The Ethics of Occultic Communication: An Invocation of Joshua Gunn and Sissela Bok

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THE ETHICS OF OCCULTIC COMMUNICATION:
AN INVOCATION OF JOSHUA GUNN AND SISSELA BOK

A Dissertation
Submitted to the McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By
James T. Begley

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THE ETHICS OF OCCULTIC COMMUNICATION
AN INVOCATION OF JOSHUA GUNN AND SISSELA BOK

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ABSTRACT

THE ETHICS OF OCCULTIC COMMUNICATION
AN INVOCATION OF JOSHUA GUNN AND SISSELA BOK

By
James Thomas Begley
May 2019

Dissertation supervised by Richard Thames, Ph.D.

Occultic rhetoric, according to Joshua Gunn, is a genre of discourse concerned with the study and practice of secret communications. The strategic sharing of secret messages involves a host of methods and conventions designed for the selective disclosure of hidden knowledge, thus controlling the boundaries of (and accessibility to power between) insider and outsider groups. Occultic rhetoric has its uses in everyday encounters, but the abuse of such manipulative strategies, especially by those in the academy and other positions of power and trust, calls for an ethical response. This dissertation submits occultic rhetoric to moral investigation by incorporating the works of Sissela Bok who examined the ethics of both secrecy and lying. By applying her principles to case studies of deliberately disguised or distorted messages in academic settings, this project suggests an approach for the moral exercise of secret communications, otherwise known as an ethics of occultic rhetoric.
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INTRODUCTION

“Philosophers are notorious for having private vocabularies.”
—Mortimer Adler (1902-2001)

Occultic rhetoric is a genre of human communication that is of central importance to scholars interested in exploring the tensions between clarity and obscurity. One such scholar is Joshua Gunn, associate professor of communication studies at the University of Texas at Austin, who has fashioned much of his career around studying “the category of the ineffable, and in particular, how people use and abuse signs and symbols to negotiate ineffability” (Gunn, 2015). Ineffable communication, characterized by much religious and poetical discourse, is the kind of communication that goes beyond the power of words to tell—to communicate the incommunicable. Gunn recognizes that efforts to engage divine mysteries and scientific unknowns have often resulted in language that can be difficult to interpret, and which can seem to convey a secretive knowledge that is privy only to those who can understand such language. Analysis of the uses and abuses of difficult speech was showcased in Gunn’s seminal work Modern Occult Rhetoric (2005) which focused on the “occultic” as a central metaphor for the type of secret-wielding rhetoric responsible for the creation of insider and outsider groups.

As the above introductory quote by philosopher Mortimer Adler suggests, the jargon or “private vocabularies” of philosophers have a reputation for frustrating audiences because of a felt need to “coin new words, or to take some word from common speech and make it a technical word” (Adler & Doren, 1972, p. 105). Such difficulties of language, while necessary at times for purposes of accuracy, are used in other times for the “notorious” purposes of secrecy. By generating an atmosphere of uncertainty and confusion through deliberately obscure language, people can pass on secret messages in a
variety of exclusive and beguiling ways, the results of which have been used to influence or control public beliefs and behaviors. But what are the ethics of such manipulative strategies? How is one to ascertain the moral worth of rhetoric as it relates to engagements in secrecy and obfuscation? Such inquiries reflect a serious concern over the kind of questionable tactics to be found within cryptic forms of communication, exploited not only by philosophers, but also by politicians, scientists, gangs, poets, and the military. One group particularly adept in such language is the academicians within our colleges. Academic discourse has been equally guilty of committing to secretive vocabularies that tend to obscure meaning, and impair or discriminate understanding amongst their various audiences.

**DISSERTATION QUESTION**

The discriminatory rhetoric of secrecy has been increasingly practiced by modern academics in a way that resembles the historical rhetoric of occult practices. The rhetoric of the occult is a rhetoric of secrets—the keeping of secrets, as well as the subtle art of revealing them. Gunn draws on this connection between the rhetoric of the academy and the rhetoric of the occult, for both traditions seem to foster a particular pattern of communication that is characterized by mystery, enigma, and obscurity. The occult is Gunn’s case study from which he seeks to better understand the difficult language of the academy. The academy too often engages in modes of thought and expression that leave audiences feeling baffled or excluded, while for others eliciting feelings of insight and privilege. Gunn terms this genre of rhetoric the “occultic”—the language of secrecy. The occultic is Gunn’s “cool, new term” for the type of language responsible for controlling the flow of hidden knowledge and the way it is understood by insiders and outsiders.
Occultic rhetoric is “a popular social phenomenon that is currently difficult to capture and, consequently, rarely discussed in scholarly literature” (Gunn, 2005, p. xxviii). Part of the reason why the occultic is rarely discussed is because it is difficult to define.

Occultic rhetoric shares in the irony of being occultic itself, for as Gunn admits, occultic rhetoric is a concept shrouded in theoretical complexity: “readers expecting a direct or definitive definition of the term are likely to be disappointed. To understand something as ‘rhetorical’ is to understand it as negotiable, as a contingent and protean object that can only be discerned partially and indirectly through case studies” (2005, p. xxiii). A “protean object” is a fitting way to describe the heart of occultic rhetoric, for it refers to Proteus—the Greek god who could change his shape, readily assuming different forms (De Romilly, 1975, p. 28). The philosopher Plato (428-348 BC) once referred to sophistic rhetoricians as dangerous magicians because, like Proteus, they could give truth different shapes. Such is the case here when dealing with occultic rhetoric which attempts to represent (or give shape to) hidden, ineffable truths. The hidden, the protean, the vague, the strange, the mysterious and the ineffable are all ways of characterizing occultic discourse—the genre of speech and writing that also typifies the rhetoric of academia.

The academy is a thriving home of dense and dissimulating rhetoric, and there is no changing this reality, argues Gunn. The “alterity of language” will always be “inevitable”; it is “our ontological plight” (Gunn, 2005, p. 234). Gunn’s only recommendation is to exercise humility through mindfulness toward “those whom we exclude,” especially those whom we exclude “in here, in the academy” (Gunn, 2005, p. 234). Besides this, Gunn offers no solutions to the problem of occultic rhetoric. In fact, despite the challenges that often accompany it, Gunn ultimately defends occultic rhetoric,
and even contends that the ineffable conditions of existence actually prevent the possibility for arriving at any solutions. Occultic rhetoric is inevitable, he exclaims, and any pursuit to the contrary is likened to running a fool’s errand.

But need this really be the case? Is there truly nothing we can do to stave off the abuses of occultic discourse within higher education? Some scholars disagree. Kevin Meyer of Illinois State University, for example, asserts that Gunn leaves the reader “longing for an extended discussion” of this topic. In his review of *Modern Occult Rhetoric*, Meyer notes that Gunn “problematizes academic language without offering solutions or suggesting approaches to balance better the ability of academic discourse to include as well as exclude audiences. Greater attention to strategies for making the language of the academy more accessible to those within as well as those outside its walls would strengthen Gunn’s argument” (Meyer, 2007, p. 119). Meyer opens a new line of inquiry that challenges a central assumption in Gunn’s theoretical work. Might it be possible to bring occultic rhetoric into the orbit of moral philosophy to formulate what may otherwise constitute an ethics of occultic rhetoric? In light of Meyer’s analysis, this dissertation investigates a primary question: *How might the scholarship of Sissela Bok offer a way to more fully develop the ethical implications of, and solutions for, Joshua Gunn’s theory of occultic rhetoric?*

The goal of this project is to expand on Gunn’s thesis by challenging the assertion that occultic rhetoric is inevitable, unavoidable, or beyond ethical correction and guidance. This project complements Gunn’s scholarship by suggesting an approach from Bok’s philosophy of communication, based on her masterful works *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life* (1978), and *Secrets: On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation*.
Bok’s treatises on the ethics of secrets and lies are relevant to Gunn’s work by virtue of their common investigations into the ways in which secretive or deceitful language contributes not only to the allocation of social and political power, but also how it bears upon manipulating the formation of insider and outsider groups. Both texts provide insights into a variety of concepts broadly underlying Bok’s ethics of deception. Through Bok’s scholarship in these areas, one is granted an ethical framework that acts as the ground by which practices of occultic rhetoric may be held more accountable, and exercised more responsibly, within professional, academic settings.

This dissertation is a contribution to the field of communication ethics by weaving the works of Sissela Bok into the moral domain of communication studies. Her scholarship on the subjects of secrecy and lying are significant accomplishments in the ethics of human communication, despite her area of expertise falling under philosophy more than that of rhetoric. Still, both Sissela Bok and Joshua Gunn share a common concern for communication, calling for greater attention to the role of secrecy in human affairs. Gunn, who laments the rarity of scholarly discussion on occultic rhetoric, makes clear the need for more research in this area. Bok, too, echoes her alarm for “the sheer extent of all we do not know about many aspects of secrecy, and the need for careful comparative and interdisciplinary studies devoted to them.” She emphasizes: “I was struck by the scope and the significance of all that still awaits exploration. At times, the resulting ignorance is costly” (Bok, 1989, p. 282). In order to remedy this ignorance, an application of Bok’s moral principles into Gunn’s occultic discourse helps to improve our rhetorical engagements with others, both inside and outside the academy.
I. Chapter I. Literature Review on the Obscurity of Language

“Most of us need to work hard at being plainspoken. Oddly, achieving a natural style takes a lot of effort because of an unconscious tendency toward verbal inflation” (Garner, 2009, p. 88). The common tendency to inflate one’s rhetoric is most salient, it seems, among those individuals operating within institutional settings. The language of institutions, from universities and laboratories to businesses and governments, tend to distinguish themselves by embellishing their communication in a tone that rings of sophistication, prestige, and authority. But this official-sounding language can be a nuisance to human understanding, earning it the apropos label “officialese.” Officialese is mostly a derogatory term for language that sounds official, “characterized by bureaucratic turgidity and insubstantial fustian; inflated language that could be readily translated into simpler terms” (Garner, 2016, p. 648). Related concepts abound, such as computerese, pedagouses, airlinese, and commercialese. “Budgetese,” for example, consists of the “esoteric or confusing” language involved in the “budget process” (McCutcheon & Mark, 2014, p. 102). Such terms ending in “ese” are not meant to imply a sense of ease, but rather (dis)ease or difficulty—denoting the familiar challenge associated with English-speaking people trying to learn Chinese. “The –ese suffix found in officialese and commercialese, as in legalese, denotes a caricatured literary style. Other types include academese and journalese” (Garner, 2009, p. 88). The drawbacks of officialese, especially the highfalutin language of scholars known as ‘academese’, are extant in the university environment. Officialese in general, and academese in particular, are characterized by four primary attributes: (1) a preference for long sentences over short sentences, (2) a preference for complex words over simple words, (3) a preference for vagueness over directness, and (4)
a preference for passive voice over active voice, or abstract connectives over concrete connectives (Garner, 2016, p. 648).

American lawyer and lexicographer Bryan A. Garner illustrates such language in his dictionary entry of bureaucratese, or what he defines as “the jargon of bureaucrats…a type of writing characterized by buried verbs, passive voice, overlong sentences, and loose grammar. Add to that an overlay of double-speak and officialese, and you end up with bureaucratese at its finest” (Garner, 2016, p. 131). Bureaucratese, like academese and other barbarous forms of speech, constitutes a genre of official communication that has antecedent roots in the history of officialdom. According to historian Steven Fischer in his History of Language (1999), “the stilted language of officialdom is also endemic in every nation with writing. ‘Officialese’ in its broadest sense pollutes nearly all ancient Egyptian and Mayan monumental inscriptions, as these to a large degree communicate stylistically convoluted messages about and from self-aggrandizing central powers” (Fischer, 1999, p. 193). The surviving official writings of our eldest human civilizations testify to the enduring, unconscious tendency toward verbal inflation, the uses of which, while serving valuable or sacred purposes, are simultaneously responsible for impeding clarity and understanding. Such abuses of communication continue to this day. Consider this modern example of standard, bureaucratic language:

Where particulars of a partnership are disclosed to the Executive Council the remuneration of the individual partner for superannuation purposes will be deemed to be such proportion of the total remuneration of such practitioners as the proportion of his share in partnership profits bears to the total proportion of the shares of such practitioner in those profits. (Garner, 2009, pp. 119-120)

The impenetrability of official prose, which has been described as “the cancer of language” (Gupta, 2003, p. 8) for “debauching reason and feeling” (Fischer, 1999, p. 193),
has seeped into every corner of professional and institutional culture. The language of officiodom is intended to dazzle or enthuse listeners and readers, thereby suggesting an association with professionalism and, by extension, a deserved increase of authority. As others have pointed out, “Among the linguistically unsophisticated, puffed up language seems more impressive” (Garner, 2016, p. 648). This pretentious quality of official speech might also share a common impulse with genteeleism, the politically correct use of “words and phrases by which insecure people try to raise their social status” (Garner, 2009, p. 88). For example, the words “plus-size,” “intellectually disabled,” and “little person” are more gentle and refined than the vulgar words “fat,” “retarded,” and “midget.” Thus, genteelisms (similar to euphemisms) may act as evasive, ‘polite’ language which can serve to raise one’s social or political profile. An additional function of officialese is the creation of outsiders by deliberately making content difficult to understand, because “If they cannot understand the content, they will either not be interested anymore and look for an alternative, or will terminate the search process completely…” (Hoppman, 2010, p. 411). By sabotaging or disengaging the general public’s attention via pleonastic, indecipherable jargon, bureaucrats can insulate their insider status, immunize themselves from the careful scrutiny of others, and foster the development of desired goals and actions without hindrance.

Because of its cultivation of vagueness and obfuscation, officialese has been classified as a type of gobbledygook that aids in the purposes of propaganda. Not to be confused with the kind of “literary nonsense” typical of Lewis Carroll’s poem Jabberwocky, gobbledygook is a legitimate class of nonsense akin to gibberish or balderdash—statements made unintelligible by the excessive use of abstruse technical
terminology. Gobbledygook overlaps with propaganda by virtue of their common
dependence on irrationality. According to the late, French intellectual Jacques Ellul, “That
propaganda has an irrational character is still a well-established and well-recognized truth”
(Ellul, 1973, p. 84). While there are indeed forms of rational propaganda, Ellul admits, the
end of propaganda is always irrational because it is ultimately meant to monopolize on our
feelings, our passions, and our sense of myth. Persuasion accomplished via irrational,
distracting, or nonsensical language is not uncommon. For example, the statement “High-
quality learning environments are a necessary precondition for facilitation and
enhancement of the ongoing learning process” is official, bureaucratic jargon for “Children
need good schools if they are to learn properly” (Fisher, 1999, pp. 193-194). Such official-
sounding gobbledygook, while it can indeed persuade by veering into the practically
nonsensical, need not always flourish so excessively. Sometimes it will appear more
tempered, restrained, or genteel, able to lighten the intensity of certain ideas with the use
of more palatable verbiage. For example, in times of war, Steven Fischer reports how
officialese typically softened the sins of various governments.

Adolf Hitler's Endlösung or ‘Final Solution’ chillingly cloaked an order for the mass murder of Europe's Jews. In the USA's Vietnam war, the expressions 'to take someone out' and 'sanitize' replaced 'kill' and 'murder'. Even at the end of the twentieth century, after the Cold War, the Pentagon was still calling bombs 'vertically deployed anti-personnel devices'. Human deaths are 'body counts'. Many believe linguistic sanitization is necessary, as it enables humans to perform inhuman acts. (Fischer, 1999, p. 192)

The sanitization of official rhetoric seems to excuse ethically questionable behavior
by burying the convictions of our conscience under jargon. In fact, the effects of such
language today have gone to such extremes that even “countless occupational titles have
received nearly incomprehensible reincarnations” (Fischer, 1999, p. 193). Regular titles,
such as undertaker or mortician, have been changed to funeral director and then to
bereavement care expert. Other common titles, like caretaker or janitor, are now exchanged for sanitary engineer. Even military officers have picked up on this trend by referring to their fallen comrades as ICPs, otherwise known as Impaired Combatant Personnel. So offended was Winston Churchill (1874-1965) by the use of this term in the second World War that he denounced an American colonel: “Never let me hear that detestable phrase again. …If you are talking about British troops, you will refer to them as ‘wounded soldiers’” (Fisher, 1999, p. 193). The ability of official-sounding language to impede accuracy, debilitate interest, obstruct understanding, mitigate intensity, and conceal facts has been the source of much controversy inside and outside the institutions that employ it.

Legal institutions, for example, are acutely aware of the problem of verbosity in matters concerning the law, a sickness of judicial language often described as abstractitis. Abstractitis is a “term for writing that is so abstract and obtuse (hence the portmanteau abstruse) that the writer does not even know what he or she is trying to say” (Garner, 2016, p. 10). This is particularly disconcerting for interpreters of the law because, as legal scholar Fred Rodell points out, our interpretations of legal code—which usually deal with long, vague, and fuzzy words—have real, widespread consequences on the rights, freedoms and protections of people’s daily lives (Garner, 2016, p. 11). Consider the following example of obscure, legal jargon: “The message of this article is simple and straightforward: If you represent non-integrated provider-controlled contracting networks purporting to operate as messenger arrangements but which in actuality are fixing prices, the time has come to fix them so they comply with section 1 of the Sherman Act.” If there is anything clear about this excerpt, it is only that it rots with abstractitis—its claim to clarity notwithstanding. “Now try rereading it slowly to see if you can make out any glimmer of a point,” chortles
Bryan Garner. “Guess what. The healthcare lawyers who sent it to me as an example of poor prose didn’t understand it either” (Garner, 2016, p. 644).

Forms of indecipherable, judicial rhetoric (legalese) can similarly manifest in other contexts, particularly in academic discourse also known as **academese**. Academese is “the style typical of scholarly writing; esp., a mode of discourse that typifies the least appealing qualities of academic writing, namely, obscurity, pedantry, and pomposity. Academese is characteristic of academicians who are writing for a highly specialized but limited audience, or who have a limited grasp of how to make their arguments clearly and succinctly” (Garner, 2016, p. 985). One renowned scholar fluent in the pompous rhetoric of academe is Judith Butler, a feminist philosopher and gender theorist, whose writings have been castigated for their dense and casual mode of theoretical allusions and hermetic wordplay. “It is difficult to come to grips with Butler's ideas, because it is difficult to figure out what they are,” chides fellow philosopher and critic, Martha Nussbaum. “Butler is a very smart person. ...Her written style, however, is ponderous and obscure” (Nussbaum, 1999, p. 2). Through professionalized jargon, Butler has procured a specialized field for herself, asserting her claims to special expertise, recognition, and privilege. The convoluted language of postmodern scholarship in general, however meaningless, gathers followers, creates insiders and outsiders, and renews the demand for esoteric texts. Consider this legendary example of academese by the literary theorist Geoffrey Hartman:

Because of the equivocal echo-nature of language, even identities or homophones sound on: the sound of Sa is knotted with that of ça, as if the text were signaling its intention to bring Hegel, Saussure, and Freud together. Ça corresponds to the Freudian Id (“Es”); and it may be that our only “savoir absolu” is that of a ça structured like the Sa-significant: a bacchic or Lacanian “primal process” where only signifier-signifying signifiers exist. (Hartman, 1984, pp. 60-61)
Conservative intellectual, Dinesh D’Souza, not only finds Hartman’s pomposity “amusing,” but he remarks that these academicians have invented a new form of “literary consumerism”—a sophisticated “interpretation industry” that supplies these critics with “large salaries and lavish lifestyles,” allowing them to exist as “the richest Marxists in the country” (D’Souza, 1991, p. 181). By appearing profound and sounding complicated, postmodernist and deconstructionist writers have bewitched tens of thousands of impressionable graduate students with their incoherent verbosity (D’Souza, 2002, pp. 107-108). University departments no longer proffer the clear exposition of truth and knowledge, but rather mysticism and interpretation. In fact, “Things have gotten so bad in some fields that even the experts sometimes can’t distinguish brilliance from gibberish” (Garner, 2016, p. 643). Such rampant abuse of the jargon and subtexts used in the liberal arts and soft sciences eventually summoned the consternation of one particular scientist who recently went down in history for orchestrating an elaborate ruse that would test the merit of these indiscernible vocabularies: his name was Alan Sokal.

Section I.1: Notable Examples on the Obscurity of Language

The Sokal Affair of 1996 is named after the contemporary physicist and mathematician Alan Sokal who played a public prank on the editors of the postmodern cultural studies journal Social Text (published by Duke University) in his attempt to prove the mystification and declining standards of understandability in certain sectors of the humanities. The social sciences in particular have long been recognized to “contain a large amount of conspicuously poor writing, which is now under growing attack” (Weaver, 1953, p. 187), and few have been as effective as Alan Sokal in exposing this scandalous trend in recent times. To test his theory, Sokal composed a grand-sounding article designed to
flatter the editors’ values, titled “Transgressing the Boundaries: Toward a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity” (Sokal, 1996a), under which he attempted to advance the claim that quantum gravity implicitly supported leftwing politics and the goals of other progressivist ideals. The parody essay cobbled together a smorgasbord of citations and theories and bizarre-sounding language, employed with such colorful phrases like “In mathematical terms, Derrida’s observation relates to the invariance of the Einstein field equation \( G_{\mu\nu} = 8\pi G T_{\mu\nu} \) under nonlinear space-time diffeomorphisms (self-mappings of the space-time manifold that are infinitely differentiable but not necessarily analytics)” (Sokal, 1996a, p. 222). The paper was eventually accepted for publication, and, to the chagrin of cultural studies departments around the world, Sokal took to admitting the hoax in the journal Lingua Franca (Sokal, 1996b) where he admitted that “Nowhere in all of this is there anything resembling a logical sequence of thought; one finds only citations of authority, plays on words, strained analogies, and bald assertions” (Sokal, 1996b, p. 3).

The exposé article erupted a firestorm of controversy, setting off national debates that still rage on today: “Are scholars in the humanities trapped in a jargon-ridden Wonderland? Are scientists deluded in thinking their work is objective? Are literature professors suffering from science envy? Was Sokal’s joke funny? Was the Enlightenment such a bad thing after all? And isn’t it a little bit true that the meaning of gravity is contingent upon your cultural perspective?” (Editors of Lingua Franca, 2000). To his credit, Sokal was careful enough to admit that his experiment did not necessarily prove that all of cultural studies was nonsense: “It proves only that the editors of one rather marginal journal were derelict in their intellectual duty, by publishing an article on quantum physics that they admit they could not understand…” (Sokal, 2008, p. 152). Nevertheless, the affair
still sparked “a years-long conversation on academic jargon and the (ir)relevance of critical and cultural studies to the academy” (Gunn, 2005, p. 233), a conversation which seems to have shaped much of the subsequent projects undertaken in Sokal’s later professional career. Shortly thereafter, in his text *Fashionable Nonsense* (1999), Sokal took to exposing at large the abuse of scientific concepts used by postmodern thinkers to bolster their arguments and theories, critiquing the likes of Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, Bruno Latour, Jean Baudrillard, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, and Paul Virilio among others. In his follow up text *Beyond the Hoax* (2008), Sokal continued with this theme, further unmasking the charlatanism of postmodernist academicians, especially the legislators, religious fundamentalists, and pseudoscientists who exploit rhetorical gymnastics to misappropriate, if not purely befuddle, scientific concepts for their own political ends.

Following in Sokal’s footsteps have been other attempts at discrediting the deluge of academic gobbledygook spewing from humanities and social science departments, such as the notoriously published research article “The Conceptual Penis as a Social Construct” (2017) written fictitiously by “Peter Boyle, Ed.D.” and “Jamie Lindsay, Ph.D.” in the peer-reviewed journal *Cogent Social Sciences*. The only problem with the article was that it was anything but cogent. In fact, its authors—later revealed to be philosopher Peter Boghossian and mathematician James Lindsay—admitted to have deliberately crafted the article as pure balderdash, heavy on citations and official sounding language. In the paper, by way of “detailed poststructuralist discursive criticism” (whatever that means, they confess), the authors argued that the penis, understood as the male sexual organ, is an “incoherent” and “damaging social trope” which should be “better understood not as an anatomical organ
but as a social construct isomorphic to performative toxic masculinity” (Boyle & Lindsay, 2017, p. 1). The central claim of the article, including the language that ushered it, was admittedly “preposterous,” and several weeks after its acceptance to the journal the authors turned to Skeptic.com, the online wing of Skeptic Magazine, where they announced the article to be a “Sokal-Style Hoax on Gender Studies” (Boghossian & Lindsay, 2017). According to them, the whole paper consisted of “3,000 words of utter nonsense posing as academic scholarship. Then a peer-reviewed academic journal in the social sciences accepted and published it” (Boghossian & Lindsay, 2017).

The controversy drew the attention of Alan Sokal himself who offered his own review on the satirical piece, finding it “both amusing and instructive” even though he quibbled with the overreach of some of its implications and conclusions (Sokal, 2017). In fact, many of the concerns raised by the article mirrored those that emerged from the Sokal affair itself, where the stunt was “seen either as a brilliant tactic to expose the shallowness of current humanist commentaries or as a heinous breach of academic trust, depending from which side of the ‘science wars’ the comment came” (Gregory & Miller, 1998, p. 79). Detractors of the “Conceptual Penis” spoof issued various criticisms: that Cogent Social Sciences was a “vanity journal” of “low quality”; that hoaxes “prove nothing”; and that the article transpired from “sexist” or “ideological” motivations, among other attacks. Even though the authors rebutted these claims and many more in their rejoinder “Cogent Criticisms” (Lindsay & Boghossian, 2017), the overall conclusion of their project seemed undeniable—namely, that the credibility of the peer review process suffered from two fundamental diseases: (1) “the echo-chamber of morally driven fashionable nonsense coming out of the postmodernist social ‘sciences’…” and (2) “the complex problem of pay-
to-publish journals with lax standards that cash in on the ultra-competitive publish-or-perish academic environment” (Boghossian & Lindsay, 2017). In other words, by lacing the article with rhetorically pretentious virtue-signaling that flattered leftist moral sentiments, combined with the pay-to-publish conditions that favor profit over academic quality, the authors concluded that: “At least one of these sicknesses led to [the article] being published as a legitimate piece of academic scholarship, and we can expect proponents of each to lay primary blame upon the other” (Boghossian & Lindsay, 2017).

The proliferation of open-access academic journals has become, over the past decade, a nearly universal problem for all disciplines, given that they incentivize a conflict of interests. To put it succinctly, “the profit motive is dangerous because ethics are expensive” (Boghossian & Lindsay, 2017). Journals have an ethical obligation to maintain high scholarly standards that aid in the circulation of accurate information. Without a moral adherence to this obligation, or should the quality of these standards be compromised, journals are reduced to nothing more than predatory money-mills which serve only to distribute nonsense or propaganda (or both, sometimes not always being mutually exclusive). The term “predatory publishers” was coined by American librarian Jeffrey Beall to describe a business model for publishing, whereby journals promise potential authors quick peer review of their manuscripts, attached of course with a substantial fee for the publication process (Butler, 2013). Looking to the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE), Beall has provided a criterion for discerning between reliable and fraudulent venues (Beall, 2015), including having amassed an online archive of several hundred entries for “predatory journals and publishers” (Beall, 2016). Philosopher and editor of Skeptic Magazine, Michael Shermer, remarked that his ultimate decision to publish the
“Conceptual Penis” exposé was determined primarily by his sympathy for “the overwhelming amount of work it takes to produce quality publication, particularly when the remunerative rewards are so low for most writers and editors” (Sokal, 2017). Because the market infrastructure of pay-to-publish journals fosters sacrificing academic integrity to the golden calf of careerism, “the dynamics of open access is clear: the pay-to-publish model permits the existence of very-low-tier academic journals that on the traditional publishing model would fail to attract enough paid subscriptions to survive” (Sokal, 2017).

Michael Shermer is not alone in his sympathy for writers and editors. The senior editor of Precision Scientific Editing, John H. McCool, has “a strong antipathy for predatory journals,” particularly the MedCrave Group’s *Urology & Nephrology Open Access Journal* which he sought to expose last year as a fraudulent academic press by submitting a fictitious case report based entirely on the plot of a classic 1991 *Seinfeld* episode “The Parking Garage”—a skit where “Jerry Seinfeld can’t find his car in a mall lot, has to urinate, does so against a garage wall, is caught by a security guard, and tries to get out of a citation by claiming that he suffers from a condition called uromycitisis. Seinfeld argued that, due to his illness, he could die if he doesn’t relieve himself when he feels the urge” (McCool, 2017). Going under the pseudonym “Dr. Martin Van Nostrand”—an alter ego of one of the main characters—McCool purported in his article that “uromycitisis is...caused by prolonged failure to evacuate the contents of the bladder and can result in a serious infection of the lower urinary tract known as ‘uromycitisis poisoning,’ which, if untreated, can cause acute renal failure and has an associated high mortality” (Nostrand, et al., 2017, p. 1). It did not seem to matter that uromycitisis was a phony condition, nor the fact that the article was brimming with dozens of *Seinfeld*
allusions, from show-inspired coauthors to made-up scenarios and references. Three days after his submission, McCool was informed that this peer-reviewed journal (with an alleged focus on the science of urology) had accepted his paper for publication—to the tune of $799.00. “I have no intention of paying the requested fee,” reported McCool to The Scientist. “My short-term goal is to expose MedCrave as a publisher that will print fiction, for a price. My long-term goal—an ambitious one, I know—is to stop the production of predatory journals altogether” (McCool, 2017). Even the fact-checking research website of urban legends, Snopes.com, contacted the MedCrave publishing group and the editors of the journal to request an explanation for how this fabrication passed through their peer review process. “We have yet to receive a response,” Snopes reported (Kasprak, 2017).

Perhaps the most astonishing example illustrating the depth to which open-access standards have sunken come from a remarkable paper titled “Get Me Off Your Fucking Mailing List” which was accepted for publication in 2014 to the deceptive vanity press International Journal of Advanced Computer Technology, a known predatory journal of little scholarly value. First, a little historical context: the paper was originally written in 2005 by American researchers David Mazières and Eddie Kohler to protest a bogus conference—the 9th World Multiconference on Systemics, Cybernetics and Informatics (WMSCI)—which was notorious for its spamming and low quality standards for paper acceptance. From the title of the article, to the abstract, to the introduction, body, and conclusion, including the graphs and figures in between, the entire document consisted of the exact same seven words—“get me off your fucking mailing list”—in repeat from start to finish (Mazières & Kohler, 2005). However, coming up to speed now several years later, the Australian computer scientist, Peter Vamplew, was being barraged by dozens of
unsolicited emails from a dubious publisher, *The International Journal of Advanced Computer Technology*. In response, Vamplew took to forwarding the humorous Mazières/Kohler article of 2005 as a submission to the journal, expecting the editors would either read it or ignore it, but at best would take him off their mailing list. But to Vamplew’s surprise,

“It was accepted for publication. I pretty much fell off my chair.” In line with the highest academic standards, Get Me Off Your Fucking Mailing List had been subjected to rigorous, anonymous peer review. “They told me to add some more recent references and do a bit of reformatting…But otherwise they said its suitability for the journal was excellent.” Vamplew was required to pay a $150 fee to have the paper published, but he declined. The scheme has earned Vamplew some online recognition, but sadly his main aim remains unfulfilled. “They still haven’t taken me off their mailing list,” he said. The editors of the journal have been contacted for comment. (Safi, 2014).

Unlike the three previous hoaxes which more or less manipulated the peer review process through rhetorical obscurity, pandering, and pure fiction, this particular hoax (which was not really a hoax at all) reveals an alarming depth to the problem of open-access journals: that the content of submitted literature, intelligible or not, factual or not, can sometimes have little to no bearing on the publication process altogether. What this unique case demonstrates is a grotesque negligence on the part of referees and editors to safeguard the separation of genuine knowledge from genuine nonsense. “To qualify as true peer review,” writes Marcel Lafollette, “a process must contain some possibility of rejection” (LaFollette, 1992, p. 119). But that possibility did not exist here. If the incentive of pay-to-publish journals have proven anything, at least with respect to this specific case, it is that they pay only lip service to the review criteria and procedures, making virtually no effort to reject or discriminate between legitimate and illegitimate work. Such conditions threaten the authority and credibility of real, sincere scholarship which the peer review process is intended to protect and promote. Of course, one must concede that “peer
review is neither uniform nor totally reliable nor intended as a fraud detection mechanism. Its principal goal—and perhaps what should be its only goal—is to evaluate manuscripts according to whether they should be accepted or rejected, not determine their authenticity” (LaFollette, 1992, p. 119). This is because the relationship between author and journal is collaborative, based on trust and good faith. A slacken approach on either end of their professional obligations would render the potential ruin of both.

The seemingly preprogrammed function of open-access journals to rush otherwise incoherent material into publication without peer review appears practically as sophisticated as the very software programs capable of generating such incoherent material to begin with. By this, of course, is meant the “Postmodernism Generator,” a website coded by Andrew C. Bulhak of Monash University in 1996 which algorithmically generates imitations of postmodernist writing with every new reloading of the webpage (Bulhak & Larios, 2000). Like other parody generators, it organizes arbitrary words and phrases into convincing prose, mostly meaningless, often in the style of a technical paper or particular writer. For example, in .02 seconds, the postmodernism generator now produced a never-before-seen article, in this case, “Marxist Socialism and Lyotardist Narrative” by “D. Jane Bailey” from the “Department of Literature, MIT.” Here is a sample of professor Bailey’s scholarly project: “Thus, the subject is contextualized into subcultural dialectic theory that includes truth as a reality. Lyotard uses the term ‘the capitalist paradigm of narrative’ to denote a self-referential whole, but in the works of Gibson, a predominant attack of the status quo is the concept of pre-cultural consciousness.” A rather insightful argument, one might say. And the essay continues for twenty-five more paragraphs of eloquent, syntactically correct nonsense, complete with endnotes. The Postmodernism Generator
uses the Dada Engine to produce random text based on a formal grammar, the rules of which are defined by a recursive transition network (Bulhak, 1996). Several of the referenced works in the first two hoaxes previously explained were directly lifted and cited from the articles here produced by the Postmodernism Generator.

Given now the existence of such technology, one can assume that it was only a matter of time before a predatory journal would accept a paper for publication despite it being nothing more than an obvious, computer-generated word salad. In 2016, associate professor Christoph Bartneck at the University of Canterbury in New Zealand received an email inviting him to submit a paper to the International Conference on Atomic and Nuclear Physics. “Since I have practically no knowledge of nuclear physics I resorted to iOS autocomplete function to help me writing the paper. I started a sentence with ‘atomic’ or ‘nuclear’ and then randomly hit the autocomplete suggestions” (Bartneck, 2016). This is evident in the very title of the paper, “Atomic energy will have been made available to a single source,” as the rest of the abstract reads as mere gibberish: “Atomic Physics and I shall not have the same problem with a separate section for a very long long way. Nuclear weapons will not have to come out the same day after a long time of the year he added the two sides will have the two leaders to take the same way to bring up to their long ways of the same as they will have been a good place for a good time at home the united front and she is a great place for a good time” (Pear, 2016, p. 1). The iOS autocomplete function worked accordingly. “The text really does not make any sense” (Bartneck, 2016). Using the alias “Dr. Iris Pear”—a subtle nod to “Siri” and “Apple”—Bartneck submitted his paper, which was accepted for publication only three hours later. “I know that iOS is a pretty good software, but reaching tenure has never been this close” (Bartneck, 2016).
Although he did not have to pay money to submit the paper, he was invited to register as an academic speaker for the conference in Georgia at the cost of US$1,099.00. “I did not complete this step since my university would certainly object to me wasting money this way,” Bartneck replied (Hunt, 2016).

While the iOS autocomplete function is self-evidently less coherent than the preformatted ramblings of the Postmodernism Generator, it may escape the attention of many scientists that scientific communication itself is not always clear either. The Computer Science Generator (i.e., SCIgen) attests to that fact. Like the Postmodernism Generator, SCIgen also plays on the random assemblage of texts in the form of computer science research papers. Its purpose is “to maximize amusement, rather than coherence,” according to its authors Jeremy Stribling, Daniel Aguayo, and Maxwell Krohn (“SCIgen—An Automatic”). In 2005, while graduates at MIT, Stribling, Aguayo, and Krohn sought to protest the very same fraudulent conference as David Mazières and Eddie Kohler (cf. the “Get Me Off Your Fucking Mailing List” article) by submitting a spurious paper fabricated by the SCIgen program, titled “Rooter: A Methodology for the Typical Unification of Access Points and Redundancy.” Consider this compelling abstract: “Many physicists would agree that, had it not been for congestion control, the evaluation of web browsers might never have occurred. In fact, few hackers worldwide would disagree with the essential unification of voice-over-IP and public/private key pair. In order to solve this riddle, we confirm that SMPs can be made stochastic, cacheable, and interposable” (Stribling, Aguayo, & Krohn, 2005, p. 1). The article’s impressive technobabble—or in this case computerese—is comparable to the convoluted academese of the Postmodernism Generator. Indeed, the aim of the SCIgen project was to maximize amusement “by aping
the jargon of the less illustrious papers in computer science. But they also had a more serious goal: to test whether such meaningless manuscripts could pass the screening procedure for conferences that, they feel, exist simply to make money” (Ball, 2005). The paper was accepted to the conference, albeit without peer review, but was later withdrawn after being notified by the authors it was a fraud. Not much has improved after this incident, considering that “more than 120 papers” have since been discovered to be nothing more than “computer-generated nonsense” (Noorden, 2014). The extent of the fraudulence taking place within scholarly, particularly scientific, disciplines points to a double standard that reveals a need to reexamine the relationship between science and rhetorical obscurity.

Section I.2: Challenges within Scientific & Postmodern Rhetoric

From the algorithmically random generation of official-sounding texts, to the seemingly unmanned marketing system of open access, pay-to-publish journals, computer technology has certainly added another layer of moral and intellectual complexity to the ethics of the publication industry. But while these technological influences present new challenges to the security of legitimate scholarship, the enduring problem of all academic disciplines, from the sciences to the humanities, continues to be one of language or style, particularly the reality of confusing, specialized jargon engendered by our unconscious tendency toward verbal inflation. Science is no stranger to jargon, for jargon refers to a particular nomenclature or shoptalk, “the special, unusually technical idiom of any social, occupational, or professional group,” writes Garner. This “idiom,” or discipline-specific terminology, “arises from the need to streamline communication, to save time and space,” but also inadvertently tends to “conceal meaning from the uninitiated” (Garner, 2016, p. 535). Hence, jargon’s advantage is also its own disadvantage. The celebrated physicist
Richard Feynman (1918-1988) alludes to the paradox of jargon in his confession: “Hell, if I could explain it to the average person, it wouldn’t have been worth the Nobel Prize” (Dye, 1988). Postmodernists, it would seem, are not alone in their use of official, technical-sounding rhetoric, for the need of precision and shorthand is an omni-disciplinary condition. In fact, the paradox of jargon greatly concerned various scientists, particularly the 20th century’s greatest physicist Albert Einstein (1879-1955) who strove for simplicity in his scientific work. He quipped, “Most of the fundamental ideas of science are essentially simple, and may, as a rule, be expressed in a language comprehensible to everyone” (Einstein, 1966, p. 27). Simplicity of language is a virtue worth striving for, primarily because human thought—its conception, expression, and reception—is indebted to the quality of our speech. But while simplicity is indeed a rhetorical ideal, simplification is ironically no simple task.

Simplifying is a higher intellectual attainment than complexifying. Writing simply and directly is hard work, and professionals ought to set this challenge for themselves. In fact, the hallmark of all the greatest stylists is precisely that they have taken difficult ideas and expressed them as simply as possible. No nonprofessional could do it, and most specialists can’t do it. Only extraordinary minds are capable of the task. Still, every writer—brilliant or not—can aim at the mark” (Garner, 2016, p. 698)

Explaining science clearly and concisely is a rhetorical skill not possessed by all, but which has become increasingly necessary in modern times, prompting the cultivation of the public understanding of science, a field that emerged precisely due to the technical jargon that typifies the manifold of scientific discourse. In their text Science in Public: Communication, Culture, and Credibility (1998), communication scholars Jane Gregory and Steve Miller explain that while previous generations may have believed that good science should be “generally unintelligible to all but an elite,” the newer generations “are being coached in communication skills to equip them for talking intelligibly to the outside
world” (Gregory & Miller, 1998, p. 1). Implicit within the idea of the public understanding of science is the tension between insiders and outsiders—those who have understanding, and those who lack it. Hence, the public understanding of science recognizes that the insider-outsider binary is a rhetorically constructed phenomenon that can only be overcome by rhetoric itself—in other words, by translating the scientists’ (insider) jargon in a language that the public (outsiders) can understand. Take medical jargon, for example, where a black eye might be referred to as “bilateral periorbital ecchymosis,” a sneeze as “sternutation,” a cut as “laceration,” a boil as “furuncule,” heartburn as “pyrosis,” a kidney stone as “renal calculus,” a headache as “cephalalgia,” and vomiting as “emesis.” Even the practice of heart bypass surgery can be jargonized through technical length, e.g., “coronary artery bypass graft”, through abbreviation, e.g., “CABG” (pronounced cabbage), or through the downright pompously arcane, e.g., “myocardial revascularization” (Garner, 2016, pp. 535-536).

Still, jargon constitutes a useful, shorthand system for scientists to present ideas to each other, even though such linguistic conveniences “would ordinarily need explaining in other, more roundabout ways for those outside the specialty. Jargon thus has a strong ingroup property, which is acceptable when one specialist talks with another. But at other times, jargon is no time-saver at all. It can be obtuse and actually inhibit communications” (Garner, 2016, p. 536). While avoiding obtuse language is one way to remedy this problem in science communication, it can also be, at times, an insufficient solution. In other words, the quality of intelligible words might fail to achieve understanding if the quantity of our words grows into long, superfluous proportions. Sometimes too much attention to the
tangential aspects, at the expense of those more central, can equally inhibit science communication and understanding.

...Excessive treatment of details often leads either to this substantive emptiness or to a self-defeating accuracy, in which it’s difficult for the reader to discern the major points because of the cascading minutiae. In writing of this kind, sentences are often so heavily qualified that they become unreadable. …“In one case out of a hundred a point is excessively discussed because it is obscure; in the ninety-nine remaining it is obscure because it is excessively discussed.” (Garner, 2016, pp. 643-4).

Because scientific jargon (and jargon in general) is a paradox that enables understanding as much as it encumbers it, the public understanding of science works to preserve jargon’s efficiencies while also hurdling its deficiencies. Strictly speaking, the public understanding of science acts as an ongoing, rhetorically motivated commitment to the advancement of scientific literacy—for experts to engage, communicate with, and translate knowledge for the public. Figures like Bill Nye “The Science Guy” is a poster child of this mission, and the same can be said of contemporary physicist and host of the Cosmos science-television series Neil deGrasse Tyson. Even one of today’s most fervent exponents of science education, particularly in his defense of Darwin’s theory of biological evolution, is the British zoologist Richard Dawkins who held the Charles Simonyi Chair for the Public Understanding of Science at Oxford University from 1995-2008, and who was himself inspired by the great science popularizer Carl Sagan (1934-1996). The public understanding of science testifies to the fact that while it may be (deservedly) easy for scientists to crack down on the circumlocutions of postmodern academic discourse, scientists themselves risk hypocrisy when scientific communication is neither a consistent paragon of rhetorical clarity. “Scientists talk funny!” admits Nobel Prize winning physiologist Peter Dougherty. “I do not mean by this the specialist jargon that is peculiar to any research discipline. Where many scientists go wrong in the public arena is to use
words like ‘abrogate,’ ‘quantify,’ ‘activate,’ ‘deduce,’ ‘elucidate,’ and ‘modulate.’ The words are Standard English, but many people will never say them” (Dougherty, 2001, p. 272). Of course the problem of specialist jargon is common to all disciplines, the arts and sciences; but far from being an exclusively postmodern tendency, even scientists engage in their own forms of recondite prose. Curiously, however, what we also discover here in Dougherty’s admission is an important nuance about the nature of jargon, one which deserves special attention—the difference between jargon as technical language, and jargon as rhetorical style.

The use of jargon as technical language is “hardly the exclusive province of such fields as medicine or law… It can be found in virtually any other specialized field, such as social work… healthcare… statistics… engineering… investments… business and management… computing,” and even “linguistics” (Garner, 2016, p. 536). Jargon as technical language, also known as ‘industry terminology,’ are words with a particular meaning within a specific industry, discipline, or field, and which serves the need to discuss themes on various registers of meaning, ranging from subtle nuances to wide and general ideas. Technical language is a rhetorical need, a construct necessary for the purposes of precision, efficiency of communication, and “specialization,” the “narrowing of a word’s meaning over time” (Garner, 2016, p. 1029). Not only is technical language an agent of specialization and accuracy, but also of brevity—words which facilitate the exchange of ideas between insiders rapidly or concisely, able to leap over large and complex conversations in a single term or phrase. The nature of this kind of jargon is as useful as it is unavoidably troublesome, for while the development of a complex class of concepts and signifiers are unique to a particular audience who knows and speaks that language, anyone
outside that community, without the knowledge to understand it, must inevitably suffer confusion, risk misinterpretation, and/or persist in utter rhetorical disorientation.

