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Postmodern Rhetorical Tricks

Examining arguments and distinguishing meanings



WORLDVIEW AND LOGIC

Thinking biblically and entering into conversation

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Postmodern rhetorical tricks

How Nicholas Shackel exposes linguistic and argumentative tricks, and why this matters for Christian apologetics

Summary: Postmodernist statements about truth, knowledge, rationality, language, and power can sound extraordinarily radical while remaining surprisingly difficult to pin down. In The Vacuity of Postmodernist Methodology, Nicholas Shackel investigates precisely this phenomenon. His thesis is not simply that certain postmodernist views are false. He wants to show how their argumentative effect often arises through ambiguity, shifts in meaning, and switching between strong and weak theses. His analysis is particularly illuminating where terms such as “truth” or “knowledge” change their meaning unnoticed. For Christian apologetics this opens a further question: what presuppositions about truth, meaning, and rationality must even those who dispute their objectivity already employ?

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1. Why postmodernist arguments are so difficult to grasp

Some philosophical texts create a peculiar impression: one reads statements about truth, power, language, knowledge, and social construction and initially feels that something extraordinarily profound lies before one. Yet as soon as one asks more precisely what is actually being asserted, the matter becomes surprisingly difficult to grasp. It becomes still more striking when one criticizes a radical statement and is then told that something far more harmless was really intended.

Nicholas Shackel starts precisely here. Instead of merely refuting postmodernist positions individually yet again, he investigates recurring rhetorical and argumentative mechanisms. His essay explicitly identifies five such procedures.

Shackel names five particularly important mechanisms:

1. Troll’s Truisms (/trəʊlz 'truːɪzəmz/): radical claims hiding behind banalities.

2. Motte-and-Bailey Strategies (/ˌmɒt ən 'beɪli 'strætədʒiz/): switching back and forth between a strong and a weak thesis.

3. Equivocating Fulcra (/ɪ'kwɪvəkeɪtɪŋ 'fʊlkrə/): using key terms ambiguously so that different meanings can be invoked as required.

4. Postmodernist Fox-Trot (/ˌpəʊstmɒdənɪst 'fɒkstrɒt/): using rationality while simultaneously disputing its binding force.

5. Rankly Relativising Fields (/'ræŋkli 'relətɪvaɪzɪŋ fiːldz/): creating an intellectual environment in which objective standards increasingly disappear.

These five mechanisms belong together. The same basic structure appears repeatedly: two statements or meanings are linguistically close but by no means philosophically identical. One is exciting and radical; the other is unremarkable and easy to defend. The rhetorical force then arises because the strong statement benefits from the plausibility of the weak one.

> **The decisive question is therefore not only: “Is this statement true?” One must also ask: “Is the same statement actually still being defended throughout the argument?”**

This is precisely why Shackel's analysis is practically interesting. One need not have read every postmodernist author in full to recognize certain argumentative moves. First one must learn to look closely:

- What claim is actually being made?
- Which concept carries the argument?
- Does its meaning remain the same?
- Is a weaker thesis suddenly defended when criticism arises?
- Does the strong conclusion really follow from what has actually been demonstrated?

2. From truisms to the motte-and-bailey strategy

Troll’s Truisms: when something true is supposed to prove more than it can

Shackel's first example is the statement that something constructed could also have been constructed differently. In a certain sense this is almost self-evident. People form beliefs, create linguistic meanings, and develop models with which they describe the world. It does not follow, however, that reality itself is therefore arbitrarily constructed by us. It is precisely this transition that Shackel criticizes.

Take a simple example. We Germans call a certain object “Baum”; in English it is called “tree.” Theoretically, we could have used an entirely different sign. It follows that:

- The word is chosen by humans.
- Linguistic classification has conventional elements.
- Different cultures can give the same reality different names.

But it does not follow that:

- The tree exists only because we have named it.
- Our word produces its properties.
- A linguistic redefinition automatically changes the object itself.

Tomorrow we could decide to stop calling water “water” and call it “liquid X” instead. We would thereby have changed our vocabulary, not the chemical composition of what we drink.

> **We can change the map without thereby changing the landscape.**

Here lies precisely the truism Shackel describes. The weak statement is: our concepts, descriptions, and beliefs are formed by humans. The strong statement, by contrast, is: what is true and what the world is like are therefore constructed by us and ultimately arbitrary. The second thesis is not justified simply because the first is obviously correct.

The same can be shown with medical concepts. The statement “What is classified as an illness depends partly on human conceptual systems” can be perfectly reasonable. Medical categories develop, borderline cases are reassessed, and diagnostic terminologies change.

