

A Reply to Bradley Lewis's "Prozac and the Post-human Politics of Cyborgs"

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It might be appropriate to begin my commentary by disclosing the fact that Brad Lewis and I are good friends. "Oh, no," you might think, "this will be one of those cozy, mutual back-patting, insider sessions that so often take place in the American Philosophical Association group meetings." But never fear. For one thing, I'm no insider to the intellectual circles represented in Dr. Lewis' bibliography. Indeed, I've read only two of the 32 works listed there. (Depending on how you look at it, that may make me either completely unqualified to comment on this paper or exceptionally well-qualified for reasons of critical distance.) Also, friendship and constructive criticism are entirely compatible in my book. And, to paraphrase a philosopher of some importance, "Brad is dear, but the truth is dearer."

I will begin my commentary by identifying some of Brad's theses that I find interesting, important, and well-supported. The second part of my commentary will elaborate my major concerns about the paper. This part will be longer, not because my overall reaction is more critical than favorable, but because exploring different viewpoints generally takes more space and time than noting points of agreement. In my conclusion, I will suggest that many of the paper's insights are likely to sail better if some of the baggage from postmodernism and cultural studies is thrown overboard.

KEY POINTS THAT SEEM ON TARGET

The claims advanced in Brad Lewis' paper form a complex and subtle tapestry so I will have to be selective in highlighting particular strands. I believe all of the following claims are interesting, important, and well-supported (either in the paper

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or elsewhere):

- Science is practiced by people who have economic, political, and other sorts of interests—and these interests crucially affect what views become legitimated, what research gets funded and carried out, and the like.
- Like most other technologies whose medical use has suddenly proliferated, Prozac should be the subject of much more critical examination than it has received.
- This critical examination should be ethical, political and sociological (a familiar point but one often neglected in practice).
- One effect of Prozac is to support a biopsychiatric approach to human suffering that has troubling, conservative political ramifications, such as benefiting certain currently dominant groups.
- Much of the massive amount of money spent on Prozac could be reinvested in the humane goal of universal access to needed psychotherapy. (An implicit claim here is also on target: Lack of price regulation has allowed pharmaceuticals to earn enormous profits by charging prices that are seriously detrimental to the patient population as a whole: drug companies are almost literally “getting away with murder.”)
- Clinical psychiatrists and other therapists, who provide an invaluable service, are increasingly marginalized due to the political and economic domination of such wealthy special-interest groups as the pharmaceuticals and the psychiatrists whom they support and who sell their products.
- The idea that, by selling products, businesses necessarily advance the interests of consumers—by satisfying their desires—is naive and pernicious.
- We need to ask how much the desire for Prozac represents a genuine need, and to what extent, alternatively, it is created by psychiatry and pharmaceuticals (the answer no doubt varying from case to case).
- While Prozac can empower patients in many cases, consumer wariness is justified by the vested interests of other parties.
- “Nothing about us without us” is an excellent democratic principle (and the suggested strategies for promoting it seem promising).

I believe these claims are on target. So does Brad, obviously, which is why he advanced them. The question I urge you to consider now is this: What general philosophical ideas are presupposed by the very assertion of these claims? This question and its answer form a theme that runs through my critique, to which I turn.

CRITIQUE

My first concern about Brad’s paper is the way major claims or their supporting arguments are sometimes stated. Whether the difficulty concerns the underlying

philosophical view or is just a matter of unfortunate wording is not always clear. Consider the first claim that I mentioned above: that science is practiced by real people whose interests crucially affect what gets legitimated, funded, etc. The following is part of the supporting argument: "It is not the world which verifies truth statements, it is other people." Now is this simply a point about the *acceptance* of truth claims, namely, that the social and professional status of a claim is conferred by people?

If so, fine. But, if it is also a claim about *truth-value*—namely, that whether a claim is true or false is independent of the world being determined *only* by people—then we have problems. (Set aside the easy point that people are a part of the world.) The matter of whether there were, in fact, brontosaurus (on any definition or conception you like) at a certain point in time is determined by the state of world at that time. What *claims* about brontosaurus are accepted is determined by people, but the existence or nonexistence of these creatures is not. To the extent that a claim about the world is *about the world*, the world has some role in determining the truth-value of the claim. How that could be intelligibly denied is beyond me. Maybe Brad did not intend to deny that.

But some other statements strongly suggest that he did. Thus he states that the "usual grand narratives for legitimizing Prozac would be narratives of the True or narratives of the Good," implying that these narratives are problematic; he also argues that the various understandings of Prozac mean that "an alternative discourse besides the natural or the artificial, the true or the false, the good or the bad" is needed. (By the way, in the first of those two quotes, he follows the postmodern trend of capitalizing "True" and "Good," which I think is done to make these notions seem metaphysically bloated, perhaps by association with Plato's problematic theory of Forms. But the shared, ordinary notion of truth is as metaphysically slim as can be.)

