

'BLACK BOXES' – the overt manifestation of the covert

Dr. Ariella Atzmon

(The Hebrew University of Jerusalem)

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Dr. Ariella Atzmon
P.O. Box 18215
Jerusalem 91181
Israel

Or: 94 Midlothian House
Oman Ave.
London NW2 6BB
U.K.

E-mail: msatz@pluto.mssc.huji.ac.il
E-mail: ariellaatzmon@hotmail.com

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Ariella Atzmon©

The question I raise deals with the link between rhetorical styles of mass media and false images of science implanted to the public in the course of contemporary science education. For example – with reference to the airplane crash in Queens NY on the 12th of November 2001 – I would ask: how is it possible that the people of NY were so easily convinced in just two hours after that traumatic occurrence, that the event was only an accident and not another terrorist attack. The fact is that the moment the announcement of the finding of the 'magic' Black Box (a box claimed to consist of hundreds of new technology links of digital information) was made, all the news channels such as CNN, BBC etc., suddenly and dramatically replaced the focus on this news with reports of the invasion of Kabul by US troops.

In this paper I would like to point up the cunning maneuvering of the notion of the term 'Black Box.' What is meant by a Black Box? Does it signify the urge to decipher something in order to achieve transparency, or does it specify an opaque entity, its content doomed to remain unrevealed? The metaphor of the Black Box originated in the field of philosophical behaviorism representing a locked, opaque object - impenetrable to any snooping, inquisitive investigation. The term 'black box' describes a sealed entity impossible to crack which necessitate according to the positivist-behaviorist imperative, a bypassing route, namely; the exposition of material output/input representations. Simultaneously the same term signifies a mechanism for shedding light on a surreptitious perplexing event. I contend that the double meaning of this term enables a conditioning procedure which is triggered by contemporary styles of western education on general, and is practiced by modes of science learning in particular. All the in-put/out-put conditioning (stimuli/response) machinery that triggered the sophistication of Nazi propaganda's brain-washing is grounded in this behavioristic notion of Black Boxes (as distinguished from gray or transparent glass boxes). How distressful and even terrifying it is that the same 'Black Box' metaphor is utilized cynically these days to portray an accessible key to

information which can be deciphered and converted from a covert entity into an overt one. This covert/overt ambiguity indicates that the same 'Black Box' expression is a new tool for the disclosure of 'missing' information and is aimed at alleviating stress, and persuading people that things are firmly under control. The new technology of Black Boxes becomes analagous with the ability to master unpredictable disastrous conditions, because of the highly technological sophisticated knowledge involved. This technology encourages people to believe that they are protected by virtue of a determined courageous leadership, which takes the path of overtly fighting back against an evil, covert, clandestine-radical- and reactionary threat. In other words: the 'brain washing' machine keeps going on!

This happens when the media, as an organ of the political authorities, attempts to convince the public regarding a specific chain of events by means of placing before the public proof, which appears covered in a scientific garment. This presentation undoubtedly has the best chance of being accepted. I would suggest that an examination of these questions might point to some of the main keystones supporting the whole rhetorical apparatus engaged in the service of sustaining the liberal democratic political order.

In fact people living in the liberal democratic states are accustomed to assess their state of affairs in accordance with observable, quantified indicators. From what is said we may infer why calculative thought, grounded in factual evidence, is crucial to analysis of the amplification of the demagogic trends of propaganda and advertisement.

It is well known that in western, liberal democratic milieu rational deliberation, grounded on well-established punctuated facts, was always privileged on personal descriptive verbalization. It is not just the way reality is shaped in relation to meanings given to words, it is the weight bestowed in advance on digital descriptions of reality that acquire the status of legitimized reports based on a linguistic contract that is relevant.

A possible answer to the question of how this kind of rhetorical device for distracting people's minds from one subject to another takes over, points to

contemporary educational styles contaminated by false images of science. In other words confusing science with technology. Recent patterns of science education reveal a peculiarly zealous devotion to solid factual data experienced by the students. These modes of science instruction are systematically eliminating a serious engagement with theoretical terms. This common belief in what is called solid data is rooted within the Lockian *Ideational Theory of Meaning* referring to language as representation. Representational thinking treats reality as if it were a picture "placed before" the subject. According to a narrow version of imaging science, scientific thought is linked to representational thinking by describing language as a 'vocabulary of things,' matching a concept with an observable attribute. According to this view, communication is enabled since words signify ideas in a perceptible (observable) way, so that language is essentially a tool for the interaction between human minds. Hence, our thoughts are viewed as an amplification of sequential ideas which associate a vocal sound or a graphic sign, giving it the same meaning. In other words we may say that the link between our mind and the objects which are perceived by our senses, is mediated by the process of name-giving, controlled by the mechanism of categorization. I shall characterize the kind of education which orients itself by the ideal of using concepts and meanings "univocally," as an inclination towards the signalization of the linguistic sign. The ideal of sharing a similar interpretation of the same linguistic sign fits the techno-scientific language.