Compare this, though, with **jargon as rhetorical style**, where it is not about the *fact* of specialized language so much as it is about the *manner* of it. In other words, jargon as rhetorical style emphasizes *how* ideas in general are expressed, whether specialized or otherwise, implying an artistic effort on the part of speakers and writers who must discern for themselves what words, what sentence structure, and what rhetorical schemes are favorable in a given context. In fact, the Greek word for style was *lexis*, meaning “words”—the root term for ‘lexicon’ (i.e., dictionary). The relationship between style and jargon depends on an individual’s judicious selectivity of certain words to fit the setting—the less fitting, the less intelligible (and therefore more jargonistic) it may sound. Unlike jargon as technical language which aids *brevity*, jargon as rhetorical style aids *lucidity*. Lucidity, or clarity of meaning, is the ultimate virtue of style, for “The best style is one that is clear without being vulgar,” noted Aristotle in his *Poetics* (2013, p. 45). Because rhetorical style is concerned with how to convey meaning both effectively and beautifully, communication can employ variant degrees of jargon depending, of course, on its appropriateness for the occasion. Without a mastery of style, Quintilian argued, “all the preliminary accomplishments of rhetoric are as useless as a sword that is kept permanently concealed within its sheath” (*Institutes of Oratory*, VIII.1.15). Hence, style is as much the rules governing jargon as it is the jargon itself. This is certainly true whenever one decries the corruption of style, when rhetorical virtue devolves into rhetorical vice, and the light of clarity and simplicity is all-at-once eclipsed by the waxing cover of opacity and complexity. As Aristotle observed, “the use of exotic expressions—foreign words,
metaphor, lengthening, and anything else of out of the ordinary—makes a style solemn and elevated beyond the norm. But if you compose entirely in this style, the result will be either paradox or gibberish—paradox if made up entirely of metaphor, gibberish if made up of foreign words” (Poetics, 1458a.22.21-25).

Now, if the duty of the academy is to foster knowledge, then what comes of knowledge if the very medium necessary for the exchange of ideas is infected by vague and stilting prose? Scientists may not hesitate to snub their noses at the humanists and pride themselves as the unmatched expositors of Nature’s mysteries, but the problem of jargon—as maladapted rhetorical style and/or clunky, technical language—continues to haunt the discursive conditions of science as equally as any other discipline. In fact, the rhetoric of postmodernism can be dressed in such technical garb that it can even go for what passes as standard scientific scholarship these days. For example, in 2016, the historian of science Mark Carey and colleagues submitted a postmodernist-themed research article, titled “Glaciers, gender, and science: A Feminist Glaciological Framework for Global Environmental Change Research,” which was published in the peer-reviewed scientific journal, Progress in Human Geography. Sponsored by a grant from the National Science Foundation for almost half a million dollars, the article seeks to remedy the “understudied” relationship between gender and the production of glaciological knowledge: “Merging feminist postcolonial science studies and feminist political ecology, the feminist glaciology framework generates robust analysis of gender, power, and epistemologies in dynamic social-ecological systems, thereby leading to more just and equitable science and human-ice interactions” (Carey, Jackson, Antonello, & Rushing, 2016, p. 1). The article drew the
attention of various critics from both the left and the right, such as the conservative philosopher Christina Hoff Sommers and the liberal ecologist Jerry Coyne.

With such arcane topics as “feminist postcolonial science studies” and “feminist political ecology,” Sommers asked her interlocutor Camille Paglia, “What are these fields? What do they read? It must just be slogans mixed with a little propaganda, a little paranoia thrown in” (Marchel & Angelova, 2016). With such buzzwords as patriarchy, colonialism, inequality, marginalization, imperialism, situated knowledges, and masculinist discourses to literally describe the study of frozen water, one can witness the full extent to which jargonized language is imbedded in the exchange and formation of scientific texts. The propagandistic themes of feminist glaciology were further analyzed by Jerry Coyne who submitted his own thorough commentary of the article on his science-blog where he remarked that, “It’s *horribly* written, in the kind of obscurantist, ideology-packed prose that we’re used to from postmodernism. And it says the same thing over and over and over and over and over and over and over and over again. These people need to learn how to write” (Coyne, 2016). Propaganda, obscurantism, and ideology so characterized the scientific rhetoric of the article that Michael Shermer, the editor of *Skeptic*, suspected it to be another kind of Sokal-inspired parody. “When this paper was published I thought it was a hoax, so I contacted the University of Oregon, the institution of authors, and confirmed it was real,” wrote Shermer. “And this is just one of countless examples, posted daily on Twitter @RealPeerReview and retweeted all over the net to the amusement of readers who cannot decipher what most of these articles are even about, much less comprehend their arguments and gain value from their conclusions” (Sokal, 2017).
As Aristotle highlighted earlier, the repetitive use of buzzwords and figurative language—what he termed *metaphors*—would ultimately result in “paradox,” a statement that arrives at a self-contradictory or logically unacceptable conclusion through sound and true reasoning. Surely the critics above would classify the relationship between gender and glaciers to be a daffy, unacceptable argument, despite its efforts to seem rational. But what about Aristotle’s other warning—that of gibberish? Consider, then, the notorious example of the **Bogdanov Affair**. In 2002, the French twin physicists, Igor and Grichka Bogdanov, were at the center of an academic dispute regarding the legitimacy of their contributions to theoretical physics when further examination of their research papers were accused of being faulty if not pure gibberish due to the deliberate robustness of their technical phraseology (though the twins continue to defend the veracity of their work). “Suddenly, physicists were trying to figure out what sentences like this meant, if anything: ‘Then we suggest that the (pre-)spacetime is in thermodynamic equilibrium at the Planck-scale and is therefore subject to the KMS condition’” (Overbye, 2002).

Instead of denouncing the twins’ research as being postmodernist or propagandistic, critics began suspecting a different impulse: *pseudoscience*—the assertion of an “utterly implausible” claim contingent on “types of argumentation” which “fall far short of the logical and evidentiary standards of mainstream science” (Sokal, 2008, p. 266). As the mathematician John Baez pointed out, “many of us began hearing rumors that two brothers managed to publish at least five meaningless papers in physics journals as a hoax,” but the twins contended that their formulas were genuine. Upon his analysis, Baez concluded that the Bogdanov papers were simply “a mishmash of superficially plausible sentences containing the right buzzwords in approximately the right order. There is no logic
or cohesion in what they write” (Baez, 2010). Other critics echoed similar reviews, such as the string theorist Jacques Distler who opined that “The Bogdanov’s papers consist of buzzwords from various fields of mathematical physics, string theory and quantum gravity, strung together into syntactically correct, but semantically meaningless prose” (Distler, 2004). Inadvertently casting much doubt on the competence of the physical sciences, the Bogdanov Affair even secured itself a spot in a respected dictionary as a classic example of “obscurity” (Garner, 2016, p. 643). Aristotle, it seems, was correct in his earlier prescription against “gibberish,” the essence of which results from the abuse of “foreign words.” We must therefore be prepared to confront the role of style from an ethical perspective.

Section I.3: Ethical Reflections on the Problem of Obscure Rhetoric

The impact of jargon in both the artistic and scientific hemispheres of the academic landscape suggests that its influence on human nature is ubiquitous. While some of the antecedent examples so far discussed use jargon for parodied purposes—be it the political implications of quantum gravity, or the social construction of the male genitalia, or the fictional condition of uromysitis, etc.—the distinction of hoax from non-hoax is not always clear, as in the cases of feminist glaciology and the Bogdanov papers. Failure to discern this hoax/non-hoax (or science/non-science) distinction suggests much about the rhetorical commonalities between genuine and fraudulent scholarship. It is instances like these where Alan Sokal rushes to the defense by disclaiming any commonality between science and its imposters, for he insists that the only commonality to be made here is between the postmodernists and pseudoscientists themselves—their relationship being one which shares a fervent disregard for established scientific consensus. “At first glance,
pseudoscience and postmodernism would appear to be opposites: pseudoscience is characterized by extreme credulity, while postmodernism is characterized by extreme skepticism.” And yet, on the one hand, “advocates of pseudoscience… sometimes fall back on postmodernist arguments when the reliability or credibility of their evidence is challenged,” while on the other hand, “postmodernists’ professed skepticism is often deployed selectively, so that a disdain for the knowledge claims of modern science sometimes coexists with a sympathy (if not outright belief in) one or more pseudosciences” (Sokal, 2008, pp. 263-264). Whether Sokal is successful in dissociating genuine science from the problems that plague pseudoscience and postmodernism is up for the reader to decide, but accepting such an argument would prove difficult from a rhetorical perspective.

It would seem that, as a human institution, the sciences can neither resist the universal temptation for cryptic, verbal inflation—Sokal’s disclaimer notwithstanding. In fact, as one reviewer put it, “[Sokal’s] critique would also gain more credibility from encompassing his own community: the failure of scientific institutions to address the abuse of statistical methods or promote systematic reviews is no less of a threat to progress than the ramblings of postmodernists or fundamentalists” (Matthews, 2008). So there are weaknesses on both sides. Humanists do talk funny, but then again, so do the scientists, as Peter Dougherty earlier admitted. And if official, technical sounding rhetoric has harbored a tendency to mislead or straight up dupe the peer review process in the past, what should this suggest about the trust we place in the quality of scholarship being published in today’s major academic journals? This is a serious rhetorical concern, one that surpasses the problem of open access journals. Open access journals rarely enforce peer review, and if they do, they will sometimes circumvent their own editors without their knowledge in order
to profit from a higher publishing quota (Gilbert, 2009). But the Bogdanov affair was not
the result of predatory publishers spamming naïve scholars, nor was feminist glaciology
uncovered to be a hoax despite prevalent suspicions to the contrary. The rhetorical
indistinguishability of genuine knowledge from its counterfeits has gotten so bad that even
after exposing his own article as a hoax, Alan Sokal reported “I confess to amusement that
one Social Text editor still doesn't believe my piece was a parody. Oh well” (Sokal, 1996c).
What does this say about the status of clarity taking place in today’s academic
conversations?

When six prestigious academics, working at their scholarly leisure, are
unable to discern that an essay is intentional gibberish, it says quite a lot
about the turn that advanced areas of academic life has taken in the U.S.
If this sort of nonsense were confined only to an isolated corner of
American academic life, it would be a problem mainly for the students
who waste their precious college years being taught by such professors,
and the parents who foot the bills. But the basic idea underlying “cultural
studies”—that there is no such thing as objective knowledge or
scholarship—has metastatized into several areas. (McConnell, 2000, p.
86)

But cultural studies, the liberal arts, and the other social sciences are not alone in
their subjection to the cancer of language. The lack of consensus among the natural and
applied sciences also results at times from the speculative nature of their own disciplines
and specialties. For example, the mathematician Peter Woit alludes to the decaying
standards of scientific clarity in theoretical physics when he confessed, “The Bogdanoffs’
work is significantly more incoherent than just about anything else being published. But
the increasingly low standard of coherence in the whole field is what allowed them to think
they were doing something sensible and to get it published” (Butler, 2002). What is the
reason for these “increasingly low standards of coherence?” What does this suggest about
the ethics of peers and editors who allow for these kinds of errors to occur, and to persist
unabated?
Arguably one of the most presently conceivable explanations must be that of the “Dr. Fox Hypothesis”—the idea that “if you cannot understand a paper, it must be a high-level paper” (Armstrong, 1982, p. 30). In other words, the Dr. Fox Hypothesis is attributed to the association of prestige with unintelligibility: the more unintelligible it sounds, the more prestigious it must be. The Dr. Fox Hypothesis stems from a study in the 1970’s which sought to measure the effects of rhetoric (i.e., expressiveness, charisma) upon a scholarly audience, and to see which of the two—content, or style—would beget greater student-learning satisfaction. “To test the hypothesis, the authors selected a professional actor who looked distinguished and sounded authoritative; provided him a sufficiently ambiguous title, Dr. Myron L. Fox, an authority on the application of mathematics to human behavior; dressed him up with a fictitious but impressive curriculum vitae, and presented him to a group of highly trained educators” (Naftulin, et al., 1973, p. 2). The actor, Dr. Fox, then delivered a pseudo-presentation titled “Mathematical Game Theory as Applied to Physician Education,” a speech which consisted of “an excessive use of double talk, neologisms, non sequiturs, and contradictory statements. All this was to be interspersed with parenthetical humor and meaningless references to unrelated topics” (Naftulin, et al., 1973, p. 2-3). The unsuspecting audience on the other hand, a group of fifty-five psychiatrists, psychologists, social-work educators, graduate students, and other qualified administrators, confided in a post-speech questionnaire to have found the lecture to be enjoyable, clear, and stimulating (even though, unbeknownst to them, it was pure nonsense).

The implications of this study offer valuable insights into the reasons behind the falling standards of coherence in today’s academic scholarship. According to the Dr. Fox
Hypothesis, peers and editors are seduced into publishing nonsense because of an inclination to associate research competence with reading difficulty, a tendency which correlates with Dr. Fox’s audience who had “…obviously failed as ‘competent crap detectors’ and were seduced by the style of Dr. Fox’s presentation. Considering the educational sophistication of the subjects, it is striking that none of them detected the lecture for what it was” (Naftulin, et al., 1973, p. 5). The seduction of style (think obscurity and jargon) is the ultimate theme explaining the phenomenon of incoherent scholarship. Journals are rhetorically seduced by the association of unintelligibility with prestige, and so clarity has become an increasingly depreciated virtue of scholarly prose. Indeed, “…the fact that no respondents saw through the hoax of the lecture, that all respondents had significantly more favorable than unfavorable responses, and that one even believed he read Dr. Fox’s [fictitious] publications suggests that for these learners ‘style’ was more influential than ‘content’ in providing learner satisfaction” (Naftulin, et al., 1973, p. 6). Style, it seems, is not only victorious in its capacity to persuade audiences that nonsense is legitimate knowledge, but the fact that one respondent felt a peculiar need to express that they had actually read the non-existent literature within Dr. Fox’s faux resumé suggests an unsettling, moral failure on the part of audiences (respondents, peers, and editors) to present themselves honestly before others. Fear of admitting one’s own ignorance, of lacking understanding, or of appearing as an outsider, engenders an all-too-human compulsion to cover up for these insecurities by employing a veneer of undue knowledge. The move to pass oneself off as an insider instead of confronting the ‘outsider-fostering’ rhetoric results in the detriment of coherence in contemporary scholarship.
Of course it must be understood that such rhetoric is binary in nature: it fosters outsider status as much as it does its counterpart. Alan Sokal demonstrates this principle in the rhetorical strategy of his hoax: “In sum, I intentionally wrote the article so that any competent physicist or mathematician (or undergraduate physics or math major) would realize that it is a spoof” (Sokal, 1996b, p. 3). Insiders became those individuals qualified with a basic knowledge of physics or mathematics, for it was only by this knowledge that one could rightly discern the truth behind Sokal’s project. Without this knowledge, the editors of Social Text became the outsiders, seduced by an unintelligible rhetorical style which managed to dupe them into an “illusion of having learned” (Naftulin, et al., 1973, p. 6). One editor of Social Text, as aforementioned, experienced a state of incredulity proportionate to the respondents in the experiment whose reactions “ranged from curiosity to disbelief” when the experiment was announced to be a hoax, the aftermath of which still managed to “stimulate interest in the subject area even after the respondents were told of the study’s purpose. Despite having been misinformed, the motivation of some respondents to learn more about the subject matter persisted” (Naftulin, et al., 1973, p. 6). That hoaxes have incentivized inquiry and investigation, however, should not be considered necessarily foolish, futile, or counterintuitive. Hoaxes are indeed fictions, but many examples of contemporary science are indebted to the work of fiction. In fact, various inventions in modern technology can be attributed to the inspirations of science fiction literature, such as the helicopter, cell phone, submarine, taser, and rocket, among others (Strauss, 2012). But before getting carried too adrift down extraneous topics on the rhetorical relationship between reason and imagination (and its Baconian implications for science), the main takeaway here is to understand the binary nature of obscure rhetoric—its ability to assist
hoaxes, like Sokal’s and others, by privileging understanding to those with knowledge, and excluding those without.

The ethics of such rhetoric can be difficult to navigate, for it treads over numerous considerations ranging from truth-telling, secrecy, and even lying. Rhetoric that facilitates the division of insider and outsider groups may, at first, seem to serve the exclusive aim of deceiving audiences—disabling their means of being “competent crap detectors” (Naftulin, et al., 1973, p. 5). But as others would argue, the function of this rhetorical ‘crap’—more strongly referred to as ‘bullshit’—sometimes has less to do with falsity, and more to do with fakery. The “essence of bullshit is not that it is false but that it is phony,” writes moral philosopher Harry Frankfurt in his treatise On Bullshit (2005). “In order to appreciate this distinction, one must recognize that a fake or a phony need not be in any respect (apart from authenticity itself) inferior to the real thing” (Frankfurt, 2005, p. 47). Frankfurt ultimately determines that bullshit is a rhetorical agent of manipulation—a kind of speech that intends to persuade others without regard for truth. This distinguishes lies from bullshit: if a woman tells a lie, she is aware that her words contradict her perception of the truth. But if she is bullshitting, “she is not concerned with the truth-value of what she says,” writes Frankfurt. He continues,

That is why she cannot be regarded as lying; for she does not presume that she knows the truth, and therefore she cannot be deliberately promulgating a proposition that she presumes to be false: Her statement is grounded neither in a belief that it is true nor, as a lie must be, in a belief that it is not true. It is just this lack of connection to a concern with truth—this indifference to how things really are—that I regard as of the essence of bullshit. (Frankfurt, 2005, pp. 33-34)

The publish-or-perish mentality thriving in the upper echelons of academia is in large part responsible for the widespread phenomenon of bullshit scholarship today, both in the arts and sciences. And our failure to attend to a clear exposition of the truth (in
addition to increasing hostilities toward modernist notions of truth in general) has resulted in bullshit becoming a standard, prevalent, and manipulative social practice. In his sequel text *On Truth* (2006), Frankfurt argues that truth is preferable to bullshit, that indifference to truth is more insidious than lying, and that by removing truth from human communication, we only bullshit ourselves. A world without concern for truth reduces people to “fakers and phonies who are attempting by what they say to manipulate the opinions and the attitudes of those to whom they speak. What they care about primarily, therefore, is whether what they say is *effective* in accomplishing this manipulation” (Frankfurt, 2006, p. 4). Driven more by a desire to “win” arguments, seeking out that which is ‘effective’ over that which is ‘true,’ reveals bullshit to possess an *eristic* nature.

This fact is further corroborated by the kind of bullshit that can be found in many scholarly books and journals. To put it mildly, as one editor explained, “What agitates me is scholarship that passes for cogent argumentation in support of a thesis that is, in fact, ‘…bullshit’” writes expert ‘crap-detector’ Michael Shermer (Sokal, 2017). It is no wonder then why such shoddy scholarship has sometimes been described as **pseudo-profound bullshit**—a type of rhetoric “constructed to impress upon the reader some sense of profundity at the expense of a clear exposition of meaning or truth”; “it attempts to impress rather than to inform; to be engaging rather than instructive” (Pennycook, et al., 2015, p. 550). This form of speech typically incorporates the use of **weasel words**, when messages aim at creating a pretense of authority simply by obscuring the source or identity of that authority with vacuous or meaningless language. Weasel words go hand in hand with pseudo-profound bullshit since they both lend the impression that a specific or meaningful statement has been made, when instead only a vague or ambiguous claim has actually been
communicated. Consider such phrases as, “Wholeness quiets infinite phenomena” or “hidden meaning transforms unparalleled abstract beauty” (Pennycook, et al., 2015, p. 549). Profundity is a common denominator of bullshit in general, but coupled with grandiloquent vagueness and ambiguity, such depth of meaning can be obscured to the point of appearing profound, yet still may consist of being nonsense.

The phenomenon of pseudo-profound bullshit coincides with the findings of the Dr. Fox experiment. Just as respondents had found Dr. Fox’s vacuous presentation to be clear and interesting, so too were participants in other experiments found to be impressed by a presentation of indiscernible statements: “We gave people syntactically coherent sentences that consisted of random vague buzzwords and, across four studies, these statements were judged to be at least somewhat profound” (Pennycook, et al., 2015, p. 559). Does the aim to impress by obfuscation reveal a flaw in human morality? Or is the fact we are impressed by obfuscation reveal a flaw in human psychology? And who is more to blame for the promulgation of bullshit: authors or audiences? Of course, it is a truism of all style-guide manuals that sloppy writing reflects sloppy thinking; but if these experiments are taken seriously, they suggest that sloppiness is not always the result of incompetence, but rather ingenuity. Sloppiness, vagueness, ambiguity, obfuscation, pseudo-profundity—these characteristics of communication are not just signs of the failures of language, but they also constitute, in a paradoxical way, the subtle ‘weapons’ of language. To deploy any weapon effectively, of course, requires a significant degree of knowledge and skill. Such is the nature of rhetoric, and obscure rhetoric in particular, where the aim to impress by obfuscation is only possible by mastering a certain class of jargon.
Take for example Igor and Grichka Bogdanov, the twins who succeeded in ‘bullshitting’ their peers, not through a careless expression of their work, but through the contrary: they took seemingly careful steps in crafting their papers so as to impress others via the density of their jargon, obfuscation, and pseudo-profundity. As one professor put it, “I had given a favorable opinion for Grichka's defense, based on a rapid and indulgent reading of the thesis text,” admitted physicist Ignatios Antoniadis. “Alas, I was completely mistaken. The scientific language was just an appearance behind which hid incompetence and ignorance of even basic physics [emphasis added]” (Morin, 2002). By this, it is clear that the enchantment of rhetoric can sometimes compensate for legitimate knowledge. When substance is deficient, style grows more elaborate. Hence, obscure rhetoric is not always the result of incompetence, for the deliberate invention of obscure messages always requires serious competency (albeit of language) in order to better conceal one’s incompetency in other areas of thought. Deploying rhetoric that hides our weaknesses demands foresight, intent, and strategy—elements characteristic of planned and skillful action. Such is a prime example of bullshit, for the art of bullshit, as Frankfurt reveals, is anything but mindless or sloppy. It is a detail-oriented rhetorical exercise that pervades all speech, from common conversation to the heights of advertising, public relations, and politics:

Is the bullshitter by his very nature a mindless slob? Is his product necessarily messy or unrefined? The word shit does, to be sure, suggest this. Excrement is not designed or crafted at all; it is merely emitted, or dumped. It may have a more or less coherent shape, or it may not, but it is in any case certainly not wrought. The notion of carefully wrought bullshit involves, then, a certain inner strain. Thoughtful attention to detail requires discipline and objectivity. …The realms of advertising and of public relations, and the nowadays closely related realm of politics, are replete with instances of bullshit so unmitigated that they can serve among the most indisputable and classic paradigms of the concept. And in these realms there are exquisitely sophisticated craftsmen who—with the help of advanced and demanding techniques of market research, of public opinion polling, of psychological testing,
Bullshit, it appears, is not simply a mindless process; it also involves *mindful* attention to detail (of course, not for the sake of truth). As Frankfurt makes clear, “however studiously and conscientiously the bullshitter proceeds, it remains true that he is also trying to get away with something” (Frankfurt, 2005, pp. 23). In order to get away with something, bullshitters attend to details more for the sake of manipulation than for truth. Bullshit, therefore, is a paradox containing both a sense of strictness and laxity: bullshit abides by strict rules to be “carefully wrought,” and yet it also relaxes its adherence to standards of “accuracy” (Frankfurt, 2005, p. 31). Laxity, or lack of care, is not so much a matter of error accidentally slipping into one’s speech, for accidents imply the intent of care, not the lack of it. Thus, the major fault of bullshit is not error, but *carelessness*—an apathetic attitude toward error altogether. The Bogdanov’s failure is not so much that they failed to get things right or accurate, *but that they were not even trying*. What they were instead trying to do was “get away with” advancing their careers without taking an interest in the truth or falsity of what they were doing or saying.

Inspired more by ambition than by truth, the Bogdanovs managed to verbally seduce their peers into an illusion of having learned something meaningful. Blind or selfish ambition has frequently been the culprit of poor communication. As some scholars put it, “The root of the problem is largely psychological: ‘Most obscurity, I suspect, comes not so much from incompetence as from ambition—the ambition to be admired for depth of sense, or pomp of sound, or wealth of ornament’” (Garner, 2016, pp. 643). While ambition may be one of the main causes of obscurity, a convenient effect is its ability to daunt or intimidate critics and outsiders. “More bluntly still: ‘The truth is that many writers today
of mediocre talent, or no talent at all, cultivate a studied obscurity that only too often deceives the critics, who tend to be afraid that behind the smoke-screen of words they are missing the effectual fire, and so for safety’s sake give honour where no honour is due’” (Garner, 2016, pp. 643). By employing smoke and mirrors, obscure rhetoric can construct illusions, foster misimpressions, insulate insiders from outsiders, and can even abet full-on deception. Nevertheless, while obscurity may often be coupled with bullshit, they can be distinguished: for it can be argued that obscurity is more so inspired by ambition, whereas bullshit is deployed more as a cover for one’s incompetence. “Bullshit is unavoidable whenever circumstances require someone to talk without knowing what he is talking about,” argues Frankfurt. “Thus the production of bullshit is stimulated whenever a person’s obligations or opportunities to speak about some topic are more excessive than his knowledge of the facts that are relevant to that topic. This discrepancy is common in public life, where people are frequently impelled—whether by their own propensities or by the demands of others—to speak extensively about matters of which they are to some degree ignorant” (Frankfurt, 2005, p. 63). As was argued earlier, it seems again that in the absence of content, style becomes increasingly embellished at the expense of truth and/or accuracy.

The interconnection of these variant forms of obscurity, ranging from officialese, gobbledygook, abstractitis, genteelism, academese, jargon, style, and bullshit, etc., share a common set of implications upon the ethics of communication, particularly as it relates to the subjects of lying, truth-telling, and most pertinently, secrecy. Up until now, intimations of secrecy have reservedly loomed in the background of this assortment of concepts and case studies; but if we interpret more seriously the purpose of obfuscation from a rhetorical
perspective, one cannot avert the centrality of secrecy to this manipulative style of communication. Strategically obscure communication depends on secrecy, for secrecy is the inherent mechanism that governs the construction of esoteric language games. Without a sense of secrecy, one could not adequately conceal their insider status or guard against infiltration by unwelcome outsiders. Secrecy is never without this insider-outsider binary. Hence, the Sokal Affair, the Bogdanov Affair, the Dr. Fox Hypothesis, and others, illustrate this binary (insider-outsider) principle in action, through the mediation of a binary language. The language of secrets necessarily demands the use of words with double meanings or hidden references—buzzwords, jargon, riddles, slang, or polysemous terms that are exclusively decipherable by insiders and indecipherable to outsiders—what can otherwise be considered a kind of ‘coded rhetoric.’

Section I.4: On Secret Languages

Getting more to the heart of the bewildering lingo of gangs, bureaucrats, professors, scientists, and politicians, the function of secrecy becomes increasingly significant. Arguably the foremost treatment of the relationship between secrecy and obscurity comes from Barry Blake’s Secret Language: Codes, Tricks, Spies, Thieves, and Symbols (2010) where “Language,” he writes, “is a means of communication, but a good deal of language use is deliberately obscure if not actually encrypted in some form of cipher or code” (Blake, 2010, p. 1). One example that quickly illustrates the encoding or enciphering of words is in the secret language of criminals. “Among criminals and others who tend to attract the attention of authorities, an elaborate argot often develops, a mixture of slang and jargon. Such in-group languages served both to bond their users and to create codes which are opaque to the authorities” (Blake, 2010, p. 5). Consider the secret language of Muslim
extremists known as *jihadese*, whereby messages are encrypted so that terrorists can plan attacks through various social media without alerting the police or local security services. In certain Islamicized sectors of the UK, jihadese has become a developing phenomenon among radicals in need of additional layers of secrecy: “their solution has been to mutate the English language by combining ordinary Muslim street slang with Urdu, Bengali and Arabic as well as scriptural references in the Koran so that it can barely be understood outside of their circle” (Fielding, 2017). Jihadese, of course, is but one kind of secretive rhetoric, and while the uses of such rhetoric can be put to terroristic ends, it is not limited to these functions. Secret languages can indeed aid in the efforts *against* terrorism as well, as it enjoys a wide scope of other applications that pertain to the lives of all people, not just a select, nefarious few.

People regularly find the need to communicate secretly. Governments need to be able to keep their communications secret from other governments, especially in time of war. In both war and peace commercial enterprises need to keep new inventions, new models, new marketing strategies, and the like secret from competitors, and planned cost-cutting measures secret from trade unions. Criminals and those involved in plots obviously need to be able to communicate in secret, as do clandestine lovers. …Secret communication can be in any medium: sign, speech, or writing. (Blake, 2010, pp. 72-73)

Blake covers a copious spectrum of mechanisms in his discourse of secrecy, such as anagrams, Kabbalah, palindromes, semordnilaps, notarikon, acronyms, acrostics, onomancy, riddles, equivocation, prevarication, steganography, magic words, argots, euphemisms, oxymora, contradictions, and allusions, to name a few. Two of the major concepts that he discusses in his book, for example, are the code and the cipher. The difference between a code and cipher are thus: a **cipher** “involves transposing the letters of plain text…or replacing them by substitutive letters from the same alphabet, another alphabet, or a set of non-alphabetic symbols,” whereas a **code**, on the other hand, “involves
employing substitutes for words or phrases” (Blake, 2010, p. 74). To put it more concretely, an example of a cipher would be Morse code. “Morse code is a misnomer since this system is in fact a form of a cipher. Each letter is allotted a pattern of long and short sounds: a • —, b — • • •, e •, i • •, etc.,” (Blake, 2010, p. 74). Other kinds of ciphers are “back slang, where words are pronounced backwards (so that fish comes out as shif), or Pig Latin, where initial consonants become the initial of a final syllable with the rhyme –ay so that ‘Pig Latin’, for instance, becomes Igpay Atinlay” (Blake, 2010, p. 5). It is from the noun ‘cipher’ that we get the verbs ‘encipher’ (to encrypt a message) and ‘decipher’ (to decrypt a message).

Ciphers, however, are different from codes, in that codes substitute for whole words. A clear example of coded language exists in Robert Luketic’s 2008 American heist drama film 21, inspired by a true story featuring several mathematically gifted students from MIT who collaborated together against various Las Vegas casinos by way of their learned card-counting techniques. Accompanying such techniques was the invention and use of coded words and gestures that would signal to one another secret instructions about which games to play and win. “The movie shows [them] using flash cards to practice the various code words, which were used to represent the count” (“21,” 2008). The count was encoded by substituting numbers for words:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>+1</td>
<td>Tree</td>
<td>(a tree looks like a one)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+2</td>
<td>Switch</td>
<td>(binary, on or off)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+3</td>
<td>Stool</td>
<td>(a stool has three legs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+4</td>
<td>Car</td>
<td>(cars have four tires)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+5</td>
<td>Glove</td>
<td>(a glove has five fingers)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+6</td>
<td>Gun</td>
<td>(a gun holds six bullets)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+7</td>
<td>Craps</td>
<td>(lucky seven)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+8</td>
<td>Pool</td>
<td>(eight ball)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+9</td>
<td>Cat</td>
<td>(cats have nine lives)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+10</td>
<td>Bowling</td>
<td>(strike is ten pins)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+11</td>
<td>Football</td>
<td>(eleven players on a football team)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+12</td>
<td>Eggs</td>
<td>(twelve eggs in a carton)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+13</td>
<td>Witch</td>
<td>(superstition, bad luck number)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
How did this code language work? The team organized themselves into two groups: Spotters and Big Players. “The Spotter conveys the count to the Big Player by casually using the code word in a sentence. For example, after the Big Player has been signaled that the table is hot, the Spotter might say nonchalantly, ‘This iced tea is too sweet,’ letting the Big Player know that the count is 16, because ‘sweet’ = ‘sweet sixteen’ = 16” (“21,” 2008). By employing this sophisticated form of coded counting, the team was frequently successful in tilting the tables against the house, and bringing home large sums of money.

While gestures and indeed the spoken word can perform impressive feats of secrecy, writing however “allows much more elaborate forms of encryption than speech” (Blake, 2010, p. 73). The practice of secret writing extends well into our earliest known records of human literacy. Consider, for instance, the invention of private shorthand, a kind of secret writing that can be found in works as ancient as the Roman orator Cicero (106-43 BC). “In many forms of shorthand the distinction between cipher and code is blurred since symbols are substituted for letters, for common sequences of letters such as (in English) –ing, and for common words such as the” (Blake, 2010, p. 74). Interest in the many forms of secret writing had spread throughout Europe during the medieval era, running “hand in hand with a curiosity about magic, and from time to time ciphers and codes that seemed impenetrable were held to be the work of the devil” (Blake, 2010, p. 77). Not only was secret writing involved with “occult lore,” but also with “science,” for “in the late Middle Ages and Renaissance it was common to encrypt critical details of new discoveries, including new recipes” (Blake, 2010, pp. 72). Despite its somewhat dark or
secretive reputation, however, the use of shorthand prevailed into the modern period, even among religious figures such as the Scottish minister George Young (1777-1848), a Scriptural geologist who “developed his own shorthand, which he used for writing his sermons and which no one yet has been able to translate” (Mortenson, 2004, p. 158). Even one of the most renowned theologians of all time, the Medieval St. Thomas Aquinas, wrote in a shorthand that was “filled with symbols, squiggles, and odd connectives” (Barron, 2016, p. 47).

A new type of shorthand gaining widespread acceptance in our technological world has recently been coined as webspeak, the lingo of teenagers who communicate through cell phones and computers with slang and abbreviations such as “BRB” (be right back), “LOL” (laugh out loud), or “TTYL” (talk to you later). One of the cultural concerns over webspeak is that it “is so ingrained in most students’ communication skills that they inadvertently use the language all the time, even where it might be inappropriate” (Murphy & Allen, 2007). Not only has webspeak been used to pass on secret messages, but many people have attributed the popularity of webspeak to a corruption of proper language. Conversely, however, the linguist Deborah Tannen suggests that learning to adapt to new uses of language is not really a bad thing: “Webspeak reflects a versatility that may actually be a strength, as long as the new language is used appropriately”—a view which Tannen compares to fashion, decorum, or how we learn to dress in a way that is appropriate to the context (Murphy & Allen, 2007). While webspeak is a type of code-language popular among teens and tech-savvy users, young children have also been recognized for their ability to construct their own forms of idiosyncratic language, what many theorists have come to label idioglossia. Idioglossia refers to languages invented and spoken by only one
person or a few people at a time, typically children, and which sometimes also refers to the pathological condition of language being so distorted as to be unintelligible. One particular form of this idiosyncratic child-language is cryptophasia, otherwise known as twin talk, twin speech, or the secret (crypto) speech (phasia) of young twins.

Perhaps more infamous than webspeak is the similar-sounding practice of doublespeak. Reminiscent of George Orwell’s dystopian masterpiece 1984 through the conflation of ‘newspeak’ with ‘doublethink,’ the term doublespeak was coined by William D. Lutz, a contemporary American linguist, lawyer, and professor of English at Rutgers University (1989; 1990; 1996). In a famous essay titled “The World of Doublespeak,” Lutz defined the term as “language that pretends to communicate but really doesn’t.” He continues,

> It is language that makes the bad seem good, the negative appear positive, the unpleasant appear attractive or at least tolerable. Doublespeak is language that avoids or shifts responsibility, language that is at variance with its real or purported meaning. It is language that conceals or prevents thought; rather than extending thought, doublespeak limit it. Doublespeak is not a matter of subjects and verbs agreeing; it is a matter of words and facts agreeing. Basic to doublespeak is incongruity, the incongruity between what is said or left unsaid, and what really is. It is the incongruity between the word and the referent, between seem and be, between the essential function of language—communication—and what doublespeak does—mislead, distort, deceive, inflate, circumvent, obfuscate. (Lutz, 1999, p. 347-348)

Moreover, Lutz raised our awareness to the social dangers of doublespeak by classifying it into four distinct categories: (1) euphemism, (2) jargon, (3) gobbledygook, and (4) inflated language. These categories help facilitate our understanding of the variant forms doublespeak can assume. In fact, doublespeak seems to repeat (if not overlap in some way with) a host of other concepts so far discussed in this literature review. For example, there is a strong resemblance between doublethink and “bullshit” (Frankfurt, 2005, pp. 21-23) when Lutz explained how “[d]oublespeak is not the product of carelessness or sloppy
thinking. Indeed, most doublespeak is the product of clear thinking and is carefully designed and constructed to appear to communicate when in fact it doesn't” (Lutz, 1999, p. 352). Some scholars might even qualify doublespeak as the explicit dialect of Washington D.C., given “the prevalence of lawyers on the District of Columbia scene” whose survival mostly depends on their mastery of “impersonal,” “obscure,” “pompous,” “evasive,” “repetitious,” “awkward,” “incorrect,” “faddish,” “serious,” and “unintelligible” rhetoric (Morgan & Scott, 1975, pp. viii-ix). Classifying the forms of occultic rhetoric can be an artistic exercise in itself, with D.C. dialect (DCD) claiming a total of ten categories, while doublespeak amounting to only four.

Whether through abbreviations, codes, ciphers, dialect, doublespeak, idiosyncratic sounds and symbols, neologisms, mutated allusions, or shorthand, the ultimate function of such secretive languages is manipulation—insofar as it allows for the discrimination of meaning upon particular audiences. Consider, for instance, the function of a dog whistle: dogs become a specified audience for whom the whistle is designed to alert, while for humans such high-frequency sounds remain unnoticed or inaudible. This metaphor of dog whistles as discriminant speech carries implications into the contentious world of public affairs. Also known as “dog whistle politics,” a dog whistle is “political messaging using coded language that seems to mean one thing to the general population, but which to a targeted subgroup means something else entirely” (McCutcheon & Mark, 2014, pp. 136-137). Statements like George Bush’s “wonder-working power...of the American people” is considered by the left to be a dog whistle that appeals to the religious community, since “wonder-working power” is a line from a beloved Christian hymn; and statements like Barack Obama’s “pay your fair share” is considered by the right to be a dog whistle that
appeals to the socialist community, since “fair share” alludes to notions of economic redistribution (McCutcheon & Mark, 2014, p. 137). Dog whistling acts as a kind of covert language that makes secret appeals to certain members of an audience.

The detection of dog whistles in political speech is an exercise in interpretation requiring an ability to draw connections between meanings and identities. Exposing a dog whistle, or decoding a buzzword, is similar in a sense to a shibboleth test. A shibboleth is a custom, motto, principle, catchphrase, belief, or expression that distinguishes a particular class or group of people. One cinematic example of a shibboleth test can be seen in Quentin Tarantino’s fictional, Nazi-war film Inglourious Basterds (2009) which depicted a scene where a British spy, disguised as a SS Officer, enters a tavern to have a drink with a leader of the Nazi Gestapo. The spy accidentally gives away his identity by ordering three drinks from the bar by gesturing “three” with his hand (using his index, middle, and ring fingers). The Nazi leader’s demeanor immediately changes upon recognizing the spy’s mistake, for this gesture was atypical German people (who instead would use their thumb, index, and middle fingers to signal “three”). This scene constitutes a shibboleth test—a test of one’s identity. A shibboleth test “is not a test of proficiency or competence, but is more like a blood test, or a fingerprint or DNA test,” writes renowned linguist Tim McNamara. “It is possible to use language tests for detection because language acts socially as a marker of identity, and in cases where social groups are in conflict or in competition, this feature of language can be exploited. But unlike a fingerprint, which is unique to each individual, language identity is shared among members of a speech community, so that it is group membership that is detected here” (McNamara, 2005, p. 352). Shibboleth tests have been used to great effect throughout history, especially in times of war (see Judges 12:6), to help
groups distinguish themselves from others, or discern friends from enemies. Hence, in order to protect one’s cover from detection and exposure, shibboleths must be carefully suppressed.

In summary, there exist myriad forms of oblique communication employed for various purposes. The desire to conceal messages, or to convey meaning in discriminant ways, works under a panoply of likened concepts, some more nuanced than others: patois, anti-language, register, cant, or more familiarly, argot. “Groups who are oppressed, imprisoned, or isolated from the community at large and those whose activities are under scrutiny by the authorities tend to develop an extensive in-group variety of language known as argot,” writes Barry Blake. “An argot is colloquial and has the character of slang, but some of its vocabulary is technically jargon in that it is specialized and has no standard equivalents. All of these specialized varieties present a source of potential obscurity to anyone who knows only formal, mainstream language” (Blake, 2010, p. 196-197). The need for obscurity no doubt involves an ethically complex strategy that has been felt by all in certain circumstances at some point in time, giving way to the invention of argots, shorthand, codes, dog whistles, and officialese, etc. It can also be said that oblique forms of communication are typically motivated by four main factors: “A desire to tease or amuse; practical security; maintaining an identity; and fear of the power of words” (Blake, 2010, p. 291). These and other causes of obscurity, as well as its effects, impact our world in significant ways, and continue to inspire important questions about the nature of secrecy and its relationship to ethics and rhetoric.
Section I.5: The Occult Connection

In order to appreciate fully the rhetoric of secrecy, one must first understand the tradition of secrecy. Few have studied secretive traditions more thoroughly than the rhetorical scholar Joshua Gunn who examines the strategies of secrecy as practiced among the intellectual elite, most especially through the ultimate of secret traditions—namely, the occult. The occult concerns the discovery and control of magical knowledge, a knowledge characterized by a manifestation of ritual, consecrated behavior, and “a practice of using tokens, images, charms, gestures, or special acts of language to influence people, events, or the natural world or to summon or beseech supernatural agencies” (Knoblauch, 2014, p. 27). These “special acts of language” are often poetic as they are puzzling, and it is this particular trait of occult language that most likens to the language of academics. In his book *Modern Occult Rhetoric: Mass Media and the Drama of Secrecy in the 21st Century* (2005), Gunn contends that the inhabitants of the academic community employ a style of speech comparable to the obscure, dissimulating language of mystics and magicians. Rhetorical obscurity is a sophisticated form of communication given its penchant to exploit esoteric vocabularies, restrict knowledge to an in-group, and exclude outsiders.

Occultism is a tradition long associated with discriminating the sharing of hidden knowledge. Magical knowledge was something to be hidden and protected, to be revealed with discretion to particular audiences who could be trusted. The hiddenness of occult practices was motivated not only by a fear of persecution, but also by a need to advance oneself as a superior magus. Occultism thus relied on a unique kind of rhetoric that carefully managed the concealment and revelation of magical secrets. This close association of magic and rhetoric has existed since the days of ancient mythology: for
example, the Egyptian god Theuth (Thoth) was not only credited with the arts of magic, the development of science, and the judgment of the dead, but was also undeniably the patron deity of language, having “invented figures, and the letters of the alphabet, and the arts of reading, writing, and oratory in all its branches” (Budge, 1904, p. 414). The kinship of language and magic in mythology is further reinforced by the cultural significance of “runes,” otherwise known as secret or magical signs, letters, or symbols. “[T]here has been a revival of interest among New Agers with an interest in the occult because runic writing is believed to be connected with magic. The name rune (rūn in Old English) means ‘secret’ or ‘mystery’ and the runic alphabet is strongly associated with magic in the Norse sagas. When one considers that runes were the first form of writing to be introduced to the Germanic people it is not surprising that they were attributed magic properties” (Blake, 2010, p. 143).

The meanings of runes were shrouded in mystery to the illiterates, appearing to hide or conceal sacred knowledge. The tendency of writing to be associated with magic was due to its ability to preserve knowledge as much as its ability to reserve knowledge to those who could understand it. Writing is discriminatory or biased toward those who can interpret it. Hence, the secret meanings behind runes contributed to the overall sense that writing in general was a magical art, making sense of the fact that both magic and rhetoric were governed by the same deity. The inscrutability of runes was consistent with the magic and secretive themes of the occult tradition; in fact, the very word “occult” is rooted in the Latin word occultus which means “secret.” Emphasizing the incomprehensibility attributed to reading occult texts brings to mind another magical object known as a “grimoire” (i.e., a book of magic spells). Grimoires were manuals containing spiritual truths and incantational
instructions to be used within pagan rituals. The term “grimoire” reflects such words as *glamour* and *grammar*, derived from the French word *grammaire* (DeRomilly, 1975, p. v), and it also referred to “a figure of speech to denote something that was difficult to read or impossible to understand” (Davies, 2010, p. 1).

