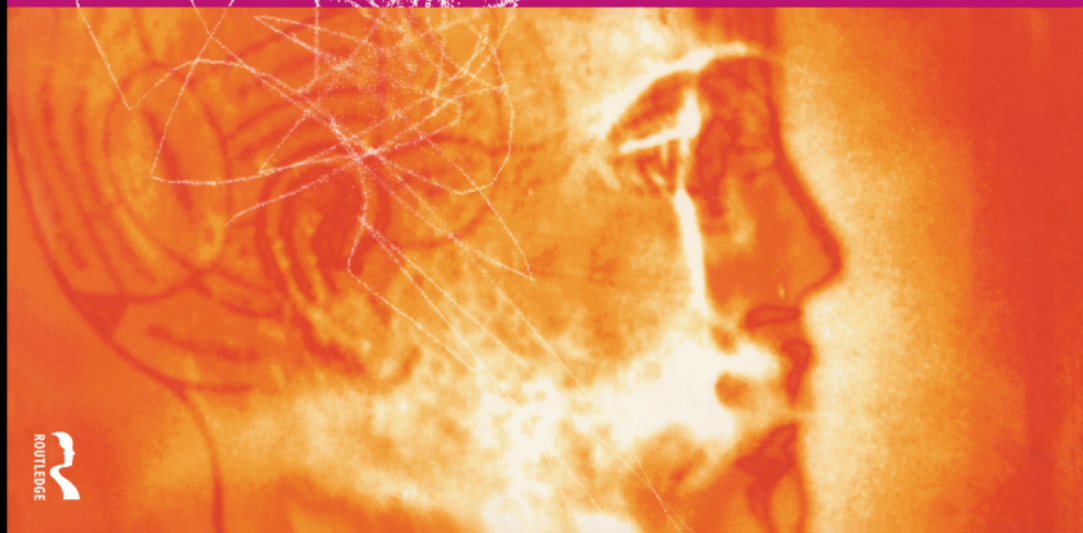


The End of Knowing

A new developmental way of learning

Fred Newman and Lois Holzman



ROUTLEDGE

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The End of Knowing

For centuries, knowledge has been thought to be the key to human progress of all kinds and has dominated Western culture. But what if knowing has now become an impediment to further human development? *The End of Knowing* is concerned with the practical consideration of how to reconstruct our world when modernist ideas have been refuted and many social problems appear insoluble. Newman and Holzman suggest provocatively that we should give up knowing in favour of “performed activity.” They show how to reject the knowing paradigm in practice and present the many positive implications this has for social and educational policy.

Over the past two decades, a postmodern critique of the modern conception of knowing and its institutionalized practices has emerged. To many, this is a dangerous threat to the tradition of liberal education, strengthened by recent prestigious voices from the physical and natural sciences. *The End of Knowing* challenges even the postmodernists themselves, rejecting the reform of knowing for a totally new performatory form of life. They support their argument with a new reading of Lev Vygotsky and Ludwig Wittgenstein that suggests they were aware of the importance of activity as “pre-postmodernists.”

The authors’ development community, from which the ideas in *The End of Knowing* have arisen, exists without government or university funding or political affiliation. Their findings offer an alternative to existential despair in confronting a postmodern world without meaning by showing how to make meaning and develop lives through performed activity.

Fred Newman is Director of Training, East Side Institute for Short Term Psychotherapy and Artistic Director, Castillo Theatre, New York. **Lois Holzman** is Director, Center for Developmental Learning at the East Side Institute for Short Term Psychotherapy. Between them they have written nine books and numerous chapters and journal articles.

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London and New York

First published 1997
by Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2001.

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data

Newman, Fred.

The end of knowing/Fred Newman and Lois Holzman.

October 1996.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Knowledge, Theory of--History--20th century. 2. Science--Philosophy--History--20th century. 3. Act (Philosophy). 4. Postmodernism. I. Holzman, Lois. II. Title.

