



Surveying the Mysteries: Epistemological Reflections on Multidisciplinary Inquiry

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Introduction

Any aspect of the social world that is secret, occluded, or covert presents epistemological challenges. Even in the best of circumstances, access to a society's secrets can be a matter of luck. One has to gain the trust of the right interlocutors, arrive at the right time in a ritual cycle, be of the right gender or age, and so on. Understanding ancient mysteries is even more challenging. Not only were they kept secret by their participants, the waves of time have effaced them. Is the assembly of these fragments hopeless? Is this field nothing but speculative mud, or is there some epistemological dry ground on which we can build?

The strategy explored in this volume is to bring the methods and theories of several disciplines to bear on the mysteries of the classical world. Perhaps if we can draw on contemporary ethnography, archeological investigation, literary interpretation, as well as philosophical, philological, and semantic analyses, we can penetrate the patina of time and secrecy. But why should the multiplication of disciplines help? Could it not just as easily produce an unintelligible cacophony? Our epistemic optimism is based on the notion that different perspectives on a single phenomenon can produce a better understanding. The metaphor of "triangulation," adopted from surveying, is appropriate here. When one wants to know the distance to a far shore or mountain top, one takes a bearing on the inaccessible object from two positions and calculates the height of the resulting triangle. The triangulation metaphor is familiar in the behavioral and health sciences, where the

epistemology of multi-method research has been theorized. The object of this essay will be to examine some of the possible benefits and dangers of multidisciplinary triangulation of the ancient mysteries.

The Prospects of Triangulation

D.T. Campbell is often credited with originating the concept of triangulation in his methodological writing in social psychology.¹ Social scientists have been willing to use whatever methods and theories come to hand, partly because of the sheer complexity of social phenomena. As a result, triangulation has become widespread. It is important to distinguish at the outset between *methodological* triangulation and *theoretical* triangulation. As the names suggest, methodological triangulation is the use of more than one analytical technique in a single inquiry, while theoretical triangulation brings more than one conceptual framework to bear on the evidence.

Methodological triangulation supports a single hypothesis with several kinds of evidence gathered and analyzed with different methodologies. For example, Holzhausen's essay uses both a literary and historical analysis to address the question of whether Euripides' *Bacche* is evidence about the Dionysian mysteries. It may seem obvious that such a question would require both literary and historical analytical techniques. After all, the inquiry will require an understanding of the play with all of its tropes and devices as well as an understanding of the other historical evidence about the Dionysian mysteries. This is triangulation because the methods are distinct, and both are necessary to advance the inquiry. In general, methodological triangulation has three possible benefits. Multiple methods brought to bear on a single hypothesis may serve to *confirm* it to a higher degree than is possible with one method alone. Also, multiple methods may provide a more *complete* understanding than is possible with one method. Finally, the results of one method can suggest new questions that may be answered with the other method, something I have elsewhere dubbed "abductive inspiration."²

The benefits of methodological triangulation in the studies of the mysteries are fairly obvious. Without stopping to name the method, scholars have long been triangulating the mysteries. One has to because

¹ Campbell and Fiske 1959.

² Risjord *et al* 2001: 6-7.

there is such a wide array of evidence and all of it is fragmentary. There are etymologies, myths, plays, novels, philosophical treatises, artwork, and ritual objects. This multi-disciplinary conference has expanded the sources to include contemporary ethnography and the study of ancient architecture. Each of these kinds of evidence requires its own analytical techniques. The pieces of evidence need to be understood in context, and the different analytical techniques have different ways of contextualizing the evidence. Consider, for example, our understanding of Greek words and concepts. Philosophical analysis helps understand a concept by analyzing its dialectical role and the historical development of the philosophical views of which it is a part. This method emphasizes arguments and theories, and discounts literary context and figurative usage. A remark like Aristotle's about the homonymy of μῦς and μυστήριον may thus be tossed aside as mere word play. Enter Nikolay Grinster with a linguist's tool kit. The connotations of a word can be gleaned from its context of use. Pulling together a variety of contexts of use with historical and mythological evidence, Grinster is able to make a case for a deep connection between mice and mysteries. This linguistic analysis sheds light on Aristotle in a way that philosophical analysis never could. Moreover, it is consonant with a philosophical understanding of the text. Methodological triangulation thus allows us to distill meaning from these fragments by putting them into different contexts and subjecting them to different analytical techniques.