The grammar of occultism relies on the indecipherability of messages in order to control the passage of understanding. Because understanding is only begotten by an act of interpretation, the practice of magic relies upon the study and principles of interpretation—an art or process known as “hermeneutics” which concerns the methods for deciphering magical signs and meanings. Whether scrying for visions in a crystal ball, or communing with spirits in another dimension, or translating the wrinkles on a person’s palm, or drawing conclusions from a set of tarot cards, or divining the future based on the arrangement of the planets, the occult tradition has long depended on hermeneutics as another form of magic, one which yielded secret truths that would grant the seeker knowledge and security (and, perhaps in many cases, also power and advantage). Once again, the relationship between magic and hermeneutics springs forth from the insights of mythology as they pertain to the dialectic of secrecy and disclosure:

The Greek word *hermeios* referred to the priest at the Delphic oracle. This word and the more common verb *hermēneuein* and noun *hermēneia* point back to the wing-footed messenger-god Hermes, from whose name the words are apparently derived (or vice versa?). Significantly, Hermes is associated with the function of transmuting what is beyond human understanding into a form that human intelligence can grasp. The various forms of the word suggest the process of bringing a thing or situation from unintelligibility to understanding. The Greeks credited Hermes with the discovery of language and writing—the tools which human understanding employs to grasp meaning and to convey it to others. (Palmer, 1969, p. 13)

The ancient Greeks identified Theuth to be the Egyptian equivalent of their own Greek deity, Hermes, for they both governed over the same values and practices (Budge,
1904, p. 414). The magic of hermeneutics rests in its function to de-code the coded, dis-cover the covered, or de-cipher the ciphered—in a sense, to banish human ignorance and mystery, and enlighten our senses to the truth. Such is (or should be) the whole purpose of working in higher academia—to advance the never-ending march of knowledge into the vast frontiers of the unknown. Whether the mechanism of such advancement is called science, or hermeneutics, or dialectic, the scholars within our colleges and universities should nevertheless commit to the prospect of expanding the territory of truth through clear, intelligible communication—the type of communication suited for eliminating the very conditions that make intelligible translation necessary in the first place. But unfortunately, much of the modern academy these days has succumbed, by and large, to a rhetorical style that perpetuates secrecy and obscurantism rather than clarity and understanding. In other words, claims are no longer measured by what is ‘approximately true’; they are instead measured by what is “increasingly verisimilitudinous” (Polkinghorne, 1998, p. 17). Such impenetrable, pompous jargon privileges inscrutability over intelligibility, obstructs the progress of knowledge, and fosters the comparison that academics are modern-day occultists.

The tendency for academics to express their knowledge in riddles and esoteric jargon has led Gunn to confess that much of today’s scholarship is allergic to plain and direct language: “all theory is occultic,” writes Gunn (2005, p. 52). This message has also been reinforced by other figures, like the lawyer Heather MacDonald who critiqued what she described as “The Ascendancy of Theor-ese” (1992). Difficult theoretical language, particularly within those pockets of postmodern scholarship, literary criticism, and the social sciences, has fortunately not gone unnoticed, as various thinkers have already begun
to address the problems that occult rhetoric is fostering. *Higher Superstition* (1994) by Paul Gross and Norman Levitt, for example, is a classic text that offers arguably one of the most formidable challenges to the deluge of theor-ese currently sweeping the academy. In time, I will eventually investigate the history, theory, and ethical principles of such secret languages from the philosophical perspective of Sissela Bok. But before then, this project shall now shift attention to the work of Joshua Gunn and showcase his contribution to understanding the bond between difficult languages and the occult.

II. **Chapter II. Joshua Gunn and the Rhetoric of the Occult**

Joshua Gunn is a practitioner of the occult arts and a college professor of rhetorical communication. After obtaining his bachelor’s degree in philosophy and communication from George Washington University in 1996, he enrolled to the University of Minnesota where he earned the rest of his education in rhetorical studies: a master’s degree in 1998 and a doctoral degree in 2002 (directed under Karlyn Kohrs Campbell). From there, Gunn moved to the south where he worked for three years as an assistant professor of communication at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, experiencing what he described as a “culture shock” that required adapting his liberal “Midwestern political correctness” to a southern-style, traditionally religious, and politically conservative student body (Gunn, 2006). Gunn was also involved with freemasonry and became a Master Mason in St. James Lodge No. 42. His occupation with freemasonry continued when he moved to Texas, becoming a 32° Scottish Rite Mason. His prolific works on the relationship between communication and the occult continued to flourish, and eventually rose his scholarly profile until he landed a career as a professor of communication studies at the University of Texas, Austin. With interests in queer theory, psychoanalysis, and feminism, Joshua
Gunn centers his attention on the subject of rhetoric as it pertains to notions of ‘ineffability’ where he explores the limits of language and meaning. His latest book *Speech Craft: Public Speaking in the 21st Century* (2017) weaves in much of these themes.

“Rhetoric,” according to Joshua Gunn, “is the study of how representations (linguistic or otherwise) consciously and unconsciously influence people to do or believe things they would not otherwise ordinarily do or believe” (2005, p. xx). This is a useful definition for Gunn’s project which essentially upholds “representation as the central, suasive dimension of human drama, the song of the opera of social being” (2005, p. xx).

**Representation** is a flexible term rooted in the concept of *mimesis* (imitation) and which points to the symbolic nature of language. Language symbolizes reality, such as “cat” (the word) is a sign meant to imitate, represent, or refer to a real cat (in the world). This relationship between *word* and *world* is one which has sparked copious philosophical debate about the presuppositions of language, the possibility of truth, the preconditions of meaning, and the correspondence between consciousness and reality. Representation is a concept that bears heavily upon discourses in the philosophy of language, philosophy of mind, and philosophy of communication. But one of the mysteries of representation is how words refer to those things which are mysterious in themselves—words which refer to things not in the world, but which transcend or abstract it. What can be said about the conflict between representation and ineffability? How does one express or represent the ineffable (i.e., that which transcends expression or goes beyond representation)?

Communication is a paradox—a **rhetorical antinomy** which can be summarized as “The Truth is ineffable, but let me tell you about it anyway” (Gunn, 2005, p. 49). Attempts at expressing the inexpressible are common themes within the discourses of
miracles, transcendence, spirituality, and religion. Gunn’s ideas about the paradoxical nature of religious rhetoric are grounded in the works of literary theorist Kenneth Burke (1897-1993). In his *Rhetoric of Religion* (1961), Burke investigated language that strove to describe the indescribable: for example, the classical God of Abraham has been invariably portrayed in many sacred texts as being male, or possessing eyes, ears, and hands, or feeling emotions like joy, love, jealousy, and anger. But these mundane figures of humanity, when used to illustrate the operations of the divine, showcase a paradox of language: that we must necessarily borrow the words of everyday experience (immanence) to grant expression for those higher things which *surpass* everyday experience (transcendence). This suggests to Gunn that no matter how hard we try, our finite descriptions of God, or of transcendence in general, will always fall short of the infinite truth. Truth, it seems, is only ever an approximation, bound as it is by the limits of language. Truth is incapable of absolute expression, and therefore, by definition, *ineffable*.

“Transcendent truths are ineffable,” writes Gunn, “but people invest a lot of time and energy into trying to represent ineffability. In the broadest sense, then, religious rhetoric seems to embody a conflict between representation and ineffability” (Gunn, 2005, p. xxi). One of the great exemplars of this effort to represent ineffability was St. Augustine (354-430 AD) whose primary question and lifelong preoccupation was determining “a correct description of God” (Barron, 2015, p. 3). However, while both Gunn and Burke

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1 Though theology and occultism share an interest in spiritual or ineffable realities, it is important to mention that the representations of theology tend more toward publicity, while the representations of occultism tend more toward secrecy. This is evident in the very cultivation of Christian homiletics, the art of preaching or writing sermons. Theology will strive to portray the divine, despite the limitations of language, while occultism will be more inclined toward mystification, exclusion, and discrimination. As G.K. Chesterton put it, “It was the Christians who gave the Devil a grotesque and energetic outline, with sharp horns and a spiked tail. It was the saints who drew Satan as a comic and even lively. The Satanists never drew him at all” (Chesterton, 1912, pp. 175-176).
affirm that religious rhetoric exemplifies a paradox or antinomy, Gunn goes further than Burke to suggest that this conflict “is not limited to supernaturalism” (Gunn, 2005, p. xxi). Gunn contends that the conflict also extends to the natural world, for the (secular) truths of our lowly, everyday encounters are no less governed by the limits of rhetoric. “Our experience of the world—what we see, hear, touch, smell, taste, and feel—is fundamentally ineffable” (Gunn, 2005, pp. xxi-xxii). Because our experiences are derived empirically (that is, directly) from our own individual senses, no one else has direct access to our own experiences the way we do. Each person’s experience is unique, capable only of being shared indirectly with others via communication. Thus, consideration for these ‘immanent truths’ leads Gunn to adopt a new standard of epistemology that encompasses not just our knowledge and “correct descriptions” of God, but also of reality. The problem therefore is not with the “real world” itself, but with our “vocabularies or language” about the real world. Hence why the antinomy is qualified as being a “rhetorical” problem (Gunn, 2005, p. 49).

Subsuming our real-life experiences under the umbrella of ineffability is a strategy similar to the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan’s (1901-1981) notion of the “Real” (Gunn, 2005, p. 51), a concept which represented “the unattainable and inexpressible limit of language” (Audi, 2015, p. 572). The transcendent and the immanent are both ineffable, according to Gunn, because our words will always fail to communicate both the divine nature of God and the “sensory manifold of human experience” (Gunn, 2005, p. xxii). Such a move to expand the range of ineffability to include everyday, mundane speech is done by virtue of the fact that both transcendent and immanent communications often share a common tendency for obscurity, creative uses of language, and ambiguous meaning. This
is evident by the secular works of Jacques Lacan himself, for example, whose psychoanalytic writings are said to be “of legendary difficulty, offering idiosyncratic networks of allusion, word play, and paradox, which some find rich and stimulating and others irresponsibly obscure” (Audi, 2015, p. 572). This sense of difficulty, idiosyncrasy, and obscurity, which result in creating followers and critics, is among the most defining elements that connect Gunn’s theory of rhetoric to his conception of the occult.

But before exploring this connection to the occult, one must first understand how arcane or cryptic speech relates to the creation of insiders and outsider groups: “The key to understanding the link between difficult language and social discrimination is to recognize that, on some level, strange vocabularies are created to better approximate the ineffability of both mundane and spiritual experience” (Gunn, 2005, p. xxii). The capacity of “strange vocabularies” to represent the un-representable aspects of lived experience consequently fosters the social discrimination and privilege of certain vocabularies over others. The competition and triumph of favored vocabularies is a theme reminiscent within Burkean theories of language, most notably his concept of the “terministic screen.” Indeed, as reviewer Pat Gehrke points out, Gunn’s book can be “rightly called a Burkean enterprise” (Gehrke, 2007, p. 380) given its emphasis on the ways in which language can screen or discriminately filter our perceptions of reality: “if any given terminology is a reflection of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must be a selection of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a deflection of reality” (Burke, 1966, p. 45). Representations of reality, based on the kinds of terms we choose to use (and not use), always play a role in directing our attention down certain channels of thought over other channels, thus influencing our understanding, interpretations, and engagement with reality.
Representation implies ‘revealing,’ so it is through representation that reality is ‘revealed’ to us.

Section II.1: Occultism as Content and Form

The connection to the occult, however, emerges here when we consider how our language determines what is not revealed about reality. Gunn’s concern with representation pivots on the fact that language governs not only the ways in which reality is revealed to us, but also how our words are responsible for the ways in which reality is concealed to us. This art of revealing and concealing is the primary linchpin connecting rhetoric to occultism. In order to explore this link more carefully, it is important to first understand that occultism is comprised by two rhetorical principles: (1) content and (2) form. First, the content of occultism is represented under the concept of the occult: “the occult should be understood as the study of secrets and the practice of mysticism and magic, comprising centuries-long dialogue between occultists and their detractors about metaphysical secrets, the role of the imagination in apprehending such secrets, and who has the authority to keep and reveal them” (Gunn, 2005, p. xxii). Secrecy is a dominant feature of the occult, likely due to the association of hiddenness with forbiddenness. As Gunn explains, occultism involves secrets in the sense that “many of the practices assembled under its name were forbidden by authorities and had to take place ‘in secret.’ The occult as the secret study of secrets, then, did not exist until there was a need for secrecy” (Gunn, 2005, p. 9).

The need for secrecy is vital to Gunn’s understanding of the occult. He argues that many introductory and encyclopedic sources have erroneously affiliated the origins of the occult with a variety of ancient traditions, like shamanism, because of a common interest in the
magical arts. Rather than identify occultism on the basis of magical interest, Gunn takes on the peculiar view of emphasizing the need for secrecy out of fear of persecution as occultism’s most defining attribute. “Of course, the idea of magic as the use of supernatural forces to do something secular has been around since antiquity, but magic did not become occult, at least in the Western world, until the Romans adopted Christianity as the official religion and began persecuting those who held alternative beliefs—including those who studied magic,” writes Gunn. “In light of this important qualification, occultism did not emerge until the medieval period—at the very earliest the fourth century of the common era, when the practice of magic became a capital offense” (Gunn, 2005, p. 9-10). This emphasis on persecutory secrecy, however, is not without its conceptual complications.

Second, Gunn argues that the role of secrecy essential throughout the history of the occult eventually gave way to a secretive form of communication—what he coins as “the occultic”—a genre or mode of rhetoric dealing with the use and methods of secrecy. “The term ‘occultic’ is derived from the Latin root occultus, which means ‘secret,’ and which is the past participle of occulere, ‘to conceal’” (Gunn, 2005, p. xxii). The occultic is,  

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2 Occultism has also been linked historically to Gnosticism, another diverse set of ancient mystical traditions obsessed with secrets or hidden knowledge—from gnosis meaning “knowledge” (Greer, 2003, pp.196-197). Gnosticism carries manifestly Platonic themes reminiscent of the Allegory of the Cave—the seeking of a truer reality behind the curtains of this world. In some ways a predecessor of occultism, in other ways a metanarrative of theology, Gnosticism teaches that truth exists ‘out there,’ fixed and unchanging like Plato’s Theory of Forms (Gunn, 2005, p. 39), and that the soul is imprisoned in a corrupt, material reality.  

3 While there is much to appreciate in Gunn’s qualification about persecution, definitional problems arise when privileging this qualification above other standards, mostly because this logic would render Christianity as a type of occultism under the reign of Emperor Nero, or Judaism under the reign of the Third Reich. Is the enemy of occultism an occultism? Even Gunn admits that occultism experienced fluctuating seasons of prominence and social acceptance (Gunn, 2005, p. 9). Did the occult then cease to be occultic? Placing undue emphasis on conditions of oppression rather than esoteric knowledge is an important qualification to consider, but remains in many ways an overcorrection to other factors that assist in the classification of these concepts. Certainly Shamanism and Gnosticism share far more in common with occultism than do Christianity and Judaism, despite the fact that all religious traditions must, to some degree, struggle with the reality of ineffability, and at times dabble with exclusivity or secret modes of communication.
therefore, the *language* of the occult, a form of secretive communication that manifests as bizarre, difficult, or esoteric expression in order to pass on secret messages, or to ward off unwelcome outsiders, or to raise one’s social or political status, or “to avoid misunderstanding, perversion, or, in some cases, persecution…” Indeed, “…the discriminatory logic of difficult language began as a form of self-protection” (Gunn, 2005, p. 17). Such is the nature of occultic language, for its progenitor—the occult itself—could not help but thrive upon the need for secrecy. Gunn, therefore, highlights a distinction between the concepts of language and tradition. “Although there is an occult tradition—a historical content obsessed with books, spells, and secrets—this has been eclipsed by the form of its rhetoric, which concerns a logic of secrecy, interpretation, and discrimination” (2005, p. xxiii). Occultism is thus comprised of both *form* (language, the occultic) and *content* (tradition, the occult), a distinction that Gunn has classed in terms of generality and particularity. In other words, the general (larger) category of secret languages (the occultic *form*) permeates, encompasses, and initially emerged from the particular (smaller) category of a secret tradition (the occult *content*). “The smaller category, the occult, is both an expression and the origin of the larger category,” writes Gunn, who suggests that, inductively, “we could learn more about the larger occultic by examining the historical occult” (Gunn, 2005, p. 26).

Some of the functions of occultic rhetoric can be observed through the various writings of occultists themselves. For example, a survey of modern occult texts showcases the use of three common rhetorical features: (1) *revelation*, (2) *neologism*, and (3) *irony*. The first feature pertains to the “language of revelation, the dialectical counterpart to secrecy” (Gunn, 2005, p. 18). The language of *revelation* connotes a sense of truth-telling:
that the facts are unveiled; that hidden knowledge is now deciphered; that clarity and precision have been promised on matters long unknown or secret. Such suspenseful or sensational tones of revelation are typical among the titles and book covers of various occult texts, all designed of course to tease the curiosities of a given audience by touting to have discovered or decoded the long awaited answer to some enduring riddle or mystery.

“The language of revelation—that the given occultist will be telling secrets—is always couched in terms of ‘the truth,’” writes Gunn (2005, p. 20). In addition to this, the language of revelation is concerned with the role of authority, for the author of a particular revelation is invested with exclusive power to determine its meaning. The words author and authority are both “derived from the Latin auctor, which means ‘creator.’ In occult books, however, the authority claimed is always in terms of something that previously has been concealed or gravely misunderstood, and this something typically has to do with powers that derive from alternate realities most immediately accessible ‘within’ one’s own mind” (Gunn, 2005, pp. 21-22). The language of revelation does not just appeal to our natural craving for new or better knowledge, but it also privileges the authority of the revealer who is ultimately granted primary legitimacy in the interpretation of their revelation.

In addition to the rhetoric of revelation is the rhetoric of neologisms. An occultist’s authority depends not merely on their revelatory power to expose secrets, but also on his or her ability to employ neologisms—the invention of words and phrases, or the novel use of preexisting words and phrases to mean new things, or to refer to old things in a new way. “Neologisms and otherwise strange terms are rife in occult texts,” admits Gunn (2005, p. 22). One notable example is the alchemic word “VITRIOL,” a cipher deployed in occult circles which referred to the Latin phrase Visita Interiora Terrae Rectificandoque Invenies
Occultum Lapidem, translated as “visit the interior of the earth, and by rectifying, you will discover the hidden stone.” According to Gunn, the cipher is referring to the Philosopher’s Stone, a rock of sacred importance to alchemists who were interested in turning metals into gold, providing eternal youth, or healing illnesses. This cipher, though found in a number of occult texts, was considered meaningless to non-alchemists. “Indeed, deliberately misleading language and prose has been a common element in occult texts since the medieval era, when magi and occultists were forced to compose their texts in an allegorical code, or ‘the language of birds’ (Gunn, 2005, p. 22). Such neologistic language was undoubtedly instrumental for occult groups who longed to conceal their knowledge from outsiders. The Rosicrucians, for example, were a secret occult order who “‘were aware of these different levels of meaning [in the use of strange occult terms] and could speak in their esoteric language on a level which was beyond comprehension to the uninitiated’” (Gunn, 2005, p. 22). And in other occult traditions, the Enochian language (the conjectured language of angels) “could also be read as cipher, a symbolic language with which to communicate with others about occult matters in ways that were unrecognizable to a public increasingly suspicious of magic and the occult” (Gunn, 2005, p. 22). While neologisms were employed to confound outsiders, irony on the other hand was a strategy used in order to deflect suspicion and criticism.

Complementing the rhetoric of neologisms is, lastly, the rhetoric of **irony**. Irony is a literary technique that surprises us by contradicting our expectations, typically used for humorous or emphatic effect by “implying a meaning opposite to the literal meaning” (Lanham, 1991, p. 92). Consider such phrases as “the police officer was arrested,” or “Titanic—the unsinkable ship!” Irony becomes known as ‘sarcasm’ when used to mock or
convey contempt. But in occultic language, irony plays an important role in the way it shielded occultists from the scrutiny of critics, a strategy that Gunn calls “prefatory piety” (Gunn, 2005, p. 21). By prefacing their books with testaments of belief in God and adherence to the Christian faith, occultists effectively cleared themselves of suspicion, freeing them up to discuss matters long considered taboo and forbidden to their societies’ dominant religious sensibilities. The late psychic Sylvia Browne (1936-2013) prefaced her books with claims of an “unshakable” faith in God; Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa (1486-1535), author of the three volumes of *Occult Philosophy*, signaled his servitude and religious conviction to the Chancellor of Italy; the mysterious 19th century occultist, Francis Barrett, author of *The Magus* (1801), was “careful to describe magic and astrology as God-given and in general ‘agreement’ with the ‘Holy Scriptures’” (Gunn, 2005, p. 21); also, the lapsed French Catholic-turned-magician Eliphas Lévi (1810-1875) introduced “his *The History of Magic* by stressing that the ‘three wise men’ of the story of nativity were, in fact, magi,” (Gunn, 2005, p. 21). But as Gunn makes clear, all these attempts to harmonize occultism with Christianity are actually exercises in an ironic form of deception, a “rhetorical blind” that is intended to mislead the uninitiated. Prefatory piety—a compositional regularity in much occult literature—is “an irony designed to mislead the less discerning” (Gunn, 2005, p. 22), for it claims to honor one thing while simultaneously paying homage to its opposite. This is what distinguishes the rhetoric of irony from that of neologisms:

Lévi’s ironic turns in many of his books are a good example of textual irony, which seems to be used instead of difficult esoteric language or jargon for the same end. Rather than alienate a curious reading public, Lévi avoids the language of birds and instead uses a self-referential and (if one is “in the know”) humorous brand of irony. In *The History of Magic*, Lévi insists “to Christians that the author of this book is Christian like yourselves. His faith is that of a [Catholic] strongly and deeply convinced.” While Lévi may have, in fact, believed this, his implication
that the Devil is a fictional “personification” of malevolent force is far from the Catholic doctrine of his time. ...That something “sneaky” is happening in his text is cued immediately when one contrasts the contents of the introduction of the book with the lengthy descriptions of black magic at its end. (Gunn, 2005, pp. 22-23)

Having showcased occultism’s three defining tropes—the compositional forms of revelation, the allegorical and figurative language of neologisms, and the frequent use of misleading ironic blinds—Gunn then moves to expound on these concepts by situating them within the story of the modern occult and the eventual development of the postmodern occultic. As the story unfolds, Gunn describes the first two tropes as being useful rhetorical strategies; but, upon entering a postmodern landscape, the imagistic and invasive environment of the contemporary mass media brought an end to secrecy, wielding the third trope of irony against the occult tradition. “As the occult transforms during the twentieth century, the first two of these features will survive in the form of the occultic, but the ironic blind becomes increasingly difficult to control as society becomes increasingly ‘public’” (Gunn, 2005, p. 26). In order to tell this story, Gunn relies primarily on three pivotal characters of modern occult history: Helena Blavatsky, Aleister Crowley, and Anton LaVey. Through these characters, Gunn animates the function of these tropes and various others in the lives and texts of these particular occultists, and narrates the complex role of rhetoric as it mediates the transition of the occult to the occultic.

Section II.2: Blavatsky’s Occult Poetics

Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831-1891) was a Russian occultist, spirit medium, and “the leader of the Theosophy movement” whose “influence on occult discourse was monumental” (Gunn, 2005, p. 55). Taking its name from the Greek theos, “god,” and sophia, “wisdom,” Blavatsky cofounded the Theosophical Society in 1875 which sought,
among other things, to “claim a knowledge of ultimate reality more profound than that gained from empirical or scientific methods” (Gunn, 2005, p. 59). In short, “Blavatsky convinced her audience that she was selected by a secret group of supernatural beings—the Secret Masters—to spread a message of universal brotherhood and peace to the West,” a message that she claimed to have channeled into a tome known as *Isis Unveiled*, “a mammoth, two-volume book of more than 1,500 pages” (Gunn, 2005, p. 60). The book sold out in its first week. Despite its fame, however, “the book is unwieldy in its use of scientific, anthropological, philosophical, and occult terminology,” leading some to dismiss it as ‘discarded rubbish’ or ‘a large dish of hash,’ while for others as ‘a mine of curious information’ and ‘one of the most remarkable productions of the century’ (Gunn, 2005, p. 60). For example, in another one of her texts *The Secret Doctrine*, she relays a cosmology that departs from the typical precepts of Darwinian evolution and natural selection. As a kind of alternative creationist, Blavatsky’s mystical cosmology is written “in difficult and obtuse language…clothed in [a] strange mix of scientific and Hindu terminology” (Gunn, 2005, p. 66).

The *Tertiary Atlantean part-cycle*, from the “apex of glory” of that Race in the early Eocene to the greedy mid-Miocene cataclysm, would appear to have lasted some 3½ to four million years. If the duration of the Quaternary is not rather (as seems likely) overestimated, the sinking of the Ruta and Daitya [both are claimed to be submerged continents] would be post-Tertiary. …leaving the classification of the geological periods to Western Science, esoteric philosophy divides only the life-periods on the globe. In the present *Manvantra* [a period between two manus, or beginning times of manifestation] the actual period is separated into seven Kalpas [a period of roughly four billion years] and seven great human races. (Blavatsky, 1977, 2: 711).

With “a penchant for Greek, Hindu, and Buddhist terminology,” Blavatsky’s revelations are novel and intriguing, yet “are more likely to confuse readers” (Gunn, 2005, p. 66). Rife with “contradiction, ambiguity, and tedious etymological explications that
obscure, rather than clarify,” Blavatsky’s books and essays were often rewritten by her editors “presumably to eliminate obfuscating vocabulary,” a vocabulary which the Theosophical Society themselves sometimes found “incomprehensible” (Gunn, 2005, p. 70). This prompts Gunn to ask a series of necessary questions: “If Blavatsky’s writings were so difficult to penetrate, why were they read at all? If Blavatsky persuaded people to believe in her cosmology, how do we explain the deliberate use of complex esoteric language? If she was claiming to reveal secrets, why did she slow their uptake in difficult terminology” (Gunn, 2005, p. 70)? Gunn suggests a spectrum of answers to these questions, all of which stem from a shared, fundamental concept: what he calls an “occult poetics.”

**Occult poetics** is a particular form of esoteric language involving both the invention and privileging of certain vocabularies over others, or the vying for “better allegories, for that which cannot be expressed in human representation” (Gunn, 2005, p. 34). Esoteric language denotes a kind of rhetorical creativity that “allows the occultist to express or perhaps do things that ordinary language does not seem to permit. For the occultist, esoteric language reaches, with hope and promise, toward the ineffable” (Gunn, 2005, p. 37). Resulting from the lacunas of human expression, occult poetics refers to the neologistic function of esoteric language which attempts to represent ineffability. Hence, modern occult discourse is described as “a creative linguistic practice or poetics (by using the term “poetics” I mean to evoke the dynamic, creative, and imaginative connotations of the term that are based on its rooting in the Greek poiētikos, “inventive,” and poiein, “to make”)” (Gunn, 2005, p. 37). The relationship between poetry and magic has endured since ancient times, and the key to understanding their connection is linked to the way language conjures our reality:
Despite the limits of language, there remain aspects of experience that elude our attempts at meaning-making. The poet is an individual who can work within a language game to extend and make previously inexpressible and meaningless elements of human experience expressible and meaningful. The refutation of old vocabularies and the creation of new ones is made possible by experiences that are not immediately expressible in a given vocabulary. The possibility of creating language for new meanings necessarily involves the occultist-poet in a political process insofar as his or her vocabulary is to replace another. (Gunn, 2005, p. 46).

Manifestly so, in response to Gunn’s questions above, it would seem that Blavatsky’s engagements in poetic or neologistic activity was ultimately indebted to her felt need to confront the limitations of language. If her use of esoteric terminology came across as indelicate, then this was meant deliberately, writes Gunn. “A quick glance at Blavatsky’s explicit discussions of language discloses both an awareness of the limits of language and a desire to develop an ambiguous and novel vocabulary for moving readers toward the ineffable truth” (Gunn, 2005, p. 70). Expressing dissatisfaction with the limitations of the Western (dominantly English) language, Blavatsky turned to Eastern vocabularies, such as Sanskrit, in order to deploy her ‘ancient wisdom.’ In her logic, “Sanskrit terms, like most words in an unfamiliar language, are initially ambiguous, and hence the possibility for multiple meanings is open. Such terminological openness prolongs the indeterminacy of meaning, and this is desirable because indeterminacy is closer to ineffability—much, much closer—than accuracy or precision” (Gunn, 2005, pp. 73-74). Striving for ambiguity over clarity was considered a better approximation of the ineffable since, she admitted, “all languages, including Sanskrit, will fail to characterize the divine…” (Gunn, 2005, p. 72). Nevertheless, however, such strategies remained valuable to her project, for “Blavatsky could actively forge the rules of a new language game based on unusual terms from another language, and she was thus free to link strange, exotic terms to the philosophical or cosmological precepts that she, magically, decreed” (Gunn, 2005,
The vocabulary-generating power of occult poetics, therefore, serves an explicitly *revelatory* function.

However, in addition to confronting the limits of linguistic representation, occult poetics serves a *discriminatory* function as well—the manifestation of insider and outsider groups. For instance, Blavatsky managed to gather support from followers who were drawn to the mysterious contents of her writings. Despite her lack of clarity, “the novelty of her rhetoric, however difficult, contributed to her mystery. In other words, esoteric language and complex argumentation helped to imbue Blavatsky with authority. Her frequent use of comparative exegesis was a common means by which she introduced strange terms and was one of her favorite ways of transferring the sacred authority of a fetishized text to her textual persona” (Gunn, 2005, pp. 68-69). *Comparative exegesis*—a method of intertextual criticism that attempts to interpret, harmoniously, the passages of one book in light of correlate passages in other books written by the same author—allowed Blavatsky to create a community of followers through a common, authority-establishing argot, an artificial glossary of “weird terms” bound by a network of other terms set in relation to each other (Gunn, 2005, pp. 74-75). While this strategy managed to generate a body of followers, it also inadvertently created a community of outsiders frustrated with her esoteric claims (Gunn, 2005, pp. 69-70). The freethinker George W. Foote (1850-1915), for example, countered, “I am aware that you are extensively read in useless literature. You have a prodigious knowledge of occult authors. You have made a wonderful collection of the maggots of the human brain. There is hardly a superstition which [is] not wholly or partially sanctioned in your four portly volumes. Your heap of rubbish is colossal” (Foote, 1889, par. 12).
The discriminatory function of occult poetics, though responsible for elevating Blavatsky’s social authority and gathering a wide array of supporters, is also that which summoned the consternation of her various detractors. Today, occult writers, like the mystic Gary Zukav and the late psychic Silvia Browne, seem to have taken a decidedly simplistic turn. Browne and Zukav “…are written in a much plainer, more straightforward style than the works of Blavatsky. Despite their striving for clarity, however, these New Age systems continue to stress, perhaps unwittingly, the inadequacy of language and preserve the function of esotericism by selectively choosing a handful of strange terms and especially by stressing the novelty of their own revelations” (Gunn, 2005, p. 77). In the end, the neologistic power of occult poetics enables the revelatory and discriminatory functions of occult rhetoric, ultimately contributing to the imbuing of occult authority—the authority to keep and/or reveal secret knowledge. But on this matter of authority, another form of occult power consists of controlling the interpretations of occult messages. For that discourse, we transition from the rhetorical strategies of Helena Blavatsky to the hermeneutical methods of Aleister Crowley.

Section II.3: Crowley’s Hermeneutics of Authority

Aleister Crowley (1875-1947) was an English poet, novelist, painter, mountaineer, and “The most famous magus of the early twentieth century” (Gunn, 2005, p. 116). Rejecting the family’s puritanical Christianity of his youth, Crowley pursued an interest in magic, culminating in his initiation to the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, a famous secret society devoted to the study and practice of the occult, metaphysics, and paranormal activities. After some internal, political conflicts, Crowley broke away from the group to eventually conceive of a new magical religion called “Thelema” (the Greek word for
“will,” to wish or want), of which he was its central prophet. Thelema emphasizes discovering and understanding one’s true will, an idea captured in Crowley’s sacred maxim: “Do What Thou Wilt Shall Be the Whole of the Law.” This maxim forms the foundation of Thelemic teaching, and is sourced in Crowley’s magnum opus The Book of the Law, a “short work of verse that Aleister Crowley claimed was dictated to him in 1904 by a supernatural ambassador of the Egyptian god Horus” (Gunn, 2005, p. 86). Crowley’s sacred book is a peculiar artifact worthy of critical discussion, particularly in the way it attempts to manage or control our channels of interpretation. The relationship between control and interpretation is one which raises our awareness to the interface of texts, hermeneutics, and authority, by virtue of the fact that any act of interpretation, according to Gunn, is always an exercise of power. “If one understands power as the ability to get someone to do what he or she would not otherwise ordinarily do, or to think what he or she would not otherwise ordinarily think…then all critical interpretation is necessarily a practice of power” (Gunn, 2005, p. 80).

Power takes on a variety of forms, but in the case of literary or textual criticism, power is understood as productive, or “epistemic”—that is, “truth is merely the product of sentences” (Gunn, 2005, p. 49). The production of sentences, or of interpretations, implies the production of knowledge, and therefore of power, for power is born of a kind of “will to knowledge” (Gunn, 2005, p. 80). By generating interpretations, we generate our own authority, for all interpretive claims necessarily assume that “the meaning or truth of a text under scrutiny is not apparent and that the production of an interpretation is necessary to bring it out. The necessity of interpretation places the interpreter in a position superior to that of the text, and most certainly in a position superior to those consulting the
interpretation” (Gunn, 2005, p. 81). If the true meaning of a text seems murky or unclear, then the need for interpretation arises from a felt hiddenness or obscurity that Gunn terms **textual occultism**: “interpretation is an exercise of power that concerns the revelation of textual secrets and occluded meaning that primary texts fail to disclose in themselves” (Gunn, 2005, p. 81). The hiddenness or obstructed meaning of a text therefore invites a diversity of interpretations, each vying for hermeneutical authority. Such critical competition pivots on the presumption that the truth remains burdened by its mode of representation, and that a better mode of representation is thus needed to more accurately express the truth. “Occult texts represent an extreme version of the burden of representation insofar as they are built on the assumption that their truths cannot accurately be represented in human language. This condition inevitably produces hierarchical relationships between those who claim to understand occult texts and those who struggle for understanding” (Gunn, 2005, p. 81).

The production of hierarchical relationships (those with knowledge/power and those without) bespeaks the role of occult authority: “Authority is the rhetorical process of establishing an unstable relation between self and Other, and particularly one that elides or obscures the way in which the signifier has more control over us than we would like to admit” (Gunn, 2005, p. 137). Authority is power, and so power intersects with textual occultism by virtue of the need for interpretation and understanding. Since interpretation generates knowledge and knowledge is power, then this naturally leads to Crowley’s **hermeneutics of authority**, the “theories concerning how to read and understand occult texts,” namely “by urging followers or potential followers to use an interpretive scheme, especially a scheme that reinforces the authority of the occultist” (Gunn, 2005, p. 125). By
exploiting textual occultism (the hiddenness or ambiguity of a book’s meaning) Crowley would subjugate his followers into a position that forced them to trust or defer to his authority. But in order to best understand this method of interpretation, it is important first to grasp how textual occultism forms the ground for a hermeneutics of authority.

One of the greatest burdens of occult representation, of course, is the difficulty associated with revealing that which is fundamentally ineffable, for any act of interpretation, Crowley argued, “was really about managing the ambiguity of language central to the production of occult texts” (Gunn, 2005, p. 81). But managing the ambiguity of occult language calls for an authoritative agent whose hermeneutical arbitrations can govern when and where our interpretations are to stop. Without a sense to stop, occult hermeneutics would spiral out of control into an infinite regress of interpretations. Such is the problem associated with not knowing when or where to end particular hermeneutical engagements as it pertains, for example, to matters of literal and figurative truth. Consider, for instance, Crowley’s magical rituals, one of which requires mixing honey and olive oil with “the fresh blood of a child” (Gunn, 2005, p. 163). Uninitiated interpretation of this passage, read literally, would no doubt lead to ritualistic dangers of committing child sacrifice, but this “is not Crowley’s intended meaning,” Gunn argues. “Even so, the literal and figurative ground here is uneven because there is no intertextual indication of where the realignments of signification are to stop: If blood is not real blood, then does honey signify something else as well? …This unstable textual irony…cues readers to unravel the text and recode its meaning, but one is uncertain as to where covert meaning ends and the overt begins” (Gunn, 2005, p. 164). Uncertainty about the precise meaning of a text thus triggers an infinite regress of interpretive possibilities.
Such ambiguity over matters of literal and figurative truth bespeaks the instability of irony: how does one know when a text is being ironic? Without someone or something to indicate or constrain our attempts at interpretation, “unstable irony at the level of a text forces readers into a chain of questioning about how far to extend ironic meaning, such that uncertainty becomes the product of an endless chain of questioning” (Gunn, 2005, p. 164). In order to remedy the chaos of infinite regression, Crowley insists that an authority-figure must be in place to control the boundaries of interpretation. Hence, Crowley constructs his persona as “the ultimate stop” (Gunn, 2005, p. 164), the final point where all meaning is ‘stopped’ or determined by him and him alone. Because Crowley must seize the last word about the true meaning of his texts, he suggests “The stops as thou wilt”—a reference to the “stops” or symbolic limits where “symbols cease to chain out into relevant texts in a field of occult discourse” (Gunn, 2005, p. 133). As Gunn explains, “occult discourse can be understood as a particular kind of reading or interpretive practice that forces the reader to end a chaining of signifiers at the feet of an occult authority—an end that is assuredly biographical and hence ‘outside’ the text” (Gunn, 2005, p. 81). By deploying vague and difficult language, Crowley forced readers to consult an authority outside of the text in order to determine its meaning. “In light of his characteristically prophetic insistence that he is ‘the sole authority competent to decide disputed points with regard to the Book of the Law,’ Crowley is thus imbued with the power of magical decree by the text: ‘All meaning stops with me’” (Gunn, 2005, p. 133). In summary, “occult hermeneutics is metonymic for the production of linguistic meaning in general, a continuous movement from one signifier to the next until one authority or another—a magus or a priest or a police officer or a rhetorician—prophetically exclaims: ‘STOP!’” (Gunn, 2005, p. 134). Such hermeneutical
strategies operate in a variety of occult contexts, most particularly in “divination”—the practice of seeking and interpreting knowledge of the future by supernatural means.

The art of divination, for example, operates similarly: an adept reader of tarot cards spends months, perhaps even years, learning the symbolic correspondences of the major and minor arcanas. In the contingent moments of divination, the tarot card reader must decide which particular meanings are appropriate to assign to the cards as they are dealt, for the possible meaningful correspondences are too numerous to be helpful. Likewise, astrologers have similar ‘wiggle room’ in deciding which meanings to assign to zodiac signs, primarily by means of numerical calculation and psychic intuition...symbolism is characteristically ambiguous, and such ambiguity is the resource occultists consult to fashion charismatic authority. (Gunn, 2005, p. 134)

One of the ways in which Crowley sustained his authority was through exploiting the ambiguities associated with the Qabalah, a kind of magical alphabet or “symbolic, mathematical vocabulary and technique of reading” which Crowley used as a method for interpreting occult texts and symbolism, most especially his own (Gunn, 2005, p. 127). Consider, for example, the word “Adam,” which if converted into Hebrew is ADM (Aleph-Daleth-Mem). According to the Hebrew alphabet, letters are also assigned numerical values (in this case, A=1, D=4, and M=40). Adding these letters together equals “45” which, to the Qabalist, is significant because it is the source of all numbers (45 = 0 + 1 + 2 + 3 + 4 + 5 + 6 + 7 + 8 + 9). Through the ambiguous relationship between letters and numbers—ranging from the divine numerology of Gematria, the shorthand system of Notariqon, and the cryptographic exercises of Temura—the Qabalah was a hermeneutical invention that would disclose “an endless chain of self-referential correspondences,” and “Crowley insisted on its importance for decoding the cosmic puzzle that is The Book of the Law” (Gunn, 2005, p. 129). This method was used to great effect, able to accomplish two things: first, the Qabalah excused the poetic shortcomings of the book by urging a symbolic meaning over a surface meaning: for example, Crowley “rescues the metaphorical banality
of phrases like ‘burning desire’ from the abyss of pretentious and bad writing by stressing they are poetic and numerical substitutions” (Gunn, 2005, p. 92); secondly, the Qabalah also brought Crowley “to assign himself the role of the ultimate signifying authority” (Gunn, 2005, p. 129). Indeed, through continual, self-referential invitations for readers to consult his insular system of texts, Crowley was able to compose and manage the ambiguities within his works, stop the infinite regression of possible meanings, and invest himself with the authority necessary to control the range of his subordinates’ occult interpretations.

But Crowley’s hermeneutical strategies were not always successful due to the fickle nature of symbolic ambiguity, and textual irony in particular. “The uncertainty as to the regress of Crowley’s ironies and ambiguous symbolism is as much a part of the success of the occult hermeneutic of authority as it is its greatest weakness” (Gunn, 2005, p. 164). The reason for this is because not everyone always ends up subjecting themselves to Crowley’s hermeneutical control. This highlights what Gunn terms a dialectic of control: some critics can stray or even break free from such control, forging their own interpretations divergent from Crowley’s authority. “As a hermeneutic, the Qabalah is both a way to secure authority and a way to undermine it; it harbors a dialectic of control” (Gunn, 2005, p. 132). The dissimulating, secretive, or vague nature of ironic textual occultism, therefore, is a double-edged sword—it is a resource that fashions occult authority, and “yet it is also a resource that can just as easily undermine authority” (Gunn, 2005, p. 134); it “works to erase Crowley’s persona as much as it celebrates it” (Gunn, 2005, p. 164). Alas, employing irony as an authority-generating strategy is difficult to control. As was mentioned much earlier about occultism’s three primary tropes, “the ironic blind becomes increasingly difficult to
control as society becomes increasingly ‘public’” (Gunn, 2005, p. 26). The reason for this is because irony functions so closely with acts of secrecy and lying. “The concept of irony is rooted in the Greek *eirōn*, which means ‘dissembler,’ or one who disguises and conceals,” and it is sometimes discussed “in term of the Latin equivalent, *dissimulare*, or ‘to dissimulate,’ [which] defines irony as ‘the humor of saying one thing and signifying another.’ …[Using] irony is especially pleasing if one manages it well but that it can also have disastrous consequences” (Gunn, 2005, p. 152). The success of irony as a verbal strategy depends on its *stability*—when readers can properly reconstruct or impute the intended meaning. Without this stability, irony becomes “slippery”—when “some audiences fail to recognize when a rhetor or author intends to be ironic” (Gunn, 2005, p. 152).

Such is the problem with employing ironic rhetorical blinds, like gathering the blood of a male child for an occult ritual, “a rhetorical blind designed to mislead a curious public and to encourage the true adept to read more deeply. …it is His simplicity that baffles the unworthy” (Gunn, 2005, p. 156). Crowley also claimed to have sacrificed “120 male children in one year”—another “literary blind” which has been apologetically interpreted as to “signify ejaculate” (Gunn, 2005, p. 162). Failure by “the masses” or “ignorant rabble” (Gunn, 2005, p. 145) to properly interpret Crowley’s “deliberate misdirections” (Gunn, 2005, p. 157) reveals the significant power of irony and its precarious role in the production of insider and outsider groups. In fact, irony’s major rhetorical function was “social discrimination”—to beguile the public, to make fools of the ‘lower classes,’ and exalt the value of the insider’s secret code language (Gunn, 2005, p. 159). The problem with this, however, was that “…Crowley is powerless to control the
significations of the excluded outsider who is free to signify the sacrifice of babies as he or she damn well pleases” (Gunn, 2005, p. 168). Thus, Crowley’s perpetual use of myth, irony, and misdirection all then begin to take on a life of their own within the public consciousness, becoming the mechanisms by which occult authority is effectively undermined, if not outright demonized. From the outsiders’ perspective, Crowley becomes “‘a thoroughly bad man, a Satanist or devil-worshipper steeped in black magic, the high priest of Beelzebub,’ an orgy conductor, a drug dispenser, a cannibal, a debauch, and a killer of cats and babies.” Occult leaders, then, are “no longer able to provide the symbolic maps for proper contextualization. Insofar as he or she courts irony and ambiguity, the occultist is necessarily doomed to misunderstanding in a media-rich environment” (Gunn, 2005, p. 168). This undoubtedly leads to a disastrous consequence of irony: an occultist’s loss of authority and control, or what Gunn calls “the decentering or death of the Great Magus,” (Gunn, 2005, p. 152).