BD161.N44--1997

001--dc21

96--52856

CIP

ISBN 0-415-13598-2 (hbk)

ISBN 0-415-13599-0 (pbk)

ISBN 0-203-18193-X Master e-book ISBN

ISBN 0-203-18196-4 (Glassbook Format)

This book is dedicated to Karl Marx, one of the great modernist thinkers. May he finally rest in peace free from all he knew and from his opportunistic followers, most of whom knew very little but didn't know it.

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Acknowledgments

Our thanks to the hundreds of co-workers, clients, and students involved in our development projects—women and men, adolescents and children—with whom we daily perform our collective lives.

We are particularly grateful to the following people and organizations:

- Our colleagues around the world for ongoing conversation (in person and in print) on matters postmodern—especially Ken Gergen, John Shotter, John Morss, Erica Burman, Ian Parker, and John Jost;
- Our production team—Phyllis Goldberg and Warren Liebesman for invaluable editing and copy editing, Kim Svoboda for typing and retyping constantly evolving drafts,
- Chris Helm and Karen Steinberg for transcribing *The Performance of Philosophy* conversations;
- Hugh Polk and the East Side Center/East Side Institute staff for their initial work in analyzing social therapeutic discourse;
- Divisions 10 and 32 of the American Psychological Association for encouragement to present our performatory psychology to a psychological audience;
- Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., Publishers for agreeing to allow us to reproduce passages that are similar to those found in Chapter 7 of *Schools for Growth*.
- Sage Publications Ltd for permission to reprint material on pages 134–5, from Holzman, “Creating Developmental Learning Environments: A Vygotskian Practice”, *School Psychology International*, © Sage 1995.
- Vivien Ward, our editor at Routledge, for her continued support and encouragement.

1 Introduction

When will all these endings stop?

Postmodernism sometimes looks to be one “end” after another (the beginning of the end!): the end of history; the end of truth; the end of philosophy; the end of science; the end of reason; the end of capitalism (if not the transition to socialism). At other times it appears to be a series of potential beginnings: a credo for a truly pluralistic and democratic world in which persons can take on (or perform) ever-changing and diverse roles and actions; a psychology of persons in relationships; liberation from patriarchal dogma, ideology, and metanarrative social coercion; a cultural, constructionist, unscientific approach to human life. However, the recent appearance of a Web site entitled “Everything Postmodern,” a regularly updated listing of “po-mo” on the Internet, suggests neither endings nor beginnings. According to the neo-Marxist Frederick Jameson, the term itself, *post-modern*, is too tied to modernism to signal closure and something new (it is, for him, a stage in the development of capitalism (Jameson, 1983, 1984)).

What postmodernism becomes remains to be lived (not seen). *That* it is seems indisputable. After all, the nearly fifty hard scientists, social scientists, and philosophers who participated in a three-day conference in New York City in the Spring of 1995 entitled, “The Flight from Science and Reason,” were reacting to *something*. The conference, convened by the New York Academy of Sciences, made front-page headlines in the *New York Times* and other major dailies. As well it should have, in our opinion, for what is at issue is whether or not the 400-year reign of modern science as the exemplar of human knowledge is coming to an end. The conference and its recently published proceedings are part of a much larger serious (if at times foolishly conducted) intellectual debate currently taking place among scientists and non-scientists alike about whether or not science has a future: have we reached the end of science?