The Freudian-Lacanian idea that what has not acquired meaning can never be known reveals a vicious circle, where the rhetorical game diverts signs into signals. Under the dominance of techno-scientific language, linguistic signs are used as clear-cut signals to narrow the multiplicity of expressive utterances, making way for the most determined communicative descriptions or reports. This techno-scientific language gains its power as a selective membrane in the play of signification owing to the educational social function.

Consequently the rhetorical representation of signalized, scientific language becomes part of an ideological illusion such as freedom of choice. The scientific cover-up allocated to findings, so that they gain the image of clusters of factual

data which form a suitable basis for rational reasoning, is connected to the citizen's self-image in democratic liberal society. We have seen that the more society has an elevated, free, liberal and democratic self image, the more it aims to reinforce the status of the individual as someone whose rational abilities a priori grant him the ability to judge, choose and plan his life-style more competently in the framework of democratic life. The belief of the individual in his ability to exercise free choice and judgment is supported by strengthening his positive attitudes vis a vis the system in which the range of data serves as the basis for deliberation.

This is why techno-calculative thinking is inseparable from the liberal humanism which characterizes human beings as individuals. The term 'individual' presupposes human beings as intellectual agents, free thinkers who are not coerced by their actual historical, cultural or socio-political circumstances. The 'individual' attempts to reveal the transcendental order which lies beyond him. According to this view 'individuals' are fully conscious, and can experience self-knowledge.

Placing the possibility of sharing a common meaning for the linguistic sign evokes the question: what is meant by a textual interpretation? By including under the meaning of the word 'text' all that can be expressed by means of language such as: a book, a film, a play, story-telling, news bites, mathematical proof, a musical score, court protocols, laboratory reports or solid data exposed by the 'BLACK BOX', we should ask: how are textual materials presented and interpreted? Do reports of laboratory experiments present an act of simulation or do they demonstrate an act of representation? An answer to this question may throw light on how we refer to the barrage of factual evidence that appears so inexhaustibly on our TV screens. A shift from visualizing reality as representation towards a ceaseless striving towards the interpretation of reality as an act of simulation is related to a view that conceives human beings as spoken subjects rather than sovereign autonomous individuals.

In enlightened liberal society in particular, humanism invalidates man through the illusion that words possess a universal and neutral linguistic key. Meanings are defined on the basis of the forced, contractual and agreed language. Those illusions promise boundless self-fulfillment and free choice, while at the same time blocking the possibility of individual emancipation. The question is what is education - a delusive scene, a vision of forgotten human longings, I would claim that education is an enterprise for obliviousness?

The hidden link between the liberal order's sources of power and false images of science adopted by societies perceiving themselves free and democratic will become clearer once we fully explore what language means to us. By acquiescing to the idea of language as the rider that harnesses our galloping speech acts, we may reveal the nature of the imposition of forgetfulness regarding the crucial role that language plays in the relentless weaving of images, the simulation of what we perceive as reality.

Dealing with the underlying gap between what 'reality is' in the 'reality of Being' and what is 'human thought,' is not new. We can trace it in the medieval nominalist writings which inspired Heidegger's "Being and Time" philosophy. The status of facts has to do with the Heideggerian notions of the ontic vs. the ontologic – namely the mobility of meaning in the process of textual/contextual interpretation, and how these views dominate rhetoric in western liberal-democratic regimes. By stressing this point I would like to illustrate how in the scope of science/scientific education the two hegemonic, controversial, philosophical movements namely: positivism and phenomenological constructivism collaborate oddly, in order to keep the unshakeable status of facts in the act of distracting the ability to grasp the notion of Being.

Despite the belief that as more facts are disclosed to the public through the vast amount of TV news channels, there are increasing prospects for individual citizens to make better judgments and to sharpen the critical approach to political affairs, I would argue that the same belief that plants the illusion of free choice associated with transparent information, simultaneously obscures people's ability

to grasp the invisible, which is concealed in between the overt readable /visible signs.

According to Kant¹ reason corresponds to a higher level of understanding; it is the faculty that unites judgments of experience through the construction of inferences. Understanding encapsulates the predicated experiential reports processed and developed by cognition, thus it is always limited to 'what is there.' Understanding synthesizes sense input by the cognitive faculties of the mind, but it is precisely at this point that education ends.