The death of the Great Magus is Gunn’s metaphor for the death of the occult. While Crowley remains a legendary figure in occult history, his fall from authority was ultimately incurred by his over-reliance upon irony—a practice compelled by his need to preserve secrets and his authority over them amidst the rise of modernity’s mass-media—resulting in an increasingly confused and paranoid public who dismissed him or reassigned him as “an apt condensation symbol for ‘evil’ occultism” (Gunn, 2005, p. 113). The fall and eventual ridicule of Crowley in the popular press reflects the mass-media’s cultivation for mob mentality, and demonstrates “how a central element of the occult tradition, namely the important role of an [sic] masterful keeper of secrets, was destroyed by modern paradoxes of publicity” (Gunn, 2005, p. xxvii). The deluge of public outrage and suspicion
against Crowley reflects the unraveling of the occult—the death of the Great Magus—and it also highlights the challenges associated with keeping secrets in media-rich environments, effectively rendering secrecy near impossible. For a better understanding of the role of publicity in facilitating the undoing and fragmentation of the modern occult, one must attend to the economic shift of occult power, a commodity once exclusive to the elite classes, now finding a wider audience amongst individuals of lower economic status. For the first time, the secrets of the occult tradition were becoming increasingly known, and “…this was because occult discourse was becoming increasingly common in the popular press. This democratization of occult knowledge, enabled by the mass media, has led to an inversion of the social standing of the typical occultist” (Gunn, 2005, p. 171).

The inversion here, of course, refers to the transition from a culture which allowed for secrecy to a culture which encouraged the uncovering of secrets. This inversion no doubt leads us to the feet of a different character whose penchant for inversions was evident even within the symbolism of his own new, religious logo (the inverted pentagram). In order to explore the collapse of occult authority in greater detail, we turn now to a figure whose impact inadvertently sealed its fate, having exposed occult secrets on a level far beyond anything Crowley could have ever imagined. Though Crowley, too, was known for popularizing the occult and infamously publishing magical secrets (Gunn, 2005, p. 116), his influence paled in comparison to the legacy of Gunn’s third and final occultist—Anton LaVey.

Section II.4: LaVey’s Ironic Imagery in the Mass Media

Anton Szandor LaVey (1930-1997) was an American author, musician, and occultist who founded the Church of Satanism in 1966, a year which he dubbed Anno
Satanis (the first year of the reign of Satan). As an expert in various occult traditions, especially Crowley’s brand of ‘magick,’ LaVey claimed that “it was time to use magick to ‘break apart the ignorance and hypocrisy fostered by the Christian churches’” (Gunn, 2005, p. 183). LaVey took extreme efforts to publicize his newfound religion by hosting such events as a “Satanic wedding” and a “Satanic baptism”—notorious, parodying spectacles which received worldwide coverage. One of the most iconic and lasting artifacts of this new religion was the publication of LaVey’s international best-selling book, The Satanic Bible. Despite its sinister title, the philosophy that pulsates within its pages was little more than an unoriginal “secular individualism that dismisses any belief in the existence of deity—good, evil, or indifferent” (Gunn, 2005, p. 184). LaVey was a kind of religious atheist, a free-thinker convinced of man’s need for ritual, dogma, and psychodrama, but who put no stock in the reality of the supernatural. Instead of worshipping a literal devil, LaVey advanced a “strident libertarianism…which touted the ‘virtues of selfishness,’” effectively re-signifying the idea of Satan to represent “the essence of human nature”—a philosophy that was argued to be “better equipped than Christianity to cope with this essence” (Gunn, 2005, p. 185).

Aside from the banality of its content, the formal aspects of The Satanic Bible was a commercial success. One formal aspect was its forthright prose: LaVey was disinterested in perpetuating the rhetorical obscurities typical of past occult writers. Rather, he believed that the occult was a discourse in desperate need of demystification. According to LaVey, the historical subject of magic had long been stultified by the overuse of secret languages and encoding techniques. Riddled with “ramblings and esoteric gibberish…[occultists have been] unable or unwilling to present an objective view of the subject,” resulting only in
“clouding the entire issue so badly that the would-be student of sorcery winds up stupidly pushing a planchette over a Ouija board, standing inside a pentagram waiting for a demon to present itself...in general making a blithering fool of himself in the eyes of those who know!” (Gunn, 2005, p. 186). The secret to truly understanding the occult, LaVey suggests, is that there are no secrets. In other words, as far as LaVey was concerned, the occult was devoid of any genuinely supernatural meaning or substance. “This brand of demystification denies any content to the occult tradition, refiguring centuries of revealed knowledge as an aesthetic contrivance, a form of human mythmaking and fantasy that appeases a human need for ritual. ...For LaVey, truth, as much as fantasy, is entertainment” and primarily serves a therapeutic function over a spiritual one (Gunn, 2005, p. 186; 190). While these iconoclastic claims harmonized well with his goals for textual disambiguation, LaVey’s greater contribution to the popularization of the modern occult is attributable more to his efficient use of symbolism and imagery in the mass media.

Arguably the premiere example of LaVey’s success in advertising Satanism is rooted in the visual appeal of his sacred text, The Satanic Bible, “a widely recognized representation of occultism as a visual idiom—a kitschy, garish, sixties go-go brand of occultism—that, in terms of popular memory, outrivals the rhetorical contributions of all other twentieth-century occultists combined” (Gunn, 2005, p. 183). This average-sized paperback was a visual idiom that set into motion a new system of occult imagery. Consider the example of the “Sigil of Baphomet”—a minimalist design of an inverted pentagram encasing the head of a goat (Gunn, 2005, p. 187). This symbol has become an almost universally recognized logo or “visual surrogate” for Satanic practices, or for all occultism in general. LaVey also recorded his tawdry, theatrical ceremonies on film for the purposes
of advancing Satanism in the mass media—a move which would later prove to have profound, rhetorical effect. As Gunn notes, “LaVey’s genius resides in his ability to package and market Satanism, not necessarily in his articulation of Satanic philosophy” (Gunn, 2005, p. 184). Equipped with the fetishism of hellish imagery and symbolism, LaVey’s aims could be said to embody a postmodern attitude, having strayed from the modernist concerns of managing hidden knowledge. Unlike modern occultists who habitually concealed or disguised the content of magical truths and traditions, LaVey heralded the triumph of form over content, publicity over secrecy. In essence, LaVey’s efforts sounded the death knell of the modern occult, and ushered in what Gunn has termed the “occultic”—a postmodern reinvention of the occult that privileges image over text, resulting only in greater confusion in defining the meaning of the occult, a tradition now rendered “increasingly abstract and diffuse” (Gunn, 2005, p. 209).

The occult lost its coherent identity not necessarily through LaVey’s wildly revisionist claims, but through his dabblings in imagistic irony (particularly the way in which it was represented in the mass media). Images need contextualization for their meaning, thus highlighting the importance of maintaining a clear link between images and their referents. But irony can trouble this relationship, for irony conveys one thing while meaning another. Failure to recognize when one is serious or not is a risk that has always haunted the trope of irony, and is partly why imagistic works of art can always engender a galore of interpretations. The ontology of imagery, therefore, points to what Gunn calls the “mobility of image”—whereby images, like the Sigil of Baphomet, are so easily “wielded to mean different things in different contexts. The less ambiguous or discrete the image, the less mobile it will be” (Gunn, 2005, p. 194). The image of an elephant, for example, is
less mobile (less likely to be misinterpreted) than the image of an inverted cross or star. Images can thus possess an ironic quality, able to convey a multiplicity of meanings, sometimes contradictory, depending on the way it is framed or contextualized. Because the meaning of an image depends on its context, the mobility of the image underscores the trouble of the occultic, for the occultic relies on visual abbreviations that are more easily given to higher potentialities of decontextualization, misinterpretation, and re-signification.

With the help of the mass media to amplify LaVey’s ironic imagery—his films of garish costumery, gloomy lighting, and irreverent parodies of Catholic rites and rituals—such televisual “stock footage” was indeed successful at drawing widespread attention, but its intended goal resulted in a rhetorical backfiring. Acting as a reservoir of abbreviated signs, LaVey’s ironic visuals were taken by the mass media, loosened of their original message, and steadily incorporated as the evidence of a different narrative: the reality of an underground network of organized evil, facilitating such scandals as devil-worship, torture, cannibalism, and sexual debauchery. Recontextualized by the mass media in this way, LaVey’s attempts at promoting Satanism were lost; instead, they were reassigned to substantiate the gradually ascending cultural myths of Satanic ritual abuse. “LaVey’s playful attempts to re-signify highly connotative signifiers of darkness and evil as ‘kitsch’ backfired, as his church was later plagued by accusations of ritual murder, child abuse, and other occult crimes” (Gunn, 2005, p. 193). What was meant as a sardonic caricature of Christian ceremonialism instead became weaponized in the mass media, inadvertently fanning the flames of a new, social paranoia known as the “Satanic Panic” of the late 1980s. The televised representations of Satanism were continually recycled into new
representations that united the diversity of occult crimes under one face and banner, and
“LaVey was incapable of controlling that spectacle once it was released into the popular
media” (Gunn, 2005, p. 194). By supplying television with stock-footage of dark, occult
activity, the Church of Satan was roundly demonized in the news and press; the Sigil of
Baphomet evolved increasingly into an iconic scapegoat symbol for society to blame their
anxieties.

The dissection and “re-presentation” of Satanism on primetime television had
become a premiere example of media sensationalism, an event that Gunn describes as a
rumor panic—“a phenomenon in which various folk legends build momentum and
metamorphose into realities in the popular media, often because of larger, political
struggles…or in response to social crisis and anomie” (Gunn, 2005, p. 173). Rumor panics
are literally panic-events caused by particular rumors—the product of wild imaginations
fueled by a popular sense of fear or concern. Having now entered an economy of
information (and, by extension, an economy of the image), rumors in developed Western
societies are more easily spread through mass-media technologies: internet, television,
film, etc. “…Unlike rumor panics of the past that were largely localized and contained
(e.g., the Salem witch trials), contemporary rumor panics are widespread and perpetuate
themselves on the basis of a limited set of iconic stimuli that is first disseminated or
released into the popular imaginary and then re-signified as evidence for a given cultural
narrative or myth” (Gunn, 2005, p. 202). In the case of Satanism and the narrative of
systematic ritual abuse, LaVey’s home-recorded caricatures of Christian liturgy failed to
preserve their irony; instead, these “iconic stimuli” were decontextualized and re-expressed
in the mass media as serious performances that confirmed the reality of a larger social mythos.

The lesson here, it would seem, is that the domination of image-based media makes the occultic (in the form of irony) near impossible to control, for the media’s cherry-picked fragmentation of useful, ironical scenes in LaVey’s recordings were undoubtedly lent “more easily to appropriation by mass-media producers, politicians, and cultural leaders, usually to either entertain and titillate or to quell widespread anxiety about this or that crisis stimulus” (Gunn, 2005, p. 203). Not only is occultic irony difficult to manage in image-driven conditions, but secrecy in general becomes an increasingly unrealizable expectation in modern society. With the triumph of the image and the centering of speech and text, we now live in a world that emphasizes surveillance and publicity—the antitheses of secrecy. The prospect of secrecy cannot thrive in technologically advanced environments that produce cameras on nearly every computer and cell phone. Transparency and exposure are the new threats incurred by an economy that privileges visual forms of communication over other forms, hence the rise of the occultic and the increasing struggles to control the ways in which information is communicated through the mass media. As the French media theorist Jean Baudrillard (1929-2007) pointed out, “…power is located in the control of the codes of representation and signification, not in the control of the conditions and means of production” (Gunn, 2005, p. 201). Hence, the power of any magician—or rhetorician—over the structure and development of human thoughts depends essentially on their mastery over the devices that control the channels of language, meaning and understanding.
Section II.5: Rhetorical Considerations

Through Blavatsky’s occult poetics, Crowley’s hermeneutics of authority, and LaVey’s ironic imagery in the mass media, Gunn provides a historical account for the death of the occult and the manifestation of a particular form of communication he terms the “occultic”—a rhetorical phenomenon that is tied to the secretive languages and symbolism of the modern occult. As such, the occultic is a postmodern discourse that attends to the paradoxes of secrecy in a world that privileges publicity. “If the term ‘occult’ is to retain its etymological roots in hiddenness and secrecy, then the concept of a ‘postmodern occultism’ is oxymoronic. … ‘Postmodern occultism’ or the occultic (or perhaps in fashionable, scholarly terms, ‘post-occultism’) is a label for the death of modern occultism as the elite study of secrets and the birth of occultism as a kind of floating signifier” (Gunn, 2005, p. 224). Images now float freely throughout the media, able to be signified (and re-signified) to mean a variety of things “that have nothing to do, necessarily, with the secret knowledge and practice of mysticism”; rather, they refer to “everything from comic books and horror films to rock music motifs and vague ‘moods’ or states of mind” (Gunn, 2005, p. xxiii). Mass media environments are toxic to the occult’s rhetorical devices that once empowered exercises in secrecy and irony, and so the occultic marks the end of the occult, or, more precisely, highlights the paradox of secrecy in post-occult conditions. “Given the power of the ‘news’ media and the speed with which information can move these days, the lesson here is that no charismatic leader is likely to succeed by means of deliberate misdirection or ironic spectacle. Of course there will always be exceptions, but in general the days of the Great Magus are over” (Gunn, 2005, p. 211).
In order to better understand the significance of the death of the occult and the subsequent birth of the occultic, one must first examine Gunn’s book as a whole. The transition from modern occult to postmodern occultic is chronicled in two parts, both of which are represented by their own respective themes: (1) *Esoterica*, and (2) *Exoterica*. Part one, *Esoterica*, referring to *esoteric* things (things which are intended for or likely to be understood by only a small number of people with a specialized knowledge or interest) consists of exploring the occultic as a privileged discourse of secrecy, covering the chapters illustrating how, at the turn of the twentieth century, the occult tradition itself was marked by secrecy, definite meaning, and cohering as “a discrete cultural practice with a long and rich historical legacy” (Gunn, 2005, p. xxvii). Here, the rhetoric of the occult was born as a logic of secrecy and discrimination, involving various strategies of subterfuge that assisted the aims of occultists seeking power and concealment. But then this secretive mode of discourse later undergoes tremendous change with the advancement of visual communication technology. This change occurs by the second half of Gunn’s book, *Exoterica*—referring to *exoteric* things (things which are meant for or likely to be understood by the general public)—where at the end of the twentieth century, the occult tradition experiences “undoing and fragmentation” (Gunn, 2005, p. xxvii). The overwhelming presence of surveillance and publicity in the modern world rendered the occult no longer a coherent tradition of secrecy; it had died, so to speak, and its rhetorical form (i.e., the occultic) was left in its wake, taking on the new paradoxical task of *exotericizing the esoteric* (or publicizing the secret and unknown) through various mass-media technologies.
Given the media’s paradox in publicizing secrets, it is easier to notice how this paradox is a direct reflection of Gunn’s earlier analysis into the primary paradox of all communication: the rhetorical antinomy of ineffability (to express the inexpressible). Because ineffability is a condition that involves our describing something we do not have words for, it is important to recognize here that the media’s paradox of publicizing secrets will also involve similar attempts at representation—the creation of new codes of meaning and signification for images which we do not yet have contexts for. The control over contexts and meaning, like the control over words in general, is the province of the occultic, for occultic rhetoric is the mode of discourse governing the invention of language, the control of meanings, and the management of what is known and unknown. The relationship between the known (publicity) and unknown (secrecy) is one which carries relevant insights into the strategies of rhetorical manipulation, particularly as it functions within the mass-media. As was argued earlier, strategically obscure or ironic communication depends on secrecy: secrecy is the principle by which language can be made esoteric; it enables those with exclusive knowledge to penetrate deeper (hidden) meanings; it insulates the power of that knowledge to particular individuals and groups. Without a sense of secrecy, insiders would not be able to maintain their different status from outsiders. It is no surprise, therefore, that we should “be expecting increasingly spectacular dramas of secrecy and publicity” in modern rhetorical engagements (Gunn, 2005, p. 232), as new tactics for maintaining secrets will be matched only by equally clever tactics in invading them. Such is the paradox of the occultic—the media’s use of the principles of secrecy in order to “crusade” against secrecy, for the sake of controlling the flow of information (Gunn, 2005, p. 203).
The occultic captures the quintessence of Gunn’s project—the study of the means of secretive communication, and how communication is used to serve hidden or concealed ends. *Modern Occult Rhetoric* is a uniquely theoretical text about “strange, mysterious, or difficult language, including the reasons or forces behind its invention, the experience of reading, interpreting, and reacting to it, and the ways in which it can get the better of us” (Gunn, 2005, p. xix). It can be argued, therefore, that occultic rhetoric is associated with secrecy because it is the genre of communication involved in the art or techniques of obfuscation—the action of making something obscure, unclear, or unintelligible. The post-humanist scholar Greg Goodale also suggests that occultic rhetoric is an exercise in obfuscating language, or what he terms “skotison.” Skotison, meaning “darken it,” refers to a “fondness for intentional obscurity” (Lanham, 1991, p. 141). Goodale declares skotison to be the representative trope of Gunn’s rhetorical project, for it functions in five fundamental ways: (1) it manifests a privileged class of experts, (2) it creates readerships or followers, (3) it divides insiders from outsiders, (4) it earns trust through obfuscation, and (5) it works as an inside joke or code (Goodale, 2015, p. 104-106). The link between skotison and obfuscation is reinforced by their common themes of darkness, as obfuscation sprouts from its Latin root *obfuscare*, meaning “to darken.”

The implications of Gunn’s work extends to the typified rhetoric of the academy, sometimes labeled *academese*, which shares in many of the occultic’s motifs of obscurity, manipulation, and dissimulation. Because much scholarly speech and writing is characterized as impenetrable, Gunn draws on a connection between the occult and the academy. “In short, current academic theory, particularly that which trucks in neologism and allegory, is the contemporary equivalent to the modern occult text, the postmodern
exemplar of the occultic par excellence” (Gunn, 2005, p. 52). The academy, in similar occult fashion, engages in its own forms of secret language that facilitates the invention of esoteric terminologies and the discrimination between insiders and outsiders. The contemporary Marxist philosopher Slavoj Žižek, for example, is an avid purveyor of this rhetorical form. His writings swell with “logorrhea”—long excursions into half-formed thoughts that aim to cleanse his readers of reasoned argument. “Almost always, at the critical juncture, when a clear argument is needed, Žižek takes refuge behind a rhetorical question, into which he packs all the mysterious incantations of the Lacanian liturgy” (Scruton, 2016). It is no surprise, then, how Gunn connects the occult to the academy when “…dissimulation is a basic element of all occult organizations” (Gunn, 1995, p. 193). Might there be a way to remedy this pattern of discourse?

The objective of this study is to locate the principles undergirding a moral theory and practice of occultic rhetoric. What are the ethical imperatives that should govern our engagements in rhetorical obfuscation? What factors, if any, would justify the exclusion of others from accessing certain kinds of knowledge? In order to move forward, we look beyond Joshua Gunn to the work of Sissela Bok whose philosophy of secrecy may offer guidance or ethical coordinates that can best address the complexities of these questions.

III. Chapter III. Sissela Bok and the Ethics of Secrecy

Sissela Bok (Myrdal) is a contemporary Swedish-born American ethicist and philosopher. Following in the footsteps of her two Nobel-prize winning parents, Bok upheld the family’s tradition of intellectual achievement by studying at the Sorbonne in Paris. At the age of 19, however, she departed from the school to marry Derek Bok (a Harvard Law School graduate traveling abroad on a Fulbright scholarship). Accompanying
his return to America in 1955, she immediately procured her bachelors and masters degrees in psychology from George Washington University. After completing her doctorate in philosophy from Harvard University in 1970, she taught ethics at Harvard Medical School and its Kennedy School of Government, in addition to later posts as a professor of philosophy at Brandeis University. She is now stationed as a visiting fellow at the Harvard School of Public Health, and her husband, Derek, went on to assume presidency of Harvard University in 2006. Having written on such diverse topics as the ethics of lying (1978), secrets (1983), war and peace (1989), euthanasia (1998), violence (1999), common values (2002), and happiness (2010), Sissela Bok makes hardly any mention of either occultism or rhetoric, but her approach to the study of lying and secrets nevertheless provides a foundation for navigating what may otherwise be called the ‘ethics of occultic rhetoric.’ In this section, a discussion of Bok’s ethical theories on the subjects of secrecy and lying are provided, including her explorations into the dialectics of privacy and publicity, the role of intent, and the impact of power on moral decision-making.

In continuation of the questions raised in her previous analysis on *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life* (1978), Bok goes further to outline the place and purpose of hiddenness within her equally admirable treatise *Secrets: On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation* (1983). Both works are used here as the primary texts for exploring the moral landscape of occultic language. Simply put, secrecy can be defined as intentional concealment (Bok, 1989, p. 5). Secrecy, then, can be characterized as an art of rhetoric concerned with managing the hiddenness of knowledge, the boundary dividing insiders from outsiders, and thus the exercising of an ethical sense of discernment and

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4 The 1989 Vintage edition of Sissela Bok’s *Secrets*, not the 1983 version—and the 1999 Vintage edition of Bok’s *Lying*, not the 1978 version—is used here and throughout this project.
discrimination. “The Latin secretum carries this meaning of something hidden, set apart” writes Bok. “It derives from secernere, which originally meant to sift apart, to separate as with a sieve. It bespeaks discernment, the ability to make distinctions, to sort out and draw lines” (Bok, 1989, p. 6). Drawing lines, separating, or making distinctions offers a host of meanings qualifying the different nuances of secrecy to various cultures throughout history, several of which Bok showcases at length (Bok, 1989, p. 6-7):

1. **Secretum** (Latin) – concealment, hiding
2. **Arcanum** (Latin) – sacred, uncanny, mysterious
3. **Heimlich** (German) – intimacy and privacy
4. **Arretos** (Greek) – silence, unspoken, ineffable, unspeakable
5. **Tanjinu** (Slavic) – stealth, furtiveness
6. **Lönn** (Swedish) – lying, denial, deceit

Of the multiplicity of ways in which secrets have been conceived, Bok determines that a sense of ‘hiddenness’ is the common denominator of them all. It would be a mistake to define secrecy solely on one or two of the above definitions, for they all have played a part in the making of what it means to be secret at some point in time. And yet shallow understandings of the role of hiddenness in daily life have continued to thrive in public thought, precisely as a result of a common tendency to ignore the diversity of nuances that go into a fuller definition of secrecy. The consequence of this shallowness has led secrecy to be generally interpreted in two simplistic ways: as either all good or as all bad. Those who recognize secrecy as all good commend the duty to conceal, when secrecy is thought in terms of its links to privacy, to intimacy, and to personal confidences. On the other hand, those who recognize secrecy as all bad commend the duty to reveal: “Negative views of secrecy are even more common” writes Bok (1989, p. 8), because of the customary association of secrets with conspiracies and corruption. While these two duties oppose each other, “Both aims have their place, whether in religious or therapeutics practices, or yet in politics or in criminal investigations. But to allow them to influence the definition of what
is secret risks casting a pall on all that is kept secret...” (Bok, 1989, p. 9). What is needed, therefore, is a neutral philosophy of secrecy.

Bok advocates for a neutral definition of the term because there is what she calls a “need for secrecy” (Bok, 1989, p. 18). Secrecy is a need (a social good) with the potential for corruption—not the necessity of it—leading Bok to conclude that secrecy is not exclusively negative; it can be positive as well. “We must retain a neutral definition of secrecy, therefore, rather than one that assumes from the outset that secrets are guilty of threatening, or on the contrary, awesome and worthy of respect,” writes Bok. “A degree of concealment or openness accompanies all that human beings do or say. We must determine what is and is not discreditable by examining particular practices of secrecy, rather than by assuming an initial evaluative stance” (Bok, 1989, p. 9). Secrecy therefore is neither explicitly all-good nor all-evil—secrecy itself is neutral; what is not neutral are the uses of secrecy. The uses of secrecy are biased: thus they are to be submitted under moral evaluation and weighed on a case by case basis. To what aim, for what reason, or by what purpose does one conceal truth and knowledge from another? Is the intent of the secret ethical? Only by properly identifying and segregating its neutral elements from its biased ones can we better understand and navigate the ethical quandaries of secrecy.

Section III.1: On Privacy and Lying

Similar to secrecy is the notion of privacy, both concepts of which share a sense of hiddenness, but also call for distinction. The private realm is the counterpart of the public realm, for there is no privacy without publicity. Neither is privacy the same as ‘isolation’ from the public, for privacy suggests being elected, not imposed. In her historical analysis Privacy: The Debate in the United States Since 1945, the legal scholar Philippa Strum
(1998) explains that some measure of privacy exists in all cultures, especially amongst the upper classes, that is until it gradually evolved into a sophisticated form within modern, individualistic, particularly Western nations. Intertwining with notions of democracy, liberty, society, and especially individuality, privacy is “the control human beings have over physical access to themselves and their possessions and over access to information about them” (Strum, 1998, p. 4). This echoes the description advanced by Sissela Bok who defined privacy as “the condition of being protected from unwanted access by others—either physical access, personal information, or attention. Claims to privacy are claims to control access to what one takes—however grandiosely—to be one’s personal domain” (Bok, 1989, pp. 10-11). These definitions may very well draw inspiration from one of the most eloquent arguments made on behalf of privacy in the history of American law, *The Right to Privacy*, penned by Samuel Warren and Louis Brandeis in the Harvard Law Review (1890) where they defined privacy as the right to enjoy life by being “let alone” (p. 193). The right to be let alone finds expression, for instance, in the American Bill of Rights which guarantees the right of freedom from unreasonable searches and seizures.

Privacy plays a valuable role not just in the life of human beings, but to all manner of social creatures. In nature, matters of space and territoriality prompt what is known as the “flight distance” which is “the distance at which an animal will flee from an intruder of another species: around five hundred yards for an antelope, six feet for a wall lizard. With respect to their own species, many animals, given a chance, will space themselves at some distance from one another…” (Bok, 1989, p. 11). Needing one’s own space is a plea for

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5 Louis Brandeis (1856-1941) was the first Jewish Justice of the Supreme Court. Sissela Bok coincidentally taught philosophy for seven years at Brandeis University, the school which was named after the famed court justice.
privacy, not necessarily secrecy. “A private life,” Bok remarks, “is rarely a secret life” (Bok, 1989, p. 11). Confusion about the boundary dividing secrecy from privacy stems from a categorical mistake between part and whole. While privacy is a part of the public realm, secrecy is in fact a part of privacy. Secrecy, unlike privacy, is “added protection” (Bok, 1989, p. 11). Bok argues that secrecy and privacy most overlap in the private lives of individuals when

secrecy guards against unwanted access by others—against their coming too near, learning too much, observing too closely... It serves as an additional shield in case the protection of privacy should fail or be broken down. Thus you may assume that no one will read your diary; but you can also hide it, or write it in code, as did William Blake, or lock it up. Secret codes, bank accounts, and retreats, secret thoughts never voiced aloud, personal objects hidden against intruders: all testify to the felt need for additional protection. (Bok, 1989, p. 13)

The propensity for privacy or secrecy to serve unethical ends also invites acknowledging the ethical differences between acts of hiddenness and acts of falsehood. So important is this distinction that Bok organized these two subjects into their own respective books, one on secrets and the other on lying. While secrets can be defined as acts of intentional concealment (Bok, 1989, p. 5), lies are less modest and ambiguous, being acts of intentional deception, particularly in the form of a statement (Bok, 1999, p. 15). Bok distinguishes lying from deception. Similar to the part-whole distinction between secrecy and privacy, lying is also a part of the whole that is deception which includes multiple forms of untruth, e.g., gestures, disguises, actions, inactions, and silence. These general forms of untruth constitute the wider notion of deception, while lying is but a species of deception—“an intentionally deceptive message which is stated” (Bok, 1999, p. 13). In any event, secrets are different from lies, writes Bok, because “Lies are part of the arsenal used to guard and to invade secrecy, [whereas] secrecy allows lies to go undiscovered and to build up” (Bok, 1989, p. xv). Conflating these two ideas as equally
negative is not uncommon. “To confuse secrecy and deception is easy,” argues Bok, “since all deception does involve keeping something secret—namely, that about which one wishes to deceive others. But while all deception requires secrecy, all secrecy is not meant to deceive” (Bok, 1989, p. 7). In other words, despite their shared reliance on a need for hiddenness, lying and secrecy nevertheless differ in one fundamental sense: “Whereas I take lying to be *prima facie* wrong, with a negative presumption against it from the outset, secrecy need not be” (Bok, 1989, p. xv). This should not be taken to mean that Bok views lying as wrong at all times and in all cases; only *prima facie* wrong—wrong at first impression, or until proven otherwise.

The negative presumption of lying constitutes Bok’s “Principle of Veracity” which is indebted to Aristotle’s view that “truthful statements are preferable to lies in the absence of special considerations” (Bok, 1999, p. 30). The principle of veracity also aligns itself with Christian theological traditions. For instance, the eighth commandment declares: “Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor” (Exodus 20:16). This prescription led early church fathers like St. Augustine (354-430) to construct an eightfold hierarchy of lies, all of which were classed as inherently sinful—some more serious than others (Bok, 1999, p. 34; 250). In recognition of the fact that not all lies were of equal offense, St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) also distinguished between three kinds of lies: “the officious or helpful lies; the jocose lies, told in jest; and the mischievous or malicious lies” (Bok, 1999, p. 34; 255). The malicious kinds of lies constituted mortal sins while the previous kinds only venial. Nevertheless, it was believed that the inherent sinfulness of all lying (or “false signification”) broke the consonance between speech and thought, undermining the God-given purpose of communication which was to put on our lips what was in the mind.
Causing the tongue to distort the contents of the mind was a violation of truth and, therefore, always ruled as immoral. Not even in the event of saving someone’s life was lying considered a permissible alternative to truth-telling, for St. Augustine held that the soul was not something to be defiled for the sake of the body, nor should our love of neighbor exceed the love of self. “Therefore it is not lawful to tell a lie in order to deliver another from any danger whatever,” concurred St. Thomas Aquinas. “Nevertheless it is lawful to hide the truth prudently, by keeping it back, as Augustine says” (Aquinas, Summa Theologiae, II-II, Q110, A3, ad. 4). Both Augustine and Aquinas maintained that hiding could be lawful, while lying could never be—a doctrine which further advanced the difference between lying and secrecy, the former being a sinful act, the latter being at times a justifiable duty.

Proving difficult to live by, the strictness of the doctrine against lying prompted some Catholic thinkers throughout the ages to adopt a controversial form of equivocation known as “mental reservation” where statements or gestures would be made vague enough to allow for the audience’s misinterpretation while clear enough in the speaker’s mind to avoid lying. There eventually emerged two forms of this doctrine: (1) wide, and (2) strict. The wide version was considered permissible, for it referred to the general ambiguity of words, allowing outsiders a chance to make the correct inference; but the strict version was forbidden, for it referred to a ‘strictly’ mental qualifier that left no chance for correct inferences to be drawn (Bok, 1999, p. 35). While the theory of mental reservation helped to offer some sanction for the felt need to hide the truth in particular circumstances, it failed to satisfy the logic of the reformers. By the 16th century, many Protestants had gone even further to say that some forms of lying did not qualify as sins at
all. Such is the case with the Dutch lawyer Hugo Grotius (1583-1645) who theorized a difference between lying and “false speech,” a view analogous to the distinction between murder and killing: while murder was the unjust taking of a life, killing was the just taking of a life, as in certain cases of self-defense, euthanasia, or capital punishment. Grotius contended that only in the presence of a justa causa (‘just cause’) can some forms of lying be morally sinless when committed against people who imbibe evil intentions, i.e., people who have no right to the truth (Bok, 1999, pp. 37; 263). Speaking falsely to a thief, for example, is not an act of lying because truthfulness is not owed to someone who intends to use truth for the triumph of evil. Even a few recent Catholics of note are sympathetic with this position: Cardinal John Henry Newman (1801-1890), for instance, defended the distinction between “formal lying” and “material lying” (Newman, 2005, p. 237), and G.K. Chesterton (1874-1936) declared that “Every sane man knows he would tell a lie to save a child from Chinese torturers” (Chesterton, 1990, p. 90).

Recognizing that some lies can be harmless (Bok, 1999, p. 57), avoiding harm (Bok, 1999, p. 78), or even countering harm (Bok, 1999, p. 140), Bok is friendly with this perspective when the intention is in good conscience or “purposely intended to benefit society” (Bok, 1999, p. 167). While the concept of “the noble lie” contradicts earlier religious theories about the injunction against lying, Bok admits “I have to agree that there are at least some circumstances which warrant a lie. And foremost among them are those where innocent lives are at stake, and where only a lie can deflect danger” (Bok, 1999, p. 45). It would seem from this that Bok countenances a kind of duty to lie, or a duty to exercise some measure of deception when the circumstances justify it. Surely this duty or “warrant to lie” does not reflect the kind of Augustinian or Thomistic sense of duty to the
sacredness of truth anymore than it reflects a Kantian or deontological sense of duty to
truth-telling as a rational and universalizable maxim. Rather, Bok’s sense of duty grants us
something closer to a utilitarian ethic of communication—an ethic that recognizes a ‘duty
to deceive’ based on the justifiability of the consequences or circumstances. Thus,
significant attention to the value of our speech and actions seems to hover over a specific
factor that precedes, animates, or undergirds them: our intentions.

Section III.2: The Principle of Intent

Intent is a curious element in the discourses of secrecy and lying: ‘secrecy’, after
all, is defined as intentional concealment, and ‘lying’ as intentional deceptive statements.
The relevance of intentionality to questions of morality is evident by these definitions,
including for example the emphasis we place on the difference between murder and
manslaughter: murder is judged by virtue of its intentional nature; without intent, murder
is replaced by the term ‘manslaughter.’ It is “the intention…which constitutes the formal
sin,” writes Cardinal Henry Newman (2005, p. 237). The fact that courts have universally
warranted murder with a heavier penalty than manslaughter demonstrates the significance
of intention to moral decision-making and the degrees to which we are judged responsible
for our actions. Signs of premeditation are always indicative of the intentions behind our
choices and behaviors. Both the knowledge and interpretation of our intentions ultimately
determines how an audience judges our character and evaluates our culpability. The notion
of intent is an abiding principle connecting ethics to human communication, for we all
communicate amongst ourselves “with the intent or purpose to influence others in some
way to some degree,” writes communication ethicist Richard Johannesen (2007, p. 38). We
all intend our words to bring about some kind of end, or change, or veritable action; therefore, rhetoric is inherently ethical.

“Intention, as the very word denotes, means to tend to something” stated Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274). “…Consequently intention belongs first and principally to that which moves to the end” (Summa Theologicae, I-II, Q12, A1, co.). The role of intentionality in communication ethics factors into the process of how we arrive at ethical judgments about rhetorical practices and circumstances. Whenever we intend to speak certain words in favor over other words, our language style reflects a kind of ‘end-in-view’ that determines what words we choose and why. Our communication patterns or language choices evince or reflect our intentions because choice-making is tied to the teleology of intent. “Choice is future-oriented, and never fully expressed in present action,” writes Sissela Bok. “It requires what is most distinctive about human reasoning: intention—the capacity to envisage and to compare future possibilities, to make estimates, sometimes to take indirect routes to a goal or to wait” (Bok, 1989, p. 23). It is not difficult to understand why intent figures so centrally to the moral configuration of rhetorical engagement. Speech theorists have long recognized the role of intent when analyzing and evaluating the ethical merits of public address. “If a dubious communication behavior seems to stem more from accident, from an unintentional slip of the tongue, or even from ignorance, often we are less harsh in our ethical assessment,” notes Richard Johanessen. “For most of us, it is the intentional use of ethically questionable tactics that merits our harshest condemnation” (Johanessen, et al., 2008, p. 8).

Clearly, intentionality is inextricably linked to the discourse of secrecy for reasons relating to the moral evaluation of human actions. According to Bok, secrets can be defined
as virtually anything “so long as it is kept intentionally hidden, set apart in the mind of its
keeper as requiring concealment.” She continues, “To keep a secret from someone, then,
is to block information about it or evidence of it from reaching that person, and to do so intentionally…” (Bok, 1989, pp. 5-6). Because secrecy can sometimes be used for deceptive ends, intentionality also bears upon the ethics of lying. “The moral question of
whether you are lying or not is not settled by establishing the truth or falsity of what you
say,” argues Bok. “In order to settle this question, we must know whether you intend your
statement to mislead” (Bok, 1999, p. 6). Morality pivots much on the fulcrum of intention,
for “A false person is not one merely wrong or mistaken or incorrect; it is one who is
intentionally deceitful or treacherous or disloyal” (Bok, 1999, p. 7). Treachery, or
malicious intent, however, is not always a precondition for lying. Many falsities we tell
each other are routine examples of paternalistic lies—“lies told for social benefit and for
the supposed benefit of the deceived persons themselves” (Bok, 1999, p. 81), such as the
myth of Santa Clause for children, or hopeful stories of recovery for the dying.

Lying for the good of others—with altruistic intent—is one of the ways we attempt
to justify deceptive speech. “The excuse of altruism is often grounded in the liar’s general
belief in his own good will. ‘I mean well; therefore my lies will help’ is as frequent a leap
of the mind as: ‘I mean no harm; therefore my lies can’t hurt.’ The possibilities of error
about one’s good intentions are immense. But even if these intentions are good, they are
obviously no guarantee of a good outcome” (Bok, 1999, p. 81). Altruistic intent participates
in acts of secrecy as well, when we aim to protect others from harm by means of
concealment. If Jews were hiding in the basement, would we be justified to keep this a
secret from Nazi inquisitors? Would lying to the Nazis be the more secure, and therefore
more ethical, response? Or do we have a duty to always tell the truth? The role of intent is part of what binds communicative action to ethical consideration, for the fundamental element that forms the architecture of all morality depends upon the ability to intend, or freely choose, between a set of right and wrong options. Without this element, it would make little sense to be upset at someone for acting a certain way. Without intent, our sense of justice and feelings of indignation or remorse would be without foundation. Only through the possibility of intention can these things have rational existence, for it implies the freedom to have intended or chosen one course of action over another.

Section III.3: Secrecy and Power

An additional element integral to the discourse of secrecy is “control”—the control of managing our ability to reveal or conceal. As Bok outlines, “What is at issue is not secrecy alone, but rather the control over secrecy and openness” (Bok, 1989, p. 23). Because of its connection to the element of control, secrecy necessarily addresses questions concerning the moral uses of power: “Conflicts over secrecy…are conflicts over power: the power that comes through controlling the flow of information. To be able to hold back some information about oneself or to channel it and thus influence how one is seen by others gives power; so does the capacity to penetrate similar defenses and strategies when used by others” (Bok, 1989, p. 19). The striving of insiders and outsiders to manipulate the flow of information, about themselves and others, ultimately reveals a struggle to sustain control over the possession and allocation of knowledge. “True, power requires not only knowledge but the capacity to put knowledge to use; but without the knowledge, there is no chance to exercise power” (Bok, 1989, p. 19). If information is knowledge, and
knowledge is power, then every attempt at concealing (or revealing) information is, in effect, a rhetorical strategy that effects our range of free choice and action.

Power and knowledge are linked to the rhetoric of secrecy by virtue of the ways in which secrecy manages the insulation and exchange of messages for particular publics. Exercising one’s control over the mediation of secrets is felt by both insiders and outsiders. For the insiders, “To have no capacity for secrecy is to be out of control over how others see one,” and for the outsiders, “To have no insight into what others conceal is to lack power as well” (Bok, 1989, p. 19). Protecting secrets is as much an exercise in rhetorical power as are the strategies for invading them. In addition to the conflict experienced between insiders and outsiders, the same tensions are also felt within each group: “for outsiders, between seeking to probe secrets and refraining therefrom, and between accepting and avoiding what is revealed; and for insiders, between keeping secrets and divulging them, and between seeking to overcome the restraint of outsiders with respect to what is in no way a secret, and acquiescing” (Bok, 1989, p. 40).

Secrecy, therefore, works under the metaphor of a **safety valve**, the function of which guards or enables control over the flow of content. “Control over secrecy provides a safety valve for individuals in the midst of communal life—some influence over transactions between the world of personal experience and the world shared with others” (Bok, 1989, p. 20). Without this metaphorical safety valve to grant us the power to control the flow of information, the relationship between insiders and outsiders crumbles, and the power relations that would otherwise exist between the two groups would render our world unlivable. “With no control over such exchanges, human beings would be unable to exercise choice about their lives. To restrain some secrets and to allow others freer play; to
keep some hidden and to let others be known; to offer knowledge to some but not to all comers; to give and receive confidences and to guess at far more: these efforts at control permeate all human contact” (Bok, 1989, p. 20). This metaphor is ultimately rooted in Bok’s concept of discretion, the mechanism by which secrecy and openness are employed responsibly, sensitively, and tactfully. Discretion is “the intuitive ability to discern what is and is not intrusive and injurious, and to use this discernment in responding to the conflicts everyone experiences as insider and outsider” (Bok, 1989, p. 41). Discretion constitutes the power or capacity to exercise judgment about secrecy.

Secrecy offers us the power to hide information about ourselves and others, and Bok lists four major elements of human autonomy where the safety valve of secrecy can be put to ethically justifiable uses: (1) identity, (2) plans, (3) action, and (4) property. The first subject of identity concerns the protection of what we are, or “the sense of what we identify as, through, and with. Such control may be needed to guard solitude, privacy, intimacy, and friendship” (Bok, 1989, p. 20). The second subject of plans concerns the protection of what we intend: “Imagine, for example, the pointlessness of the game of chess without secrecy on the part of the players” (Bok, 1989, p. 23). Without a hidden plan, there can exist no element of surprise. The idea of planning is also inseparable from actions. The third subject of actions concerns the protection of what we do: “for the sharing and working out of certain plans and for cooperative action. …Surprises are sprung and jokes explained. The result of the jury trial can be announced, the statue unveiled, the secretly negotiated treaty submitted for ratification, the desire to marry proclaimed. …Many projects need both gestation and emergence, both confinement and publicity” (Bok, 1989, p. 23). The last subject of property concerns the protection of what we own. Ownership in secrecy “is
closely linked to identity, in that people take some secrets, such as hidden love letters, to 
*belong* to them more than to others, to be *proper* to them.” At the same time, “the school-
bus driver who has a severe heart condition cannot rightfully claim to *own* this medical 
information, even though it concerns him intimately. Even when outsiders have less need 
to share the information than in such a case, the question who owns a secret may be hard 
to answer” (Bok, 1989, p. 24). While these four claims are defensible, Bok recognizes that 
they are not always persuasive, being sometimes abused beyond their appropriate limits. 
Nevertheless, their shortcomings notwithstanding, Bok admits “I shall assume that they do 
hold for certain fundamental human needs” (Bok, 1989, p. 24).

While the power to guard information can be used to defend human autonomy, 
namely our identity, plans, actions, and property, secrecy also carries a variety of *moral 
dangers*. The English Catholic historian John E. E. Dalberg, better known as Lord Acton  
(1834-1902), once famously quipped that “power tends to corrupt and absolute power 
corrupts absolutely” (Acton, 1887). Suspecting that power necessarily leads to corruption,  
Acton was similarly contemptible toward the power of secrecy and its equal tendency to  
foster moral degeneration. Bok acknowledges that “such categorical dismissals are too  
sweeping, but they do point to the harm that secrets can do” (Bok, 1989, p. 25). There are  
several dangers associated with abusing the power of secrecy. (1) Secrets can *debilitate 
judgment*: scientific creativity, for example, suffers under secret conditions because “it  
shuts out criticism and feedback, leading people to become mired down in stereotyped, 
unexamined, often erroneous beliefs and ways of thinking. Neither their perception of a  
problem nor their reasoning about it then receives the benefit of challenge and exposure” 
(Bok, 1989, p. 25). (2) Secrets can also *compromise moral character*: by concealing our
wicked traits or vices, secrets can ‘corrode us from within,’ leading to moral deterioration. (3) Secrets *tend to multiply:* the insatiable, all-too-human desire for greater amounts of power and control lead us to increase the spread of secrecy, whether to exploit others or to protect ourselves. (4) Secrets can *become obsessive:* constant dependence on concealment forces one to live in a rigid and stifling existence, no longer serving sanity and free choice. Such irrational obsession with secrecy can also cultivate “the pathologies of prying into the private spheres of others,” like “voyeurism” (Bok, 1989, p. 26). (5) Lastly, secrets often *affect others unintentionally:* “When the freedom of choice that secrecy gives one person limits or destroys that of others, it affects not only his own claims to respect for identity, plans, action, and property, but theirs” (Bok, 1989, p. 26).

Secrecy need not always lead to corruption. “A measure of control over secrecy and openness—and thus one form of power—is needed in personal life for equilibrium, liberty, even survival” (Bok, 1989, p. 106). On the other hand, however, the risk of moral danger is increased when secrecy is combined with power. “When power is joined to secrecy, therefore, and when the practices are of long duration, the danger of spread and abuse and deterioration increases” (Bok, 1989, p. 110). The relationship between power and secrecy is one which occupies an important place in Bok’s analysis, taking on two particular forms: (1) *individual secrecy,* and (2) *collective secrecy.* **Individual secrecy** refers to the power of a single person to exercise their own control over the flow of information. We are generally in favor of individual secrecy since “denying people the right to decide whether or not to reveal their own personal secrets would interfere in the most fundamental way with their freedom”; therefore, “the burden of proof is on those who would override such personal control” (Bok, 1989, p. 86). However, when it comes to
collective secrecy, the presumption reverses. **Collective secrecy** refers to the power of groups or institutions to control the flow of information. Working as a collection of individuals under a common entity, we generally disfavor institutional forms of secrecy, exercised by the likes of corporations and governments, because they naturally dispose of greater than ordinary power over others; therefore, “it is up to them to show why giving them such control is necessary and what kinds of safeguards they propose” (Bok, 1989, p. 110).