Those proceedings, also titled *The Flight from Science and Reason* (Gross *et al.*, 1996), shatter the popular image of research scientists. In responding to the postmodernist “attitude,” they have given up objectivity, empirically based findings, and logical argumentation in favor of hyperbole, emotional outbursts, and arguments *ad hominem*. The 600-page volume is little more than a vitriolic “hit-back” on postmodernists and

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proponents of what the scientists sneeringly refer to as “alternative models.” (While some of the authors lump together radical feminists, creationists, social constructionists, phenomenologists, followers of Derrida, homeopaths, and pop psychologists, most of them concentrate on the academics.) Distinguished professors of physics, biology, chemistry, medicine, mathematics, and philosophy of science denounce their postmodern academic colleagues as “hypocrites,” “high-jackers,” “delusionary,” “fraudulent,” “willfully ignorant,” and “quirky,” among other things. Used to the “antiscience” of the right (creationists, for example), these defenders of science and the scientific method are especially outraged at the academic left. As Gross puts it, “a decade or two ago naming oneself a ‘progressive’ meant aligning oneself with logic, science, and the truth; associating oneself, as it were, with the future, [but] today showing respect for science, or for universalism . . . in a truly with-it college . . . is [to be] a dinosaur” (p. 5). (Two years earlier, Gross co-authored a book entirely on this topic—*Higher Superstition: The Academic Left and its Quarrels with Science*, Gross and Levitt, 1994.)

While Mario Bunge of McGill University’s Foundations and Philosophy of Science Unit draws some distinctions between postmodernists and pseudoscientists, he nevertheless regards both as “gangs [that] operate under the protection of academic freedom, and often at the taxpayer’s expense” (Bunge, 1996, p. 97). (He also dismisses existentialism as “a jumble of nonsense, falsity, and platitude,” p. 97.) The *best* that Wallace Sampson, a professor of medicine, can say about postmodernism is that it is unethical. In the introductory paragraphs of his attack on alternative medicine he links cultural relativism and postmodernism with propaganda, Hitler, and Goebbels (Sampson, 1996, p. 188). Duke University’s Martin Lewis, arguing that sociological and technological developments at the end of the twentieth century are “definitive of modernity,” pooh-poohs the postmodern thesis as “merely an academic repackaging of the 1960s countercultural belief in the ‘dawning of the age of Aquarius’ ” (Lewis, 1996, p. 221). Nevertheless, Lewis spends twenty pages discussing the destruction wrought by postmodernism on the ecological movement by “the philosophically inclined fringe” (the Greens) who “have undermined the movement from within at the moment of its greatest vulnerability” (p. 223).

In arguing that scientific objectivity and humanistic insight are not at odds, Princeton University’s Robin Fox, an anthropologist, produces a classic *non sequitur* that surely (we would hope) embarrassed his more philosophically sophisticated colleagues. Defending the importance of assessing empirical reality against the critical analysis of concepts, he addresses those who engage in “deconstruction as an intellectual activity”:

Of course, you will respond, the existence of empirical reality is what these theories hold to be moot (or at least they question the possibility of our knowing it). To which I can only reply: let me hear you say that when told you need a difficult operation to save

your life, or the life of one of your children. Christian Scientists are at least consistent on this issue; academics who hold these ridiculous theories are simply hypocrites.

(Fox, 1996, p. 342)

With friends like Fox, science hardly needs enemies. Not only is the logic of this statement ludicrous (if you deconstruct concepts, even “surgical” concepts, it follows that you should refuse surgery), not only is Fox’s remark *ad hominem*, he also apparently favors consistency over human life; by his own logic, the “consistent” Christian Scientist would, after all, be more likely to die than the “hypocritical” deconstructionist. Whether or not consistency is the hobgoblin of small minds, it seems to be an obsession among some scientists and hardcore empiricist social scientists.

Not coincidentally, Fox argues that his own discipline, anthropology, can be the “shining example” of returning humanism to its original meaning (man, rather than god, as “the measure”); as the “science of mankind,” anthropology is perfectly suited to unite humanism and science by applying the rules of science to art, poetry, and other nonscientific human endeavors. With this sleight of hand, Fox (clearly no dialectician) dismisses the heart and soul of the postmodern challenge—that such human endeavors are not subject to the laws of science and that attempting to apply them is distortive, coercive, and elitist.

