1923). In 1960, Hans Gadamer published his magnum opus, *Truth and Method*, which remains "the single most important work in the field of hermeneutics."<sup>41</sup>

Gadamer significantly impacted Continental philosophy in *Truth and Method* by reestablishing the historical notion of hermeneutics. Gadamer broke with the positivists by embracing a hermeneutical understanding of *other*. Gadamer's hermeneutic "allows us to understand how it is possible to know in the 'historical object' the genuinely 'other' despite 'my own' convictions and opinions; that is to say, how it is possible to know them both."<sup>42</sup>

Central to Gadamer's hermeneutic is the notion that horizons of meaning, generated within traditions by individuals, groups, and whole peoples overlap and inform one another - a fusion of horizons.<sup>43</sup> "Gadamer wants to show how the tradition communicates its goods, passes on its wealth. He describes a process in which horizons are formed and reformed, in which they mutually enrich and expand one another."<sup>44</sup> For Gadamer, a horizon is "the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point."<sup>45</sup> Our particular horizons are created by our prejudgments or prejudices, which have "a threefold temporal character: they are handed down to us through tradition; they are constitutive of what we are now (and are in the process of becoming); and they are anticipatory - always open to

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<sup>40</sup> In Greek mythology, Hermes served as both messenger and patron for the gods. His deliverance of divine messages (*understanding*) was never fully disclosive nor straightforward, since Hermes also served as the patron god of cunning and theft. How appropriate, then, that this method of interpretation has the same root since neither discloses all there is to be known.

<sup>41</sup> Bontekoe, *Dimensions*, 9.

<sup>42</sup> Gadamer, "The Problem of Historical Consciousness," 159.

<sup>43</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 271.

<sup>44</sup> John D. Caputo, *Radical Hermeneutic: Repetition, Deconstruction, and the Hermeneutic Project* (Indianapolis: Indiana University, 1987), 108.

<sup>45</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 269.



future testing and transformation.”<sup>46</sup> Our horizons, therefore, are continually formed by the interplay of both internal and external influences as our predilections are stretched. In other words, changing contexts always exert power on the ways we continually (re)define ourselves.

Gadamer’s fusion of horizons, specifically his concept of a grand horizon, illustrates well the interpretivist’s worldview. We might be tempted to classify interpretivism as relativism if “the relativist believes that there is (or can be) a nonreducible plurality of such conceptual schemes [and] challenges the claim that [the concepts of truth, Reality, or norms] can have a determinate and univocal significance.”<sup>47</sup> But this is not so for Gadamer. Gadamer argues that a higher universality does exist. He states that all of our horizons involve “the attainment of a higher universality [a univocal significance] that overcomes, not only our own particularity, but also that of the other.”<sup>48</sup> Consequently, interpretivism denies absolutes, both universalism *and* relativism. Instead it affirms *realities* that are understood through the interplay of the particular horizons involved.

Again, returning to the textbook-sticker case, John’s comments are representative of Interpretivism. John does not understand the Bible to be conclusive about how God created and, consequently, states that he hears “two different stories about God creating the world.” When John first read the two accounts, he wondered which one was true. This true/false dichotomy, though, is typically characteristic of a positivistic perspective, and John might have first engaged these passages as a positivist. However, John eventually does not try to reconcile the two accounts from a scientific approach but rather engages them with a more hermeneutical approach. Notice that this hermeneutical approach does not reconcile the seeming inconsistencies between the two accounts but, rather, it changes his assumptions. When John first read the accounts, he assumed that the Bible was objectively consistent (which probably created his dilemma in the first place). But when he moved away from a scientific approach, John began to interpret that the passages were not about “science but about faith.”

<sup>46</sup> Bernstein, 140-141.

<sup>47</sup> Bernstein, 8.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 272.

So is this the *right* answer? It might be if John takes a positivistic approach. But in his short statement, John does not want to make absolute and final claims about what either the Genesis accounts or the theory evolution is about. Rather, John offers his *interpretation* as the way he makes sense out of them. He does this by stating his perspective in the first person rather than as an expert who knows what is true - "I hear..." and "So for me..." From an interpretivist's perspective, there is the desire to leave room for multiple interpretations that will help make sense out of the data.

## CONSTRUCTIVISM

If interpretivism departs from positivism's objective claims about *how I see* and *what I see*, then constructivism<sup>49</sup> outright rejects the "representational and objective or rational concepts of knowledge and truth; grand, synthetic theorizing meant to comprehend Reality as and in a unified whole; and any concept of self or subjectivity in which it is not understood as produced as an effect of discursive practices."<sup>50</sup> For the positivist, it is *Reality*; for the interpretivist, it is *realities*; but for the constructivist, both Reality and realities are only our construction of *knowledge*. Constructivists work out of an *ontological relativity* that "holds that all tenable statements about existence depend on a worldview, and no worldview is uniquely determined by empirical [positivism] or sense [interpretivism] data about the world."<sup>51</sup> Constructivists strive to change the parameters (see Table 1 above) of the conversation so that it is not about Reality or *realities* (e.g., universalism verses relativism) but rather "constructing *knowledge about reality*."<sup>52</sup> In the (rephrased) words of the

<sup>49</sup> Michael Crotty makes a helpful distinction between *constructivism* and *constructionism*. Constructivism "points out the unique experience of each of us. It suggests that each one's way of making sense of the world is valid and worthy of respect as any other, thereby tending to scotch any hint of a critical spirit. On the other hand, social constructivism emphasizes the hold our culture has on us: it shapes the way in which we see things (even in the way in which we feel things!) and gives us a quite definite view of the world," *The Foundations of Social Research: Meaning and Perspective in the Research Process* (London: Sage, 1998), 58.