The dangers of secrecy also extend into the dangers of lying, for the power disposed in an act of lying stems from its reliance on the hiddenness of truth. “While not all that is secret is meant to deceive—as jury deliberations, for instance, are not—all deceit does rely on keeping something secret. And while not all secrets are discreditable, all that is discreditable and all wrongdoing seek out secrecy (unless they can be carried out openly without interference, as when they are pursued by coercive means)” (Bok, 1989, p. 26). Although distinct from secrecy, lies carry ethical dangers of their own—dangers which affect human knowledge and choice. Without an ability to distinguish truth from falsehood, human choice and survival would be imperiled, and society would collapse. “All our choices depend on our estimates of what is the case; these estimates must in turn often rely on information from others. Lies distort this information and therefore our situation as we perceive it, as well as our choices” (Bok, 1999, p. 19). While the power of secrecy leaves outsiders groping in the dark, the power of deceit manipulates or cripples human choice even further by succumbing to the use of illusions and/or false knowledge. Knowledge is power because, as was indicated earlier, the power to have control over the flow of knowledge influences the thoughts, choices, and actions of others:
To the extent that knowledge gives power, to that extent do lies affect the distribution of power; they add to that of the liar, and diminish that of the deceived, altering his choices at different levels. A lie, first, may misinform, so as to obscure some objective, something the deceived person wanted to do or obtain. …Lies may also eliminate or obscure relevant alternatives, as when a traveler is falsely told a bridge has collapsed. …Similarly, the estimates of costs and benefits of any action can be endlessly varied through successful deception. …Finally, the degree of uncertainty in how we look at our choices can be manipulated through deception. Deception can make a situation falsely uncertain as well as falsely certain. It can affect the objectives seen, the alternatives believed possible, the estimates made of risks and benefits. Such a manipulation of the dimension of certainty is one of the main ways to gain power over the choices of those deceived. And just as deception can initiate actions a person would otherwise never have chosen, so it can prevent action by obscuring the necessity for choice. This is the essence of camouflage and the cover-up—the creation of apparent normality to avert suspicion. (Bok, 1999, p. 19-20)

As far as lying relates to rhetoric and communication, Bok admits that truth (i.e., legitimate knowledge) is an element of language necessary to the healthy functioning of all human societies. Granted, truthful statements can sometimes be employed for “coercive and destructive” ends, being “used as weapons, to wound and do violence,” but nevertheless, “…society could scarcely function without some degree of truthfulness in speech and action” (Bok, 1999, p. 18). One of the areas where truth is most jeopardized is in the difficulties of “public relations”—that rhetorical endeavor to present “the best possible image of a person or organization or event.” Bok argues that, “Publicity of this kind can involve manipulation, secrecy, at times deception and outright lies; such publicity can orchestrate and arrange how something is to appear, and how its problematic aspects are to be concealed. It is therefore in no sense opposed to secrecy, and often makes a mockery of publicity in the sense of public discussion and accountability. Indeed, the motives and actions kept secret or blurred by avalanches of information or by manipulation are often precisely those that go against the public interest” (Bok, 1989, pp. 114-115). Public relations are a troubling form of publicity that harbors, multiplies, or exacerbates the problems of secrecy and lying. But publicity may, at the same time, be a necessary
ingredient to the redemption of deceptive practices. In order to elevate the standards of moral action from the pitfalls of secrecy and lying, Bok proposes a variety of publicity-based principles that work to deter unethical uses of deception.

Section III.4: Ethical Considerations

Grounded in the notion of **publicity**, Bok provides ethical coordinates that help to maintain a just exercise of secrecy. Publicity does not always guarantee such a standard, for it sometimes fosters the detriment of morality (as in the case of public relations which so often employs deception). On the other hand, however, publicity can also foster moral accountability, and therefore enhance the ethical uses of secrecy. At first, it is reasonable to wonder how publicizing secret information restores morality to secrecy. Is not publicity the opposite or elimination of secrecy? “The tension between the two is inevitable” writes Bok. “But it can be reduced by stressing the publicity of moral choice about secrecy” (Bok, 1989, p. 112). In other words, there are secrets, and then there are the ethical rules that govern secrets: publicity refers not to the exposing of secrets themselves, but rather to the moral discussions and procedures undergirding our practices of secrecy. “The moral arguments for any secret practices must be capable of being publicly discussed. They should never themselves require secrecy; nor should the existence of the practices themselves” (Bok, 1989, p. 112). In order to debate the moral principles of secrecy, including their limitations in various circumstances, it is necessary that free and open discussion about these protocols be made available and accessible to the public.

With the precondition of publicity in place to secure a more transparent exchange of ideas concerning the moral exercise of secrecy, Bok lays out two core presumptions: (1) **equality**, and (2) **partial individual control**. Concerning the presumption of **equality**, Bok
insists that we avoid hypocrisy and double-standards: “Whatever control over secrecy and openness we conclude is legitimate for some individuals should, in the absence of special considerations, be legitimate for all” (Bok, 1989, p. 27). A just society must allocate such power evenly across the board, unless constraints are deemed necessary or appropriate for certain situations, like in journalism and government, where risks of abuse are heightened or more dangerous than average. In such cases, “they would have to advance reasons sufficient to overcome the initial presumptions favoring equality” (Bok, 1989, p. 27). Bok’s presumption of equality stems from her denunciation of esoteric ethics, a “most corrupting exercise of secrecy” where people do not uphold their morals equally; instead, they practice “one set of moral principles for public consumption and another for themselves” (Bok, 1989, p. 112). Esoteric ethics attempts to conceal this double-standard, for it is as much about secrecy as it is an application of secrecy unto itself. Esoteric ethics is “secrecy about one’s own moral position” (Bok, 1989, p. 112), allowing people to set up hypocritical standards that exempt themselves from the presumption of equality. Bok, who is “truly concerned for consequences,” favors a public ethics, and “condemn[s] esoteric ethics categorically, as a minimal requirement to offset some of the worst effects of the shared predicament on moral judgment and character” (Bok, 1989, p. 113). Secret ethics discourages the consistent application of equality, thus skewing choice and harming both insiders and outsiders.

Concerning her second presumption of partial individual control, Bok insists that we secure a middle ground between ‘no control’ and ‘full control’ over secrecy. Having no control over secrecy would render our world literally naked, devoid of any sense of privacy with respect to our identity, plans, actions, and belongings—“all of which we should
legitimately be able to claim” (Bok, 1989, p. 27). The lack of control over the safety valve of private information (whether due to some mental impairment or social coercion) translates into an absence of choice, for without control, there would be no choice but to reveal all that is personal and intimate about our lives. On the other hand, however, having full control would aggravate the dangers of secrecy—“it would force us to disregard the legitimate claims of those persons who might be injured, betrayed, or ignored as a result of secrets inappropriately kept or revealed” (Bok, 1989, p. 28). Whether by regarding all secrets to be sacrosanct and inviolable, or by the sheer impossibility to eavesdrop or crack encoded messages, such full authority over secrecy would invite criminal abuse as much as it would induce social panic, for societies depend in part “on the possibility of predicting and forestalling or preparing for danger” (Bok, 1989, p. 18). In light of these two extremes—no control and full control—Bok recommends an ethic of partial individual control, a moderate and justifiable measure of freedom “over the degree of secrecy or openness about personal matters—those indisputably in the private realm” (Bok, 1989, p. 27). The virtue of control, flanked by the vices of its deficiency and excess, is reflected in the analogue of fire:

Secrecy is as indispensable to human beings as fire, and as greatly feared. Both enhance and protect life, yet both can stifle, lay waste, spread out of all control. Both may be used to guard intimacy or to invade it, to nurture or to consume. And each can be turned against itself; barriers of secrecy are set up to guard against secret plots and surreptitious prying, just as fire is used to fight fire. (Bok, 1989, p. 18)

In addition to the arguments undergirding the moral exercise of secrecy, Bok also proposes a set of principles to guide our policies on lying. All lies depend on secrecy, for lies are “inherently secretive” (Bok, 1999, p. 92), requiring an element of hiddenness in order for lies to be of any use. But lies also go beyond secrecy—whereas secrecy hides the truth, lying distorts it. The tampering of truth always demands justification, according to
Bok, and the justification of lies, like secrets, thus implies the need for an audience. Without an audience, justification would be impossible. “Moral justification, therefore, cannot be exclusive or hidden; it has to be capable of being made public” (Bok, 1999, p. 92). Publicity, again, resurfaces as the formal constraint necessary for the open deliberation of moral principles. Secret moral principles cannot satisfy such a condition; thus publicity becomes “crucial to the justification of all moral choice” (Bok, 1999, p. 92). Moreover, justification is not simply a defense of one’s position before any kind of public, but rather a public of reasonable persons. Reasonable persons refer not only to those from the liar’s perspective, but also to those who are affected by our lies, both directly and potentially. “The test of publicity asks which lies, if any, would survive the appeal for justification to reasonable persons” (Bok, 1999, p. 93), thus allowing for the liar to reflect on the privately held assumptions and biases undergirding his or her reason(s) to lie. With the consideration of how acts of lying affect both the liar and those lied to, one can better curb self-deception and other hasty calculations that may go into our engagements in deceit.

After reestablishing the significance of publicity to moral decision-making, Bok lays out her three levels of justification, a triple-pronged procedure for determining whether a lie is justifiable: (1) we scrutinize our conscience, (2) we solicit helpful advice, and (3) we enter into public debate. The first level of justification deals with our conscience, forcing us to “ask whether there are alternative courses of action that will achieve the aims one takes to be good without requiring deception” (Bok, 1989, p. 113). Conscience acts as a kind of internal interlocutor or inner judge by which moral choices are reflected and evaluated. However, the soul-searching method cannot guarantee the conditions of publicity, for “while consciences can ravage, they can also be very
accommodating and malleable. Most often, those who lie have a much easier time in justifying their behavior so long as their only audience is their own conscience” (Bok, 1999, p. 94). The second level of justification deals with solicited advice, compelling us “to set forth the moral reasons thought to excuse or justify the lie, and the possible counterarguments” (Bok, 1989, p. 113). Looking up precedents, consulting priests, lawyers, and moral philosophers, or asking advice from friends and family allows one to go beyond our own thought-experiments. Unfortunately, however, “in the more difficult cases, where the stakes are high, such consultation is still insufficiently ‘public.’ It does not [always] eliminate bias; nor does it question shared assumptions and fallacious reasoning” (Bok, 1999, p. 96). The third level of justification deals with public debate, having us “ask how a public of reasonable persons would respond to such arguments. To deliberate, to reason, to seek to justify in public” (Bok, 1989, p. 113). This level summons the consultation of all persons with any manner of allegiances. Publicity at this degree “rules out the hand-picking of those who should be consulted. It is not so much a matter of whether many or a few have access to the public justification, as that no one should be denied access” (Bok, 1999, pp. 97-98).

From conscience to colleagues to community, the flow of the justification procedure moves from the private sphere to the public sphere, cultivating an increased assurance that the lie is justified. But this procedure, albeit useful, is not without some drawbacks. “The test of publicity is not always needed; where needed it cannot always be implemented; if implemented it does not always bring forth solutions to moral quandaries. Given these limitations, it can nevertheless reduce the discrepancy of perspectives, shed light on moral reasoning, and facilitate moral choice” (Bok, 1999, p. 103). Given the
precondition of *publicity*, the presumptions of *equality* and *partial individual control*, and the procedure of *conscience, advice, and debate*, Bok has proffered a robust philosophy that attends to the ethics of deceptive communication. Deception, ranging from secrets to lies, effects a diverse range of scenarios, many overlapping with each other. In *Lying*, Bok explored “lies in wartime…or to children; lies told to protect confidentiality or to conduct research” (Bok, 1999, p. xxxiv), and in *Secrets*, Bok explored “confession, psychotherapy, gossip, trade secrecy, cryptography, and undercover policing” (Bok, 1989, p. 18). These myriad forms of deception, especially in the case of secrecy (since secrecy is fundamental to lying), inspire theoretical research and investigation, and reinforce Bok’s everlasting relevance to the study of rhetoric and the ethics of communication. “The resulting challenge for ethical inquiry into the aims and methods of secrecy is great,” writes Bok, and “…it is especially important to look at them separately, and to examine the moral arguments made for and against each one” (Bok, 1989, p. 27). That challenge is set forth in the next and final section of this project.

For the purposes of this dissertation, Bok’s principles are extracted and implemented within the context of secretive/deceptive discourse, the mode of communication which Joshua Gunn terms “occultic rhetoric.” This mode of rhetorical deception deserves ethical reflection. Occultic rhetoric, combined with the ethics of secrecy and lying, are thus synthesized in an attempt to formulate what may otherwise be designated an “ethics of occultic rhetoric.” Fulfilling the challenge to study the methods of rhetorical deception, and examine the moral arguments for and against each one, is a unique undertaking that invites further scholarly analysis and debate. What forms of occultic rhetoric may be permissible or impermissible? How does context influence its justification?
When does occultic rhetoric constitute a lie instead of a secret message? To what extent do our intentions determine the merits of obfuscation? Is truth-telling overrated? What considerations may override the presumptions of equality and partial individual control? These and other questions comprise some of the main dilemmas and predicaments addressed within the ethics of occultic rhetoric.

IV. Chapter IV. Bok and Gunn on the Ethics of Occultic Rhetoric

In this final chapter, the ethics of Sissela Bok now merges into conversation with the occultic rhetoric of Joshua Gunn. The convergence of their scholarship is organized below to address the problems of occultic rhetoric, its application, and its consequences. From the start of this project, Gunn’s resignation to the inevitability of occultic rhetoric prompted Kevin Meyer of Illinois State University to assert that Gunn leaves the reader “longing for an extended discussion” of this topic. In his review of Modern Occult Rhetoric, Meyer noted that Gunn “problematizes academic language without offering solutions or suggesting approaches to balance better the ability of academic discourse to include as well as exclude audiences. Greater attention to strategies for making the language of the academy more accessible to those within as well as those outside its walls would strengthen Gunn’s argument” (Meyer, 2007, p. 119). Meyer steers the conversation toward the value of ‘accessibility’ (or penetrability, intelligibility) and the ways in which we can cultivate it in academic language. The result of this inquiry moves occultic rhetoric into the purview of moral consideration, thus initiating a new discourse on the “ethics of occultic rhetoric.” To develop this ethics, this chapter attempts to answer the primary question of this project: How might the scholarship of Sissela Bok offer a way to more fully develop the ethical implications of, and solutions for, Gunn’s argument?
This chapter initiates a cross-fertilization of ideas between Gunn and Bok in order to generate helpful coordinates that can guide an ethical use of occultic rhetoric. It begins first by reviewing specified abuses of occultic rhetoric in academia, such as those committed by Deleuze, Guattari, Lacan, Butler, and others. The sampled writings of these scholars constitute the primary problem of academic language that this project seeks to examine and rectify. In addition to exploring and comparing a variety of cryptic, scholarly prose, I then analyze the faulty excuses promoted within Gunn’s philosophy of communication in his attempt to justify the inevitability of occultic rhetoric (and therefore the impossibility of an ethics). He advances a relativistic view of language that cannot account for the moral system he strives to promote. The inconsistencies and contradictory presumptions adhered to within his theoretical system of thought force me to supplant (and supplement) his work with the concepts and categories proposed by Bok from her texts on secrecy and lying. Although Bok composes the spine of philosophical research that I rely on in this project, I also make use of other works (like Kenneth Burke, etc.) to inform my construction of an ethics of occultic rhetoric. In the end, I take up the question of ‘justification,’ and outline several guideposts that can encourage both insiders and outsiders to engage in acceptable forms of occultic rhetoric within an academic context.

Section IV.1: The Occult and the Academy

Gunn’s book Modern Occult Rhetoric is about a particular kind of experience: “the experience of picking up a volume in the local bookstore, reading the first few pages, and finding ourselves utterly mystified.” Modern Occult Rhetoric “is also about the ways in which individuals use language (and the ways in which language uses individuals) to harbor secrets, creating groups of insiders and outsiders” (Gunn, 2005, p. xv). While these
types of experiences are ubiquitous to human life, Gunn focuses primarily on the dynamics of this rhetoric within the academy, and how this language mirrors the rhetoric of the occult tradition. Consider the introduction of his book where he starts with a playful example of the dense, “torturous jargon” of philosophers (Gunn, 2005, p. xv). This jargon provides the reader a taste of occultic rhetoric, illustrating the breadth and scope of how cryptic the vocabulary of philosophers can be:

this hodgepodge of esoteric terms and academic jargon is designed to discriminate among those who can read it and those who cannot. When writing the example ruse, I wanted the aesthetic form of the prose to reflect the content or argument: the difficult language of philosophy is akin to the difficult language of the occult tradition; both traditions simultaneously obscure the truths their vocabularies seek to deploy, and both utilize difficult language to create readerships. In short, the content domains of philosophy and the occult share a common logic of discrimination. Their prose, like mine, is designed to delight and to encourage the reader who is “in the know” and to annoy, discourage, or perhaps even intrigue the reader who is not. (Gunn, 2005, p. xix)

Occultic rhetoric characterizes much of the rhetoric of the academy, and as the great neo-Aristotelian philosopher Mortimer Adler reminds us: “Philosophers are notorious for having private vocabularies” (Adler & Doren, 1972, p. 105). The vocabularies of philosophers are not unknown for their private, occultic style. In fact, the several paragraphs of impenetrable prose at the beginning of Gunn’s book are meant to recreate the feeling one experiences when encountering the literary obscurantism of the two, collaborative French philosophers Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995) and Felix Guatarri (1930-1992). Whether reading their Anti-Oedipus or A Thousand Plateaus, the works of Deleuze and Guatarri are widely considered to be “anything but straightforward”; indeed, their difficult language is specifically designed “to upset and subvert binary thinking and the philosophical categories of transcendence. My intent here is not to ridicule their language,” writes Gunn, “but rather to suggest that their philosophical rhetoric is occultic in terms of,
first, its having created a dedicated group of followers who have become absorbed in the argot of ‘D&G,’ and second, its explicit claim to a better way of understanding the world—indeed, for understanding the enterprise of philosophy itself” (Gunn, 2005, p. xxiv). Deleuze and Guattari are among the premiere exemplars of occultic stylists, but they are far from the only ones who employ this manner of discourse. Enormous sectors of academia are replete with a penchant for dissimulation, most particularly the humanities and the social sciences.

Consider, again, the gender philosopher Judith Butler whom Gunn compares to a modern-day mystic (Gunn, 2005, p. 52). Her project consists of “messing with grammar” so as to “locate spaces in which people can resist oppressive cultural logics, such as heterosexual gender norms (or ‘heteronormativity’)” (Gunn, 2005, p. 47). Butler’s rhetoric is characterized as mystical because of the way it fascinates “frequently by obscurity.” The equivalency of Butler to an occultist is reinforced by the philosopher Martha Nussbaum who declares that Butler is a “witch” whose baffling convolutions are “really only designed to create a cultish following” (Gunn, 2005, p. 220). Once again, private vocabularies feature centrally in occultic discourse, the purpose of which is to assume the position of originating authority over an esoteric vocabulary. Rather than rely on simple and direct communication, Butler instead “prefers a verbosity that causes the reader to expend so much effort in deciphering her prose that little energy is left for assessing the truth of the claims” (Nussbaum, 1999, p. 4). For this, Butler has won first prize in the annual Bad Writing Contest sponsored by the journal Philosophy and Literature, writes Nussbaum. Not only is obscurity the choice mechanism behind Butler’s importance, but it also serves as the weapon by which Butler bullies her readers into submission:
[Obscurity] bullies the reader into granting that, since one cannot figure out what is going on, there must be something significant going on, some complexity of thought, where in reality there are often familiar or even shopworn notions, addressed too simply and too casually to add any new dimension of understanding. When the bullied readers of Butler's books muster the daring to think thus, they will see that the ideas in these books are thin. When Butler's notions are stated clearly and succinctly, one sees that, without a lot more distinctions and arguments, they don't go far, and they are not especially new. Thus obscurity fills the void left by an absence of a real complexity of thought and argument. (Nussbaum, 1999, p. 4)

Despite this fact, however, Gunn is not here to ridicule Butler’s rhetoric. Instead, like his defense of Deleuze and Guattari, “[he is] sympathetic to Butler’s project and agree[s] with the reasons for her call for challenging prose” (Gunn, 2005, p. 52). Gunn is ultimately a defender of occultic rhetoric; however, many of his colleagues are not sympathetic with this position. Various exponents of difficult language in recent history alone have been met with fierce criticism. Take for example the German existentialist philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) whose excessive use of neologisms, wordplay, and opaque writing style brought him to the center of academic attention (and vilification). “Heidegger’s bombastic mode of expression, whereby he sought to express insights in a manner which escaped the distorting effects of traditional philosophical terminology, has been ridiculed by philosophers who advocate clarity and exactness, for example Rudolf Carnap and A. J. Ayer. Even Gilbert Ryle, who appreciated aspects of Heidegger’s account of the self, thought that his phenomenology would end up in a ‘self-ruinous subjectivism’, or in a ‘windy mysticism’. Yet, when he wanted to, Heidegger himself could write with astonishing clarity and simplicity and with penetrating insight” (Moran, 2002, p. 192). Even the late German historian Klemens von Klemperer (1916-2012) remarked that “I am impatient with [Heidegger’s] metalanguage” (Klemperer, 1994, p. 2). Some scholars might impugn Heidegger’s critics as biased reactionaries who opposed
his work on the basis of his Nazi sentiments, but this would make no sense of the equally shared invective for the Jewish postmodernism of Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995). Levinas was another existentialist philosopher whose works deployed a thick soup of mystical prose (Miller, 2017), often in response to the ethical failings of Heidegger’s philosophy. But in the eyes of the contemporary theologian David Hart, Levinas’s obscure language did little to advance the conversation:

Levinas's importance, it must be noted, lies not in the clarity of his thought (which is, in truth, a prodigy of incoherence), but in the utter purity of his idiom; in his work one encounters a logic of the ethical that other thinkers repeat, but none with such absolutely unalloyed and hyperbolic intensity. It should also be noted that the good opinion that Levinas’s work at present enjoys is so great (in large part because it appears apt to satisfy some commendable appetite in certain thinkers in this postmetaphysical age for some language of moral responsibility) that it may seem somewhat coarse to observe that it is poor philosophy—the banal tortured into counterfeit profundity, the obviously false propounded as irresistibly true, other forms of thought caricatured and condemned with a vehemence frequently vicious, and a fulminant tone of mystical authority assumed wherever principled argument proves impossible. (Hart, 2003, p. 75)

As a self-described Levinasian, Gunn defends occultic rhetoric in his attempt to honor the need for philosophers to grapple with the ineffable. The ineffability of ‘the Other’ in Levinasian philosophy is among the canons of translinguistic ideas paralleling the ineffability of ‘the Real’ in Lacanian psychoanalysis. As a comparably faithful admirer of Jacques Lacan, Gunn also seeks to defend the need for social scientists to grapple with the ineffable. The writings of the French psychoanalyst has “been routinely attacked for its difficulty, and his many followers are quick to acknowledge that reading Lacan’s prose is anything but easy. One might say Lacan’s letters seem to take on a life of their own, as if they held an authority over the reader” (Gunn, 2005, p. 139). Social scientists are no less guilty of having private vocabularies, and are perhaps no less deserving of similar critiques like those offered by Hart and others. The contemporary philosopher Raymond Tallis, for
instance, is one such critic contending that “Lacan’s ideas were insulated against critical
evaluation by his writing style.” In fact, “His quasi-mathematical, pseudo-logical
fantasies—the culmination of the cargo cult science of his school—propounded in
interminable seminars, were agonised over by his congregation who suffered appallingly
from their inability to make sense of them. They felt unworthy of the Master” (Tallis,
1997). Lacan’s legacy now seems to live on within literature departments where they
attempt to (or pretend to) make sense of his “gnomic teachings,” whereas the legacy of
“Aleister Crowley…whom Lacan most resembles” has not been so fortunate (Tallis, 1997).

Gunn’s painstaking analysis into the hermeneutical methods of Aleister Crowley is
no accident. The relationship between Lacan and Crowley—indeed between the academy
and the occult—rests upon a single, foundational endeavor: to describe or define
phenomena that transcends the representational powers of language. Whenever we
encounter anomalies or confront the unknown—phenomena that fail to fit neatly within
our mental preconceptions or linguistic categories—our attempts at description and
definition become ever more explorative, experimental, inventional, or more simply,
thetical. But as with all theoretical communication, our descriptions and definitions of
reality are never neutral. All talk about talk, all theory, is biased, partisan, or sermonic
(Weaver, 1970), or as Gunn prefers, occultic (Gunn, 2005, p. 52). “Theory,” then, is the
academy’s equivalent to the poetic incantations of the occult (i.e., occult poetics), since all
expression is a form of preaching. “Academic terminology (most especially theoretical
vocabulary) is…deployed in a manner that is said to invite esoteric understanding, often
for the purposes of demystifying human behavior or social reality,” writes Gunn. “[T]heory
should be understood as a proposed alternate vocabulary for describing human reality. For
example, Rorty has argued that the difficult vocabularies of Heidegger and Derrida represent a poetic or ‘literary’ attempt to ‘suggest new questions in new terms.’ Insofar as everything meaningful is within the domain or map of human representation, new vocabularies help to expand meanings and, as Rorty suggests, possibilities for change” (Gunn, 2005, p. 51). Tapping into the expansive power of language is as much the method of the occult as it is for the academy. Just as Blavatsky, Crowley, and LaVey “are revered authorities of esoteric knowledge, so too are Heidegger, Derrida, and Butler authorities in an esoteric language game…” (Gunn, 2005, p. 51-52). Authority over language is the hallmark of academia, and the social sciences are particularly adept at this technique because of their relentless investigations into the ineffable.

Consider the psychoanalytic preoccupation with representing the unconscious. “Psychoanalysis is a contemporary occultic discourse precisely because of the pride of place it secures for the ineffable,” (Gunn, 2005, p. 140). Because its truth is beyond representation, psychoanalytic investigations into the unconscious are steeped in theoretical communication, rendering the social sciences an elite coven of jargon and academese. Rhetorical scholar Richard Weaver in his Ethics of Rhetoric (1953) highlighted that the language of the social sciences contains a plethora of “conspicuously poor writing” because, among other reasons, it suffers from an equivocation between scientific truths and moral truths (Weaver, 1953, p. 189). In order to downplay this equivocation, social science literature often relies on a pool of sophisticated vocabulary that serves to conceal its flaws—a vocabulary that strongly resembles the official language of bureaucracy: “The bureaucrat’s world is prim and proper and aseptic, and his language reflects it (perhaps one could say that the discourse of the bureaucrat is social science ‘politicalized’)” (Weaver,
One example of this language can be seen in the ancient adage: “Too many cooks spoil the broth.” This phrase is far too simple and direct. For a social scientist, the phrase should read: “Undue multiplicity of personnel assigned either concurrently or consecutively to a single function involves deterioration of quality in the resultant product as compared with the product of the labor of an exact sufficiency of personnel” (Weaver, 1953, p. 200). Written this way, any simplicity of truth and meaning is wonderfully deflected by jargon.

The abuse of obscurity within the social sciences has attracted the attention of various scholars who have pondered its relationship to magical thinking and practice. For example, in his *Social Sciences as Sorcery* (1972), the sociologist Stanislav Andreski (1919-2007) makes mention of how “constant attention to the meaning of terms is indispensable in the study of human affairs, because in this field powerful social forces operate which continuously create verbal confusion” (Andreski, 1974, pp. 60-61). The confusion engendered by obscure rhetoric is more or less strategic, working like a *smokescreen* that limits or controls the range of human thought and action. Such is the method of magic. But science, on the other hand, triumphed over magic because its method sought to reveal the truth rather than disguise or distort it. “Sorcery lost, not because of any waning of its intrinsic appeal to the human mind, but because it failed to match the power created by science. But, though abandoned as a tool for controlling nature, incantations remain more effective for manipulating crowds than logical arguments, so that in the conduct of human affairs sorcery continues to be stronger than science” (Andreski, 1974, pp. 98-99). This infiltration of magic into the sciences has confused the boundaries of science and the occult. Echoing Weaver’s disputes, the contemporary psychologist Paul
C. Vitz argues in his *Psychology as Religion* (1994) that the equivocation of both scientific truth and moral truth has made “selfism” (e.g., psychology and psychotherapy) indistinguishable “from religion, literature, political ideology and ethics” (Vitz, 1994, p. 55). Our failure to distinguish between science and the occult tradition does not necessarily mean that there is no distinction, “but rather that the rhetoric of each is often experienced by the ‘outsider’ as occultic” (Gunn, 2005, p. xxiv). Even the specialized jargon of the natural (hard) sciences can be experienced as occultic, for the abuse of metaphors among physicists has even been known to summon “unintelligible” notions, such as the nonsensical idea that space is literally curved (Tallis, 2015).

In summary, the permeation of abstruse language is a feature endemic to higher education that renders a variety of parallels between magicians and academicians. “[T]he contemporary academic paradigm is occultic,” writes Gunn, and “a litany of homologies” are evident by the ways in which scholars at universities (like magi in secret societies) climb up various promotion systems toward increasingly higher degrees of prestige; or, how the processes of “publication” and “initiation” serve mysterious power structures; or, how “close textual reading” resembles the “hermeneutics of the Kabbalah”; or, most pertinently, how the esoteric language of modern occultism mirrors the rhetoric of postmodernist theorists (Gunn, 2005, p. 231). If these parallels prove anything, it is only that all individuals within the arts and sciences are tendentiously vulnerable to the suspect practices and politics of verbal complexity, a tendency which has resulted in society’s widespread disdain for the academic profession. In her book *Academic Instincts*, Shakespeare scholar Marjorie Garber explains that, in modern parlance, the word ‘academic’ is associated with social awkwardness, intellectual skepticism, and a jargonized
language that is perilously detached from public understanding. Academic is a word that “has come to mean artificial or impractical, merely theoretical...or excessively formal,” and “is not a term held in high repute in today’s world” (Garber, 2001, p. 112). The decline and fall of academic respectability should be cause for alarm in our historical moment, and unless scholars begin to seriously redress the flaws within academic communication, the relevance of the academy will continue to hang in the balance.

Section IV.2: The Conflicted Ethics of the Fool

Possessed by a spirit of pride, academics have by and large succumbed to the seductions of careerism at the expense of ‘the Other.’ Having willfully forgotten their audiences in their ambitious pursuit for ever greater means of personal power and success, occultic rhetoric has flourished to such extremes that academia has been devolving into a “Lucifer State” with an impeding “death date” (Melia & Ryder, 1983). One synecdoche of academia’s gradual expiration is featured in Roman Polanski’s 1999 film *The Ninth Gate*, an occult thriller about the power of hidden knowledge and the drama of secrecy within magical texts and societies. The Faustian character, Boris Balkan, figures as the central villain whose vice of pride is represented by many members of the academic community: “Balkan is described as the stereotypically arrogant professor,” an upper class aristocrat with delusions of grandeur whose claim to authority is established through undeniable self-righteousness and charismatic appeal (Gunn, 2005, p. 220). As the patron of many rare occult texts, Balkan funds a quest to uncover the secrets of *The Nine Gates*—a book supposedly written by the inspiration of the Devil—in order to benefit from the powers of Satanic knowledge within. By the climax of the film, Balkan’s expedition comes to an abrupt end when his body is engulfed by flames in a ritual that *backfires* on him. In an
under-worldly spectacle of death by self-immolation, Gunn uses Balkan’s demise as a synecdoche for the death of the academy: “just as Nussbaum would symbolically burn Butler at the scholastic stake, so Polanski sets Balkan ablaze;” (Gunn, 2005, p. 220). Balkan’s haughtiness and conceit are roundly punished in the film, reducing the professor to nothing more than a glorified fool.

But the notion of the academic fool is no minor footnote in *Modern Occult Rhetoric*. Rather, it forms the fundamental basis to understanding the ethics of occultic communication. In the beginning of his book, for instance, Gunn explains that the occult and the academy—portrayed through his metaphors as the “Great Magus” and the “Great Orator”—have died; in fact, “these deaths are one and the same” (Gunn, 2005, p. xxix). Such is the message reflected in Boris Balkan’s fall from greatness—the occultist/professor brought low. Just as the authority of the occult has been demoted to hocus-pocus nonsense, so has much of the increasingly cryptic academy been losing its social legitimacy, being reduced to foolishness: “academics are often regarded by outsiders as fools—intelligent, perhaps, but fools nonetheless” (Gunn, 2005, p. 231). Not even Gunn exempts himself from the implications of his critique, for according to him, *all academics are fools*, being committed to keeping secrets, to excluding others, to playing the prideful insider, and weaponizing knowledge rhetorically against our fellow outsiders. “[T]he figure who arose in the wake of the Great Orator and the Great Magus,” writes Gunn, “…is the Learned Fool, Parsifal, the Great Professor, number zero in the Rider-Waite tarot. The composite character of Boris Balkan in Polanski’s *The Ninth Gate* is, of course, this figure” (Gunn, 2005, pp. 230-231). The primary image of this figure can, in fact, be seen on the very cover of Gunn’s book, featuring the tarot card “The Fool” with Gunn’s own name replacing the
The Fool is a symbol which offers a peculiar scene: “In the Rider-Waite tarot deck, the Fool is depicted as a young white man in garish clothes, his worldly belongings tied in a bundle at the end of a stick. The Fool feels free, engaged in a new beginning, and because his head is in the clouds he does not see the cliff he is swiftly approaching. A tiny dog barks at his heels trying to warn him” (Gunn, 2005, p. 231). Also known as the Fool’s ‘yapping cur,’ the dog attempts to draw attention to the peril ahead.

The meaning of the symbol of the Fool, according to Gunn, is grounded in a critical view of the professoriate. With their heads in the clouds, academics march forward blithely unaware of the fact that a precipice awaits their path: “The scene depicted on the card is an allegory for the contemporary occultic enterprise of academics in the humanities” (Gunn, 2005, p. 231). Academics are fools—dreamers and stargazers secluded from the outside world, pondering matters unrelated to the practical problems of everyday life from behind the safe and insulating walls of the ivory tower. Gunn, a practicing academic, cannot help but identify with the Fool; but, in a stroke of insight, he also finds himself identifying with the yapping cur—the dog who yields a warning to the Fool. Gunn’s bark, so to speak, is directed to the inhabitants of the ivory tower, and can be translated roughly in this way:

...we academics should, in light of what happened to the great modern magi of the twentieth century, be expecting increasingly spectacular dramas of secrecy and publicity. ...we should be able to locate competing vocabularies concerning secret truths, and a professoriate at odds with itself, mobilized into elite, discrete, and competing cabals that are, in turn, organized around the challenging work of this or that scholarly magus. Worse, in light of the death of modern occultism as a coherent tradition, we should discover that the ‘ivory tower,’ the central metaphor of a clandestine academic enterprise, has been leveled. Amid the smoldering ruble of this centuries-old artifice, we should find the Great Professor unprotected, naked, divided against him- or herself, unable to control or signify his or her texts, and, perhaps, under attack. If the rhetoric emerging from the academy these days is any measure,
then these things are coming to pass—if they are not already a done deal. (Gunn, 2005, p. 234)

The collapse of the ivory tower reflects the demise of the arrogant professor, Boris Balkan, in Polaniski’s *The Ninth Gate*. It is not entirely impossible to say that academicians court the Devil with their smugness, their exclusivity, and their “sadistic” appetite for greater control and autonomy. The vice of the academy is the vice of pride, and Gunn appears in the form of a dog to issue a perennial warning: *pride is the root of all evil*. Take caution, barks Gunn, for where the occult is today, the academy will be tomorrow, if we do not turn from this voracious path of pride and power. “Balkan’s spectacular death, for example, can be understood as the price one pays for narcissism, for failing to realize the importance of the Other” (Gunn, 2005, p. 222). The deaths of the Great Orator and Great Magus—condensed within the iconic demise of Boris Balkan—results from narcissism, selfishness, and a disregard for others. The tightly controlled membership of the academic community, and the snobbishness of the scholarly elites, emerges from a sense of superiority or pride; but as Gunn seems to affirm in ancient wisdom, “Pride goeth before the fall” (Proverbs 16:18). So the prescription for resolving this little dilemma—indeed its only conceivable solution—is to embrace the virtue of *humility*. Humility is the diametric opposite of pride; a modest or low view of one’s own importance. And the first step for academics to begin practicing this virtue is by encouraging them to admit their own foolishness. “[W]e should embrace the fool as our patron saint” argues Gunn (2005, p. 236). It appears that the Fool has a double meaning: because of “the ambivalent symbolism of the Fool, …I think that there are good reasons to embrace the figure” (Gunn, 2005, p. 231).
The ambivalence of the Fool as the mascot of the academy can be characterized as the dialectic between two sub-classifications: *Calliclean* fools and *Socratic* fools. Gunn does not create nor define these categories, but for purposes of illuminating Gunn’s argument, I label these categories as such. **Calliclean** fools are the type of fools who portray the stereotypical professor, like Boris Balkan, by promoting a self-venerating disposition. This type of fool is representative of Callicles (c. 484 BC – 5th century BC), a character from within Plato’s dialogue *Gorgias* (named after Callicles’ teacher). Callicles was an ancient Athenian political philosopher who criticized democracy and equality because these concepts, he believed, were violations to the laws of nature. Instead, he advocated roughly for a ‘might-makes-right’ philosophy: “justice consists in the superior ruling over and having more than the inferior” (Plato, 1952, p. 271). Responding to Callicles is a fellow Athenian philosopher named Socrates (c. 470 BC – 399 BC) who astutely asks Callicles to define what he means by “the superior.” Callicles concludes that the idea of superiority is a status established or won by those who are deemed “the wiser.” Socrates checks his understanding:

_Soc._ Then according to you, one wise man may often be superior to ten thousand fools, and he ought to rule them, and they ought to be his subjects, and he ought to have more than they should. …

_Cal._ Yes; that is what I mean, and that is what I conceive to be natural justice—that the better and wiser should rule and have more than the inferior. (Plato, 1952, p. 274).

Such is the nature of the prideful academician who establishes a system of competition which sorts the weak from the strong. Reminiscent of Boris Balkan’s unwavering assurance in his own intellectual superiority, Callicles endorses a social system that privileges one class over another—the _wiser_ over the _foolish_. Not only does such competition foster the ultimate rule of a tyrant (e.g., an ‘alpha,’ dictator, or charismatic
leader), but it also cultivates the idea that procuring power is the only best way to avoid having to suffer an injustice. Resonances of Callicles’ thought are perpetuated throughout the contemporary university, especially among graduate students, where competition for authority is a fierce struggle. One example of the rivalry for intellectual dominance stems from an experience in Gunn’s graduate years where he recounts an embarrassing interaction between him and another advanced student:

...at the age of twenty-four my first taste of magickal warfare was in my maiden graduate seminar, a course on semiotic theory conducted by a highly regarded professor at the University of Minnesota. Much of the material we were reading (Peirce on “thirdness,” e.g.) was very difficult to understand. I recall delivering a presentation for class on the readings, and then voicing some difficulty with a concept. An advanced graduate student from the Department of Cultural Studies and Comparative Literature laughed aloud, and then smugly posed a rhetorical question to me: “Haven’t you read Lacan on desire?” I was embarrassed and felt stupid, having been taken to task by someone who knew a secret that I didn’t know, someone smarter, more in control of his language, someone who knew how to read better. (Gunn, 2005, p. 234)

This ruthless experience of being “laughed at” resulted in Gunn feeling “nauseous” and wanting to “throw up” (Gunn, 2005, p. 235). With such fervid determination to embarrass or subjugate others in order to demonstrate our own intellectual superiority, we reinforce a Calliclean system of competition that extends beyond graduate school and into the halls and hierarchies governing faculty and scholars. “I do think that the professoriate too easily forget how contentious and competitive our degree system can be on the inside—especially among graduate students—and how the word humiliates at each successive rung of progress toward certification” (Gunn, 2005, p. 235). It is perhaps this pattern of humiliation that most defines the vicious conditions of the academy, a pattern which continues to spread (as well as invite criticism). To humiliate someone is to make them feel ashamed and foolish by injuring their dignity and self-respect, especially publicly. Humiliation is motivated by one’s pride or sense of superiority, for it is only by humiliating
others that one is believed to procure power and ascend the social hierarchy. Such is the reason why academicians are often held in an ironic, low repute. For of all their self-styled importance, arrogant intellectuals are repeatedly vilified—effectively reduced to (Calliclean) foolishness. Despicable pretension and their increasing lack of empathy for others is a notorious hallmark of the Calliclean fool, and the irony of their superiority-complex is well recognized throughout history: “Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools…” as it were (Romans 1:22). Gunn suggests that in order to salvage what is left of modern academia from the proverbial rubble of a collapsing ivory tower, we must begin thinking of our foolishness in a new way—a way that does not result in one’s painful loss of pride (i.e., humiliation), but rather one in which it is organically reoriented (i.e., humility).

By this, Gunn means for us to imitate a humble fool rather than a prideful one—a fool which I designate after the West’s original philosopher, Socrates. Unlike the self-venerating disposition of the Calliclean fool, Socratic fools are in reference to those scholars who promote a self-depricating disposition. This type of fool is representative of Socrates, the antithesis of Callicles, who imbibed such a spirit of self-criticism that the famed Pythian prophetess—the Oracle of Delphi—declared Socrates to be “the wisest” of all. According to the Apology written by Socrates’ student, Plato, the Oracle expresses what would later become known as the “Socratic paradox,” for Socrates cannot understand how he—the great skeptic of his own knowledge—could ever possibly epitomize the height of human wisdom. As far as Socrates was concerned, the only thing he knew was that he knew nothing: “I know that I have no wisdom, small or great” (Plato, 1952, p. 202). Socrates then attempts to refute the Oracle by visiting with (and inquiring into the knowledge of)
fellow politicians, poets, and artisans, all of whom end up disappointing him, thus reaffirming the Oracle’s judgment. “I found that the men most in repute were all but the most foolish and that others less esteemed were really wiser and better” (Plato, 1952, p. 202). Contrary to the Calliclean fools who fashioned themselves as wise, Socratic fools are deemed wiser because of their humbling recognition of their own ignorance. “I am better off than he is,” asserts Socrates, “for he knows nothing, and thinks that he knows; I neither know nor think that I know” (Plato, 1952, p. 202). In a paradoxical turn, Socrates’ professed ignorance becomes emblematic of the highest wisdom, while those who would profess their own intelligence are soundly regarded as fools.⁶

The ambivalence or dialectical symbolism of the Fool (between Calliclean and Socratic) is figured in Polanski’s *The Ninth Gate*, where the arrogant professor Boris Balkan attempts to rival the anti-heroic book detective and protagonist, Dean Corso. Unlike Balkan who is absolutely convinced of his autonomous power to determine his own destiny, Corso instead puts his faith in others, resisting to trust only in himself. He is honest and respectful; in fact, he is “the only character who engages the community for companionship and for information” (Gunn, 2005, p. 222). Corso exemplifies the Socratic fool by the way he humbles his own intelligence, allowing himself to rely on the knowledge of others and to relinquish whatever sort of control he thinks he might have over his own fate. After Balkan’s infernal demise, the film ends with Corso’s humility being rewarded with unlocking the secret of *The Nine Gates*.

Corso is regarded not only because of his scholarly humility…but also because he seems to understand the fictive nature of his autonomy as an

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⁶ Callicles seems to assert that the binary relationship between *wiseman* and *fool* is one that is grounded in nature, like the relationship between predators and prey. But Socrates rejects this logic. Knowledge is not proper to some people more than others, as if wisdom and foolishness were identities to be born into. Instead, Socrates argues for the democratization of wisdom—in other words, that knowledge is common and therefore universal to all men.
individual. …The significant difference between Corso and the other characters is his sense of his own fallibility, his somewhat naïve trust in the characters he meets, and his distrust of the image and other forms of representation. Those who do not ‘get it’ are the Fools who have the strongest faith in their individual autonomy” (Gunn, 2005, pp. 222-223).