If Brad's statements are meant to suggest the thesis that there are no such things as truth and goodness (or rightness or any other objective normative standard), any view that accepts this thesis will have major problems. The denial of truth, of course, includes the denial of the truth of the claim that there is no truth, along with every other claim made in stating and defending the view in question. So the claim that there is no truth yields unintelligibility. The denial of goodness, rightness, etc. is probably intelligible. But it proves utterly implausible in removing the grounds for even the most obvious ethical judgments (such as "raping children is wrong"), and self-defeating for anyone, like Brad, who advances normative claims. More on this later. Suffice it to say, for now, that throughout his paper Brad presupposes the existence of truth and goodness (or rightness)—for example, in appealing to the *effects* of Prozac (since whether there are certain effects is either true or false) and the *desirability* of inclusion (since to hold that something is desirable is to make a value claim). Similarly with his factual claims about who wins and who loses in the current phenomenon of Prozac use, and with his many normative judgments about the relevant facts.

What if his point was not to deny the *existence* of truth and goodness (or rightness), but just to say that our discourse should not *make reference* to such notions? First, I would like to know what's wrong with the discourse. Second, for the reasons just given, I don't see how it is possible to avoid making at least implicit reference to these notions.

Moving along, just as I am concerned about the statements I mentioned, I am also concerned about such language as "the production of truth," which suggests that truth—as opposed to perceptions, beliefs, and theories—is purely a "cultural construct" or something produced by people alone. We have already seen why this is problematic. Meanwhile, his reference to "dominant forms of truth" suggests that there are various incompatible forms of truth. That makes no sense. There can be incompatible beliefs and belief systems, but not incompatible truths. If the statements purporting to express truths are incompatible, they can't all be true. Again, I don't know whether Brad's language captures what he really intended.

That brings me to another point. Some of my critique thus far had been about the literal meaning of Brad's words. But that assumes there is such a thing as literal meaning, that such meaning differs importantly from, say, metaphorical meaning. And this assumption is apparently rejected by Haraway, whom Brad approvingly cites. What troubles me here is that no reason is offered in the paper to accept this contentious thesis. (I take it, the fact that Haraway holds the thesis is not reason to accept it.) I guess I am inclined to think there is an important difference between literal and metaphorical meaning. For example, the imperative "Have a heart" is usually employed metaphorically, say, in a context of giving to charity. But, "Have a heart" might be used literally—say, among vampires—and the difference here seems to matter. Yes, there is sometimes a grey, indeterminate area between literal and metaphorical uses of an expression, but that fact is consistent with there being many cases in which the use of an expression is either literal or metaphorical, but not both. For reasons like these, it seems odd to reject the literal—metaphorical distinction without defending this move.

Maybe this move has become so commonly accepted in some circles that it seems not to require arguments any longer. This possibility leads me to one of my greatest concerns, not just about the paper, but about the cultural studies and postmodern currents that carry much of it: the apparent existence of a party line or a set of dogmas, now uncritically accepted and disseminated, often despite considerable implausibility. This is the sense I get when I read what Brad says about such claims as that the world doesn't verify truth statements and that we should "level the playing field between science and other forms of inquiry." He says that these "conclusions regarding science have been sufficiently rehearsed and documented with science studies that, in Traweek's words, 'most [science studies] researchers take these statements to be a sort of boring baseline of shared knowledge in the field.'" These conclusions have apparently hardened into a party line that is uncritically accepted by the critical thinkers of cultural studies.

But the claim that science and other forms of inquiry are on a par, in terms of yielding knowledge, is wildly implausible unless some quality control is used in selecting among the other forms of inquiry. I hope we can agree that astrology is not on a par with physics in yielding knowledge (as opposed to mere belief). If quality control is to be exercised, how are the relevant discriminations to be justified—without appealing to truth and related notions? Also, does Brad's assertion that the conclusions in question have been *documented* within science studies implicitly prioritize certain social sciences? If not, won't the claims of documentation be neutralized by all forms of inquiry or viewpoints that disagree with these conclusions? These, by the way, are not rhetorical questions.

A similar set of questions arises in connection with this statement: "in the sausage factory of knowledge production, subordinate knowledges [!] are excluded." We are not told what Brad is willing to call "a knowledge." *Any claim* to knowledge—including those made by ouija board aficionados? How about those who claim to know the Holocaust didn't happen? And those who claim to know that the Bible is literally true? If quality control is to be exercised, I assume that is because some claims to knowledge are true (or reasonably likely to be true) while others are not, and that the way the world works has some role in adjudicating among all these claims. Naturally, if there is no quality control, the results include both *nonsense* (since, for example, if one really *knows* that the Holocaust didn't happen, then it's *true* that it didn't happen) and *incoherence* (since the latter putative truth contradicts the truth known by those who know that the Holocaust did take place).