Fox’s mode of argumentation typifies the response of those in the scientific community who are outspokenly alarmed by the postmodern critique of their profession. They self-servingly and arrogantly presume the validity of the very things they claim to be defending, namely science and reason. In doing so, they violate the rules of their own method. So too they abandon logic in favor of the *non sequitur* (as we have already seen) and misapply “the law of the excluded middle.” This fundamental law of logic, which modern science inherits from Aristotelian philosophy, states that everything is either an A or not an A ($A \vee \sim A$). Thus, if the postmodernists are challenging rationality, they must be irrational. (A proper use of the law of the excluded middle might be: everyone is either challenging rationality or they are not.) To say that science is a social construct, these exasperated scientists conclude illogically, is to say that it cannot be valid. They should, of course, know better; it is the very category of rationality and the rational–irrational dichotomy that most postmodernists want to do away with (deconstruct).

Moreover, both the “irrationality” and “emotionality” of many of these scientists’ accusations are in opposition to their own standards of argumentation and ethics. One wonders how such intelligent *men* (which they are, almost exclusively) can speak so unintelligently, how they can abandon scientific methodology and reason so easily and completely. They seem, in short (pardon the therapeutics), hysterical. Their behavior suggests that they have as much interest in keeping their prestigious jobs and large grants as in advancing science or reasoning. The fight over the flight from science and reason may

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be as much about money as anything else. Harry Greenberg of the New York Academy of Sciences ends his introduction to the conference proceedings with this warning:

Such a failure to defend science from its irrational critics can set the stage for a lethal blow when the real budgetary attacks arrive, and they are nearly upon us. Some would say they are here, but I am not so optimistic. If science cannot claim a preeminence for its intellectual virtues or an excellence for its methodologies and sense of design, then it will have great difficulty laying claim to a rational share of the nation's resources for its perpetuation.

(Greenberg, 1996, p. x)

Greenberg's dire prediction is perhaps all the more serious for being tautological: without rationality (that is, science) there would be no basis for claiming a "rational" share of the nation's resources.

In suggesting that opportunism plays a role in these scientists' responses to postmodernism we do not mean to reduce the fight to mere pragmatics (or vulgar economics). Similarly, in pointing out the frequent silliness and hostility of the argumentation, we do not mean to imply that the fight is trivial. Rather, the responses of Gross, Levitt, Lewis, Bunge, Fox, and the others seem to us to be evidence that the issues of the future of science and the possible limits of knowledge are being taken very seriously.

Within a month or two after *The Flight from Science and Reason* was published, there appeared another—very different—dialogue-in-print on the future (or lack thereof) of science. In *The End of Science: Facing the Limits of Knowledge in the Twilight of the Scientific Age* (1996), John Horgan considers whether scientists have discovered everything there is to know and whether science has brought us to the outer edges of knowledge. Having posed this question to dozens of the most prominent researchers in their fields, Horgan (a prize-winning journalist who is a senior writer for *Scientific American*) has written a book that introduces us not only to the latest work by neuroscientists, cognitive scientists, physicists, biologists, and others, but to their assessment of (including their subjective responses to) of the "state of the art" of the modernist pursuit of knowledge and Truth. Juxtaposed with the reactive and, in many cases, reactionary scientists we met in *The Flight from Science and Reason*, Horgan's interviewees help to provide a more complete picture of the process by which the current paradigm shift we are experiencing is taking place.

Here are scientists themselves (and the highly influential, controversial, and relatively recently deceased philosophers of science—Feyerabend, Kuhn, and Popper) seriously questioning whether the scientific age is ending and why. Many, if not the majority, believe that it is. Early on, Horgan tells us about a 1989 symposium that took place at Syracuse University entitled "The End of Science?" The symposium was organized to discuss concerns that the *belief* in science was coming to an end. Yet one of its invited speakers,

twenty years earlier, had put forth the thesis that *science itself* was ending. As Horgan tells it, amidst philosophers of science who were challenging “the authority of science,” here was

Gunther Stent, a biologist at the University of California at Berkeley, [who] had for years promulgated a much more dramatic scenario than the one posited by the symposium. Stent had asserted that science itself might be ending, and not because of the skepticism of a few academic sophists. Quite the contrary. Science might be ending because it worked so well.