But we must distinguish:

- People classify illnesses.
- People develop names for illnesses.
- People can be mistaken in such classifications.

That is different from:

- People create an illness through their classification.
- The illness exists only because of social recognition.

A virus does not disappear because a society changes its designation. The distinction between our description of reality and the reality described must not be lost.

Motte and bailey: the strong thesis and the safe retreat

This structure leads Shackel to his most famous concept: the motte-and-bailey strategy. A medieval motte-and-bailey castle had a larger, more attractive area, the bailey, and a fortified but less pleasant retreat, the motte. As long as there was no serious danger, people used the attractive ground. Under heavy attack they retreated into the motte. After the attack the more attractive area could be occupied again.

Shackel transfers this pattern to philosophical positions:

- Bailey: exciting, strong, far-reaching, but hard to defend.
- Motte: weak, unremarkable, but easy to defend.

Take the strong claim:

> **“Truth is produced by social power.”**

This sounds revolutionary. It seems to say that social power relations not only influence what people believe but in some sense determine what is true. If someone objects, retreat can follow:

> **“All that is meant is that power influences which statements are recognized as true within a society.”**

This second statement is much easier to defend. Institutions can of course influence:

- which views are taught at universities,
- which research receives funding,
- which statements are circulated in the media,
- which positions enjoy social prestige,
- which beliefs are sanctioned or marginalized.

But it does not follow that power produces the truth of these statements.

> **What people believe to be true is not the same as what is true.**

The motte-and-bailey move works so effectively because the two statements are closely connected in subject matter. One may not even notice that a philosophically very strong thesis has just been replaced by a much weaker one.

> **The radical thesis supplies the impact. The harmless thesis supplies the defense.**

The problem is expressly not that someone clarifies a view. Anyone who recognizes that an original claim went too far may of course correct it. The problem arises where the weaker statement is advocated only during the attack and the stronger thesis is subsequently used again.

3. When “truth” suddenly means something else

“What is true?” and “What is accepted as true?”

Probably the most difficult part of Shackel's analysis concerns Michel Foucault's concept of truth. The problem becomes understandable once we keep two questions strictly separate:

- What is true?
- What is accepted as true within a particular society?

These questions can have the same answer but need not. Imagine an authoritarian kingdom. The king proclaims that the earth is flat. Schools must teach it, books contradicting it are banned, and professors holding another view lose their positions. After several generations the majority of the population is convinced: “The earth is flat.”

We can now ask two different things.

Question 1: What is accepted as true in this society?

- The earth is flat.

Question 2: Is the earth actually flat?

- No.

The decisive distinction is now visible. Political power can ensure that a false statement is socially recognized, taught, and even protected against criticism. It thereby possesses great power over beliefs, but no power to change the earth's shape in accordance with the official doctrine.

> **Power can influence what is accepted as true. It does not follow that power determines what is true.**

Foucault's special use of “truth”

This is precisely where Shackel approaches Foucault. Foucault describes “truth” as an ordered system of procedures by which statements are produced, regulated, distributed, and made socially effective. Shackel's objection is: if “truth” is defined in this way, it is no longer automatically the same thing we normally mean when saying that a statement is true.

The two meanings can be kept clearly apart:

- Truth A: a statement is true if what it asserts is actually the case.
- Truth B: a social system produces, circulates, regulates, and authorizes certain statements.

Interesting investigations can be undertaken into truth B. One can ask:

- Who decides which research is considered serious?
- Which institutions possess epistemic authority?
- Which beliefs receive social rewards?
- Which statements receive political support?
- Which positions are publicly marginalized?
- What role do power, money, and institutions play in circulating beliefs?

All these questions may be important. Initially, however, they do not answer whether the statements being circulated are also true.

Where the impression of philosophical depth arises

The difficulty arises when “truth” switches back and forth between the two meanings. With truth A, the statement “Truth is connected with power” sounds extraordinarily radical. It seems to make a profound statement that even a claim's being true depends on power relations.

With truth B, however, this becomes something far more harmless: social procedures for producing and recognizing statements stand within social power relations. This is hardly surprising. For example, if a government funds universities, passes laws, and controls public institutions, it naturally influences social structures of knowledge.

The two statements are therefore:

- Strong: power produces truth.
- Weak: power influences social procedures by which statements are recognized as true.

The second thesis does not prove the first.

Shackel's criticism is precisely that readers can gain the impression that both things are being discussed simultaneously. The ordinary concept of truth supplies the philosophical drama, while the newly defined meaning provides a safe retreat when criticism arises.