Theoretical triangulation is the use of more than one theory to understand a single phenomenon. An older view of theories took them to be nothing more than ways of organizing data. Philosophers of science now understand observation to be heavily dependent on theory. There could be no phenomenon without some prior conceptualization. A theory tells us what the phenomenon *is*, and hence it provides grounds for discriminating genuine from spurious evidence. As a result, theories can mislead as well as inform. There can be evidence that one theory treats as mere noise, while a different conceptualization would find a place for it in a larger system. The second theory might, of course, supplant the first, but it need not if the theories are consistent and they answer different kinds of questions about the data. In the social sciences and humanities we tend to be promiscuous with our theories. The hope is that different ways of conceptualizing the evidence might provide both a more accurate and a more complete understanding.

In MacGaffey's essay, he sets out to "construct a set of vantage points" from which we may speculate about the participants experience

of the mysteries. These vantage points are built on the high ground of anthropological theory. MacGaffey sees in Burkert's work an application of Turner's distinction between *communitas* and *societas*.³ *Societas* is a structured set of social relationships, while *communitas* is an unstructured and egalitarian connection among people. *Communitas* arises in liminal situations where social relationships are intentionally or unintentionally broken down. Initiation rituals often exploit the power of *communitas*, and Burkert's final analysis of the mystery experience invokes the powerful experience of fellow-feeling among initiates freed from their social roles. This theoretical model clearly presupposes the conception of a person as autonomous. The person must exist independently of the social roles, if she is to be able to free herself from them and experience *communitas*. MacGaffey contrasts this individualistic conception of the person with a model that regards the person as constituted (in large part) by social relationships. Applied to his own fieldwork, this model understands the liminal experiences of initiation rituals as reiterating and reinforcing the social relationships that are temporarily broken down.

MacGaffey's theoretical triangulation permits us to think about the mysteries in terms of structure and liminality without reifying the participant as an autonomous individual who chooses to be initiated. This means that the question of how the individuals experienced the mysteries must change. There may be no single experience shared by the individuals, hence it makes no sense to ask about *the* extraordinary experience. Rather, the participants' experiences were probably influenced by the range of motivations and expectations with which they approached the initiation. Theoretical triangulation here does more than give us a more complete understanding. It changes our understanding of the phenomenon, and thereby changes the kinds of question we can ask about it.

The Perils of Triangulation

Reading the vast literature in the social and health sciences that self-consciously uses triangulation, one might get the impression that it is a method that always yields positive results. This is a danger sign to the methodologically minded. A method that cannot show a hypothesis to be false cannot show it to be true either. While proponents write

³ Burkert 1987; Turner 1969: 96-97;131-165.

optimistically, methodological triangulation can undermine a hypothesis just as easily as it can support it. Indeed, the contributions to this conference are full of critical uses of triangulation. Triangulation is used critically when evidence gathered and analyzed by several methods make a thesis less likely than it was when supported by one sort of evidence alone. Study of the mysteries certainly provides the opportunity for this sort of criticism. In this conference, anthropologists and classicists are exploring the same theses with different bodies of evidence and analytical devices. If this combination is to be successful, then there ought to be some older views of the mysteries that are rejected or modified. These will be theses held by classicists and defended using their textual methods. The thesis will be rejected by the combination of anthropological evidence and a different reading of the text. Perhaps Grinster's discussion of Aristotle's homonymy and Holzhausen's discussion of the *Bacchae* fall into this category.

Methodological triangulation thus can undermine as well as support hypotheses, but this raises a difficulty for its application. Why should classicists be convinced by anthropological argument? One can imagine a classicist arguing that her thesis is supported by well-established interpretive methods. The anthropologist's results may conflict with the thesis, but these methods were designed to interpret the speech and action of living subjects, not pull together different aspects of a text into a coherent interpretation. Anthropological arguments, the classicist might conclude, should carry no weight in classics. The argument may seem like special pleading, but it cannot be discounted so lightly. Methods have strengths and weaknesses that need to be considered when we evaluate their results. My suggestion for resolving this problem is that investigators pay very close attention to the questions they are asking and answering. Inquiry, whether textual, ethnographic, or linguistic, is a matter of asking questions. Theses and interpretations are answers to these questions, and there is a deep relationship between the questions asked and the methods used to answer them.⁴ Where the classicist and the anthropologist are asking the same questions, they are bound by the logic of their question to weigh the relevant answers, regardless of discipline from which they arise.