(Horgan, 1996, p. 9)

Stent’s view, as presented in *The Coming of the Golden Age: A View of the End of Progress* (1969) and his conversations with Horgan, are threaded throughout *The End of Science*. The demise of science, Stent contends, is lawful. “Indeed, the dizzy rate at which progress is now proceeding makes it seem very likely that progress must come to a stop soon, perhaps in our life-time, perhaps in a generation or two” (Stent, 1969, quoted in Horgan, 1996, p. 10). Stent allows that applied science will continue, as will the accumulation of more and more bits of information relative to what we already know. What is ending are the sort of pure science discoveries made by Galileo, Newton, Darwin, and Einstein that so dramatically increased our knowledge of the universe and transformed the life of our species and civilization.

Debates on the future of science are, likewise, debates on the nature of knowledge, truth, and religion. Horgan’s dialogue with his readers and those he interviewed quickly turns to “big” questions: Is there such a thing as truth? Is everything knowable? What is the purpose of life? If science is ending, what can we believe in? To some scientists, there are some things—such as the origin of life or the nature of consciousness—that we will never know; they will elude our understanding and forever remain unknowable regardless of what technology we invent, how much money we spend, or how imaginative and brilliant we become. The end of science, for them, is not knowing *everything* but knowing everything that is capable of being known.

The linguist Noam Chomsky provides a particularly apt example: one of the unknowable things is why human beings do science. In conversation with Horgan, Chomsky proposed that the success of science is a chance event; it stems from a coincidental convergence of the truth about the world and the structure of our cognitive space. “It is a chance convergence,” he continued, “because evolution didn’t design us to do this; there’s no pressure on differential reproduction that led to the capacity to solve problems in quantum theory. We had it. It’s just there for the same reason that most other things are there: for some reason that nobody understands” (quoted in Horgan, 1996, p. 153).

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For others, the end of science would mean that we have discovered/uncovered what Horgan calls The Answer (“a theory that quenches our curiosity forever,” p. 30). He, among others, is fearful of this possibility:

The ostensible goal of science, philosophy, religion, and all forms of knowledge is to transform the great “Huuuh?” of mystical wonder into an even greater “Aha!” of understanding. But after one arrives at The Answer, what then? There is a kind of horror in thinking that our sense of wonder might be extinguished, once and for all time, by our knowledge. What, then, would be the purpose of existence? There would be none.

(Horgan, 1996, p. 266)

Equating science with knowledge, with the search for truth, with the purpose of life, and with what there is to believe in (faith) brings science, ironically, closer and closer to religion. Three centuries ago, modern science defeated religion after an extended and bloody battle with the church, only to be constructed in the twentieth century more and more in the image of religion. In concluding his book, Horgan asks (and in so doing, he is speaking for several of the scientists with whom he spoke): “And now that science—true, pure, empirical science—has ended, what else is there to believe in?” (p. 266). Some of them, especially the scientific theologians, say the answer is God.

In selectively reviewing these two books, *The End of Science* and *The Flight from Science and Reason*, we hope to have conveyed some of the drama and historical significance of the debate and controversy over modern science. To our way of thinking, it signals the potential for monumental change in human life. One of our favorite statements by one of our favorite intellectual influences, Lev Vygotsky, helps complete our thought. In arguing that revolution, not evolution, is characteristic of history, Vygotsky noted that “A revolution solves only those tasks which have been raised by history: this proposition holds true equally for revolution in general and for aspects of social and cultural life during a revolution” (Vygotsky, quoted in Levitin, 1982, frontispiece).