> **The decisive checking question is: are we discussing what is true, or what people and institutions treat as true?**

4. Equivocating fulcra: how concepts carry arguments

What “Equivocating Fulcra” means

Shackel calls concepts used ambiguously in this way Equivocating Fulcra. The English word fulcrum denotes the pivot or support point of a lever. With a small support point a lever can amplify force and change its direction. This is precisely Shackel's image: an ambiguous redefinition gives mere rhetorical effect the appearance of argumentative force.

The process can be presented in four steps:

1. A familiar word has an ordinary meaning.

2. The word is given a new or special definition for a theory.

3. The two meanings are subsequently no longer kept clearly separate.

4. Conclusions benefit alternately from properties of both meanings.

> **The philosophical impression then arises not from a new insight into the same thing, but because two meanings of the same word slide into each other unnoticed.**

An important qualification: not every ambiguity is intentional deception. Shackel's analysis concerns the argumentative function of this ambiguity. What matters is whether an argument derives its effect from a failure to distinguish clearly between different meanings of a key concept.

The example of “knowledge”

Shackel examines the same mechanism in David Bloor's sociology of knowledge. For his sociological investigation Bloor uses a special concept of knowledge: “knowledge” there essentially means what people firmly believe, what they orient their lives by, and what is collectively recognized or institutionally authorized. Shackel points out that this concept differs from the ordinary philosophical concept of knowledge.

Again, two meanings can be distinguished:

- Knowledge A: cognition that is actually true and can epistemically count as knowledge.
- Knowledge B: a belief collectively accepted and socially treated as knowledge.

The two categories can coincide. A scientific community may collectively recognize something because it has good reasons and its belief is true. But they can just as easily diverge. A society may collectively “know” something that is actually false.

This makes a considerable difference to statements such as:

> **“Knowledge is socially produced.”**

What does this sentence mean?

If “knowledge B” is intended:

- Institutions influence which beliefs are recognized.
- Societies form teaching traditions.
- Authorities lend particular statements special weight.
- Groups decide which views they treat as established.

Then the statement is plausible.

If “knowledge A” is intended:

- Social processes produce a belief's being true.
- Collective agreement turns a claim into knowledge.
- The truth of a state of affairs arises through social recognition.

Then a much stronger claim is being made.

That is precisely why we must ask: which meaning of “knowledge” is carrying the conclusion at this point?

Why redefinitions are not the real problem

Philosophy and science may of course define technical terms. Scientific work would scarcely be possible without precise definitions. A redefinition becomes problematic only when the theory subsequently argues as if the newly defined concept still possessed all the properties of the ordinary concept.

If a sociologist explicitly explains, “In my investigation, by knowledge I mean socially recognized beliefs,” he can meaningfully investigate:

- how such beliefs arise,
- how they are circulated,
- which institutions stabilize them,
- how they acquire authority.

However, this has not yet clarified:

- whether they are true,
- why they are true,
- whether society has good reasons for them,
- which procedures actually produce reliable knowledge.

> **A definition can stipulate how a word is used within an investigation. It cannot, merely by stipulation, change the reality previously discussed using that word.**

5. The postmodernist fox-trot: rationality against rationality

Can one argue that arguments have no objective force?

With the postmodernist fox-trot, Shackel describes a further switch. Certain postmodernist positions deny or relativize objectively binding standards of rationality. Rationality then appears as something historically, culturally, or socially produced. At the same time, however, reasons are offered, opposing positions criticized, contradictions exposed, and conclusions drawn.

This creates a fundamental tension. Someone arguing seems, at least in practice, to presuppose that not just any reason is as good as any other. Such a person distinguishes between:

- relevant and irrelevant reasons,
- valid and invalid inferences,
- apt and mistaken objections,
- contradictory and consistent positions,
- correct and incorrect presentations of a theory.

A simplified conversation shows the problem:

> **A: “There are no objectively binding rational standards.”**
>
> **B: “Why should I believe that?”**
>
> **A: “Because historical investigations show that cultures have different conceptions of rationality.”**
>
> **B: “Then you are giving me a reason right now and expecting that this reason actually supports your conclusion.”**
>
> **A: “But your demand for an objectively good reason already presupposes your own understanding of rationality.”**

Now the back-and-forth begins. When rational argument is offered, rationality seems to possess normative force. When this normative force becomes problematic, there is a retreat to the claim that no objectively binding rationality was meant to be presupposed at all.

> **If reasons count, the argument against objective rationality must also be examined rationally. If reasons do not count, why should one accept this argument?**

What is not being claimed

Shackel's objection does not mean that every criticism of theories of rationality is self-contradictory. People can dispute:

- what constitutes a good justification,
- which rules of inference are valid,
- which epistemic norms are justified,
- how cultural factors influence our thinking,
- where apparently neutral models of rationality actually have problematic presuppositions.