Corso is to Balkan what Socrates is to Callicles: unlike the Calliclean fool who consistently overestimates the extent of his/her knowledge, the Socratic fool instead recognizes the limitations of it. Corso’s triumph is linked to his humility, while Balkan’s downfall is linked to his pride. For this, Gunn appreciates the ambivalence of the Fool, thus calling for us to amend our Calliclean ways and to adopt a Socratic attitude. Without an awareness of our own ignorance, we merely labor under the illusion of possessed wisdom or superiority. Self-absorbed authority, ruthless competition, and a penchant for humiliating others is largely what summoned the undoing and fragmentation (or Balkan-ization) of the occult tradition (Gunn, 2005, p. 236). The academy’s resemblance to occultic practices—its tendency to employ secrecy and obfuscation as a rhetorical strategy against competing scholars and colleagues—is no doubt courting a similar destruction. The pretentious language of the Calliclean fool cleverly conceals and/or conveniently obscures the reality of their own ignorance. It is no surprise, therefore, that the Socratic method (a dialectical process named after Socrates’ habit of clarifying the truth through continued exchanges of inquiry and response) emerged as an effective alternative to the dominant Sophistic methods of rhetorical education, which, at the time, focused more on understanding the principles behind entertaining, impressive, and persuasive communication. The Socratic method was useful in wading through the mysticism, fallacies, and contradictions of sophistic speech—a style of speech which resembles if not strongly correlates with the meaning and function of occultic rhetoric. Even Socrates hints at the relationship between sophistry and occultic rhetoric when he declares, “I have
concealed nothing, I have dissembled nothing. And yet, I know that my plainness of speech makes them hate me” (Plato, 1952, p. 203).

Section IV.3: Illuminating Gunn's Contradiction

The above tension between plain speech and difficult speech is one which returns us to the problem of academic language. The impenetrably theoretical language of the academy can make outsiders of us all. Like reading the difficult works of psychoanalysis, for example, the presumed incapacity (or ‘ineffability’) of language to reach the things themselves—concomitantly producing the plague of occultic rhetoric we see in the academy—is largely what drives Gunn’s intellectual resignation: “we fools can’t help it” (Gunn, 2005, p. 234). And if such foolishness is inevitable—because ineffability implies the impossibility of knowledge—then the production of occultic rhetoric is also unavoidable, thus prompting Gunn’s command for “a certain degree of humility” (Gunn, 2005, p. 140). Gunn concludes, therefore, like the humbling approach of Socrates, that “the best one can do is dialectic, the method of using language against itself in order to transcend it” (Gunn, 2005, p. 34). But while this is a perfectly reasonable antidote that makes sense of Socrates’ everlasting relevance to (and classical enmity with) the Sophists of antiquity, there is only one problem: Gunn tacitly rejects the Socratic method. The Socratic method is a dialectical process we find in Plato’s writings that assumes a fixed view of language—the view which “presumes a meaningful mind-independent reality that language, however inaccurately, represents” (Gunn, 2005, p. 45). But Gunn rejects the fixity of language, and instead endorses the fluid view of language—the view that “language is contingent and never corresponds to the material world in a direct or transparent way” (Gunn, 2005, p. 45).
The crux of the dialectic between fixity and fluidity is one which argues over the relationship between truth and language. This places the academy at odds with the occult (and religion in general). While religious discourse generally assumes the correspondence between truth and language, academic discourse ignores this distinction. According to Gunn, truth and language are one; truth is whatever language makes it to be. Truth, in any fixed, absolute, transcendent, or independent sense does not exist; rather, truth is contingent, fluid, relative, and/or socially constructed. “The Platonic assumption… that there is something ‘out there’ beyond language…denies the fluidity of language that academics like Butler draw upon to ‘open up’ spaces of cultural resistance” (Gunn, 2005, p. 48). In other words, Gunn exchanges the correspondence theory of truth with a rhetorical one: We must “recognize the contingency of truth and the social construction of reality. …A rhetorical worldview, of course, stresses the fluid view of language mentioned previously—a sophistic understanding of meaning that Robert L. Scott termed ‘epistemic’ in the late 1960s. Regardless of one’s stance on ‘the real,’ the rhetorical view implies that nothing means outside human modes of representation and that ‘truth’ is merely the product of sentences” (Gunn, 2005, p. 49). The rhetorical position is largely an epistemic view of the world—the view that rhetoric creates knowledge. This idea is fundamental to Gunn’s project, and its impact can be clearly seen in the early pages of his book: “For Robert Icabod Ebenezer Alexander Perry Garcella Phillip Algernon Scott” (Gunn, 2005, p. v). Like Harry Potter’s spirited devotion to Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, Gunn’s book is dedicated entirely to his headmaster, Robert L. Scott, as further admitted in his acknowledgements: “The idea for a book on secrets was hatched in an ‘Introduction to Rhetorical Criticism’ course taught by my adviser, Robert L. Scott, in the very early hours
of a cold Minnesota winter day. Despite reading numerous error-filled essays, Professor Scott encouraged further study. He read, reread, and read yet again every chapter, tirelessly recommending changes and suggesting new areas of inquiry. I dedicate this book to Dr. Scott for his kindness, his caring, his parenting, and above all his humanity” (Gunn, 2005, p. xi).

As a loyal sorcerer’s apprentice, Gunn rejects the fixed view of language in favor of the fluid (epistemic) view, indebted to Scott (and Nietzsche, Derrida, Rorty, Wittgenstein, Brummett, and others). But this complicates Gunn’s call for a more Socratic, dialectical humility: *how can Gunn consistently endorse the Sophistic presuppositions of language while simultaneously advocating for a Socratic sense of humility?* The source of Socrates’ humility stemmed from his conviction in the existence of a transcendent truth or reality, and particularly his recognized futility of possessing it. His failure to grasp this higher knowledge rendered him admittedly ignorant, and this paradoxical knowledge of his own ignorance was the very perception that defined his claim to wisdom. The Socratic method, therefore, is a natural outworking of these convictions, and so the Socratic dialectical process is one that depends on the presumption of transcendence—a presumption which Gunn explicitly rejects. How, then, can one hope to preserve and/or encourage the imperative to humility (engendered by our ignorance of the Truth) if there is, at bottom, no Truth to be ignorant of in the first place? All truth is presumably *created* rather than *discovered*, according to Gunn. Thus, epistemic theory is incompatible with a dialectic ethic, thereby undermining the presumptions that made the Socratic fool possible. This does not mean that humbling the academy is wrong or an undesirable prospect. In fact, it is one that should be celebrated. Gunn offers a timely analysis into the unfortunate
state of contemporary academic language, and he should certainly be applauded for his call to humility—a call which is undoubtedly needed in our climate of intellectual pride and competition. But it does raise the question of how a fluid view of language—a self-undermining view which regards truth and morality as contingent and epistemic byproducts of sentences—can provide the foundation necessary for compelling us toward an ethic of humility.

Gunn’s conundrum is that he identifies with the Sophists, but envies Socrates. The irony is palpable. Gunn devotes approximately three-hundred pages spilling ink against the idea of universals, but concludes his book with a call to humility—a moral (i.e., universal) admonition. Gunn proudly owns an epistemology of morality while denying the ontology of morality. His rejection of transcendence (or of universals) is principally a rejection of realism, the idea that language is a bridge to the noumenal world, most aptly exemplified through Plato’s Theory of Forms. Realism contends that “universals, numbers, and/or propositions exist objectively, apart from the human mind and distinct from any material or physical features of the world” (Feser, 2008, p. 41). Without universals, Gunn is effectively an exponent of nominalism, the alternative view that denies the reality of universals, thus reducing language to a “body of fictions convenient for grappling with transitory phenomena” (Weaver, 1948, p. 150). Nominalism (which stems from the Latin nomen meaning ‘name’) posits that universals are not real, but “are only general names, words we apply to many things” (Feser, 2008, p. 44). In his Ideas Have Consequences (1948), the rhetorical scholar Richard Weaver traces the contemporary, fluid view of language (espoused by the “Semanticists”) to the Medieval period, where its best articulation emerged from William of Occam, the father of nominalism: “one of the first
major steps in the direction of modern skepticism came through the victory of Occam over Aquinas” where “ontological referents were abandoned in favor of pragmatic significations” (Weaver, 1948, p. 150). Flowing from Occam to Bacon to Hobbes and now to the semanticists, “ideas become psychological figments, and words become useful signs” (Weaver, 1948, p. 151). The semantic, fluid view of language, according to Weaver, is an “extreme outgrowth of nominalism” which is inspired from the felt irreconcilability between the perpetually changing particularities of the world and the eternally fixed universals of the word.

Given Gunn’s nominalist assumptions, the call to humility is not grounded in the idea of a transcendent ‘Good,’ but rather in his own arbitrations—which is to say, like a good occultist, his own charismatic authority. There is nothing within our descriptions of language, Sophistic or otherwise, that “commands” our humility, for this commits the fallacy of reification. Humility must be grounded in a transcendent source. Instead of admitting his ignorance of the knowledge of the Good, like the humble Socrates did, Gunn ironically asserts his knowledge that there is no Good! Clearly this approach (to remedy the pride of the academy) is not going to work. It would seem that the humility of the Socratic fool can best be secured through practicing the Socratic dialectic. This, in fact, is the recommendation of Richard Weaver who argues that the “Socratic dialectic” links “reason” with “the science of naming” (Weaver, 1948, p. 167). This relationship can be seen in the word nomenclature (Latin for name-calling) which finds itself naturally related to such concepts as technical terminology, specialist vocabulary, shoptalk, and jargon, the concepts of which result from humanity’s dialectical ability to reason together and to strive
for increasing precision and specificity from within given disciplines of knowledge.

Weaver writes,

> Dialectic comes to our aid as a method by which, after our assumptions have been made, we can put our house in order. I am certain that this is why Plato in the *Cratylus* calls the giver of names a lawgiver (νομοθέτης); …Plato sees here that name-giving and lawgiving are related means of effecting order. Actually stable laws require a stable vocabulary, for a principal part of every judicial process is definition, or decision about the correct name of an action. Thus the magistrates of a state have a duty to see that names are not irresponsibly changed. (Weaver, 1948, p. 168)

Gunn, however, rejects this proposal. “The best we can do is dialectic… But not just any dialectic—certainly not Plato’s—will do” (Gunn, 2005, p. 34). How can Gunn hope to defend a spirit of humility by dispensing with the very Fool we are expected to emulate? It seems that Gunn’s idea of dialectic is one that concerns the rivalry between “privileged vocabularies” (Gunn, 2005, p. 34), which is not really dialectic at all, but rather a recipe for “eristic.” Eristic, which means *seeking victory in argument*, was the Sophistic art of discourse that promoted the aim of ‘winning debates’ over the aim of ‘discovering truth.’ While the end of dialectic is geared toward the search for truth, eristic on the other hand regards truth as an expedient element of persuasion. Truth is not necessary or integral (and sometimes a nuisance) to the end of eristic, suggesting that the deliberate use of false or fallacious reasoning is justifiable so long as it enhances one’s success in debate. Such is the nature of occultic rhetoric which also attempts to persuade and manipulate others by means of difficult or obscure (secret) languages, the result of which necessarily manifests in the drama of in-group/out-group conflict. No surprise, then, that occultic rhetoric would be couched in terms of eristic debate or competition—the struggle in language where vocabularies are interfering with each other, competing to win for favor and cultural authority, thus prompting “the creation of new metaphors and the destruction of old, ‘dead’
ones” (Gunn, 2005, pp. 45-46). Eristic sets the stage for rhetorical and political rivalry between two or more ‘language games’ vying for prominence and social legitimacy. “The possibility of creating language for new meanings necessarily involves the occultist-poet in a political process insofar as his or her vocabulary is to replace another” (Gunn, 2005, p. 46).

Gunn’s diagnosis of the rhetorical landscape is not exactly inaccurate, however. The world of occultic rhetoric is indeed red in tooth and claw—it carries homologies that can be more or less described as Darwinian or Malthusian (or, perhaps, even capitalistic). The eristic conditions of occultic rhetoric bespeak the struggle for existence between competing vocabularies and definitions, all of which seek to exert their dominance over the currency of thought, and assume official primacy. This cutthroat environment constitutes the unfolding drama of secrecy taking place within the academy: a scene concerned with the preservation of favored vocabularies in the struggle for acceptance, privilege, and officialization. As a socialist, Gunn blames capitalism for the wild production of occultic rhetoric, for capitalism best reflects the conditions of competition that occur within nature as well as the marketplace. He writes,

> there is immense pressure on us academics to popularize our work and to justify our existence, and consequently an intense desire to thicken our prose and to create the conditions that require our interpretive expertise and thereby guarantee our survival. In short, we are encouraged to be snotty. Our contemporary academic occultic is the ironic response to that globalizing corporate machine that accuses us of producing mere gibberish, “empty rhetoric.” As our jobs become less plentiful and tenure goes the way of the dodo, as resources become more scarce and we are made to compete for a sense of security, the pressure to produce the contentious, argumentative Blue-Meanie Magus, or in the argot of graduate students, the “theory Nazi,” is increasing. (Gunn, 2005, p. 235)

The modern magician or academician is caught within a fierce “struggle for authority and recognition,” bound within the hierarchy of intellectual celebrities that Gunn
terms “the current star system of the academy.” He expounds, “We academics in the humanities are currently mired in a genius-virtuoso, superstar model of intellectual authority that has emerged in the wake of ‘Truth’ and the abandonment of absolutes. Understanding the relevance of the authority of the modern magus only requires one to replace the role of supernatural truth with this or that notion of post-truth ineffability that is so central to the project of the posts (e.g., poststructuralism, postmodernism, and so on)” (Gunn, 2005, p. 118). In other words, the eclipse of absolute truth has rendered us in a Darwinian-like struggle where only the fittest will survive if only we have the nerve, the wit, and the brute strength to seize it. Such is the nature of a Calliclean environment which fosters the tyranny of the strong and superior over the weak and inferior. To put it more simply, with the rise of nominalism over realism, and eristic over dialectic, the academy has gradually toggled away from the pursuit of absolute truth in exchange now for the pursuit of absolute power. Power is the idol of the postmodern academy; it constitutes the very epicenter of critical discourse that mobilizes much of the contemporary political concerns over a spectrum of new, fashionable controversies ranging from social justice and white privilege to queer studies and intersectional feminism. Our obsession with power has cultivated an academy that is nothing short of a “sadistic” Machiavellianism that takes pleasure in humiliating others.

The power to control the channels of knowledge implicitly points to the power of secrecy, for secrecy entails the role of gatekeeper or strategic control over the flow of information, in order to further manage, by extension, the (re)formation of the class-struggle between insider and outsider groups. Occultic rhetoric serves an ideological function, and its practices are learned by example from the so-called ‘academic star
system.’ Graduate students, for instance, would not be learning “how to spar and demean with secret vocabularies” if they were not watching “black-caped magi posture, argue, and stab backs at conferences and conventions” in the first place (Gunn, 2005, p. 235). The Darwinian struggle to survive the hostile milieu of the academy overlaps with the presuppositions of the Calliclean Fool—the proclivity of the stronger or “the wiser” to compete and backstab, to win at any cost, to deny the objectivity of truth, to humiliate and dominate, to secure power and autonomy, and to rule over the weaker and inferior. Certainly the great irony of all of this is Gunn’s Dawkinsian conviction that nothing—no truth or moral transcendence of any sort—exists beyond the drama of “natural justice” governing the intellectual community. And yet, amidst this rhetorical savagery, Gunn appeals for a dose of Socratic virtue that makes no sense from within a strictly Calliclean worldview. He must necessarily borrow from the Platonic universe in order to comfort a Sophistic one. Gunn advocates for the ambivalent symbolism of the Fool, but seems suspiciously unaware of the fact that the two symbols are mutually incompatible with each other. Gunn is not the first academician whose philosophy is in tension with his ethics. Gunn is the Richard Dawkins⁷ of the rhetoric department who is “not content to derive his ethics from the scriptures of his upbringing,” but still tries to harmonize the humility or “super niceness” of Christ with a Darwinian (or in this case, Calliclean) perspective (Hahn & Wiker, 2008, p. 128).

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⁷ While Gunn and Dawkins do share a common rejection of the Christian faith, including a desperate attempt to salvage a sense of humility without appealing to a transcendent source, Gunn is clearly a postmodernist scholar disenchanted by any notion of absolute truth and meaning. Dawkins, on the other hand, remains a strict modernist thinker given his defense of the truth-claims of atheism and evolutionary theory, and his hostility for postmodernists who distort the findings of science by means of obscure speech and writing (Dawkins, 1998).
The Slavic scholar Ewa Thompson put the irony in a similar way, citing the common postmodernists’ anti-Darwinian “sympathy toward the voiceless peoples whose history has been obliterated by the victorious imperial voices” (Thompson, 2003, p. 195). Postmodernists seek to subvert the triumph of the colonizers through deconstructionism and postcolonial discourse which attempts to delegitimize the version of events as told from the perspective of the strong and powerful, and to reclaim the lost narratives of the oppressed and marginalized. Curiously, however, such a project presumes an essentialist ethics—that the domination of the conquerors was evil or wrong in the absolute sense; that the Darwinian triumph of the strong over the weak violates a universal, objective, and natural moral law and not merely an advantageous, socially constructed one. But the postmodernists, being nominalists and existentialists, have already given up on the reality of essences and universals. What, then, are the grounds for their moral outrage from a non-essentialist perspective? “Any kind of sympathy for the weak and the defeated is essentialist in nature, for it is grounded in a hierarchy of values and goes against the Darwinian thesis that the fittest should and must win” (Thompson, 2003, p. 196). Without these values being grounded in some kind of essence, final cause, or universal, we are merely left with relativized desires and subjective preferences, guided by nothing more than “heredity, environment, luck”—the very Darwinian conditions that reduce our desires to a game of power and competition, all of which are vying for fulfillment and prominence, and yet none of which can satisfy instructing “what desires we ought to have,” argues philosopher Edward Feser. Hence the irony of postmodernist ethics: all of morality “falls apart if we deny that anything has a final cause or that there are forms, essences, or natures
in the Aristotelian sense; and of course [the nominalist] denies just this” (Feser, 2008, pp. 139-140).

Despite this peculiar irony, however, Gunn’s attentiveness to humility is one which still deserves academic reflection and appreciation, even if it is incompatible with a strictly Sophistic, rhetorical ontology. The virtue of humility is the solution—or great secret—to restoring the academy to its former glory. He writes, “…if the demise of the Great Modern Magus provides a lesson for us academics, it must be that of recognizing our ignorance and celebrating the virtue of humility” (Gunn, 2005, p. 235). Humility is Gunn’s central clarion call—a Levinasian reminder for us to be our brother’s keeper and respond to the face of the excluded other. He repeats: “…the rhetorical lesson to be learned from the Great Magi of modernity is an ethical one, a lesson that has less to do with the inevitable alterity of language use (our ontological plight) and more to do with the ways in which we ignore or forget those whom we exclude or discipline with our words in here, in the academy” (Gunn, 2005, p. 234). Beyond this general (golden) rule, however, Gunn does not expound on what a humble application of occultic rhetoric should look like. His book merely ends on a cryptic, Derridean rumination, and thus leaves the reader “longing for an extended discussion of this topic,” complains Kevin Meyer. Gunn “problematizes academic language without offering solutions or suggesting approaches to balance better the ability of academic discourse to include as well as exclude audiences. Greater attention to strategies for making the language of the academy more accessible to those within as well as those outside its walls would strengthen Gunn’s argument” (Meyer, 2007, p. 119). Devoid of any strategies to temper the incline of obfuscation in the academy, this project now focuses on one scholar who can demystify the complex nature of secret languages,
and illuminate some helpful principles that can foster a more virtuous practice of occultic rhetoric.

Section IV.4: Bok Renovates the Foundations

The first step in establishing an ethics of occultic rhetoric must begin primarily by dispensing with a variety of Sophistic presuppositions about language. Gunn advances such a philosophy, making it difficult to construct a moral practice of occultic rhetoric. Evidence of Gunn’s sophistic tendencies can be verified by his preoccupation with speech as a kind of “craft” that coordinates social action. In his latest book *Speech Craft* (2018), Gunn explores the linkages between rhetoric and magic, a relationship that hinges on the idea that language can control us in a manner commensurable to our control over it. Awareness of this relationship between rhetoric and magic goes as far back as ancient Greece, where some of the most influential sophists of the day sought to teach that the true power of language did not rest in the truth of our words, but rather the *effectiveness* of our word choice. Words carry power, and the right word at the right time arranged in the right way was believed by sophists to unlock the secret to persuasion. Rather than emphasize the pursuit of truth and logic, the sophistic study of the art of rhetoric depended on one’s mastery over “rhythmic…epideictic” prose, an “oppressive social force” whereby “one is hypnotized by the beautiful words repeating themselves forever, and constrained in thought by compositional principles that lend themselves more to the copious stacking-up of equivalent phrases than to reasoned inquiry” (Walker, 2000, p. 12). One of the most prominent teachers of this rhetorical philosophy was the famed sophist Gorgias (483-375 BC) who sought to privilege the power of *pathos over logos*. Gorgias and his fellow “masters of rhetoric, who wanted to claim this power for themselves,” sought “the irrational
influence of poetry” by making emotions central to their rhetorical theory (De Romilly, 1975, pp. 6-7). This “hypnotic ‘witchcraft’ of poetry” reflects a kind of occultic rhetoric that “functions as a medium for both the exercise and contestation of authority and social power” (Walker, 2000, p. 12-13).

Much of Gorgias’ thoughts on the emotional effects of magical or poetic language play into Gunn’s theory of occultic rhetoric: in fact, Gorgias is given primary treatment in his introduction to the art of public speaking (Gunn, 2018, pp. 3, 5). Gunn also argues that “public speaking is mostly about feelings” (Gunn, 2018, pp. 70-71), a claim undoubtedly inspired by the Gorgian emphasis on emotion or audience disposition. “Gorgias can be regarded as having sought to create an elevated oratorical style for formal speech, distinct from conversational language, though at the risk of drawing attention away from what he was saying to how he was saying it,” writes the classicist George Alexander Kennedy. The Gorgianic figures of rhetoric, such as “homoeoteleuton (rhyme at the ends of successive phrases) or parison (equal lengths of phrases)” are but a few of the tropes that “probably should be regarded as the devices by which Gorgias sought to work his magic. They are the techniques that stir the passions or obsess the mind and perhaps draw the listener to unconscious agreement with the speaker” (Kennedy, 1999, p. 35). Many consider Gorgias as more a magician or clever rhetorician than a philosopher, but others have challenged this impression. Speculations about Gorgias’ philosophy mirror the principles and presuppositions undergirding Gunn’s investigations into ineffability, paradox, and the limitations of human knowledge and expression. In his famous treatise On the Nonexistent, or On Nature, “Gorgias proposes that nothing exists, that even if anything does exist it is
inapprehensible by human beings, and even [if] it were apprehensible it would be impossible for one person to communicate knowledge to another” (Kennedy, 1999, p. 36).

The logic of this argument seems to reflect the major assumption underlying Gunn’s theory of occultic rhetoric, namely that “our experience of the world—what we see, hear, touch, smell, taste, and feel—is fundamentally ineffable” (Gunn, 2005, pp. xxi-xxii). Similar to Gunn’s “axiom” that communication will always fail to capture or convey “the sensory manifold of human experience” (Gunn, 2005, pp. xxii), Gorgias echoes that “since the truth cannot be known rationally, the function of an orator is not logical demonstration so much as emotional presentation that will stir the audience’s will to believe. Thus, the power of persuasion involves deceiving ‘the emotional and mental state of listeners by artificially stimulating sensory reactions through words’” (Kennedy, 1999, p. 36). Gunn and Gorgias share a common understanding of language and its powers, both of which depend on a particular understanding of truth: that it is inapprehensible, incommunicable, or even, more simply, inexistent. It is this emphasis on our inaccessibility to the truth that shapes much of the expression and practice of occultic rhetoric in the 21st century academy. Only by confronting the sophistic presuppositions of language can we then move to construct a new foundation necessary for supporting a formal ethics of occultic rhetoric, one that reclaims the importance of truth and restores our accessibility to it.

Gunn’s preoccupation with the subject of truth, and the failure of language to convey it, constitutes arguably the major foundation of his philosophy of rhetoric. This principle, which he terms ineffability, is the product of his conviction that language is inadequate as a means of communicating meaning. To ‘communicate the incommunicable’
or ‘describe the indescribable’ is the “rhetorical antinomy” at the root of Gunn’s theory of language, for he believes that we all engage in the paradoxical task of using effable symbols to point to ineffable referents. Since all referents are presumably ineffable, language is only ever a subjective approximation for describing human experience. Many theological scholars have already responded to these kinds of objections against the adequacy of language. For example, whereas Gunn advances the epistemic claim that truth is merely the product of sentences, the theologian Douglas Blount points to the reality that sentences, while diverse, can certainly share “common meanings,” i.e., propositions (Blount, 2013, p. 48). For instance, “I think therefore I am” and “Cogito ergo sum” are obviously different sentences, but betoken the same proposition. “John is a bachelor” and “John is an unmarried man” is another example that shares a common proposition between two different sentences. Propositions exist objectively and universally, “distinct from the material world” and “independent of any mind,” because, as the philosopher Edward Feser points out, people down from ancient history to the present day can communicate and contemplate “exactly the same thing[s],” despite the differing varieties of grammar that we use to convey them (Feser, 2008, p. 41). The principle of ineffability, which depends on the rejection of universals, assumes that truth does not exist out there and that “sentences, not propositions, are the fundamental bearers of truth” (Blount, 2013, p. 52). But these presumptions about truth and the adequacy of language deserve to be further unpacked if we are to understand how to seriously consider the subject of occultic rhetoric from within an ethical framework.

In her book Lying, Sissela Bok never uses the word ‘ineffability’ in her analysis of truth, but she certainly is attuned to its complexity: “The truth has seemed so obviously
unattainable to some as to cause them to despair of human communication in general. They see so many barriers to prevent us from obtaining truthful knowledge, let alone communicating it; so many pitfalls in conveying what we mean” (Bok, 1999, p. 4). This common concern over the pitfalls and problems of obtaining truthful knowledge has resulted in many academicians, like Gunn, to declare the inadequacy of communication because of our inaccessibility to (or, simply, the nonexistence of) truth. Gunn denies truth, it seems, because of an unrealized Cartesian impulse to conflate knowledge with certainty. In other words, Gunn infers from the elusiveness of certainty that all truth is therefore inaccessible (if it exists at all). But certainty need not be a necessary precondition for an ethics of lying (or, in this case, occultic rhetoric). According to Bok, “The whole truth is out of reach,” she concedes. “But this fact has very little to do with our choices about whether to lie or to speak honestly, about what to say and what to hold back” (Bok, 1999, p. 4). Bok offers a more balanced way to understand the concept of truth, and provides a sturdier foundation from which to construct an ethics of occultic communication. The daunting topic of truth, she writes, is nothing short of a perplexing discourse—“no concept intimidates and yet draws thinkers so powerfully. From the beginnings of human speculation about the world, the questions of what truth is and whether we can attain it have loomed large. Every philosopher has had to grapple with them” (Bok, 1999, p. 5). Gunn is certainly not the first to doubt the adequacy of language in conveying truth; Bok points to ancient precedents such as the Heraclitean disciple, Cratylus, a contemporary of Socrates who “refused discussion of any kind” because “words in any conversation would be changing and uncertain”; and the great skeptic, Pyrrho, “denied that anything could be
known and concluded that nothing could therefore be said to be honorable or dishonorable, just or unjust” (Bok, 1999, p. 9).

A revival of such doubts have evidently taken over much of the modern academy. Gunn’s principle of ineffability is likely inspired by the French deconstructionist philosopher Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) whose concept of *di†érance* held that philosophy, and language in general, is characterized by an “absence” (not “presence”) of meaning. The absence of meaning in language is wrought by a perceived gap between signifier and signified. But as the hermeneutician Grant R. Osborne points out, the question behind the deconstructive logic of ineffability is not whether this gap exists, but whether this gap is insurmountable. Derrida certainly thought so, and Gunn’s principle of ineffability also seems to parallel this assumption. But the key to bridging this gap, Osborne argues, is “context.” Equipped with context, “the reader has an ethical responsibility to consider the intended meaning of a text.” But if the deconstructionist critics are correct in their dictum that *there is nothing outside the text* and that absolute knowledge or meaning is “an impossible dream,” then “the ethical aspect would not be quite so strong a case” (Osborne, 2006, p. 487). This claim is significant, and may be cause for concern: Osborne hints at how the perceived impossibility of certainty or absolute meaning tends to attenuate our investigations into the moral aspects of language; that is, epistemology takes precedence over ethics. Without our knowledge of the whole truth, it seems, there is little impetus to explore how we ought to use it in our dealings with others. But Bok considers this a problem: our “impatience” to possess the whole truth immobilizes ethical reflection. “This impatience helps to explain why the contemporary debate about deception is so barren. Paradoxically, the reluctance to come to grips with deception can stem from an
exalted and all-absorbing preoccupation with truth” (Bok, 1999, p. 5). In other words, the underdevelopment of an ethics of occultic rhetoric can be attributed to the fixation with epistemological certainty. This also explains Kevin Meyer’s vexation with Gunn’s nebulous call for humility: crippled by the presumption that truth is either inaccessible or nonexistent, the growth of an ethics is stunted.

Evidence of this ethical impediment can be seen throughout Gunn’s work, particularly in his criticism of scholars who rebuke the use of unwieldy prose. Take, for example, his report on the impasse between Martha Nussbaum and Judith Butler: appealing once again to the principle of ineffability, Gunn discounts Nussbaum’s call for a more ethical standard of communication. He argues, “One problem with Nussbaum’s account, of course, is that she fails to recognize that mystery and mystification are inevitable consequences of the rhetorical invention spawned by the ubiquitous confrontation with ineffability, consequences that are aptly and humorously caricatured in Kenneth Burke’s modern version of the Tower of Babel as the cacophonous and mundane ‘human barnyard,’ with each of its critters chattering and goading each other into hierarchies” (Gunn, 2005, p. 52). Again, the principle of ineffability seemingly defends obscurity; it undermines the call for a humbler rhetorical style. By denying our access to absolute truth or meaning, the principle of ineffability serves instead to excuse Butler’s obfuscation rather than hold it morally accountable.

The same goes for Gunn’s defense of Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytic prose from critics such as Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont. “Because Sokal and Bricmont lack any understanding of rhetoric, their failure to acknowledge the psychoanalytic processes of invention and interpretation in respect to ineffability (occult poetics) makes them the
unwitting victims of their own lettered thefts” (Gunn, 2005, p. 140). In other words, Sokal and Bricmont are prevented from establishing an ethics of clarity and accuracy because, by its very nature, the language of psychoanalysis is necessarily complex, ambiguous, and translinguistic (i.e., ineffable). The principle of ineffability justifies the use of occultic prose, thereby neutralizing the development of a mature or formal ethics of secrecy and lying. This confirms what Bok (and Osborne) hinted at earlier: “to the extent that one has radical doubts about the reliability of all knowledge, to that extent the moral aspects…may lose importance” (Bok, 1999, p. 10). Gunn’s principle of ineffability, which prioritizes the impossible possession of knowledge, engenders the trivialization of morality—his various claims to humility notwithstanding. The natural flow of such logic can be summarized as: “since we can never know the truth or falsity of anything anyway, it does not matter whether or not we lie when we have a good reason for doing so” (Bok, 1999, p. 12).

Bok is the real yapping cur. The principle of ineffability paralyzes the relationship between rhetoric and ethics because it negates the existence and/or accessibility to universal truth, the removal of which reduces language to a mere game for procuring power and exerting it over others. In short, humility cannot flourish under the consequences of ineffability. And yet one of the most spurious defenses of occultic rhetoric comes from Gunn’s own suggestion that it does not problematize academic language, but rather resolves it. (Cue the record skip!). At this point, Gunn’s apologetics for ineffability takes an unprecedented turn toward a glorious, self-sabotaging inconsistency, as this claim stands in direct conflict to everything he has so far been explaining throughout his whole book. Contrary to the impression that scholars “struggle over authority and ‘secret’ meaning,” we are instead expected to believe that occultic rhetoric is “intentionally designed” to
“achieve the opposite effect” (Gunn, 2005, p. 140). Are we now to discover, after all, that occultic rhetoric is actually an agent not of struggle and warfare, but of peace and harmony? Presumably exemplified by Jacques Lacan, the difficulty of his writings were “deliberately designed to ‘jolt’ readers out of ‘conceptual ruts.’” One of those ruts is the tendency to put faith in an authoritative expert—Lacan as a magus—instead of in our own ability to think though [sic] ideas or pursue ‘the truth.’ In other words, unlike Crowley’s, Lacan’s hermeneutic is one of anti or un-authority to prevent the subjection and hierarchy of an occultic star system” (Gunn, 2005, p. 141). This spirited defense of Lacanian rhetoric is an attempt to dismantle the barbs of Sokal and Bricmont, but it fails to avoid the charge of self-contradiction.

First, suggesting that Lacanian rhetoric is designed to achieve the opposite effect of securing power is an attempt on Gunn’s part to accomplish the very thing he claims is impossible: to get at the absolute meaning of a text. There is no absolute truth or meaning according to Gunn’s own principles, and yet he speaks of the pursuit of truth and the intended meaning behind Lacan’s rhetoric. Contradiction and other violations of logic are not uncommon within deconstructionist discourse (and probably explains the postmodernists’ general intolerance of logic altogether). Even Derrida “breaks his own rule when he accuses John Searle of ‘avoiding reading me and trying to understand’” (Osborne, 2006, p. 487). In similar fashion, Gunn also engages in self-admitted “hypocrisy” (Gunn, 2005, p. 235), and stubbornly fails to recognize that Lacan’s language contributes to the very problems that Sokal and Bricmont diagnose. Contrary to the charge that “they have succumbed to the fetish of esoteric language” (Gunn, 2005, p. 141), it is Gunn who startlingly admits that he is the one who has succumbed to it (Gunn, 2005, p. xxix). In
addition to being self-defeating, one cannot help but wonder: did not Helena Blavatsky explicitly centralize her authority by the exact same means that Lacan is said to democratize his own? How are outsiders supposed to know when precisely Gunn’s counter-argument applies? One would be wise in suspecting Gunn to not spare any effort in attacking his enemies with ruthless clarity, logic, and precision, but then appeal to the principle of ineffability whenever critics fire back with accusations of obscurity and incomprehensibility. It would make for a fine rhetorical strategy. After all, deferring to misunderstanding is the ubiquitous ‘rescuing-device’ of occultic rhetoric. The Bogdanov brothers from earlier claimed to have been misunderstood; the exponents of feminist glaciology also claimed to have been misunderstood. “You can pretty much defend any piece of postmodernist tripe by saying that it was ‘misunderstood’” (Coyne, 2016). The true lesson to be learned from Sokal and Bricmont’s critique is that, had Lacan written well, they would not have misunderstood him.

Still, this critique should not lead to the all-too-hasty generalization that all forms of rhetorical obscurity are unethical. This is where Bok proves more useful than Gunn, because she provides the right measure of nuance to texture our understanding of secrecy and lying, the principles of which directly translate and contribute to the formation of an ethics of occultic rhetoric. Before engaging in a systematic analysis of the ethics and various forms of rhetorical obscurity, it is first important to understand that the major problem with Gunn’s philosophy of language is the Sophistic denial of truth assumed within his principle of ineffability—a verdict reached out of impatience over our inability to grasp absolute certainty, omniscience, or the ‘whole truth.’ Having allowed the limitations of knowledge to disable our assumption that truth is accessible, that the world
is intelligible, or that the domain of human experience is effable, we have essentially sabotaged any chance of contemplating ethical questions about the good, the right, and the moral. In short, the problem with a Sophistic understanding of truth is that it suffers from an inability to separate the epistemological concept of truth from the ethical concept of truthfulness. This unfortunate conflation is a foundational error, and “[until] the differences are seen, and the areas of overlap and confusion spotlighted, little progress can be made in coping with the moral quandaries of lying,” writes Bok (1999, p. 6). The shades of secrecy and lying in the art of occultic rhetoric as practiced within the contemporary academy is a matter of ethical importance, and it begins primarily with recognizing the fact that “truth and truthfulness are not identical, any more than falsity and falsehood” (Bok, 1999, p. 6). From Cratylus and Pyrrho in the ancient world, to Nietzsche and Gunn in the modern world, the pattern of this confusion is perpetuated and in need of correction. In order to renovate the Sophistic foundations of occultic rhetoric, the relationship between ethics and epistemology must be reformed and brought back into balance. Otherwise, ethics will remain impoverished.

Even after the two domains of the ethical and the epistemological are set apart, some argue that the latter should have priority. It is useless to be overly concerned with truthfulness, they claim, so long as one cannot know whether human beings are capable of knowing and conveying the truth in the first place. Such a claim, if taken seriously, would obviously make the study of truth-telling and deception seem pointless and flat. Once again, the exalted and all-absorbing preoccupation with ‘truth’ then comes to nourish the reluctance to confront falsehood. …For these radical skeptics, just as for those who believe that complete and absolute truth can be theirs, ethical matters of truth-telling and deception melt into insignificance by comparison with the illumination of truth and the dark void of its absence. As a result, both groups largely ignore the distinctions between truthfulness and falsehood in their intense quest for certainty regarding truth. (Bok, 1999, p. 9)

As a result of eclipsing the moral domain of choice and action with the much vaster epistemological domain of truth and knowledge, philosophers fail to see the value in
studying the ethics of deception. Devoid of any ability to determine truth from falsehood, it is no surprise to find, therefore, that “every man [does] that which [is] right in his own eyes” (Judges 21:25). Like a country without a king, moral duties and values are consequently relativized, and academicians then “make up their own rules,” writes Bok. “They think up their own excuses and evaluate their own arguments” (Bok, 1999, p. 11), such as Gunn’s convenient defenses of Lacanian rhetoric as a hermeneutic that supposedly facilitates independent thinking, or how the Fool is a fitting abbreviation symbol for the virtue of humility. Moral relativism, it seems, is symptomatic of epistemological relativism. By dismissing the assumption of objectivity in epistemology, a Dostoevskian sort of logic may find application here: if truth does not exist, then everything is permitted.

Ethical relativism spawns from the rejection of objective truth. In fact, without truth, we eliminate the very basis that makes trust possible. Trust is a necessary component to the functioning of a healthy society, for all relationships depend on set patterns and expectations that form the basis of human character and credibility. In rhetoric, one’s credibility was reflected in one’s ethos—the persuasive appeal of a speaker’s ethical character—the foundation of which depends on the value of trustworthiness. Without being able to distinguish truth from falsity, the ethical idea of trust then loses all meaning, perpetuating once again the irrelevance of ethics. Bok is particularly attuned to the absurdities that incur from a world void of truth. She argues:

Imagine a society, no matter how ideal in other respects, where word and gesture could never be counted upon. Questions asked, answers given, information exchanged—all would be worthless. Were all statements randomly truthful or deception, action and choice would be undermined from the outset. There must be a minimal degree of trust in communication for language and action to be more than stabs in the dark. This is why some level of truthfulness has always been seen as essential to human society, no matter how deficient the observance of other moral principles. Even the devils themselves, as Samuel Johnson said, do not lie to one another, since the society of Hell could not subsist without truth.
any more than others. A society, then, whose members were unable to distinguish truthful messages from deceptive ones, would collapse. But even before such a general collapse, individual choice and survival would be imperiled. (Bok, 1999, pp. 18-19)

By rejecting the objectivity of truth, individual choice is incapacitated. The cost of epistemological skepticism, it seems, is ethical relativism. In fact, denying the possibility of knowledge (i.e., skepticism) foregrounds the parallel of denying the possibility of freedom (i.e., determinism). Denying the possibilities of knowledge and freedom circumvent the foundations for “reasonable choice,” writes Bok, thus committing skeptics and determinists to the aporia of relativism—being “cast about like a dry leaf in the wind” (Bok, 1999, p. 22). Religious scholars have marshaled similar critiques against relativism, such as Francis J. Beckwith and Greg Koukl who affirm that “When truth dies, all of its subspecies, such as ethics, perish with it. If truth can’t be known, then the concept of moral truth becomes incoherent. Ethics become relative…” (Beckwith & Koukl, 1998, p. 20). The suggestion that truth is unknowable or incommunicable undermines the possibility for an ethics of occultic rhetoric, if not ethics altogether. “Few go so far” with their doubts about truth, writes Bok, but Gunn is a determined skeptic. Unfortunately, what he does not seem to realize is that “Both skepticism and determinism have to be bracketed—set aside—if moral choice is to retain [its] significance” (Bok, 1999, p. 22). Contrary to the suggestion that ethics is compatible with the skeptical doctrine of ineffability, Bok insists on the reverse: that ethics or moral choice depends on a necessarily reasonable degree of knowledge (what Bok calls “truthfulness”). Truthfulness is an ethical prospect of knowledge that avoids the epistemological obsession with establishing absolute certainty. “The fact that the ‘whole truth’ can never be reached in its entirety should not, therefore, be a stumbling block in the much more limited inquiry into questions of truth-telling and
falsehood,” writes Bok. “It is possible to go beyond the notion that epistemology is somehow prior to ethics. The two nourish one another, but neither can claim priority” (Bok, 1999, p. 13).

Bok’s distinction between epistemological “truth” and ethical “truthfulness” is one that is endorsed by other scholars, such as the religious philosopher Douglas Groothuis who separates the existence of objective truth from the mastery of it: “It is one thing to claim that objective, absolute and universal truth exists. It is quite another to claim that one has mastered these objective, absolute and universal truths or that one has nothing more to learn and is in no need of correction. I will argue strenuously for the former claim but (not being omniscient) make no pretense to the latter” (Groothuis, 2000, p. 12). Nobody has a mastery of the truth, for this implies an omniscient sense of ‘whole truth’ which Bok admits is beyond human apprehensibility. Despite this epistemological challenge, we are nevertheless capable of defending a modest sense of knowledge which Bok calls ‘truthfulness.’ Such a distinction (between truth and truthfulness) would predictably find no audience among the postmodernists who, like Gunn, fret over the way scholars commonly weaponize the truth to humiliate and overpower others. According to the postmodernists, truth entails an “arrogant attitude or an unbending, irrational dogmatism” responsible for all the rhetorical obscurities and scholarly mistreatments that have ruthlessly engulfed modern academia. And so postmodernists have made it their mission to disconnect truth from language: “The only way to end the chaining of occult modes of invention is to let go of the need for a transcendental presence; trapped in our own symbolicity, there is no access to the outside” (Gunn, 2005, pp. 210-211). The postmodern turn to skepticism (and relativism), therefore, is a bid to stamp out the presumed source of
these conflicts. But this response, of course, is a flamboyant overcorrection to the sins of modernism.

Rather than perpetuate the postmodernists’ assumption that truth is corrosive to the virtue of humility, Groothuis offers a sobering rebuttal that showcases their compatibility: “In fact, it is precisely belief in a truth beyond one’s own thoughts and culture that allows one to be rebuffed and reconstructed by reality,” argues Groothuis. “We can, therefore, be realigned by the truth and with the truth. This nonnegotiable distinction should engender humility, not arrogance; a quest for reasonable certainty through dialogue, not dogmatism through mindless affirmation and denunciation” (Groothuis, 2000, p. 12). Far from Gunn’s suggestion that humility can only thrive under a skeptical, relativistic epistemology, Groothuis argues instead that humility is best secured through the possession of a *reasonable certainty*. The quest for a reasonable sense of knowledge reflects Bok’s ethical concept of ‘truthfulness’—a concept which is perfectly consistent with the art of rhetoric, particularly judicial rhetoric, where judges and juries in court proceedings act as an audience of “reasonable persons” who ascertain not the absoluteness or certainty of truth, but rather its *justifiability* (its ability to be placed beyond a *reasonable doubt*). Clearly the standard of reasonability in jurisprudence is not irreconcilable with the idea of humility. In fact, it restores our trust in the power of communication and our ability to make ethical judgments. Reasonability, not ineffability, is more conducive to the aims of justice, especially given how the burden of proof *humbles* our suspicions against the accused, for the necessity of proof always lies with the person who lays the charges. Bok’s principle of truthfulness, therefore, should serve as a better foundation for the ethics of language and occultic rhetoric, rather than Gunn’s principle of ineffability which instead fosters a kind
of intellectual vertigo. Whereas Gunn enforces a crippling skepticism that eliminates any grounds for humility to flourish, Bok (and Groothuis) restores our trust in the bond between rhetoric and ethics by effectively redirecting our skepticism to our mastery of the truth, not the existence of truth itself.