We also hope to have conveyed some of what we found helpful about these books. In different ways, they expose both the seduction and the dead end (as opposed to “the limits”) of knowledge. For neither those scientists fighting for their lives nor those musing about the purpose of life engage the historical viability or validity of *knowing* itself. On the one hand, they accuse those who challenge the insistence of science that it has a privileged relationship to reality and human progress, that it is the *only* kind of knowledge, of being heretics and worse. On the other hand, they argue over whether there is anything more to discover about the universe, the brain, the mind, or the origin of species and debate whether we have reached the limits of knowledge. But decrying those who challenge the One Way to Know or suggesting that there might not be anything more to know is a far cry from suggesting that we *no longer need to know* and, moreover, that our continued employment of knowing (cognition, epistemology) when it has outlived its usefulness is potentially

destructive of human life and development. We believe that the circumstances of history demand more than an examination of science and scientific knowing. Rather, what is required is an investigation of knowing itself that entails not only how human beings have done knowing over the centuries but the presuppositions of the “epistemic metanarrative”—the story/myth that human life and growth *require* a way of knowing the world. It is this *epistemic posture* (considered by many to be as natural as our upright stance) more than any particular epistemological position that fascinates and disturbs us. This book is part of our call for *the end of knowing* as the revolutionary, humane, and developmental move our species needs to make at this moment in history.

ENGAGING REALITY

Unlike some postmodernists, we have no real quarrel with the claim of science to preeminence or with its methodologies and sense of design. The scientific and technological discoveries and inventions of chemists, physicists, biologists, neuroscientists, astronomers, and other natural and physical scientists are, to us, indisputable. In the postmodern and post-postmodern future, science might well remain preeminent. It is the all-pervasiveness (the “religious-ification”) of science, in our view, that poses the serious threat to humanity. The so-called social or human sciences, in particular, have been seriously misshapen—perhaps irrevocably—by the hegemony of the modern scientific and epistemological paradigm. As we, among others, have written about extensively, for the greater part of this century most natural and physical scientists stood by quietly while psychology (along with other disciplines) created itself in science’s image and convinced enough people that it was capable of making bona fide knowledge claims about human life and relationships (Danziger, 1994; Gergen, 1994; Newman and Holzman, 1996). No doubt the failure of the hard scientists to issue any serious critique contributed to the success of the social science scam.

Now, however, many of these same hard scientists and hardcore modernists are “exposing” the “pseudoscientific” nature of the postmodernized social sciences (Gross and Levitt, 1994; Gross *et al.*, 1996), declaring that the method, categories, and criteria of science are the only possible ones, that to understand *is* to be scientific, and that everything can and must be understood relative to a scientific (that is, their) framework. The authoritarianism of science’s defense of itself has been, understandably, a major impetus for and target of continuing postmodern critiques of science.

Yet we think science is too easy a target (not to mention the wrong one). More difficult is the task of taking on directly the epistemological authoritarianism that underlies and informs the authoritarianism of science. It seems to us that modern science has been able to get away with declaring itself the one true path to reality (understanding the world, finding the Truth) because its proponents, critics, and just about everyone else presuppose

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that there must be a path, that the world must somehow be known and understood. The nearly complete domination of philosophy by epistemology that occurred during this century (which we shall discuss in Chapter 2) has had the effect of muting the critically important distinction between having a conceptual framework (a way of knowing, a path, a view, a theory) for engaging the world or reality and actively engaging the world or reality. The result is the typically unstated assumption that human engagement is made possible by worldviews, theoretical constructs, and abstractions. The postmodern challenge to modern epistemology includes deconstructing its presupposition of “a knowing mind confronting a material world” (Gergen, 1994, p. xx). But is the postmodern rejection of the epistemic posture complete?