The difficulty arises only with a much stronger thesis: that there are no objectively binding rational norms at all, while one's own theory is simultaneously to be distinguished from competing positions by arguments.

Anyone saying that a counterargument is wrong, misunderstands their position, or commits a fallacy is already drawing on normative distinctions. They are not merely saying, “I don't like your argument.” They are claiming that something is factually wrong with it.

6. When relativism becomes a closed system of thought

Rankly relativising fields

According to Shackel, the various mechanisms can stabilize each other. Ambiguities concerning “truth,” “knowledge,” “objectivity,” and “rationality” then no longer form isolated problems but an interconnected intellectual environment. When one meaning is criticized, another ambiguous term can be used in its defense.

Shackel therefore describes rankly relativising fields. In such an environment, roughly the following development can occur:

- Truth is increasingly connected with social recognition.

- Knowledge is connected with collectively accepted beliefs.
- Objectivity is suspected of being a product of certain interests or power structures.
- Rationality is understood as historically or culturally produced.
- Criticism of these views is in turn interpreted through the same categories.

It becomes particularly problematic when every possible reaction can be integrated into one's theory:

- Agreement: you have recognized the power structures.
- Disagreement: your disagreement shows how deeply you yourself are shaped by these power structures.
- Logical criticism: you are merely presupposing a particular model of rationality.
- A demand for objectivity: supposedly, this very demand confirms the criticized ideology of objectivity.

A decisive question then arises:

> **Under what conditions could the theory still be recognized as false at all?**

A theory must be able to distinguish between two possibilities:

- My critic is mistaken.
- My critic has uncovered an error in my theory.

If these two possibilities can no longer be kept apart, the position increasingly immunizes itself against criticism.

The path to absolute irrationalism

Shackel describes an endpoint of absolute irrationalism in which ultimately every claim would be as good as any other. He considers this endpoint self-refuting. Even meaningful language already presupposes distinctions between correct and incorrect usage. Without such distinctions, according to Shackel, we would no longer have language and thought, but merely noises.

Take the sentence:

> **“The dog is sitting in front of the house.”**

For this sentence to communicate anything at all, it cannot at the same time equally well mean:

- The moon is made of cheese.
- Two plus two is five.
- Napoleon lives in Berlin today.
- It will rain tomorrow.

Communication presupposes that words cannot arbitrarily mean absolutely anything at every moment. The same applies to argumentation. Anyone saying that a critic has misunderstood them already presupposes a distinction between correctly and incorrectly understanding their statement.

Radical relativist statements therefore encounter characteristic problems of self-application:

> **“There is no objective truth.” Is this statement objectively true?**

> **“There are no universally binding rational standards.” Am I supposed to accept this statement for rational reasons?**

> **“Meanings are completely unstable.” Does this statement have a sufficiently stable meaning for me to understand it correctly?**

This by no means refutes every dependence on context or change in language. Words of course change, human perspectives are limited, and cultural influences shape our thinking. The criticism concerns the step of radicalizing these observations so far that the presuppositions of one's own assertions and arguments are ultimately dissolved as well.

7. What Christian apologetics can learn from this

Shackel provides analytical tools, not a Christian epistemology

In this essay Nicholas Shackel does not argue from a Christian worldview or develop presuppositional apologetics. The following application therefore deliberately goes beyond Shackel's own argument. His analysis does, however, provide tools of particular interest for a presuppositional investigation.

For presuppositional apologetics asks not only:

- Is this particular statement true?
- Is this individual argument valid?
- Is there empirical counterevidence?

It also asks:

- What presuppositions must already hold for this statement to be formulated meaningfully at all?
- Which worldview can ground truth, meaning, and rationality?
- Might a position be living on presuppositions that it itself denies?

Someone denying objective truth nevertheless wants their statement to be accurately understood. Someone relativizing objective rationality nevertheless presents reasons. Someone problematizing stable meaning nevertheless expects critics not to misrepresent their position.

Truth is not the product of social agreement

The Bible ultimately anchors truth in God and his revelation. Jesus prays:

> **“Sanctify them through the truth! Your word is truth” (John 17:17).**

This by no means implies that, on the Christian view, social power has no influence on human beliefs. People can:

- suppress truth,
- spread lies,
- institutionalize error,
- conduct propaganda,
- invest false teaching with authority,
- manipulate concepts,
- exert social pressure on dissenters.