To take us back to the idea shared by German Idealism and Romanticism, it is that reason acquires its importance precisely where it is most remote from immediacy, where it defers towards an insistence on the otherness of being. By listening to Heraclitus we shall be reminded that

“The eyes and ears are bad witnesses if they have barbarian souls”.

This view points to the blind spots of recent styles of western educational curriculum; namely, the destination of ethics and aesthetics.

If according to Kant, an aesthetic idea is an intuition of the creative imagination for which an adequate concept can never be found², then perhaps the covert role of education is to minimize those opportunities for aesthetic individual acts. Every effort is made to keep the learning subject in secure conceptualized paradigms of scientific knowledge, in the frameworks of schemes and models.

This, in order to protect man from entering the minefield of what cannot be domesticated in briefing guidelines. The gap between what can be restrained in formulae and what cannot be articulated in principle by the use of models is that gap between techno-science and the aesthetic act that bursts forth in artistic creation. This chasm is what separates understanding the concept of meaning as an agreed signal with one channel of interpretation, and the linguistic sign as having seventy faces.

¹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*. (London:Macmillan & CO LTD, 1964), p.106/94

² Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, pp.69-70/ 15, pp.141-145/34, 35, 36

Being, without being in possession of rules-to think 'the uncaused cause' means to cross the boundaries to an unpromised land - to go beyond the fiction of certainty, to another meaning of the ideas of 'freedom' and 'duty.' Contrary to the ideas of liberal education, freedom must be grasped as an asymptotic desire to build new and original meanings from the flashes and displays of the 'collected editions' of reality.

In every society education fulfills the central role of regulating a social order. This nature of education is reflected in the trend to narrow the track where meanings are interpreted. This trend can be defined as an attempt to "signalize the linguistic sign." It has been said that the covert mechanisms that apply various devices to the student's consciousness are today, more than in the past, based on a link which is complex and impossible to unravel. It is the link that exists between 1) educational patterns; 2) images of science; and 3) patterns of persuasion utilized by all the systems, starting with the political system and up to the level of the "schooling discourse."

In other words, education by means of science instruction and learning, entrenches in peoples' minds, in advance, the readiness to accept correspondence modes of validating informative statements. People are used to take the truth value of propositions that are confirmed by means of authorized, scientific, methodological procedure for granted. The 'Black Box' metaphor was just a rhetorical device for presenting the idea of how techno-scientific thought links education with patterns of persuasion, mainly in the field of political rhetoric. I would say that it is in this very gap between formal articulation based on techno-scientific thought, in briefing guidelines and schemes of action (e.g. directing the profile of the desired educational product), and what in principle cannot be articulated, lies what little "free play" man does possess by the virtue of a human choice.

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abstract

In this paper I would like to examine the link between rhetorical styles of mass media, and false images of science (which became common due to contemporary science education). For example – with reference to the airplane crash in Queens NY on the 12th of November 2001 – I would ask: how is it possible that the people of NY were so easily convinced in just two hours, that the event was an accident and not another terrorist attack? The fact is that the moment the announcement of the finding of the 'magic' Black Box (claimed to consist of new digital information technology) was made, all the news channels suddenly replaced the previous news with reports of the invasion of Kabul by US troops.

In order to direct attention to the rhetorical device for distracting people's minds from one subject to another, this paper attempts to examine the intricate link existing between: 1) The use and the abuse of language 2) (false) images of science, and 3) rhetorical styles adopted by latter-day propaganda and advertisement.

I shall describe contemporary rhetorical styles oriented by the ideal of using concepts and meanings "univocally," as an inclination towards the signalization of the linguistic sign

If according to Kant, an aesthetic idea is an intuition by the creative imagination for which an adequate concept can never be found, then the invisible subtle role of (science) education, is to reduce to a minimum the capacity for personal aesthetic acts. Every effort is made to keep the learning subjects (along all stages of schooling-from nursery to higher education) in secure conceptualized systematic paradigms of knowledge, of which science is the most reliable. Consequently, the rhetoric of signalized, techno-scientific language becomes part of an emancipatory ideological illusion such as freedom of choice. A shift from visualizing reality as representation, towards the interpretation of reality as an act of simulation, is related to the view which conceives human beings as spoken subjects rather than sovereign autonomous individuals.

In this paper I try to challenge contemporary trends of humanist education, which are grounded within the phenomenological and constructivist schools of thought. I would say that the populist current view referring to reality as a 'vocabulary of things', i.e.: representation, prevents people from an encounter with the sublime. It blocks the ability to contemplate vague positions which entail doubts and uncertainties. Though the citizens of liberal democratic countries are left defenseless in the hands of a subversive- persuasive rhetoric as an easy prey.