<sup>50</sup> Jane Flax, *Thinking Fragments: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and Postmodernism in the Contemporary West* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 188.

<sup>51</sup> Patton, *Qualitative Research*, 97.

<sup>52</sup> William R. Shadish, "Philosophy of Science and the Quantitative-Qualitative Debates: Thirteen Common Errors," *Evaluation and Program Planning* 18:1 (1995): 67.

third umpire, “Knowledge about reality isn’t anything till I construct it.”<sup>53</sup>

Even though constructivists change the parameters from Table 1, Table 2 attempts to locate constructivism with the few categories that do correspond.

**TABLE 2: CONSTRUCTIVISM BY CATEGORY**

Category	Constructivism
<b>Reality</b> ( <i>what we know</i> )	constructed knowledge
<b>Instrument</b> ( <i>how we know</i> )	genealogy of knowledge
<b>Causality</b> ( <i>relationship between what and how we know</i> )	uses of power
<b>Axiology</b> ( <i>philosophy on values</i> )	value driven
<b>Knowledge</b>	socially constructed

The work of Jacques Derrida and Michael Foucault are illustrative of this worldview. Derrida is “remembered as one of the three most important philosophers of the 20th century. No thinker in the last 100 years had a greater impact than he did on people in more fields and different disciplines”<sup>54</sup> because he *deconstructed* many well known books by reading them against the grain. Derrida saw that embedded within texts there are subtexts, subordinated knowledge, and counter claims and, therefore, he sought to lift these competing meanings up. The effect of which was to challenge the ruling or accepted interpretation, to deconstruct the text so that power is distributed among many voices within it and within the social context. If we believe that reality is constructed knowledge, then what we study (e.g., a text in

<sup>53</sup> The point constructivists are making is that our work with “reality” is not with reality itself but is our “knowledge about reality.” They are not arguing about whether or not reality exists nor are they arguing that reality is created by us, they are concerned with how people use power to dictate what reality is and what reality isn’t.

<sup>54</sup> Mark C. Taylor, “What Derrida Really Meant,” *The New York Times*, October 14, 2004.

this case) is neither a smaller part of Reality nor a particular horizon in some grand horizon. Rather it is something to be deconstructed, where “deconstruction is not a dismantling of the structure of a text but a demonstration that it has already dismantled itself.”<sup>55</sup> Derrida’s readings thus “disclosed concealed meanings that created new possibilities for imaginative expression.”<sup>56</sup>

After Derrida’s death in the fall 2004, Mark C. Taylor wrote:

Mr. Derrida’s name is most closely associated with the often cited but rarely understood term “deconstruction.” Initially formulated to define a strategy for interpreting sophisticated written and visual works, deconstruction has entered everyday language. When responsibly understood, the implications of deconstruction are quite different from the misleading clichés often used to describe a process of dismantling or taking things apart. The guiding insight of deconstruction is that every structure - be it literary, psychological, social, economic, political or religious - that organizes our experience is constituted and maintained through acts of exclusion. In the process of creating something, something else inevitably gets left out. These exclusive structures can become repressive and that repression comes with consequences. In a manner reminiscent of Freud, Mr. Derrida insists that what is repressed does not disappear but always returns to unsettle every construction, no matter how secure it seems.<sup>57</sup>

Derrida’s work is quintessentially constructivist because it defines knowledge as socially constructed and consensually validated. His process moves beyond the categorization of opposites (e.g., black/white, speech/writing, beginning/end) in that he delegitimizes such boundaries and, as such, challenges any hierarchical relationship the “opposite” implies. As is often the case, one category is asserted and

<sup>55</sup> Linda H. Peterson, *Emily Brontë Wuthering Heights: Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism*, ed. Ross C. Murfin (Boston: Bedford Books, 1992), 453.

<sup>56</sup> Taylor, “What Derrida Really Meant,” October 14, 2004.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

believed to be superior and the other inferior. Derrida argues that opposites function as dichotomies of hierarchies and when deconstructed are revealed to be constructs of power.

By showing that what was prior and privileged in the old hierarchy (for instance, metaphor and speech) can just as easily seem secondary, the deconstructor causes the formerly privileged term to exchange properties with the formerly devalued one. Causes become effects and (d)evolutions become origins, but the result is neither the destruction of the old order or hierarchy nor the construction of a new one. It is, rather, *deconstruction*.<sup>58</sup>

For the constructivist, therefore, *power* determines *what we see* and *how we see*. Power is the way parlor conversations are created, sustained, and concluded because:

as views of reality are socially constructed and culturally embedded, those views dominant at any time and place will serve the interests and perspectives of those who exercise the most power in a particular culture. By exercising control over language, and therefore control over the very categories of reality that are opened to consciousness, those in power are served.<sup>59</sup>

Constructivists claim two important assumptions. First, social constructions always serve someone's interests - typically the powerful. And second, as Foucault demonstrates, language is the principal vehicle for constructing the society's reality.

Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth; that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms in instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged

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<sup>58</sup> Peterson, *Emily Brontë Wuthering Heights*, 365.

<sup>59</sup> Patton, *Qualitative Research*, 100.

with saying what counts as true.<sup>60</sup>

Language is the vehicle the powerful use to construct dichotomies that serve them. These constructed dichotomies are heinously evident, for example, in war. Chris Hedges, a war reporter, says “the myth of war creates a new, artificial reality. Moral precepts - ones we have spent a lifetime honoring - are jettisoned.”<sup>61</sup> Hedges notes that before the civil war in Yugoslavia, residents spoke Serbian, Bosnian, and Croatian, all of which are of Slavic origin. But in wartime, different groups began to construct a dichotomy of “us” and “them” by changing their own tongues:

The Bosnian Muslims introduced Arabic words and Koranic expressions into the language....Just as energetically the Croats swung the other way, dusting off words from the fifteenth century. The Croatian president at the time, Franjo Tudjman, took delight in inventing new terms. Croatian parliamentarians proposed passing a law that would levy fines and prison terms for those who use “words of foreign origin.”<sup>62</sup>

Philosopher Elizabeth Minnich exemplifies the use of constructivism in her research on the classification of human beings:

The *root problem* reappears in different guises in all fields and throughout the dominant tradition. It is, simply, that while the majority of humankind was excluded from education and the making of what has been called knowledge, *the dominant few not only defined themselves as the inclusive kind of human but also as the norm and the ideal*. A few privileged men defined themselves as constituting mankind/humankind and simultaneously saw themselves as akin to what mankind/humankind ought to be in fundamental ways that distinguished them from all others. Thus, at the same time they removed women and non-privileged men within their

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<sup>60</sup> Michael Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language* (New York: Pantheon, 1972), 131.

<sup>61</sup> Chris Hedges, *War Is a Force that Gives Us Meaning* (New York: Anchor Books, 2003), 35.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

culture and other cultures from “mankind,” they justified that exclusion on the grounds that the excluded were by nature and culture “lesser” people (if they even thought of the others as having “cultures”). Their notion of who was properly human was both exclusive and hierarchical with regard to those they took to be properly subject to them - women in all roles; men who worked with their hands; male servants and slaves; women and men from many other cultures.

Thus, they created root definitions of what it means to be human that, with the concepts and theories that flowed from and reinforced those definitions, made it difficult to think well about, or in the mode of, anyone other than themselves, just as they made it difficult to think honestly about the defining few.<sup>63</sup>

Currently, many scholars in various disciplines assume a constructivist perspective in their research. Examples of such perspectives include feminist and race-based analysis.<sup>64</sup>

Finally, let's return one last time to textbook sticker case and look at Mary's response in light of this constructionist worldview. In some ways, Mary's statement is similar to John's statement. For instance, she also speaks in the first person and seems to want to leave room for other interpretations. Yet, Mary calls our attention away from specific stories and theories by directing us to wonder how power and language are used in the conflict. To do this, she attempts to move the argument away from competing theories and interpretation to an analysis of what might really be going on. “I think this has more to do with their control of education than competing theories.” Interestingly, we do not know what she thinks about the Genesis accounts or evolution because she does not believe it is the issue.

Now imagine, if you will, where the conversation goes

<sup>63</sup> Elizabeth Minnich, *Transforming Knowledge* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 37-38.

<sup>64</sup> For examples in the field of education, see Patricia Ann Lather, “Reinscribing Otherwise: Postmodernism and the Human Sciences,” in *Getting Smart: Feminist Research and Pedagogy with/in the Postmodern*, eds. Patricia Ann Lather and Michael W. Apple, 102-122 (New York: Routledge Press, 1991) for feminism; Terry Kershaw, “Afrocentrism and the Afrocentric Method,” *The Western Journal of Black Studies* 16:3 (1992): 160-168, for race-base analysis; and Jean Anyon, “Social Class and the Hidden Curriculum of Work,” *Journal of Education* 162:1 (1980): 143-167, for critical theory and ethnography.

from here. How might each person respond to the other given his or her worldview? For instance, what might Mike's response be to Mary's perspective? In what ways does your own paradigm move you closer to or farther from each person? Do you imagine the content changing for any of these people if their age, gender, and/or race were different? Most importantly, recognizing each person's worldview, how would you, as a leader, help facilitate mutual understanding among these people such that they learn from one another and grow in grace and knowledge?

The intention of this article has been to offer a schema that enables us to be better pastors, teachers, and leaders by examining three different paradigms that organize *how* and *what* we know. If we are able to be more reflective of the paradigms we operate from and aware of the paradigms others are operating from, our parlor conversations will be the richer for it.



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