But all of this initially concerns the human relationship to truth. It does not produce truth itself.

> **A society can institutionalize a lie. It cannot make it true.**

This is precisely why the distinction between “being true” and “being believed true” is so important. An error can be the majority view. It can be state doctrine. It can be advocated by scholars, media, or religious authorities. None of these social facts alone answers whether the claim is actually true.

Language does not arbitrarily change reality

The same applies to language. In the biblical worldview humans do not create the world by naming it. Reality precedes them:

> **“Everything came into being through it, and without it not even one thing that came into being came into being” (John 1:3).**

Humans thus find themselves within an already existing created order. Their concepts can be appropriate or inappropriate, their statements true or false, and their classifications helpful or misleading. Language certainly has power, but not the power to bring any reality into existence at will merely by renaming it.

One can:

- obscure a fact linguistically,
- load a term emotionally,
- change definitions,
- group different things under the same expression,
- describe the same object with different concepts.

But it does not follow:

- that the reality designated becomes arbitrary,
- that contradictions thereby disappear,
- that new definitions make false statements true,
- that a shift in meaning is simultaneously a change in the object.

Four questions that untangle many complicated arguments

Shackel's analysis yields a simple method of examination for apologetic conversations. Especially in abstract discussions of truth, identity, knowledge, construction, or rationality, four initial questions help:

1. What exactly does the key term mean? For example, what do “truth,” “knowledge,” “rationality,” “construction,” or “power” mean in the particular statement?

2. Does this meaning remain constant throughout the argument? Is “truth” first used in its ordinary sense and later as a designation for a system of social recognition?

3. Is there a strong and a weak thesis? Is it initially claimed that society constructs truth, while under criticism only the claim that society influences what people believe to be true is defended?

4. Does the criticism also apply to one's own position? If all truth claims are supposedly merely socially conditioned, does that also apply to this claim? If rationality has no objective normative force, why should the argument for that conclusion rationally oblige us?

These questions are not rhetorical traps. On the contrary, they also protect the conversation partner from a straw man. If someone actually advocates only the weak statement, the strong one should not be attributed to them. But if they assert the strong thesis, it must not be defended solely by the plausibility of the weak one.

The deeper presuppositional question

At this point Shackel's analysis leads to a still deeper worldview question. Truth, logical distinguishability, linguistic meaning, and rational consistency are already presupposed in every serious discussion. Even denying them seems impossible without using them in practice.

The relativist must distinguish between:

- what they assert and what they do not assert,
- a correct and an incorrect presentation of their view,
- good and bad objections,
- agreement and disagreement,
- understanding and misunderstanding.

In theory, they can attempt to relativize these distinctions completely. Yet as soon as they say, “You have misunderstood my position,” they themselves already claim an objective distinction between a correct and an incorrect representation.

> **The relativist can deny truth, but must make a truth claim in order to deny it. They can dispute rationality, but must argue to convince us. They can relativize meaning, but must expect us to understand what their words mean.**

Christian apologetics can therefore go one step further. It need not treat truth, rationality, and meaning as independent abstract entities standing above God. It can locate these presuppositions within a worldview in which a truthful, rational, self-revealing God created reality and humans receive knowledge as his creatures.

Shackel's essay therefore does not prove the Christian worldview. Nor should that be attributed to it. It does, however, help expose the weaknesses of certain relativist strategies and bring discussion to the decisive point: on what foundation do our claims to truth and rationality stand at all?

Conclusion

The strength of Shackel's analysis lies in reducing complicated-sounding arguments to a few comparatively simple questions. There is no need to be intimidated by technical language. What matters is distinguishing clearly between claims, meanings, and justifications.

We should be particularly attentive when:

- a surprising thesis is developed from an obvious truism,
- a substantially weaker statement is suddenly defended under criticism,
- a key term changes its meaning within the same argument,
- objective rationality is disputed while rational superiority is simultaneously invoked,
- criticism of a theory can in principle be interpreted only as confirmation of that theory.

Then the simplest question of all is worth asking:

> **What exactly are you claiming, and is it still the same claim when you have to defend it?**

Precisely this conceptual clarity removes the fog from many apparently profound arguments. Not because demanding philosophy is suspect, but because real philosophical depth needs no concealed shifts in meaning. Truth need not be protected by making concepts mean something else at the decisive moment.

Literature: Nicholas Shackel, The Vacuity of Postmodernist Methodology, Metaphilosophy 36 (2005), pp. 295-320. The essay explicitly examines Troll’s Truisms, Motte and Bailey Doctrines, Equivocating Fulcra, the Postmodernist Fox-trot, and Rankly Relativising Fields.