The other side of this coin is too often missed: where inquirers are answering different questions, their answers need not conflict. Unfortunately, inquirers are not always as clear about their questions as

⁴ see [Risjord 2000](#): ch.s 4 and 5.

they could be. The result is the familiar sort of rancorous dispute where the participants eternally argue past one another. This is another lesson for would-be triangulators of method. The multiplication of evidential sources and analytical tools is not an intrinsic epistemic good. There must be some reason to think that the sources and methods are relevant to the inquiry. I have suggested that questions provide the link between the evidence and analysis on one hand and the goals of the inquiry on the other. A piece of evidence and its associated method are relevant to an inquiry if they are necessary to answer the questions that constitute the inquiry. Close attention to the questions thus cuts both ways. It tells us when we need to attend to the evidence and methods provided by another discipline, and it tells us when methodological triangulation is going to be useless.

A final source of difficulty for triangulation is the consistency of the methods or theories used. The inconsistencies for which we must be alert are not going to be obvious and superficial. If two theories are direct competitors—answering the same questions with conflicting theses—then no competent investigator is going to try to use both at the same time. Rather, the conflicts will run deep, and only be exposed by a careful analysis of the theory's (or method's) presuppositions. Here one thinks again of MacGaffey's theoretical triangulation. Turner's distinction between *societas* and *communitas* presupposed an individualistic and autonomous conception of the person. MacGaffey's own fieldwork was best interpreted by a concept of the person that treated persons as locations in a social space. These conceptions of the person stand in conflict, and unless the conflict is resolved, the two conceptual schemes cannot together yield anything but confusion. MacGaffey is, of course, quite aware of the possible conflict here. He is careful to insist that his distributed or relational model treats the person as both individual and social. As he says, the "Kongolese make a distinction between ordered 'society' and the 'autonomous' individual, much as Americans do, but attach opposite moral values to it." I am arguing that this is a crucial turn in his argument. Without it, he would not be triangulating with theories, but using one theory to argue against the other.

Methods have presuppositions, and these presuppositions can conflict just as they do in theories. For example, Grinster pulls together folk etymologies with etymologies done by contemporary scholars. The former gives us some evidence about how the participants in the mysteries might have conceptualized mice and mysteries. This

presupposes that the meanings of the different words are related in the minds of real people. A scholarly etymology, however, does not aim to discover meaning as it was in the minds of historical agents. These etymologies presuppose that the meaning of the words can be found in their context of use (in this case textual use), and that something unified can be said about a word's meaning as it is used in different texts. The authors may have lived centuries apart, or in different parts of the ancient world. There is a *prima facie* conflict between thinking of meaning as embodied in the mind of an individual and thinking of meaning as embodied in texts. While Grinster does not comment on this potential conflict, I think it can be resolved. What this shows is that we need to be very careful drawing conclusions from Grinster's evidence: we cannot move immediately from historical etymologies to conclusions about how the participants thought about or experienced the mysteries.

Conclusion

Methodological and theoretical triangulation thus hold promise for the study of the ancient mysteries. Indeed, once the process has been named and brought to light, it is hard to see how any progress could be made without amalgamating the methods and theories of several fields. Yet, we should not open the alchemist's book lightly. The upshot of the foregoing ruminations is that successful triangulation depends on a careful analysis of one's own inquiry. We need to be clear about the questions asked and what will count as a relevant answer. This will make it possible to decide whether and how the results of another discipline bear on one's own line of investigation. We also must attend to the presuppositions of our questions, methods, and theories. Inconsistencies need to be resolved, and doing so often leads to better questions, clearer methods, and more subtle theories. Our epistemic optimism about multidisciplinary research is warranted, just as long as we approach it reflectively.

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