To accept some claims while rejecting others is something we have to do not only in understanding the world, but also in making normative judgments about how we should act and live. In the conclusion to his paper, Brad says that what he is seeking "boils down to a call for priority of *democracy over science* in psychiatric knowledge production." I take it his call for this prioritization is based not on whim or esthetic preference, but on a normative judgment that democracy *should* be prioritized over science in the way he discusses.

Given some of the relativistic-sounding claims made earlier, and the dismissal of what he calls "narratives of the Good," I wonder how a claim like his is to be justified. He clearly believes that the priority he has in mind is good or right, better than the priorities embraced by the psychiatric status quo. Can this normative belief coherently avoid the presupposition that there are objective standards of rightness or goodness? I don't think so. Note that I am not raising the question of the metaphysical status of such standards—views here could range from metaphysically overweight forms of realism to ontologically trim forms of pragmatism. My claim is that to make a normative judgment is to assume that there are normative standards that one has (objectively) good reasons to accept. Whether the totality of Brad's theses leaves room for such standards is unclear.

The next claim I would like to consider may well be a current dogma in some intellectual circles: "... it is impossible to determine authentic individual needs outside of cultural context." It is a very important fact that this claim is mistaken.

I recently attended a presentation by a woman who entered Afghanistan and, in violation of the rules enforced by the Taliban militia, interviewed and photographed Afghani women (with their consent) to learn about their situation and how they felt about it. This is some of what she learned or confirmed: Women and girls are prohibited from attending school; from working; from going outside the house without a male relative; from receiving medical care (except in one poorly equipped clinic); from playing with toys or listening to music (prohibitions that apply to males as well); from wearing white socks or shoes that make noise as they walk. Violations lead to public beatings of the most savage kind. When walking in public, women must be covered from head to toe in a shroud, with only small mesh opening around the eyes; this garment makes breathing very difficult and peripheral vision impossible. One woman, fearing that she would otherwise suffocate, removed the headpiece of her required garment, only to be chased down and brutally beaten by a Taliban militiaman; several women have died because they were unable to see oncoming cars that struck them. Landmines are everywhere. People are so destitute that they commonly just beg all day, but hardly anyone has money to give. Lacking transportation, women often die because they can't get to the one pathetic facility where women may be treated. And, no, by the way, cultural differences do not result in these women approving of their situation: 97% of those interviewed present the symptoms of major depression; 42% meet criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder. A full 20% of those interviewed have considered suicide. Interestingly, 96% expressed support for women's human rights, believing many of theirs were being violated.³

Okay, what's my point? My point is that these women, like all human beings, have certain needs, some of which are not be in met. These needs include breathing, food and water, avoidance of severe injury, and treatment for injuries that occur. These needs and many others (including sleep) *are not contingent on culture*. They are a matter of *biology* (although, yes, of course many other needs are based on culture).

Biology brings us to cyborgs. The paper presented no reason to accept Haraway's claim that we are all cyborgs or the presumably related claim that we are "post-human." A cyborg is said to be a system that has both living and technological components. Am I a cyborg? Well, I have fillings in my teeth and I wear either glasses or contact lenses on any given day. If this makes me a cyborg, I am not yet convinced that the concept of a cyborg is very interesting. As for the claim that we are "post-human," this is neither explained nor defended. I have no idea what it means, except for one of its implications. Since "post-" means "after," the claim that we are post-human suggests that we are *not human*; humanity, I guess, has been transcended. (Sounds Nietzschean.) Well, all of this would be news to me; I believe I'm a human being. Maybe Brad can clarify these points.

³It is perhaps worth noting that this paper was written before American and allied forces ended the rule of the Taliban.

CONCLUSION

Let me conclude. As noted at the outset, I believe Brad has offered some important insights about medical technology and the Prozac phenomenon in particular, including insights about the political and economic dimensions of this phenomenon. I believe his tough critique of several aspects of the psychiatric, medical, and legislative status quo are justified and warrant further development. And I believe they can be developed independently of the problematic claims to which I have called attention.

Again, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish sound claims that are worded inappositely from claims that are truly problematic. But quite a few statements in the paper suggest at least a flirtation with the theses—commonly accepted, if I'm not mistaken, by many postmoderns and cultural studies people—that there is no mind-independent world about which statements can be true or false, and that no ethical judgments are, in any important sense, objectively justified. These theses, I have argued, are both highly implausible and destructive of the claims Brad attempts to advance in this paper. I suggest that his important ethical, political, and sociological messages would be more powerfully developed and deployed if they were liberated from the excessively relativistic and anti-realistic claims that I have challenged.

REFERENCES

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