We think not. More often than not, what postmodernists propose are alternative kinds of knowing minds and alternative ways of knowing. The terms coined by the influential American psychologist Jerome Bruner are useful here. He describes the turn away from a “paradigmatic posture” in which knowing and understanding are posited on general laws, categories, and inductive and deductive truths, toward a “narrative posture” in which knowing and understanding are not explanatory but interpretive (Bruner, 1993). Thus, meaning is said by the postmodernists to reside in our conversations, in our discourse, in the language we create and use, rather than “out there” in the objects our language supposedly denotes or “in our minds.” We live and make sense of the world, then, not by coming to know something that is already there, but through the socially constructed narratives we continuously create. This view—that human “world-structuring” is linguistic rather than cognitive—dominates much of postmodern social constructionism. Yet this seemingly non-epistemological construct still presupposes that we *must* structure the world. It still implies that our lives as lived *must* be mediated by some sort of knowing.

For those of us who wish to find a way of eliminating the dualism that separates human beings and the material world, the problem with any type of mediation theory is that it reintroduces the dualism on another level. If reality is what we construct through our stories, words, narratives, and discourse, then there must be something our stories and words are *about* (Newman and Holzman, 1996, p. 8). If everything must mean *something*, and what it means derives from how language is *used* (a current popular view), then there must be something relative to which we are making meaning when we use language.

The narrative posture of postmodernism does not, in our opinion, succeed in liberating us from the knowing mind. Many postmodernists take meaning-making to be an interpretive act. How we know is not through reasoning or explaining, they say, but through socially constructed interpretations—clearly an important step away from the patriarchal absolutism of modernism but not yet a complete break with cognitive models. We return to John Horgan’s conversations about the end of science to illustrate how insidious the cognitive bias is.

Among the social scientists Horgan interviewed was the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, for whom anthropology is an interpretive science akin to literature and literary criticism: it is “imaginative writing about real people in real places at real times” (Geertz, 1988, p. 141). Summarizing “Thick description: Toward an interpretive theory of culture” (Geertz, 1973), Horgan tells us that in this classic essay Geertz is insisting that the anthropologist “must interpret phenomena, must try to guess what they *mean*,” and that “a culture consists of a virtually infinite number of . . . messages, or signs, and the anthropologist’s task is to interpret them. Ideally, the anthropologist’s interpretation of a culture should be *as complex and richly imagined as the culture itself*” (Horgan, 1996, p. 154, emphasis added).

Some (including us) might well question why this should be the case. More to the point, however, is how it *could* be the case. Consider the assumptions that must be made in order even to consider the possibility: How can the culture “itself” be “complex and richly imagined?” A culture cannot imagine itself; surely, Geertz must mean that the people of the culture are doing the imagining. If so, then being a member of a culture implies having to have a view of it—for example, as complex or not, as richly or poorly imagined. It implies the mentalistic acts of abstracting and generalizing and structuring. It implies that essential to the social-cultural activity of people creating culture together is their interpreting of their activity. Ironically, Geertz winds up imposing the anthropologist’s view on the “real people in real places at real times”—the natives, like the anthropologist, must be interpreting, for there is nothing else relative to which the anthropologist’s interpretation of the culture can be judged except the natives’ interpretation of their culture. That interpretive anthropology employs a cognitive paradigm goes without saying, and does not concern us here. Our point is that we see here the authoritarianism in the cognitive model of human relating where it is not intended.

We are, of course, not denying that human beings structure the world, create theoretical constructs, conceptual frameworks, or engage in abstraction (such as interpretation and explanation). Nor do we think that these capacities are in themselves problematic. We are suggesting, however, that we human beings do these things far less than philosophers, scientists, and social scientists have led us to believe. Moreover, this all-pervasive cognitive bias has brought our species dangerously close to developmental paralysis. Another of our favorite intellectual influences, the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, has said, “You can fight, hope, and even believe without believing scientifically” (Wittgenstein, 1980a, B69). Building upon his antifoundationalism and taking liberties with his provocation, we offer this paraphrase: “You can fight, hope, and even believe without knowing.” We do not assume that there must always be something other than human activity, that is, something about it or something it is about. Of course, we do not *know* this to be the case!