Section IV.5: Contingent and Necessary Causes

Having renovated the foundations of occultic rhetoric by reinstating a classical, essentialist ontology of language in place of a nominalistic, postmodern one, the challenge now is to focus on the areas of occultic rhetoric that pertain specifically to its ethical (rather than metaphysical) nature. How do we identify the ethical dimensions of occultic rhetoric? Such a task would no doubt require our locating those areas of occultic rhetoric that lend themselves to moral inquiry and evaluation, and separating them from those other areas which do not. In other words, we must identify and distinguish between its neutral and non-neutral elements. Starting first on the subject of its neutrality, occultic rhetoric shares in the neutral definition of secrecy. Occultus, meaning ‘hidden’ or ‘secret,’ tethers the idea of occultic rhetoric to the Bokian principle of neutrality, given how it serves ambivalent biases (for both the purposes of good and evil). Even Gunn is savvy to this insight when he points out that the occultic “study of secrets…did not exist until there was a need for secrecy” (Gunn, 2005, p. 9), and “a need to maintain one’s elite status” (Gunn, 2005, p. 171). The need for secrecy overlaps with the notion that jargonized language—language that hides or obscures—is a necessary staple of human discourse. We have a duty to conceal as much as we have a duty to reveal; thus, if Bok is correct in her conclusion that there exists a “need for secrecy” (Bok, 1989, p. 18), then the ethical nature of secrecy would no doubt
transfer over to the art and practice of occultic rhetoric itself. Occultic rhetoric is thus neutral, given the range of uses and secretive purposes to which it can be put.

At the same time, however, occultic rhetoric is not limited to secrecy alone, for it also encompasses the non-neutral domain of lying and dishonesty. Strategies of deceptive statements are among the functions of occultic rhetoric; therefore, in cases such as these, occultic rhetoric is not neutral, but also prima facie unethical: “Whereas I take lying to be prima facie wrong, with a negative presumption against it from the outset, secrecy need not be” (Bok, 1989, p. xv). This conceptual versatility complicates the nature of occultic rhetoric, for “while all deception requires secrecy, all secrecy is not meant to deceive” (Bok, 1989, p. 7). Secrecy is a neutral concept; truth is a neutral concept; communication is a neutral concept. Neutrality applies when concepts fulfill a need that can be used to serve a range of moral (and immoral) purposes. But lying, according to Bok, is not neutral; it is an act which already assumes an “initial evaluative stance” (Bok, 1989, p. 9). Whereas truth itself is neutral, truth-telling and lying are morally biased from the outset. Truth is a need; but need we always tell the truth? Secrecy is a need (or ‘good’) with the potential for abuse; but lying on the other hand seems to already constitute an actual abuse (in violating truth) therefore requiring justification. In the case of “prefatory piety” and other forms of irony like the “deliberate rhetorical blind” (Gunn, 2005, p. 22), occultic rhetoric is evidently involved in the business of misleading audiences through distorting truth as well. *Modern Occult Rhetoric* is not only about the drama of secrecy, but also the drama of lying. It appears that, depending on the circumstances, occultic rhetoric straddles the boundary between neutrality and non-neutrality, for the variant forms of manipulation that emerge
from occultic rhetoric seem to result from its envelopment of both the discourses of secrecy and lies.

The common thread between these two discourses, however, is a principle which helps to clarify the moral dimensions of occultic rhetoric: the role of intention. Drawing on Bok’s philosophy of communication, the defining element in the ethics of secrecy is intentional concealment (Bok, 1989, p. 5), and the defining element in the ethics of lying is intentional deceptive statements (Bok, 1999, p. 13). Intention is the essential principle governing the ethicality of secrecy and lying, and since occultic rhetoric (like all rhetorical engagements) involves the element of intent, it becomes paramount to distinguish between certain kinds of rhetorical obfuscation that are (and are not) intentional in nature. Hence, in order for rhetoric to truly qualify as occultic in the deliberate sense, it is prudent that we establish a fundamental distinction between two forms of obscurity: (1) the legitimate form, and (2) the apparent form. Legitimate forms of rhetorical obscurity denote genuine occultic rhetoric—that which is ‘intentionally’ occultic—and thus pertain specifically to moral inquiry and investigation. Legitimate forms of occultic rhetoric therefore possess what may be termed in principle as occultic intent. Occultic intent is essential to the identification of the legitimate form because of the added layer of moral responsibility that comes with the consequences of our intentions. Silence, evasion, (wide) mental reservation, and some forms of equivocation, bespeak the presence of occultic intent, for the ethics of these actions hinge on the reality of one’s willfulness to conceal knowledge—‘to block information about it or evidence of it from reaching that person, and to do so intentionally: to prevent him from learning it, and thus from possessing it, making use of it, or revealing it’ (Bok, 1989, p. 6).
In addition to the intent to hide, Bok also showcases the intent to deceive, revealing the depth of intricacies involved in the three differing “filters” of lying: (1) self-deception, (2) error, and (3) variations of the actual intention to deceive. “These three factors can be looked at as filters of irregular thickness, distortion, and color that alter the ways in which a message is experienced by both deceived and deceivers. To complicate matters further, someone who intends to deceive can work with these filters and manipulate them; he can play on the biases of some persons, the imagination of others, and on errors and confusion throughout the system. The interaction of these filters through which communication passes and is perceived is immensely complex” (Bok, 1999, p. 15). Although the complexity of these filters can seem daunting and discouraging to the formation of an ethics of lying, Bok avoids this complication by reserving her analysis to those clear-cut examples of deception “where the intention to mislead is obvious” (Bok, 1999, p. 16). The intention to mislead or evade (i.e., occultic intent) constitutes the foundational element common to acts of secrecy and lying, and thus must also apply to our engagements in the ethics of rhetorical obscurity. However, not all forms of rhetorical obscurity invariably result from occultic intent; some examples, for instance, are the consequences of necessity or of circumstance—what could be described as apparent forms of occultic rhetoric.

The distinction between apparent forms and legitimate forms is one of vital importance for the ethics of occultic rhetoric, and an ancient precedent of this distinction goes as far back as Philodemus of Gadara (110-35BC), an Epicurean philosopher who wrote on rhetoric, ethics, and poetry, among other things. According to him, there were two kinds of obscurity: “one intentional (i.e., obfuscation), the other not” (Kustas, 1973, p. 66). Rhetoric that is legitimately occultic is reflected in Philodemus’ notion of intentional
obscurity, which is produced “…when a person, having nothing to say, deliberately obfuscates so as to appear to be saying something useful. An author will use poetical and tropical expressions, archaisms, and solecisms toward this end since they would not be understood by the majority” (Kustas, 1973, p. 66). Speaking truthfully, says Philodemus, would contain “none of [the] vices” typical of intentional obscurity. “Here Philodemus introduces us to a common motif: obscurity is a device for keeping out the crowd and showing oneself distinctive and exclusive” (Kustas, 1973, p. 66). Philodemus’ emphasis on the intentional aspects of esoteric language parallels a Bokian approach to the ethics of occultic rhetoric. But of course, as stated earlier, obscurity does not always result from the element of intent. Some examples of obscurity are merely apparent, resulting instead from unintentional obscurity. “Unintentional obscurity, on the other hand, arises basically from ignorance, either of the subject matter or of the rules for writing good Greek” (Kustas, 1973, p. 66). According to Philodemus, two kinds of ignorance are capable of generating unintentional obscurity: (1) ignorance of the subject matter, and (2) ignorance of the rules for good writing. Both forms of ignorance impair the codependency of truth and language. Subject-matter ignorance implies the flaws in one’s logic or understanding, setting the conditions for false statements and fallacious arguments; Good-writing ignorance implies the flaws in one’s rhetoric or expressive style, ripening the propensities for maladapted messages and poor articulation. It would seem, therefore, that unintended obfuscation can result either from logical thoughts poorly expressed, or false/fallacious thoughts eloquently expressed (or some combination of the two).

Such was the curious case of Derlyn Roberts in 2017, a faulty sign language interpreter from Florida who appointed herself to translate for a press conference at the
Tampa Police Department, but who ultimately ended up confusing the deaf community and embarrassing the authorities with her phony skills in sign language. “Most of the time it just looked like she was signing but not using actual signs,” said University of South Florida professor Rachelle Settambrino. “When she was spelling words out, she wasn't spelling anything at all. They were just gibberish more than anything” (Chambers, 2017). Roberts’ subject-matter ignorance of sign language resulted in the unintentional production of confusing, obscure messages. Unintentional obscurity may be described as incidental (as opposed to intentional); it constitutes the flaws or accidents of the communicative process, apart from any deliberate intent, purpose, or strategy. It should be noted, however, that human ignorance does not exhaust the list of factors that contribute to communication breakdown. As Bok reminds us, “There are, of course, many other reasons why information or evidence may not reach a person, quite apart from intentional secrecy. Unintended distortions or blockages may occur either at the source, en route, or at the receiving end of any communication” (Bok, 1989, p. 6) She continues: “The speaker, for example, may be mistaken, inarticulate, or using a language unknown to the listener. En route, the message may be deflected by outside noise, by atmospheric conditions, by interruption. At the receiving end, deafness, fatigue, language problems, or mental retardation may affect the reception of the message” (Bok, 1999, p. 8). Based on these examples, messages can indeed be lost due to a variety of unforeseeable or accidental factors.

Thus, in addition to the intentional (legitimate) and unintentional (apparent) categories of rhetorical obscurity, there may be room for another cause of occultic rhetoric that can be classified as necessary obscurity. Necessary obscurity contrasts with the
contingent categories of intentional and unintentional, for necessity is categorically different from contingency in the same way that permanence is different from change. Contingency implies *change*—where something can happen in more than one way, being the result of luck, specific choices, accident, individual effort, etc.). “Necessity,” on the other hand, rules in the opposite by implying *permanence*—that something *must* happen or happen *lawfully*, and that it can happen in one and only one way. Necessary obscurity refers to the type of occultic language that Gunn describes as unavoidable, or more precisely, “inevitable” (Gunn, 2005, pp. 52, 72, 77, 104, 234, 235). The inevitability or necessity of obscurity does not exactly refer to a “need” in the moral sense of a social ‘good’ which humans value and pursue (for this implies contingency); rather, it refers to something larger: namely the *determinacy* of obscure language—that obscure language *must* exist, independent of human action, beyond both design and chance, purpose and accident (or intent and incident). The necessity of obscurity is ontological, and it reflects its determinacy in the same way triangularity necessitates three sides. It exists by necessity, by sheer virtue of its definition or identity. Just as triangularity is a necessary property of any three-sided shape, so is obscurity a necessary property of any language, for language is bound by a range of inescapable limitations that nonetheless contribute to the exclusion and/or obstruction of understanding.

There are various reasons why difficult prose *must* exist. “As a rhetorician,” writes Gunn, “I am most interested in the defenses that were offered for the invention of difficult prose” (2005, p. 233). He lists three main defenses: (1) the short-hand argument, (2) the audience-specific argument, and (3) the occult-poetics argument. **Short-Hand:** First, “jargon serves as a kind of shorthand for complex ideas” (Gunn, 2005, p. 233). Dropping
names and employing neologisms might come across as “hermetic,” but as Gunn affirms, “these are often useful and efficient ways of bringing an entire argument or position quickly into the conversation” (Gunn, 2005, p. 233). In fact, the efficiency of rhetorical ornaments have been thought to confer survival value to the human species by compressing data, assisting our memories, and saving us time in recalling information (Lanham, 1991, p. 80).

**Audience-Specific:** The second argument focuses on the specificity of the audience, the existence of which determines the language or “style” best suited for a given context. Style is dependent on audience analysis, “a utopic gesture that attempts to speak to a future public” (Gunn, 2005, p. 233). Adapting one’s rhetorical style to an anticipated audience also capitalizes on “defamiliarization”—the artistic technique of presenting to audiences common things in an unfamiliar or strange way in order to enhance perception of the familiar. **Occult-Poetics:** The third argument centers on the human need to continually generate new ways to express ourselves, what Gunn refers to as “a consequence of the ineffability of human experience” (2005, p. 234). Involving the novel use, redefinition, and/or whole cloth invention of new terminologies leads Gunn to consider this argument as “better than the first two,” and that “it roots difficult language in an ontology” (2005, p. 234). The ontology Gunn proposes, as critiqued earlier, is squarely in tension with his ethics. But, nevertheless, Gunn concludes that occult poetics is our “inevitable…ontological plight” (Gunn, 2005, p. 234).

There certainly is validity in these arguments. Necessity (like its intentional and unintentional counterparts) is among the main causes of occultic rhetoric. In fact, necessity rarely (if ever) acts in isolation from the other two causes. In most cases, obscurity results from chance and necessity working together; at other times, necessity works with some
measure of purpose. For Gunn, rhetorical obscurity is a product of necessity, and the difficulties of scholarly language can evince this idea. Consider the natural sciences where abound multitudes of esoteric terminologies that vary from discipline to discipline. The language of biologists, mathematicians, physicists, geologists, chemists, computer technicians, and cosmologists can appear deliberately exclusive not just to the average reader or listener, but also to experts in disparate scientific fields. Parodies of such technobabble have emerged in the past as reactions to the unavoidable difficulty associated with scientific language, such as the fictional machine: the “Turboencabulator.” The Turboencabulator (sometimes going by different titles, like “Retro-encabulator”) was conceived as a rhetorical spoof to illustrate the common, enigmatic motifs of mechanistic terminology. Observe the complexity of its expression in the following excerpt:

For a number of years now, work has been proceeding in order to bring perfection to the crudely conceived idea of a transmission that would not only supply inverse reactive current for use in unilateral phase detractors, but would also be capable of automatically synchronizing cardinal grammeters. Such an instrument is the turbo-encabulator. Now basically the only new principle involved is that instead of power being generated by the relative motion of conductors and fluxes, it's produced by the modial interaction of magneto-reluctance and capacitive directance. The original machine had a base plate of pre-famulated amulite surmounted by a malleable logarithmic casing in such a way that the two spurving bearings were in a direct line with the panametric fan. The latter consisted simply of six hydrocoptic marzlevanes, so fitted to the ambifacient lunar waneshaft that side fumbling was effectively prevented. The main winding was of the normal lotus-o-delta type placed in panendermic semi-boloid slots of the stator, every seventh conductor being connected by a non-reversible tremie pipe to the differential girdle spring on the "up" end of the grammeters. The turbo-encabulator has now reached a high level of development, and it’s being successfully used in the operation of novertrunnions. Moreover, whenever a forescent skor motion is required, it may also be employed in conjunction with a drawn reciprocation dingle arm, to reduce sinusoidal repleneration. (Koretsky, 2014)

This amusing, technical manuscript began in the mid-twentieth century and has since become a legendary subject of professional humor among engineers. Add to this the obscurity associated with chemical and molecular nomenclature, and you also have
another, similarly related, scientific spectacle known as the “Dihydrogen Monoxide” (DHMO) hoax of the late twentieth century—a parody which deployed unfamiliar, ‘chemophobic’ verbiage to portray the mundane characteristics of liquid water as a dangerous, toxic substance that should be regulated, avoided, or simply banned (Glassman, 1997; Kruszelnicki, 2006). The ability of large, unfamiliar, or specialized terminology inevitably contributes to the production of mystery over clarity, showcasing once again the link between science and magic, or knowledge and language. “Understanding the occultic in this general way begins to unravel the tidy distinction between ‘real science’ and the ‘occult’ that was introduced during the Enlightenment. This is not to say that there is no distinction between science and the occult tradition but rather that the rhetoric of each is often experienced by the ‘outsider’ as occultic” (Gunn, 2005, p. xxiv). The occultic impression of scientific verbiage, however bewildering, is typically the result of a normal if not necessary part of our rhetorical existence. Such terminological obscurity is attributable not always to the sole factors of strategy or incompetence, but rather to an element of necessity which the late French-American historian Jacques Barzun (1907-2012) described as the “gangrene of specialism.” Barzun took notice of the increasing overspecialization (and inevitable fragmentation) of modern, academic knowledge. He contended that “good writing should not sound stuffy, pompous, highfalutin, totally unlike ourselves, but rather, well—‘simple & direct’” (Barzun, 2001, p. 17). Fellow scholar, Herbert I. London, concurred with Barzun’s judgment against the gangrene of specialism when he wrote that,

The proliferation of scholarship with specialties now so arcane that the average person cannot possibly [sic] know what is meant by academic terminology has reduced knowledge to a form of mysticism or revealed truth. A faculty member at the New School for Social Research describes himself as a ‘post-modern semiotics instructor.’ After having listened to
him lecture, I'm convinced he is a witch doctor enamored with obfuscation of language and meaning. (Barzun, 1993, pp. xiii-xiv)

Barzun strove instead for universities to cultivate “common knowledge and common reference” (Holley, 2012) for the sake of advancing common sense and understanding. This approach to communication overlaps with Bok’s quest for a set of transcultural “common values” (Bok, 2002). The gangrene of specialism, however, aggravates the interdisciplinary coherence and unification of knowledge, and testifies to the fact that not all forms of difficult prose arise solely from human intent or ignorance. Sometimes, difficult prose is more so the product of necessity and circumstance. Just as the English words of this page are enough to exclude a variety of non-English audiences, no one would fault the reality of language-barriers as a breach of one’s personal ethics. Language-barriers are inevitable. Therefore, occultic rhetoric is inevitable—that language, according to Gunn, is only barriers, not bridges (if the principle of ineffability be true). But if Gunn is correct in his conclusion that all occultic rhetoric is inevitable, deterministic, or necessary, then of course the prospect of an ethics is surely undermined, for the blame of obscurity would lie with no one other than the nature of language itself. Fortunately, Gunn’s claim is not entirely true. In fact, it is far removed from our common experience of reality. Some of occultic rhetoric is inevitable, yes, but not all. Some forms of occultic rhetoric are also accidental in nature, being the product of human ignorance or incompetence. And other times, most pertinently, occultic rhetoric is explained only in the light of human deliberation, purpose, or intent. But Gunn’s preoccupation with inevitability and determinism stems from his commitment to the paradoxical idea that our intentions are pre-determined, that is, “the motives structuring intent may be unknown to the individual. In other words, intent may be scripted by ideological forces or unconscious motives and
desires” (Gunn, 2005, p. 150). With this presumption, it is no wonder then why Gunn espouses the inevitability of academic jargon (i.e., that all occultic rhetoric is borne of necessity).

But as a Bokian approach reminds us, ethics depends not on the element of determinacy, but contingency, particularly the principle of intent, which she characterizes as the “most distinctive” part of “human reasoning” (Bok, 1989, p. 23). Without a free, indeterminate capacity to intend one way or another, moral choices between good and evil are incapacitated, for all of moral behavior is animated by our intentions. Without intention, there can be no genuine sense of action; only motion remains. The distinction between action and motion is one which deserves special attention here because it underscores the significance of intent within the moral calculus. Motion implies inevitability; it suggests that the movement of things are (pre) determined by the regularities of nature, such as a rock falling down a hill, or a person accidentally tripping over a bicycle. Motion, therefore, is a concept that connotes the lack of intention. But in his Grammar of Motives (1945), Kenneth Burke declared that motion should be distinguished from action, because action connoted something more. To put it simply, “the basic unit of action would be defined as ‘the human body in conscious or purposive motion’” (Burke, 1945, p. 14). While action overlaps with motion, it is distinct from motion, because “Action involves character, which involves choice; and the form of choice attains its perfection in the distinction between Yes and No (between thou shalt and thou shalt not). Though the concept of sheer ‘motion’ is non-ethical, ‘action’ implies the ethical (the human personality). Hence, the obvious close relation between the ethical and the negatives of the Decalogue” (Burke, 1970, p. 41). By rejecting the freedom of the willing or intending individual (through an attempt to subsume
all rhetorical and/or ethical agency under the domain of motion or necessity) Gunn advances a philosophy of communication that detonates the very foundations of moral inquiry.

Gunn renders ethics impossible. By advancing the claim that there is no intentional agent and that occultic rhetoric is inevitable, Gunn leaves no room for intent or free moral choice; he leaves no room for action; he leaves no room to tell the difference between a *wink* and a *blink*. The capacity for action (i.e., for ethical decision-making) is but an illusion conjured by motion. To Gunn, there is no distinction between action and motion—they are one and the same. But this is the downfall of Gunn’s ethical framework: motion is a precondition for action, not a synonym of it. Despite how often these terms are treated interchangeably, intention is integral to action. In fact, the very concept of “action” is inseparable from intention: to *act* is to imply an *end in view*, for all actions tend toward some end. Otherwise, we are talking about ‘motion,’ not ‘action.’ Motion is ‘non-ethical,’ writes Burke, because motion is devoid of an *end in view*—it has no *motive* or intent. Only action can account for these concepts because actions connote “consciousness or purpose,” while motions do not. Any verb, according to Burke, implies a *willed* phenomenon, because verbs are ‘action words.’ Without the will—without intent, choice, motive, or conscious purpose—our world cannot make sense of ‘action words’ (verbs) because action depends on something more than motion. And it is precisely because of this additional qualification—a qualification that Gunn rejects—that Gunn undermines ethics.

**Section IV.6: Grappling with Hierarchies & Mystification**

The discourse of action and motion (or contingency and necessity) leads us naturally to the phenomenon of *mystification*—a type of secretive or deceptive language
linked to the exercise of power. **Power** is a natural part of the social order. Where two or three come together, power structures inevitably arise. To this extent, power is both necessary and contingent: it exists within every *motion* toward social order, and social order is the end to which our *actions* make power manifest. In order to glean and organize the ethical implications that can be drawn from the relationship between power and language, one must first engage the question: How does the logic of contingency and necessity—which is to say the categories of action and motion—relate to or inform our ethical understanding of occultic rhetoric and/or mystification?

As Gunn hinted at earlier, much of the cause behind academic gobblegook emerges from a desire to climb up various promotion systems and attain ever higher degrees of prestige. In other words, the drive to ascend the social **hierarchy** encourages the production of **mystification**. This is evident within Judith Butler’s own philosophy, since “[m]ystification as well as hierarchy are the tools of her practice, a mystification that eludes criticism because it makes few definite claims” (Nussbaum, 1999, p. 3). One scholar particularly adept at identifying the relationship between mystification and hierarchy is Kenneth Burke (1897-1993) whose contributions to rhetorical theory helps to clarify how these two concepts interact. Burke’s term “mystification” both predates and informs Gunn’s own understanding of occultic rhetoric. In fact, mystification is the “primary rhetorical feature of occultic rhetoric” (Gunn, 2005, p. 180). Mystification is precisely the element of language that misleads or conceals the truth, particularly with respect to one’s own power or status within a given hierarchy (Burke, 1969, p. 178). Inspired by his Marxian insights on the order of the social classes, Burke likened hierarchical communication to “pyramidal magic”—when communication from one level of the
pyramid facilitates action in another level. Hierarchical communication thus moves in two directions: (1) inferior-to-superior, and (2) superior-to-inferior. The former direction, inferior-to-superior, is a bottom-up magic whereby the inferiors’ communication influences change by flattering or imitating their superiors (which Burke termed “prayer”). The latter direction, superior-to-inferior, is a top-down magic whereby the superiors’ communication influences change by inspiring inferiors to sacrifice for a social good (which Burke termed “mystification”). Prayer and mystification are types of rhetoric that overcomes the divisions of hierarchy; but mystification, unlike prayer, is more frequently deceptive: it is superior-to-inferior communication that often disguises itself as equal-to-equal communication (Thames, 1999, pp. 25-26).

Burke referred to this as the “mystification of class.” Orders of class exist and are easily exemplified within academia itself. For instance, academia involves the division and authority of the teacher class over the student class. And just as students are “hierarchically arranged among themselves,” so too are teachers “among themselves ‘invidiously’ ranked” (Burke, 1969, p. 178). Mystification of class, however, can set in whenever teachers use equal-to-equal communication to conceal their hierarchical difference. Consider teachers who claim to “instruct” their students: instruction assumes the existence of an academic hierarchy. But teachers who claim to “facilitate” the learning experience essentially downplay the power relationship that prevails between the two groups. “Facilitation” thus becomes an attempt at mystification, for it obscures the reality of hierarchy that exists between teachers and students. Burke was interested in the ways language concealed the reality of hierarchy—an interest which likely sprang from his communist sympathies (Abbott, 1974). Equipped with this general overview on the relationship between hierarchy
and mystification, it now makes sense to see why Burke applies the logic of action and motion to the understanding and practice of difficult language.

In his *Rhetoric of Motives*, Burke distinguished between two forms of mystification: (1) a “special” kind, and (2) a “general” kind. The first kind of mystification can be described as *action* (contingent, intentional, motivated, biased, and “simple but ubiquitous,”) given how it is rooted in the way “language can be used to deceive” (Burke, 1969, p. 179). This type of mystification, then, “is a process of verbal and symbolic deception; linguistic or symbolic mystification obscures or covers up (or covers over) the world that supposedly is being described” (Jasinski, 2001, p. 378). Such examples of this *purposeful* type of mystification range from acts of deliberate omission and secrecy to strategic ambiguity, distortion, embellishment, and lying. On the other hand, Burke also illuminated our understanding of a secondary “general” level of mystification which could be described as *motion* (i.e., inevitable, necessary, “cannot be cleared away,”) and is the “‘logical conclusion’ of the persuasive principle” (Burke, 1969, p. 179). Indeed, this “profounder kind of mystification” is “implicit in the very act of persuasion itself” (Burke, 1969, p. 178). In order to appreciate the depth of complexity involved in the distinction between special and general forms of mystification, consider how people invariably employ what might be described as deceptive names or terms to cultivate (or manipulate) the ways in which we understand the world around us.

The process of naming or of definition is one which illustrates the process of mystification. Observe the function of the *euphemism*: a *euphemism* is a common rhetorical trope that qualifies as a kind of verbal magic by the way it masks or (mis)represents the harshness or unpleasantness of certain words, such as trading the word
“genocide” for “ethnic cleansing.” Euphemism gives a deceptive name to that which it refers; it functions often as an agent of humor, but sometimes is employed with subtlety for the “special” purposes of persuasion. At the same time, however, Burke also contended that euphemisms served a “general” function as well: that all words carry certain connotations of a euphemistic or dysphemistic cast. Burke’s notion of the euphemism covering derives from the English philosopher Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) who criticized the use of eulogistic and dyslogistic terms. Bentham believed that language was once neutral, free from positive or negative suggestions, and stood simply and directly for the things they represented. Over time, however, certain names and labels would come to pollute language with biased connotations, acquiring degrees of good and evil undertones which served to complicate and confuse public discourse. Consequently, Bentham called for language reforms that would eliminate the use of eulogistic and dyslogistic terms. “Burke shared Bentham’s interest in uncovering the way in which certain terms, phrases, or epithets functioned to convey attitudes and feelings about the objects to which they pointed, but he did not share Bentham’s desire for radical linguistic reform. Bentham thought that language originally was neutral; Burke rejected this view” (Jasinski, 2001, p. 235).

Contrary to Bentham, Burke contended that “The magical decree is implicit in all language, for the mere act of naming an object or situation decrees that it is to be singled out as such-and-such rather than as something other. Hence, I think that an attempt to eliminate magic, in this sense, would involve us in the elimination of vocabulary itself as a way of sizing up reality” (Burke, 1957, p. 5). In other words, connotation is inseparable from denotation. All of vocabulary, all terminology, imbibes some degree of mystification,
for the power to christen someone or something with a name or label is the same power responsible for introducing a new, particular bias, affect, or covering. The process of “naming,” according to Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951), is “an occult process,” one which reflects the “baptism of an object” (Wittgenstein, 1958, p. 19, par. 39) and interlinks the identifier with the identified—thus forming the moral basis of identity. The question of identity is an ethical question, the implications of which result from the magical fusion of language and reality. Take, for example, the case of Paul Geisert—a biology teacher who denies the existence of God, yet desired to re-express his ideology through a different word—a word that was not as ugly or offensive as the common labels atheist or godless. “The way Geisert saw it, the word godless is synonymous with ‘evil,’ and its use was a surefire way to alienate the general public” (Leibrock, 2010). And so, in the Fall of 2002, Geisert devised a new term—“one that was less divisive than godless but more inclusive than atheist”—thus giving birth to the more fashionable title, “Bright.” A Bright is any individual who identifies as an “atheist or agnostic,” including “self-described ‘freethinkers,’ rationalists, secular humanists and skeptics,” all of whom eschew “a belief in the likes of deities, the paranormal, psychic powers or any other so-called ‘supernatural’ entity” (Leibrock, 2010). Geisert’s felt need to re-identify his atheism by a different name is a case study in the reality of eulogistic and dyslogistic terms. Whether the coinage of Bright has been a success among the secular world is controversial. Richard Dawkins embraced the label on the spot; fellow atheist luminary Christopher Hitchens, however, considered it a “cringe-making proposal” (Hitchens, 2009, p. 5).

All of this goes to show that language has a complex relationship with the truth. On the one hand, language users are capable of a ‘special’ mystification that intentionally
hides, bends, or contradicts the truth; on the other hand, language users are invariably subject to a ‘general’ mystification that is intrinsic to every channel of communication, forever limiting us only to approximations of the truth, and forbidding our grasp of its wholeness or entirety. “The first (or special) type of mystification…can be confronted and, with effort, overcome; community members can begin to ‘see through’ various naming strategies or acknowledge the contingency of their social structures. But the general or ‘profounder’ sense of mystification cannot be escaped. …All persuasion involves an element of deception or mystification. As much as we might want to confront and overcome mystification, we also seem to depend on it” (Jasinski, p. 381). The inevitability of mystification constitutes the cornerstone of Gunn’s principle of ineffability, and it is this specific property that has been stretched beyond reasonable measure, retarding Gunn’s trust in the adequacy of language to communicate truth and meaning. Of course Gunn’s fallacy is understandable: the idea that mystification is inevitable seems to stem from the fact that hierarchy itself is inevitable (Burke, 1969, p. 141). We are all goaded into hierarchy, for hierarchy is “the motive of the sociopolitical order…of the social ladder, or social pyramid, involving a concern with the ‘higher’ as an organizing element, in men’s modes of placement” (Burke, 1970, p. 41). This brings to mind such notions as “ascent” and “social superiority”—those same inimical strivings that compare between those in academia and those in the occult.

Just as the occultist seems to replicate the external hierarchy of class within a secret order, so, too, the academic carves out spaces of belonging in terms of a disciplinary argot and other rhetorics of inclusion and exclusion (e.g. admission standards). Indeed, as some first-generation scholars are likely to admit, academic success is motivated by a desire for class ascendancy, a motive that is frequently derided as a source of professional arrogance. In this respect, it is not surprising that the unfavorable public reactions to occultists like Blavatsky and Crowley are similar to the unfavorable representations of academics in the popular media in general. (Gunn, 2005, pp. 219-220)
Competition for academic authority is a fierce struggle among students, and even among teachers. And the consequence of this rivalry for dominance in the intellectual hierarchy ripens our propensities for secrecy and deception. Such was the humiliating spectacle showcased by Gunn’s ignorance of Lacanian desire (Gunn, 2005, p. 234). Through our displays of intellectual superiority, we contend and compete for our place in the social ladder; we reinforce a practice of pyramidal magic that privileges pride and conquest rather than humility and cooperation. And one of the main weapons deployed in these struggles for ascension and prominence is mystification—or as Gunn would have it, occultic rhetoric. It would seem that in the game of academia, one need not attempt to possess expert knowledge; rather, it suffices to simply obstruct the understanding of everyone else around you. As one popular adage puts it, *if you can’t convince them, confuse them.* Such is the tactic illustrated within Gunn’s own experience, where the difficulty of the course content resulted in his outsider status.

The subsequent nausea of that experience was precipitated by Gunn’s damaged *ethos*—his damaged reputation or credibility. This much is easy to see, for we all intuitively understand that without trust or credibility (*ethos*), our words will count for little; we are brought low and disempowered. Without *ethos*, we are, in effect, demoted in the hierarchy. Hence, the preoccupation of academics far and wide is to seek the elevation of their social and intellectual status by continually building their *ethos*, their trustworthiness, their reason to be taken seriously. And so, the attainment of a greater *ethos* implies that hierarchical ascension is dependent on each and every scholar’s ability to procure a greater level of knowledge that may be called ‘expertise.’ In her text *The Rhetoric of Expertise*, E. Johanna
Hartelius from the University of Pittsburgh showcases the importance of expert knowledge and its relationship to the academic hierarchy.

Expertise is not simply about one person’s skills being different from another’s. It is also grounded in a fierce struggle over ownership and legitimacy. To be an expert is to claim a piece of the world, to define yourself in relation to certain insights into human experience. Expertise constitutes a special relationship between a subject matter, a public, and one who masters and manipulates the former for the latter’s benefit or need. The crux of the expertise issue is that being recognized as an expert generates not only status and power but considerable influence. Those labeled reap the financial and symbolic benefits. Their opinions are ‘expert’ opinions. Their voices are heard above others’. To be an expert, in short, is to rhetorically gain sanctioned rights to a specific topic or mode of knowledge. (Hartelius, 2011, p. 1)

The problem, however, is not with succeeding others in the hierarchy through a resilient and legitimate expertise; it is with trampling over others to get to the top, especially by means of an appearance of expertise (where the language is so inscrutable that the legitimacy of expert knowledge is indeterminable). The difficulty associated with academic language (i.e., the rhetoric of the experts) is a great source of disdain for all people, both inside and outside of the academic profession. As Marjorie Garber reminded us earlier, the word “academic” is held in low repute today for being so detached from the goods of clarity and comprehension. Gunn echoes a similar warning about the declining respectability of the academy which he attributes to the manipulation of secret languages. Just as occultists secure their hierarchical advancement through the novelty and controlled meanings of their own private vocabularies, academics assemble themselves around revered texts, dispute the meaning of words, and manipulate their place within the hierarchy through theatrical displays of their own knowledge. Gunn explains that the persistent arrogance of the academic community has fostered a society that no longer takes the profession very seriously, and that the threat of irrelevance has left scholars scrambling. In response to these chilly conditions, he writes, we academics should
be expecting increasingly spectacular dramas of secrecy and publicity. …we should be able to locate competing vocabularies concerning secret truths, and a professoriate at odds with itself, mobilized into elite, discrete, and competing cabals that are, in turn, organized around the challenging work of this or that scholarly magus. …we should discover that the ‘ivory tower,’ the central metaphor of a clandestine academic enterprise, has been leveled. Amid the smoldering rubble of this centuries-old artifice, we should find the Great Professor unprotected, naked, divided against him- or herself, unable to control or signify his or her texts, and, perhaps, under attack. If the rhetoric emerging from the academy these days is any measure, then these things are coming to pass—if they are not already a done deal. (Gunn, 2005, p. 234)

The crisis of academic language concerns the struggle for existence between competing vocabularies and definitions, all of which seek to exert their dominance over the currency of thought, and assume official primacy. This cutthroat environment undergirds the unfolding drama of secrecy taking place within the academy, a scene concerned with the preservation of favored vocabularies in the struggle for acceptance, privilege, and officialization. While Gunn recognizes how abusive occultic rhetoric can be, he still tends to excuse its existence in either one of two ways—the first is economic, and the second is epistemic. The first excuse focuses on the economic factors that produce occultic rhetoric: “as our jobs becomes less plentiful and tenure goes the way of the dodo, as resources become more scarce and we are made to compete for a sense of security, the pressure to produce the contentious, argumentative…‘theory Nazi’ is increasing” (Gunn, 2005, p. 235). Gunn suggests that capitalistic forces are to blame for the aggressive habits of the academic milieu—that the scarcity of venues for employment and promotion has fostered an interminable rivalry between scholars vying for authority through increasingly complex modes of expression. When demand is high and opportunities are diminishing, “there is immense pressure on us academics to popularize our work and to justify our existence, and consequently an intense desire to thicken our prose and to create the conditions that require our interpretive expertise and thereby guarantee our survival. In
short, we are encouraged to be snotty” (Gunn, 2005, p. 235). With these economic circumstances, Gunn excuses the snottiness of the academy and abuses of occultic rhetoric as necessary for survival.

The second excuse, however, emphasizes the epistemic view of truth (i.e., that truth is man-made, socially constructed, or relativistic). This view is indebted to a fluid understanding of language, where the process of ‘invented words’ (neologisms) is the fount from which we derive our claims to truth and knowledge. Devoid of any objectivity, truth is but the product of sentences, or the result of preachments, politics, and power. From this postmodernist framework which denies the possibility of truth, engagements in rhetorical obfuscation are therefore rendered inevitable (and thus justifiable). This results in the supremacy of rhetorical power and skill over the philosophical values of truth and knowledge: academicians are now caught within a fierce, relativistic “struggle for authority and recognition,” bound within the hierarchy of intellectual celebrities that Gunn terms “the current star system of the academy.” He expounds, “We academics in the humanities are currently mired in a genius-virtuoso, superstar model of intellectual authority that has emerged in the wake of ‘Truth’ and the abandonment of absolutes. Understanding the relevance of the authority of the modern magus only requires one to replace the role of supernatural truth with this or that notion of post-truth ineffability that is so central to the project of the posts (e.g., poststructuralism, postmodernism, and so on)” (Gunn, 2005, p. 118). The triumph of epistemic relativism in the academy has begotten a hierarchy of intellectual superstars vying not for truth, but for power—the legacy of which now exacerbates the occultic conditions of academic communication. This skepticism,
combined with the need for security, constitutes Gunn’s excuses for the drama of secrecy within the scholarly community.

The overarching combination of these two (economic and epistemic) excuses outlined by Gunn is leading to the increase of mystification in the academy. And common to the two excuses, unsurprisingly, is the element of hierarchy, or authority, prestige, and power. But notice also that Gunn’s observations reflect the exact same two diseases diagnosed earlier by mathematician James Lindsay and philosopher Peter Boghossian, both of whom devised “The Conceptual Penis as a Social Construct” hoax (Boyle & Lindsay, 2017). In response to their critics, both scholars concluded that their spoof article’s acceptance for publication was best explained by two fundamental problems, namely the epistemic problem—“the echo-chamber of morally driven fashionable nonsense coming out of the postmodernist social ‘sciences’…”—and the economic problem—“the complex problem of pay-to-publish journals with lax standards that cash in on the ultra-competitive publish-or-perish academic environment” (Boghossian & Lindsay, 2017). Together, both problems contribute to the plight of obfuscation in academic discourse, as well as foster the conditions that perpetuate the publication of fraudulent or pseudo-sophisticated literature. “At least one of these sicknesses led to [the “Conceptual Penis” article] being published as a legitimate piece of academic scholarship, and we can expect proponents of each to lay primary blame upon the other” (Boghossian & Lindsay, 2017). The important point to draw from this parallel of thought is that while Boghossian and Lindsay see the economic/epistemic factors as ‘diseases’ or problems in need of remedial action, Gunn sees them as excuses—as inevitable realities that justify the exploitation of mystification in academia.
In sum, Gunn’s philosophy of communication attributes the spread of mystification to the combined pressures of the epistemic and economic problems. In other words, mystification is excusable because these two forces guarantee its inevitability. As a result, Gunn allows the necessary existence of occultic rhetoric to eclipse the contingent realm of ethical inquiry. After all, as far as Gunn is concerned: why bother with the burden of clarity or comprehension when the truth, in the end, is ineffable anyway? Why consider it our obligation to communicate intelligibly when there is no contingency (i.e., purposive agency) in the first place? But as Burke makes clear: if genuine intent or free choice is illusory, then the idea of action is impossible. And if the idea of action is impossible, then all that remains is motion. And if motion is all that is left, then the entire point of ethics is utterly and unequivocally sabotaged from the outset. Whether he realizes it or not, Gunn’s philosophy of communication is not only radically skeptical; it is also radically deterministic. How can starting from these philosophical presumptions ever hope to support an ethics of occultic rhetoric? It can’t. And Sissela Bok explains why:

> An interesting parallel between skepticism and determinism exists here. Just as skepticism denies the possibility of knowledge, so determinism denies the possibility of freedom. Yet both knowledge and freedom to act on it are required for reasonable choice. Such choice would be denied to someone genuinely convinced—to the very core of his being—of both skepticism and determinism. He would be cast about like a dry leaf in the wind. Few go so far. (Bok, 1999, pp. 21-22)

Gunn is one of those “few” who subscribes to such extremes. But his actions betray his theory. Is Gunn a real skeptic when he professes to know the true meaning behind Lacan’s difficult writing? Is he a real determinist when he attempts to persuade us away from pride and toward humility? According to his own words, one should expect him to be ‘cast about like a dry leaf in the wind,’ and yet his actions speak otherwise. Either Gunn should be denied the substance of action (i.e., “reasonable choice”), or he should reevaluate
his convictions in the skeptical and determinist principles of his own philosophy. Alas, this is the value of a Bokian philosophy of communication, for she tempers Gunn’s radicalism with balance and reason. Not only does she refute Gunn’s skepticism by addressing the shortcomings of the problematic quest for epistemological certainty, but she also recognizes the economical forces that promote the reproduction of mystifying or deceptive language.

The very stress on individualism, on competition, on achieving material success which so marks our society also generates intense pressures to cut corners. To win an election, to increase one’s income, to outsell competitors—such motives impel many to participate in forms of duplicity they might otherwise resist. The more widespread they judge these practices to be, the stronger will be the pressures to join, even compete, in deviousness. The social incentives to deceit are at present very powerful; the controls, often weak. Many individuals feel caught up in practices they cannot change. It would be wishful thinking, therefore, to expect individuals to bring about major changes in the collective practices of deceit by themselves. Public and private institutions, with their enormous power to affect personal choice, must help alter the existing pressures and incentives. (Bok, 1999, p. 244)

Rather than excuse the economic problem with philosophical determinism, Bok promotes our ability to choose: “Individuals, without a doubt, have the power to influence the amount of duplicity in their lives and to shape their speech and action” (Bok, 1999, p. 243). She discourages our resignation to economic pressures, and moves us toward a position of ethical responsibility. Instead of surrendering to the strains that currently dominate the academic hierarchy, she seeks to reform the hierarchy. And because the only way to change hierarchical practices is from the top-down, she first initiates her agenda with the loftiest of all public hierarchies: the government.

“What role can the government play in such efforts?” she asks. “First, it can look to its own practices,” and attempt to “reverse the injuries to trust” committed against the public (Bok, 1999, p. 244). Second, the government could begin enforcing “the existing laws prohibiting fraud and perjury. Here again, government members have to be the first
to be held to such standards” (Bok, 1999, p. 244). And third, our laws should be examined to see if “they encourage deception needlessly,” such as welfare programs that abet public dishonesty, or criminal record laws that compel felons to conceal or deny their history from prospective employers (Bok, 1999, p. 245). After the government can set the example for protocols on truth-telling, Bok moves to private institutions. “Private institutions can play a parallel role in reducing the incentives to cut corners. Recent studies indicate that businessmen regard unethical practices as very widespread, and pressures to conform as strong.” Patterns of conformity will undoubtedly persist unless challenged because “young executives automatically go along with superiors to show loyalty” (Bok, 1999, p. 245).

Lastly and most relevantly, “educational institutions” must also recognize their responsibility in effecting ethical change.

First of all, they, too have to look to their own practices. How scrupulously honest are they in setting an example? How do they cope with cheating, with plagiarism, and with fraudulent research? What pressures encourage such behavior? To what extent, and in what disciplines, are deceptive techniques actually taught to students? What lines do law school courses, for instance, draw with respect to courtroom tactics, or business school courses with respect to bargaining and negotiation? Second, what can education bring to the training of students, in order that they may be more discerning, better able to cope with the various forms of duplicity that they will encounter in working life? Colleges and universities, as well as nursing schools, police academies, military academies, accounting schools, and many others need to consider how moral choice can best be studied and what standards can be expected, as well as upheld. (Bok, 1999, p. 247).

These questions renew the academy’s responsibility to ethical communication practices, and Bok promotes reflection about the status of ethical pedagogy in various academic disciplines. Certain traditions of ethical inquiry have existed in some professions longer than others, such as medicine and law. Even the discipline of communication ethics did not gain national recognition as an important field of study until the 1980’s (Andersen, 1991, pp. 3-19; Arnett, Fritz, & Bell, 2009, pp. 28-29). Nevertheless, she warns that “in all
these fields, much too little effort is being devoted to train persons who are competent to teach such courses. As a result, existing courses are often inadequate, leaving students confirmed in their suspicion that moral choice is murky and best left to intuition” (Bok, 1999, pp. 247-248). In the development of these courses, Bok recommends that contemporary scholars look to the wisdom of those who came before us, from the ancient, medieval, and modern periods. Much progress has already been made in answering ethical questions about secretive and deceptive speech. Thus, “[w]e need not start from scratch. The structure of [deceptive language] and the possible justifications have long been studied. We need to make use of the traditional approaches” (Bok, 1999, p. 248).

Section IV.7: Discerning the Justifications

So far, the practice of mystification or occultic rhetoric has been illustrated in a mostly negative light. But not all mystifications are equal. And it is upon this fact—upon the sheer immensity of its varieties—that occultic rhetoric must be examined thoughtfully and parsed with care. This marks the beginning of an ethics. In order to resolve the problem of occultic rhetoric, we must begin by locating the proper boundaries that distinguish it from amoral inquiry. As Gunn stated earlier, occultic rhetoric is “a popular social phenomenon that is currently difficult to capture and, consequently, rarely discussed in scholarly literature” (Gunn, 2005, p. xxviii). The difficulty in capturing and studying occultic rhetoric stems from the ambiguous scope of its meaning, thus making sense of Gunn’s admission: “readers expecting a direct or definitive definition of the term are likely to be disappointed” (Gunn, 2005, p. xxiii). It is therefore necessary to first develop a precise definition that works within an ethical framework, although this will be no simple task. Even Bok recognizes the complexity of occultic rhetoric when she outlines how the three
rhetorical filters (self-deception, error, and variations of the actual intention to deceive) work as the primary forces that obstruct a clear understanding of the concept. “These three factors can be looked at as filters of irregular thickness, distortion, and color that alter the ways in which a message is experienced by both deceived and deceivers. To complicate matters further, someone who intends to deceive can work with these filters and manipulate them; he can play on the biases of some persons, the imagination of others, and on errors and confusion throughout the system. The interaction of these filters through which communication passes and is perceived is immensely complex” (Bok, 1999, p. 15). Thus, we must attend to parsing the forms of occultic rhetoric that are, in practice, morally culpable.

The first step, therefore, toward founding a less ambiguous definition is by excluding the necessary realm of occultic rhetoric from moral discourse. The necessity or inevitability of difficult language—what Burke termed the “general” or “profounder” category of mystification—is confined to the domain of motion. If a broad form of obfuscation is to some degree unavoidable, then it is to that degree where we must demarcate that territory as beyond ethical inquiry. This move automatically nullifies the source of Gunn’s ethical relativism and determinism, since the necessary realm of occultic rhetoric is outright disqualified as the ground from which to base our ethics. We must return to an understanding of motion as non-ethical, and therefore limit our moral attention to the contingent realm of occultic rhetoric, the realm which concerns Burke’s category of “special” mystification, or what can be described as the domain of action. This is consonant with Bok’s philosophy of communication, where she avoids the complications involved with the inescapable filters of language. She narrows her analysis to those clear-cut
examples of purposive deception “where the intention to mislead is obvious” (Bok, 1999, p. 16). This forces us to confront the role of what I call occultic intent, considering how intention is the distinguishing attribute shared among all actions of secrecy and lying. But once we recognize occultic intent as the common denominator in these events, we may prematurely assume that occultic intent is in itself the incriminating factor of occultic rhetoric. But this would be, as I said, a mistaken conclusion, since it violates Bok’s presumption about the general need (and thus ‘neutrality’) of secrecy, including certain justified forms of lying (both of which require occultic intent). Occultic intent, therefore, is not enough to fault the practice of secretive or deceptive speech, since some occasions demand or justify such speech.

Consider more carefully the rhetorical uses of ambiguity (amphibolia). Ambiguous language is either “an intended or inadvertent…ambivalence of grammatical structure, usually by mispunctuation” (Lanham, 1991, p. 8). Some examples, like semantic ambiguity, is where “a word or phrase carries more than one meaning in a particular context,” or in syntactic ambiguity where “the structure or grammar of a sentence renders the meaning of a word or phrase uncertain” (Herrick, 2015, p. 184). Other kinds of ambiguity abound, such as “lexical ambiguity,” “structural ambiguity,” “scope ambiguity” and “pragmatic ambiguity” (Audi, 2015, p. 27). Although ambiguity can often spawn obscurity of meaning, it can also result in clarity as well, such as in metaphor which “both conceals and reveals” (Kustas, 1973, p. 65). We all experience ambiguity differently, if only because our expressions and interpretations of the world around us are subjective and, consequently, affect us in variant ways. Neither are all ambiguities the same, for there also exist several classes of ambiguity which have at times been arranged into unique
categories: there have been claims for four types of ambiguity (Kaufer, 1983), or five types (Schultz, 1974), or six types (Wilkinson, 2006), or even seven types (Empson, 1966). It is indefinite to know precisely just how many classes of ambiguity there truly are, for the construction of its categories seems entirely begotten from context-driven invention. Quintilian (35-100 AD), for example, suggested that its “species are innumerable” (Institutes of Oratory, VII.ix.1). The ambiguity of ambiguity, therefore, requires some demonstration of its varieties as they also testify to the versatility, productivity, and creativity of occultic rhetoric.

In his discussion of the Ethics of Speech Communication (1966), professor emeritus Thomas R. Nilsen of the University of Washington reminds us that “vagueness and ambiguity are [not] wrong in themselves. …There are also instances of their legitimate use.” He argues,

If a speaker seeks to stimulate his listeners to feelings of national pride (certainly an acceptable purpose if done with prudence), he must realize that for different people different aspects of their national life are cause for pride, and the speaker can rightfully permit each listener to identify with that which is most meaningful to him. Where rigorous thought is needed, however, where decisions are being made on specific issues, such personal interpretations may be highly misleading, and the speaker has an ethical obligation to minimize them. If ambiguity is unavoidable, it should be made explicit. Where vagueness is unavoidable, the speaker should not claim more specificity than the terms warrant. (Nilsen, 1966, pp. 62-63)

Nilsen’s ethics of ambiguity demonstrates that some forms of broad or vague communication are permissible if not necessary in certain situations. From this, it is easy to see how Nilsen’s ideas resonate with Kenneth Burke’s concept of identification—the idea that division is humanity’s natural state, and that the prospect of overcoming division
and establishing unity is the primary function of rhetoric. Ambiguous language, it seems, is a redeemable practice; it is not always a nefarious art deployed for purposes of secrecy, deception, and power-grabbing. There are authentic reasons for its use, and the communication scholar Eric Eisenberg of the University of South Florida has dedicated much of his career to defending its role in organizational life. In his famous article “Ambiguity as Strategy in Organizational Communication” (1984), he explained his concept of **strategic ambiguity**:

Strategic ambiguity fosters the existence of multiple viewpoints in organizations. This use of ambiguity is commonly found in organizational missions, goals, and plans. When organizational goals are stated concretely, they are often strikingly ineffective. Strategic ambiguity is essential to organizing because it allows for multiple interpretations to exist among people who tend that they are attending to the same message—i.e., perceive the message to be clear. It is a political necessity to engage in strategic ambiguity so that different constituent groups may apply different interpretations to the symbol. …For example, university faculty on any campus may take as their rallying point “academic freedom,” while at the same time maintaining markedly different interpretations of the concept. (Eisenberg, 2007, pp. 8-9)

The role of ambiguous language for individuals in leadership positions is vital to their management of social order and group cohesion. In fact, strategic ambiguity can be illustrated through four major functions: (1) to promote unified diversity, (2) to preserve privileged positions, (3) to foster deniability, and (4) to facilitate organizational change (Eisenberg, 2007, p. 3). These functions constitute legitimate uses of unclear language, and it fundamentally expands our understanding and appreciation of occultic rhetoric by challenging the notorious impression that it is all just a bunch of rhetorical *black magic*. There is a lot of *white magic* involved here as well—not that this should reduce occultic rhetoric to a mere ‘rhetoric of magic,’ but that it should be better understood as an exploration into the ‘magic of rhetoric.’ And even though the magic of such rhetoric can be deceptive in principle, this does not necessarily consign it to the province of evil or
immorality. If this were the case, no one would expect the religious tradition of Christianity (who Gunn blames as the main suppressor of the occult) to be accused of dabbling in such strategies of language; and yet, we discover lo and behold that Christ Himself is one of its most iconic practitioners.

Consider the occultic function of the **parable**. Christ told approximately 40 parables throughout his short-lived ministry, and they work as “a form of indirect communication intended to ‘deceive the hearer into truth,’” writes bible scholar Klyne Snodgrass (2008, p. 8). In other words, parables are a species of occultic rhetoric; they rely on a logic of discrimination between in-groups and out-groups. When the disciples asked Jesus: “Why do You speak to them in parables?” (Matthew 13:10), Jesus replied: “To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted. For whoever has, to him more shall be given, and he will have an abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has shall be taken away from him. Therefore I speak to them in parables; because while seeing they do not see, and while hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand” (Luke 8:10). Christ’s parables served a two-fold purpose: (1) to **reveal** the truth to those who wanted to know it—those with “an honest and good heart, having heard the word, keep it, and bring forth fruit with patience” (Luke 8:15); and (2) to **conceal** the truth from those who were indifferent or hostile—such as the Pharisees who had publically rejected their Messiah. Christ’s parables were indirect and unclear to some, yet profound and instructive to others. However, “[w]hen He was alone with His own disciples, He explained everything” (Mark 4:34). Christ employed cautious ambiguity in his teachings in order to help his listeners ponder on his words and lessons. By allowing
a degree of open-endedness, Christ’s audience was invited to participate in the process of bringing their own experiences to his stories, and identifying the inherent truths within.

It should be clear from the examples above that occultic rhetoric is not always wrong, if only because “…ambiguity has an extremely ambivalent status in rhetorical thinking,” writes communication scholar James Jasinski. “Ambiguity often is figured as a pharmakon (a Greek term meaning both poison and cure)” where it functions as “a potential linguistic poison that prevents understanding and human cooperation” as well as “a linguistic cure that enhances the possibility of understanding and cooperation” (Jasinski, 2001, p. 8). The question of an ethics of ambiguity or occultic rhetoric comes down to deciphering when occultic rhetoric is being used as opposed to when it is being abused. What variables legitimize the practice of occultic rhetoric? What forms are condemnable, and what forms are condonable? To answer these questions, we must not assume that there is a universal (one-size-fits-all) method or rule that can apply in all situations apart from time and place—that would be a Kantian solution. Rather, I propose a Bokian solution, one which avoids sweeping generalizations by accounting for the particularities of social being.

In her attempt to study a linguistic phenomenon that Gunn describes as difficult to capture, Bok turns towards a ‘case study’ methodology—but case studies of a very special sort. She locates specified case studies that attempt to justify acts of secretive and/or deceptive language. Her examples stem from a variety of sources, like literature, private life, and work. “While completeness is obviously out of the question,” she writes, “the cases selected may shed light on the major kinds of lies, ways in which they vary, and excuses used for telling them” (Bok, 1999, p. xxxiii). In other words, examples of lying through misleading, mystifying speech, or manipulating others through deceptive omissions
(secrecy) do not qualify (in and of themselves) as sufficient case studies for ethical investigation. “We need to look most searchingly, not at what we would all reject as unconscionable, but at those cases where many see good reasons to lie” (Bok, 1999, p. xxxiii). Here starts the beginning of an ethical discourse.

Bok’s attention to these particular kinds of case studies is a rhetorical approach to ethics. As Gunn himself accedes, “To understand something as ‘rhetorical’ is to understand it as negotiable, as a contingent and protean object that can only be discerned partially and indirectly through case studies” (2005, p. xxiii). By attending to case studies that specifically submit good reasons for dishonesty, we can glean the logic of these excuses for deception, and then broaden our knowledge enough to discern what forms of academic obfuscation are ethically justifiable. For instance, as was stated earlier, Bok lists four categories where secrecy has served basic moral practices: (1) when secrecy protects our identity, such as keeping our religious or political beliefs hidden; (2) when secrecy conceals our plans, such as devising covert strategies in a game of chess; (3) when secrecy enables certain actions, such as facilitating the element of surprise; and (4) when secrecy defends our property, such that valuable information is treated as an object of confidential importance (Bok, 1989, pp. 20-24). In addition to these basic defenses of secrecy and their contribution to human autonomy, Bok also lists four common justifications for the practice of untruthful speech: (1) lying to prevent harm, such as misleading Nazis of the whereabouts of Jewish fugitives; (2) lying to achieve an overriding benefit, such as sparing patients of the news that they are dying, (3) lying to comport with fairness, such as following in the rules of a poker game, and (4) lying to serve the cause of veracity, such as telling a child to feel safe because his closet was recently sprayed with anti-monster
repellant (Bok, 1999, pp. 78-86). In sum, these several arguments for the practice of secretive and deceptive language constitute as more than mere excuses, for excuses often attempt to remove fault or blame. But the above excuses do not attempt to dodge responsibility—rather, they qualify as positions that own up to their actions, and defend those actions by supplying reasons that justify their use.

Within each of these justifications, there is room for the practice of secrecy and lies to be corrupted and abused. But when exercised with prudence, they form a reasonable basis for allowing the exchange of ambiguous or untruthful communication. Now, in addition to this, there must be a driving context to guide these justifications. The context for the purposes of this project shall be limited to the rhetoric (and goal) of the academy. The primary goal of the academy is “education” or “demystification”; therefore, its function is explicitly didactic (or edifying). The aim of education is enlightenment (or to serve the transfer of knowledge). Who among us would seriously suggest that the genuine purpose of education is misinformation, or worse, disinformation? No, the purpose of education is quality information—it is about the advancement of truth and the regression of ignorance. In such a context, there is a moral obligation on all teachers and scholars to demystify the complex, to explain the difficult, to correct the error, or to clarify the obscure. Treating obfuscation as the end of education rather than as its cause is to turn the pedagogical process on its head. Obscurity is the condition that initiates learning and wonder; in fact, it is the very obstacle which education seeks to remedy. Obscurity of meaning constitutes the conditions that make education necessary, for the need for learning is initiated by overcoming that which is unknown or unclear. “Learning is a pragmatic communicative function in a moment in which clarity does not reign” (Arnett, Fritz, &
Bell, 2009, p. xiv). But once clarity is achieved, then understanding can be secured. Learning is not an end in itself, but rather a means to an end (that being knowledge and understanding).

But the academy suffers from a rhetorical sickness known as *academese*. Academese is my shorthand way of expressing my concern for how far the standards of educated language has fallen. Spanning centuries of academic tradition, illumination was privileged over darkness—the triumph of truth over falsehood, fact over fiction. This hierarchical structure was also a moral structure that even played itself out in the dyad between expert and amateur. The amateur (or learner) is subordinate to the expert (or teacher), much like children are subordinate to their parents. As parents bear the responsibility of raising their children, so do children bear the responsibility of obeying their parents. The end of good parenting, after all, is to raise children who will grow into good parents themselves; and so the same expectations can hold out for the relationship between expert-teachers and amateur-students. This expert-amateur relationship can even be reflected in the very logic of discrimination that undergirds the structure of occultic rhetoric—where knowledge is possessed by an in-group over and against an out-group. But in the academic context, the expert in-group is responsible for ensuring the transfer of knowledge to the amateur out-group. And so, the academic tradition has been for experts to assume the role of *pedagogues* (teachers), and the amateurs to assume the role of pupils (students). But in the contemporary climate of academic language, many experts have foresworn their duty toward clear and profitable instruction, and have instead adopted the role of the *mystagogue*. 
“[T]his is really and specially the age of mystagogues,” writes G. K. Chesterton (1874-1936) in his essay Aristocrats as Mystagogues, sometimes titled Demagogues and Mystagogues. “The demagogue succeeds because he makes himself understood, even if he is not worth understanding. But the mystagogue succeeds because he gets himself misunderstood; although, as a rule, he is not even worth misunderstanding” (Chesterton, 1987, pp. 31-32). Mystagogy, it seems, has come to replace the traditional function of pedagogy in common, academic discourse. With this being the case, learning is no longer possible in an environment where knowledge is hoarded or kept hidden. Mirroring Gunn’s criticism of the arrogant and aristocratic professor Boris Balkan, Chesterton points out that “[a]n aristocracy is a secret society”; it is an in-group that subscribes to an exclusive language so that people “can be more effectively kept at a distance” (Chesterton, 1987, p. 34). This exclusive language is what Chesterton referred to as a Modern Jargon, an “impudent piece of pedantry” often characterized by “the habit of arbitrarily changing the ends of abstract words (which are bad enough already so as to make them sound more learned),” such as changing Christianity to Christianism, or Ethics to Ethology (Chesterton, 1987, p. 338). “What the deuce is Ethology?” Chesterton asks. “[T]here seems to be a curiously bloodless and polysyllabic style now adopted for the discussion of the most direct and intimate matters” (Chesterton, 1987, p. 339). While Chesterton agrees with Gunn about the impudent or pedantic status of modern, academic jargon, he does however stand squarely opposed to Gunn’s principle of ineffability. In his poem Mystagogue, Chesterton contends that truth, or any ideas of serious merit, will always strive toward communication rather than remain incommunicable.

Whenever you hear much of things being unutterable and indefinable and impalpable and unnamable and subtly indescribable, then elevate your aristocratic nose towards heaven and snuff up the smell of decay. It
is perfectly true that there is something in all good things that is beyond all speech or figure of speech. But it is also true that there is in all good things a perpetual desire for expression and concrete embodiment; and though the attempt to embody it is always inadequate, the attempt is always made. If the idea does not seek to be the word, the chances are that it is an evil idea. If the word is not made flesh it is a bad word. (Chesterton, 1912, p. 174)

The thrust of Chesterton’s critique stems from his conviction in the notion that goodness always tends towards “Incarnation,” while the trend of evil will always hide itself, remaining shapeless, wordless, unutterable. The Devil is worshiped as “the unspeakable name” (Chesterton, 1912, p. 175). Chesterton’s philosophy is unequivocally pedagogical; it reflects a bias toward publicity rather than secrecy, to manifest and debate rather than leave vacant or unexplained. And it is in this sense that it also mirrors the theological impulse of the Great Commission—to preach the truth boldly, always and everywhere, instead of opting for silence or mystification. Mystagogy, like Lutz’s doublespeak, is a corruption of pedagogical practice—it is language that pretends to share knowledge, but really doesn’t. Authentic pedagogues on the other hand undertake the valiant task of moving from the unintelligible to the intelligible, from darkness to light; but mystagogues seem to prefer lingering in the shade. “They can explain nothing because they have found nothing; and they found nothing because there is nothing to be found” (Chesterton, 1912, pp. 181). Because of this difference, both Chesterton and Bok endorse a pedagogical philosophy—a philosophy that privileges the light of publicity over the darkness of secrecy. In fact, as far as Chesterton is concerned, mystagogy is just a worse kind of demagoguery—“it is more vulgar than being a demagogue; because it is much easier” (Chesterton, 1987, p. 33). Thus, both Chesterton and Bok reject Gunn’s mystagogical philosophy of ineffability, and instead promote the value of public, intelligible communication.
The association of pedagogy with clear communication must be renewed; we must return to the traditional purpose of education, which is the sharing or transfer of knowledge. In other words, I offer a parallel presumption to Bok’s Principle of Veracity: that we all should, in the absence of special considerations, strive for accuracy and precision in our teaching. Whereas mystagogues operate under the presumption of the “Dr. Fox Hypothesis”—that “researchers who want to impress colleagues should write less intelligible papers”—pedagogues undertake the opposite presumption of the “Communication-for-Knowledge Hypothesis”—that “researchers should invest energy in developing understandable ways to present their findings” (Armstrong, 1982, p. 30). In order to live within a reasonably informed society, we as scholars in rhetoric must recognize the role of style in the means by which we inform the public. Inspired by Bok’s work, I submit a similar presumption which can be called the Principle of Clarity: an a priori ethical obligation among academics to share their knowledge plainly and directly, for the benefit of both the public and the professoriate. Unfortunately, at present, “[c]lear communication is not appreciated. Faculty are impressed by less readable articles. Lack of clarity is especially helpful when content is poor” (Armstrong, 1982, p. 32). By submitting this presumption as a primary commandment of academic communication, we can set a new standard of intellectual engagement that erodes the negative connotations of the academic profession, and restore the value of scholarly expertise necessary for the functioning of a more informed society.

In order to cultivate this society, we must rejuvenate the virtue of clarity alongside Bok’s principle of veracity; this move will demonstrate academia’s humility and good will to the public, in addition to offsetting the impressions of secrecy, snottiness, arrogance,
pridefulness, superiority, pedantry, priggishness, and impudence that Gunn, Garber, Barzun, Bok, Lutz, Chesterton, Sokal, and others have so thoroughly reported about earlier. The test of clarity, like that of veracity, must enter into the marketplace and engage people on their own grounds. This form of communicative engagement is a true hallmark of academic humility, as was displayed in the work of Paulo Freire (1921-1997). “Not all students in a class are brilliant, but mentors meet students on the ground where they walk rather than the soil on which we demand their presence,” writes communication ethicist Ronald Arnett in his analysis of Freire’s revolutionary pedagogy. “To fail to meet a student on his or her historical ground courts pessimism on our part as underprepared students disappoint us. Meeting the historical situation and rejecting the temptation to focus on our own ideals require us to engage life on its own terms, not in terms of our own demands” (Arnett, 2002, p. 505). The revolutionary element in Freire’s pedagogy is its humility, one that harmonizes with the principle of clarity since it compels the expert to meet the amateur on their own terms, literally (by translating the unintelligible into a terminology that the student or uninformed scholar can understand). Such is the method by which scholars in the liberal arts are able to walk the humanities into the marketplace, as reflected in Bok’s justification procedure (a morality-testing method that is geared toward publicity).

Striving for clarity and veracity are acts that exude a concern for the welfare of others, particularly the public marketplace, and other non-expert outsiders The three levels of Bok’s justification procedure is a method for determining the justifiability of deception by moving increasingly toward the public realm. In order to test when occultic rhetoric is ever justifiable, I submit that we apply the same logic of her procedure here: (1) we scrutinize our conscience—where academicians should weigh the reasons for occultic
rhetoric within their own minds; (2) we solicit helpful advice—where academicians should weigh the reasons for occultic rhetoric with fellow allies and wise experts; and (3) we enter into public debate—when academicians should weigh the reasons for occultic rhetoric with all outsiders, especially those of whom this rhetoric will affect the most. As Bok exclaims, “publicity is connected more directly to veracity than to other moral principles” (Bok, 1999, p. 92). The reason for this is because, from an ethical perspective, the public provides the greatest weight in approving the justification of certain moral practices. “Moral justification, therefore, cannot be exclusive or hidden; it has to be capable of being made public” (Bok, 1999, p. 92). Bok’s focus on publicity is a rhetorical understanding of ethics by the way it engages the polis—all members of the assembly, not just the self or a secret minority—to participate in the process of moral decision making. By assigning publicity as the metric by which we justify certain exceptions to the ethical rule, her philosophy in fact reflects the spirit of the Golden Rule, taking into consideration the perspective of reasonable persons—those persons who would be most affected by such exceptions. “The test of publicity asks which lies, if any, would survive the appeal for justification to reasonable persons” (Bok, 1999, p. 93).

Inherent to Bok’s philosophy of communication is an emphasis on human relationships, particularly between insiders and outsiders—hence her stress on the public (not the individual) as the province of justification. The interconnection between these two groups (expert and amateur; private and public; teacher and student) is what allows Bok to “recognize communication as a relational process” (Makau, 1991, p. 119). But part of being in a relational process carries the dilemma of how to assign fault amidst instances of occultic communication: Who is to blame when unintelligibility arises? Is blame to be
attributed to the student’s ignorance, or to the mystifying professor? How can we determine whether occultic rhetoric is in fact the result of expert intention, or amateur interpretation? Because rhetoric can be simultaneously revealing and ambiguous, the question of how to study it has thrown up many differences in opinion. For example, the contemporary British historian of rhetoric Richard Toye at the University of Exeter reports how George Orwell (1903-1950) and other advocates of plain-speech in the ‘rhetoric exposed’ school had emphasized intention over interpretation. From this perspective, Orwell placed greater responsibility on the clarity of speakers and leaders, having concentrated on “denouncing perceived abuses of language by contemporary politicians” (Toye, 2013, p. 60). In contrast to this, Toye then showcased Roland Barthes (1915-1980) and the ‘New Critics’ of the mid-twentieth century who began to challenge this approach by privileging the audience over the author, or the interpretation over intention. In other words, these literary critics argued that the message of a text was gathered only by how an audience understood it, rather than by what the author meant by it. As far as the New Critics were concerned, the author was dead, his or her intentions were indeterminable, and any biographical context should be kept irrelevant to the process of reaching a text’s meaning (Wimsatt & Beardsley, 1954; Barthes, 1967).

But the logic of the New Critics often showed signs of confusion, “descending at times into quasi-mysticism about the role of the reader” (Toye, 2013, p. 64). I submit that the privileging of either intention or interpretation over one or the other is a mistaken way to characterize the link between these two rhetorical (or hermeneutical) concepts. Similar to Bok’s insight about the bond between ethics and epistemology (Bok, 1999, p. 13), I argue that ‘it is possible to go beyond the notion that one is somehow prior to the other.
The two nourish one another, but neither can claim priority.’ Like Bok, I argue for a middle path: that intention and interpretation are rhetorically co-dependent concepts. As Eric Eisenberg has pointed out, researchers have remained “vague about the locus of ambiguity, i.e., whether it resides in the source’s intentions, the receiver’s interpretations, or in the message itself.” He seems to suggest that because fault is too difficult to locate in any one of these things, the relational process indicts them all as partially responsible. “[T]he concept of an ideally clear message is misleading in fundamental ways. Clarity (and conversely, ambiguity) is not an attribute of messages; it is a relational variable which arises through a combination of source, message, and receiver factors” (Eisenberg, 2007, pp. 6-7). Eisenberg advances a “contextual view of meaning,” one which considers identifying the locus (or blame) of ambiguity “an impossible task.” This does not, however, change the fact that fault or blame is real; only that it is difficult at times to ascertain.

But I digress: the object here is not meant to be one of hermeneutics, but rather ethics—it is not about locating a method or mechanism for determining what qualifies as, or who is necessarily more to blame for, ambiguous communication; rather, it is about focusing on the reasons we advance in order to justify the intentional practice of rhetorical ambiguity. As such, Eisenberg focuses majorly on the role of the intender rather than that of the interpreter, having “limit[ed] the discussion to those instances where individuals use ambiguity purposefully to accomplish their goals,” rather than devote much attention to those instances of “perceived ambiguity” which he describes as a “psychological variable” distinct from strategic ambiguity (Eisenberg, 2007, p. 7). Still, this interactional view should not imply that the interpreter holds no degree of responsibility; in fact, if the philosopher Diane Davis is correct, the very idea of responsibility—or “response-
ability”—is inseparable from the obligations of the attentive listener (Davis, 2010). Active listening is a condition of ethical communication, for the sharing of meaning is never without the simultaneous transaction of speaking and listening. Listening, therefore, is a ‘response-ability’ or “pact” (Gunn, 2018, p. 35) foundational to the function of all communication. Thus, in the context of academia, the amateur listener or interpreter has an obligation to listen actively, and to read closely. As was the lesson in Sokal’s hoax, journal editors who are not actively understanding what they are reading have no business working in the academic publication industry. At the same time, we ought to neither assume that a text is always dubious whenever its meaning is not immediately apparent or intelligible to us.

In cases where messages fail to be understood, we as listeners and interpreters have an obligation to neither endorse nor condemn the message; rather, we must remain neutral, or in a sense, agnostic. To drive this point closer to home, the academic audience must be wary of avoiding two hermeneutical snares: (1) the Overreading Principle, and (2) the Noseeum Principle. Starting with the former, I draw from Colin Davis’s text Critical Excess (2010) in order to define the Overreading principle as an activity that “refuse[s] the hermeneutic regulation of interpretation,” which is to say, it “entails a willingness to test or to exceed the constraints which restrict the possibilities of meaning released by a work” (Davis, 2010, p. ix). The overreading principle goes beyond the symbolic stops of the author, violating the limits of interpretation contra Aleister Crowley’s ‘hermeneutics of authority.’ Overreading is an abuse of interpretation which the semiotician and literary critic Umberto Eco (1932-2016) called “overinterpretation.” In his work Interpretation and Overinterpretation (1990), Eco asked, “by what criterion do we decide that a given textual
interpretation is an instance of overinterpretation? One can object that in order to define a bad interpretation one needs the criteria for defining a good interpretation. I think on the contrary that we can accept a sort of Popper-like principle according to which if there are no rules that help to ascertain which interpretations are the ‘best’ ones, there is at least a rule for ascertaining which ones are ‘bad’” (Eco, 1990, p. 169). Eco sought a standard of hermeneutic falsifiability that still allowed multiple interpretations to arise, but argued that some interpretations were better than others.

Overreading is one example where interpretations can go awry, as evident by the various hoaxes formerly discussed in the literature review. For example, the journal editors at Cogent Social Sciences read Peter Boghossian and James Lindsay’s “The Conceptual Penis as a Social Construct”; and instead of seeing it for the rubbish it truly was, the editors overread the faux article as a stimulating project worthy of publication. They perceived something meaningful in a text which was intentionally meaningless (or, to be more fair, meaningful insofar as parodies go). Peering into an unclear text and deriving comprehension is a suspect way of doing hermeneutics, and the vice of the overreading principle has much to blame for that. As Richard Johanessen points out, “it seems ethically dubious to lack understanding of an argument but to pretend to agree with it in order to mask our lack of comprehension” (Johanessen, 2008, p. 122). This was the failure of Alan Sokal’s reviewers in Social Text; it was the failure of the dissertation advisors of the Bogdanov twins; and it continues to be the failure of journal editors world-wide whose chronic support for mystagogical prose fuels the standards of the Dr. Fox Hypothesis.

The second snare to be mindful of is the Noseeum principle—the assumption that the absence of evidence is justified as the evidence of absence. Noseeum arguments are
probabilistic arguments that rely on the condition that, more likely than not, the item in question would be detectable if existent. For example, we can apply the Noseeum principle by asking ourselves if there is an elephant in the living room. If we check the living room and see no elephant, then the principle allows us to be justified in the knowledge that there is no elephant in the living room. But if we were to ask ourselves if a sandflea is in the living room, then the justification allowed by the principle would certainly be much harder to satisfy. It seems that the Noseeum rule admits exceptions depending on reasonable expectations of the “seeability” of the item in question. Thus, in the context of academic communication, freshman-level students and other amateur interpreters may be impatient with the rhetoric of scholarly texts, and condemn them as too difficult to understand. They may also rashly assume that because the meaning of a text is not readily apparent to them, they are justified in concluding that the text is therefore meaningless and worthless. But this would commit a faulty application of the Noseeum principle.

Imagine a student who finds a philosophy manuscript in the library. It has many sections that seem utterly meaningless. (I certainly hope that this example does not apply to this book.) The student is about to dismiss the paper as nonsense, until it occurs to him that a distinguished philosopher may have written it. Philosophers are known to write specialized papers that are intelligible only to a small group of their peers. So the student’s Noseeum case fails. There is no warrant for the students to say, “I don’t see the merit of this paper, therefore it doesn’t have merit.” If the paper did have merit, the student is not likely to have seen it anyway! Notice that the Noseeum case fails even if we aren’t sure that the paper was in fact written by a distinguished philosopher. The mere possibility that it was is enough to defeat the student’s presumption that “there is no merit to this paper.” (D’Souza, 2013, pp. 69-70)

Such is the risk with all probabilistic arguments, for no amount of probability can amount to absolute certainty. Still, not to be entirely sidetracked by these hermeneutical considerations, the Noseeum principle does suggest some important ethical implications for the active listener. In order for listeners to be ‘response-able’ actors in the academic community, they must apply the Noseeum principle virtuously, understanding the nuances
that allow certain exceptions, and made aware of the fact that, in the absence of clarity, the honest adoption of *epoché* (the suspension of judgment) is the ethically preferable choice over other options regarding works that we do not fully understand. By rejecting difficult theoretical rhetoric as meaningless (without first understanding its meaninglessness) is no more arrogant on the part of the interpreter than the editors’ endorsement of difficult theoretical articles as meaningful (without first understanding their meaningfulness). What is needed for the outsider/interpreter to exercise their rhetorical (or hermeneutical) obligations more ethically is if they apply the Noseeum principle more judiciously, having patience and humility with difficult texts before reaching the hasty conclusion that the text is nonsense all because the meaning is not (yet) evident to them.

This project does not claim to exhaust all the ethical inquiries from every conceivable scenario of occultic communication in academia; but having so far offered some coordinates on the ethical duties of the outsider/interpreter, I now shift my attention primarily on the ethical duties of the insider/intender. When we intend to deploy occultic rhetoric, there is a greater responsibility placed upon us than if our obscurities were the result of sloppiness. As Bok has pointed out, “There is a large category of statements where deceit is not intended, but truthful communication is far from being achieved” (Bok, 1999, p.xxi). When occultic rhetoric is only *apparent*—without occultic intent—then whatever may be perceived as occultic in our speech or texts is a mere product of incidence, free from ethical guilt. Consider, for example, the innocent trust we place in superstitions or *illogical* thoughts. The philosopher Nicholas Rescher at the University of Pittsburgh believes that the unintentional or accidental use of unsound evidence or illogical reasoning is not a moral or ethical issue: “the obligation to be rational is not a moral obligation, and
lapses from rationality are not moral lapses” (Rescher, 1977, p. 80). A defective intelligence, he says, is guilty of ‘gaffes,’ but not ‘sins.’ Therefore, Rescher contends that only when occultic rhetoric is not just apparent, but legitimate—when we deliberately set out to deceive others by means of improper reasoning or fallacious, equivocating language—do we become “morally culpable,” (Rescher, 1977, p. 81). The propagation of logical fallacies, as a form of occultic rhetoric, if used disingenuously, becomes tantamount to lying and dishonesty.

Our intentions (even if not fully actualized) are not the only variables at play in the ethics of occultic rhetoric. There is also the matter of duties. Duties are ethical obligations tethered to the particularity of contexts whenever and wherever they arise, and so the natural shifting of these contexts will always alter the ethical demands placed upon us according to time and place. Being a speaker in a political context, for example, will permit different standards of ambiguous communication than if the speaker were in a relaxed context. Other scholars, like Sister Miriam Joseph (1898-1982), have made similar points about how ethical duties fluctuate with the changing of our circumstances: “Although ambiguity is a fault to be carefully guarded against in purely intellectual communications, it is sometimes deliberatively sought in aesthetical or literary communication” (Joseph, 2002, p. 42). It would seem that the ‘appropriateness’ (tu prepon) of rhetorical style (of either clarity or obscurity) is determined by the ethical duties inherent within each and every ‘opportune moment’ (kairos) of human communication. What this means is that not all contexts demand rhetorical clarity: “practical experience suggests that complete clarity, despite our professed desire to achieve it, is not always the best rhetorical strategy” (Jasinski, 2001, p. 9). Sometimes clarity can leave no wiggle room for negotiation; it can
even result in acts of *truth-dumping*, where “parents…bombard their children with criticisms, spouses who gloomily dwell on each other’s dreariest traits, curt health professionals who shock unprepared patients with grim new—all may be telling the truth even as they violate fundamental standards of respect and concern” (Bok, 1999, p. xxii-xxiii). These examples reveal how our circumstances give rise to different ethical rules that determine the appropriateness of rhetorical style.

But in the case of academic rhetoric, the expectation of plain and direct speech is preferable for the aims of pedagogy. Within a pedagogical context, the Communication-for-Knowledge hypothesis must be the standard practice governing academic discourse. Even Richard Johanessen affirms the observation that “[m]ost people probably would agree that intentional ambiguity is unethical in situations where accurate instruction or efficient transmission of precise information is the acknowledged purpose. Even in most so-called persuasive communication situations, intentional ambiguity would be ethically suspect. However, in some situations communicators may feel that the intentional creation of ambiguity or vagueness is necessary, accepted, expected as normal, and even ethically justified” (Johanessen, 2008, p. 106). One example where academicians can be justified in overriding the principle of clarity is when teachers, like Jesus Christ from earlier, use parables, allegories, metaphors, and other forms of ambiguity (or defamiliarization) to teach lessons that stimulate contemplation through analogies. But notice how this form of ambiguity is beneficent and instructive. In a context where non-expert audiences are present to learn, the pedagogical use of ambiguity can be rewarding without relying on its capacity for confusion or concealment. Unlike Christ’s audience, many of whom were
hostile to his message, the academic audience is geared toward a desire to understand—*for that is the very reason why the academy exists.*

Other forms of ambiguity are pardonable if not unavoidable, such as the word *rhetoric* which is itself a necessarily ambiguous term. But beyond these sorts of justifications, there simply is no reason to obstruct the learning of others when the ethical responsibility of the academy is to teach and communicate knowledge. It may be helpful therefore to distinguish between two forms of ambiguity: the ‘determinate’ form (which, as mentioned, is helpful and therefore justifiable), and the ‘indeterminate’ form (which is intended to shun the Other). The *indeterminacy* of ambiguous language—stemming from the *indeterminacy thesis* which is nothing more than Gunn’s principle of ineffability by a different term (Jasinski, 2001, p. 9)—refers to a type of ambiguity that misleads or confounds the audience rather than enlightens them. It is this type of rhetorical obscurity that Aristotle warns against in his *Rhetoric*:

avoid ambiguities; unless indeed you definitively desire to be ambiguous, as those do who have nothing to say but are pretending to mean something. Such people are apt to put that sort of thing into verse. Empedocles, for instance, by his long circumlocutions imposes on his hearers; these are affected in the same way as most people are when they listen to diviners, whose ambiguous utterances are received with nods of acquiescence… Diviners use these vague generalities about the matter in hand because their predictions are thus, as a rule, less likely to be falsified. We are more likely to be right, in the game of ‘odd and even’, if we simply guess ‘even’ or ‘odd’ than if we guess at the actual number; and the oracle-monger is more likely to be right if he simply says that a thing will happen than if he says *when* it will happen and therefore have a definite date. All these ambiguities have the same sort of effect, and are to be avoided unless we have some such object as that mentioned. (Aristotle, 1952, p. 658).

Within certain contexts, like in a game of poker, such attempts at ambiguous or deceptive communication can be found justifiable. But within academia, where the explicit goal is pedagogical and intrinsically biased toward the advancement of accuracy and truth, the practices of mystification cannot be justified. The scholarly enterprise bears an ethical
expectation toward the humanistic ideal of sharing knowledge, not occluding it. By
overriding the principle of clarity in such a context is, therefore, unethical. As others have
pointed out, “[f]rom a pragmatic standpoint, vagueness is only perceived a fault when a
speaker deliberately violates ‘reasonable expectations’ about specification levels, when a
speaker reneges on an obligation to inform and/or withholds information another has a right
to know” (Kaufer, 1983, p. 211). The amateur’s right to gain knowledge is interlocked with
the expert’s obligation to give knowledge. Failure to recognize the link between rights and
responsibilities, we can only expect, will result in the very conditions that prompt Gunn’s
warning about the Great Magi: “the rhetorical lesson to be learned from the Great Magi of
modernity is an ethical one,” one that has “to do with the ways in which we ignore or forget
those whom we exclude or discipline with our words in here, in the academy” (Gunn, 2005,
p. 234). It is therefore important to cultivate a virtuous sense of discretion when it comes
to our uses of occultic rhetoric.

As Bok makes clear, it is only through the maturity of discretion that one can be
sensitive to the duties or expectations that impinge upon us from the ever-changing cycle
of contexts that qualify every moment of existence. She writes, “This ability, which I have
called discretion, therefore calls for the judgment to pick and choose among incoming
messages and possible outgoing ones: and thus in turn for sensitivity to certain forms of
manipulative rhetoric and advocacy, whether in family or group settings or in such large-
scale practices as advertising or campaign bombast” (Bok, 1989, p. 43). While Bok and
Gunn may differ on some fundamental principles of language, they both recognize the
values of humility and respect for the Other. Without a maturity of discretion, the
relationship between expert and amateur—insider and outsider—can become uncharitable
and sadistic. This moral failure is what led to the demise of the Great Modern Magus in the first place. But we in the academy can learn from the mistakes of the occult, by “recognizing our ignorance and celebrating the virtue of humility” (Gunn, 2005, p. 235). To exercise humility, we need to manage the boundary between expert and amateur with greater care. “Learning to handle secrecy with discretion blends with and reflects moral development. In each, one must come to see oneself and others as capable of moral choice and as owed respect” (Bok, 1989, p. 44). Only then can occultic rhetoric be exercised ethically, and the academician can dodge the yawning chasm that swallowed the occultist.

CONCLUSION

“We struggle all our days with misunderstandings, and no apology is required for any study which can prevent or remove them. Of course, inevitably at present, we have no measure with which to calculate the extent and degree of our hourly losses in communication,” wrote the iconic rhetorician I. A. Richards (1893-1979). In some ways, the logic of this project can be attributed to his philosophy of rhetoric which he defined as “the study of misunderstanding and its remedies” (Richards, 1939, p. 3). Occultic rhetoric indubitably fosters misunderstanding through the manipulation of unfamiliar, technical, coded, or ambiguous word choice and arrangement; it confounds outsiders and insulates knowledge among insiders. While not all instances of occultic rhetoric or occluded meaning are intended by the speaker/author, we have witnessed a panoply of examples where obfuscation is the explicit aim of many within the academic community. This move away from pedagogy toward mystagogy is worrisome for the future of academia. In fact, the effects of occultic rhetoric can be distressing to society at large. As the historian Steven Fischer explains, “A society also obfuscates, lies and deceives through language, with dire
consequences for the personal freedoms of its members who are thereby deprived of their right of achieving a democratic consent. Such misuse of language is a symptom of an ill society. In the past, governments which have practised this misuse for a protracted period have invariably perished” (Fischer, 1999, p. 191). Peril, it seems, awaits all who abuse the justifiable limits of occultic rhetoric. But this need not be the future of the academy.

In order to subdue the abuses of occultic rhetoric, we must adhere to a principle of clarity as the standard style of academic communication. Style has a complex (perhaps inseparable) relationship with content, controlling the ways in which information is understood. In his *Rhetoric*, Aristotle affirmed that “Style to be good must be clear, as is proved by the fact that speech which fails to convey a plain meaning will fail to do just what speech has to do” (Aristotle, 1952, p. 654). Occultic style on the other hand strives too often toward indeterminate ambiguity rather than *disambiguation* (the reduction of uncertainty in meaning or interpretation). Hence, the remedy to occultic rhetoric may rest in what some have called the Plain Language movement. The call for plain and direct speech can be heard at times from various scholars frustrated by the inscrutability of, say, postmodernist prose, such as the historian of science Michael Shermer who proclaimed: “It’s time we put a stop to the lunacy and demand critical thinking and clear communication” (Sokal, 2017). Plain Language is more or less a movement among technical and professional communication scholars who see clarity as a virtue worth promoting in all manners of social, legal, and organizational discourse. In *Plain Language and Ethical Action* (2015), Russell Willerton of Boise State University explains that “[p]lain language gives citizens and consumers better access to their rights, and it combats the information apartheid that convoluted, overly complicated documents generate.”
Unfortunately, he admits, “I have been both surprised and a bit dismayed that plain language has not received much attention in the field’s publications” (Willerton, 2015, p. xiii). One reason for this lack of reception, I presume, stems from the insecurities of persistent, ambitious scholars, indicating academia’s enduring commitment to, and prolonged dependence on, occultic modes of speech.

Such anxieties were hinted at earlier when Gunn lamented: “as our jobs becomes less plentiful and tenure goes the way of the dodo, as resources become more scarce and we are made to compete for a sense of security, the pressure to produce the contentious, argumentative… ‘theory Nazi’ is increasing” (Gunn, 2005, p. 235). It would seem that the ascendancy of ‘theor-ese,’ as it were, is proportionately attributable to a profit motive, a motive to attain a career, to preserve one’s status, and to ascend the intellectual hierarchy. This explains why the ethics of plain language has not received as much attention in the academic literature. When diplomas and faculty positions are put on the line, our pedagogical obligations to ethical standards of clarity are compromised and demoted in favor of a rhetorical style that (although less intelligible) we trust will better ensure the achievement of our personal aims. This is the great secret—the “ruse”—of the academy, argues Gunn; “the content running cover for form” (Gunn, 2005, p. 236). We turn to style when argument is lacking. Or, if you can’t convince them, confuse them. Such is the risk of clarity; or, to repeat the earlier phrase: “the profit motive is dangerous because ethics are expensive” (Boghossian & Lindsay, 2017). This is the reasoning that guides most academicians today, and which also led the British philosopher Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) to give the following advice: “I suggest to young professors that their first work should be written in a jargon only to be understood by the erudite few. With that behind

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them, they can ever after say what they have to say in a language ‘understanded of the people’” (Russell, 2009, p. 37). Who could deny that the profit motive is compelling? Even Russell condones it. Why honor our duty to clarity if it is so costly?

I want to conclude this project by challenging the assumption that (plain language) ethics is expensive. Maybe it is to some; but not to those who have nothing to hide. In Writing for Dollars, Writing to Please: The Case for Plain Language in Business, Government, and Law (2012), professor emeritus Joseph Kimble of Western Michigan University dispels ten of the most common myths against plain language (e.g., plain language is anti-intellectual, or plain language earns less prestige, etc.), and summarized fifty studies showing that using plain language can actually save tons of money for businesses, organizations, and governments. If plain language can accomplish this much in other sectors of society, imagine how it could restore faith in public institutions like the modern academy. Contrary to Gunn’s account, the benefits of clarity are not costly, but rather cost-effective. Other scholars agree that plainness of speech would lead to improvements in the quality of academic journals: “Such a program would aid in the communication of knowledge. It's cheap. It's needed. Let's do it. Now!” (Armstrong, 1982, p. 32). So which is it? Are ethics cheap, or are they expensive? Between clarity and obscurity, it might simply depend on what we deem as profitable. For many unintelligible scholars, occultic rhetoric has won them fame, prestige, disciples, and influence. But for those of us concerned about academic integrity, one cannot traverse this carnival of confusion without, at times, wondering: What does the academy profit if it gains the whole world, but loses its very soul?
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